

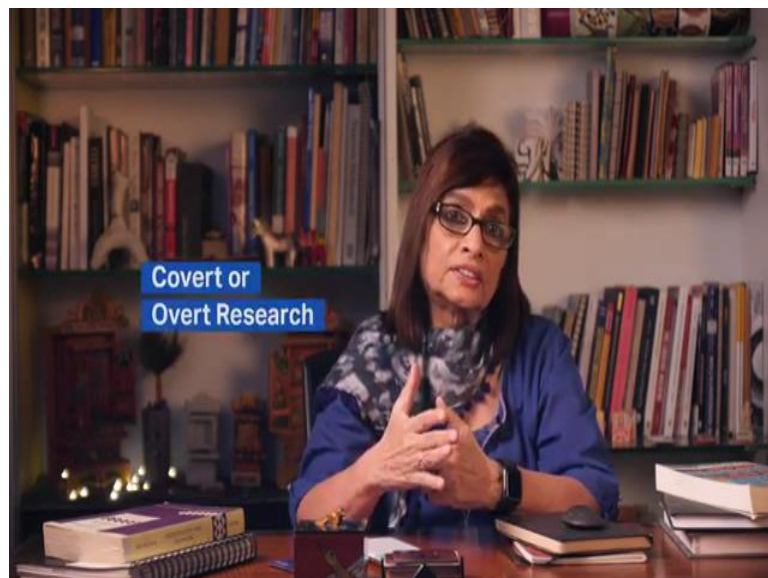
Understanding Ethnography
Week 4
Lecture 08
Conclusion: Covert and Overt Research

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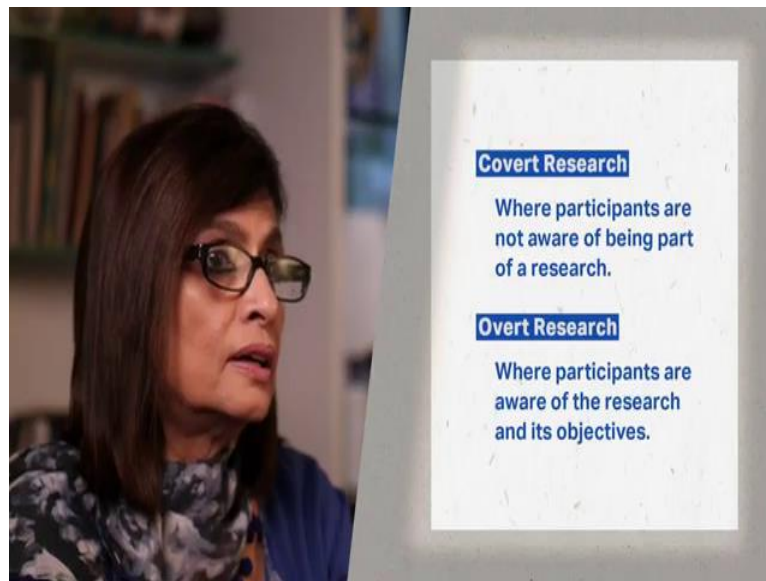
There are certain ethical dilemmas that we are able to foresee even before we step into the field. These define the nature and method of our engagement from the beginning.

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One of these is the deciding whether our research is covert or overt. Research could be covert or overt, depending on what we are investigating. For example, someone doing research on human trafficking may not reveal what she is investigating, because it may endanger some of her participants, or impede her research, and even place her at risk.

