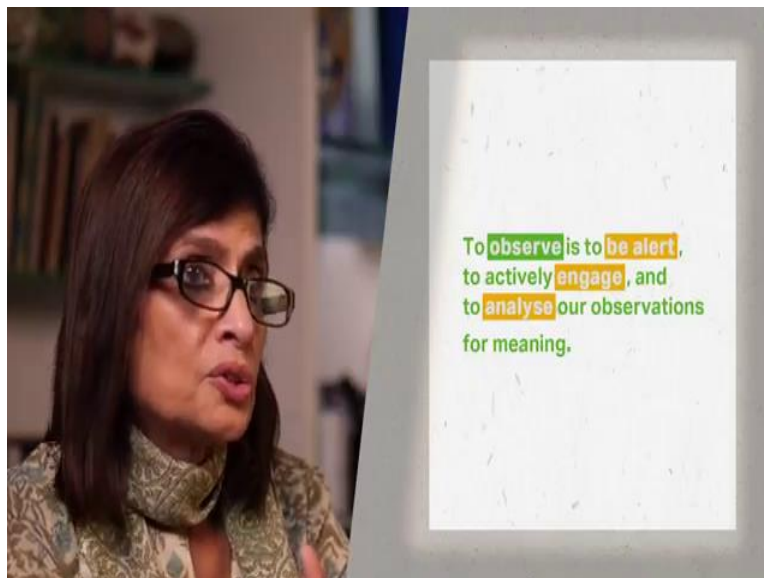


**Understanding Ethnography**  
**Module 5 Observation and Participation**  
**Module 5 Section 1: Introduction**

Welcome again as we journey along on this course understanding ethnography. In this module, I would like to draw our attention to one of the basic tools or let us call it a method, a way to learn about our participants through observation. To observe comes naturally to all of us. It is the most primary method of learning. As children we learn by observing the actions and behaviors of others around us. And as we grow, we continue to learn from our surroundings. But in ethnography, observation has a somewhat different meaning. For ethnographers, observation is different from the seeing or looking around, which we do almost without thinking.

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