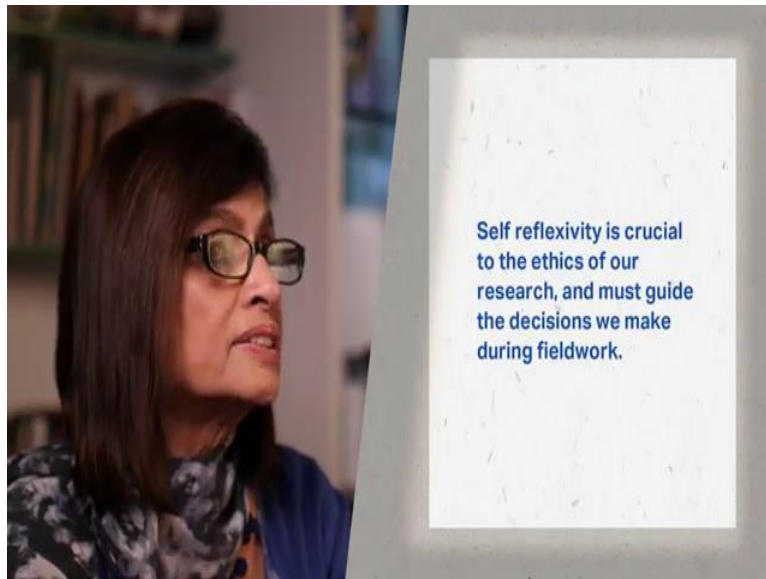
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Such kind of a research is called covert research, where participants are not aware that they are part of a research. Overt research, as the word implies, is where we present ourselves to participants as researchers and share with them the broad objectives of our research. On ethical fronts, the covert position is often considered problematic, but there are certain areas of research in which this cannot be avoided. These often include studies on subjects which are considered deviant, illegal or immoral by mainstream society. However, the choice between being covert and overt is rarely a zero-sum decision.

In most ethnographic engagements, there are some aspects of the research that are revealed to participants, and some that are not. Also, the researcher may be overt with some participants, who they trust and want to be on the same page with while being covert with others. In situations such as these, how do we decide what is the most ethical choice? It is important to be conscious of the calls we take because our decisions can impact the lives of our participants and of the community they represent.

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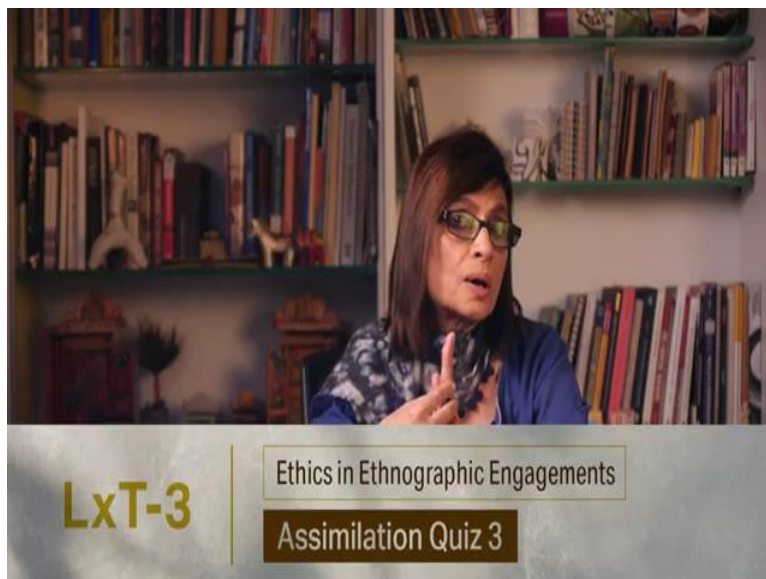
There isn't a concrete set of dos and don'ts listing out research ethics. Instead, the emphasis is on self-reflexivity. By presenting these examples, what we have tried to do is show the kind of ethical dilemmas we may face in doing fieldwork, and how we may be conscious in our on-field engagements. As we close our discussion on on-field engagements and the dilemmas they sometimes bring, we have to admit that in carrying out a research there is a selfish motive on our part: we want to do the best for our project. It is critical, though, that when we come to taking research decisions, we weigh the benefits and harms that our work might have for our participants and their community.

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In this, it is better to err on the side of less rather than more intervention. Research, no matter how it benefits a larger group, cannot come at the expense of the individuals who, knowingly or unknowingly, participate in the creation of its knowledge

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Here, we have for you some readings on ethics in ethnographic research. And a quiz based on the material. Our next module is about how we learn through observation and participation in the field.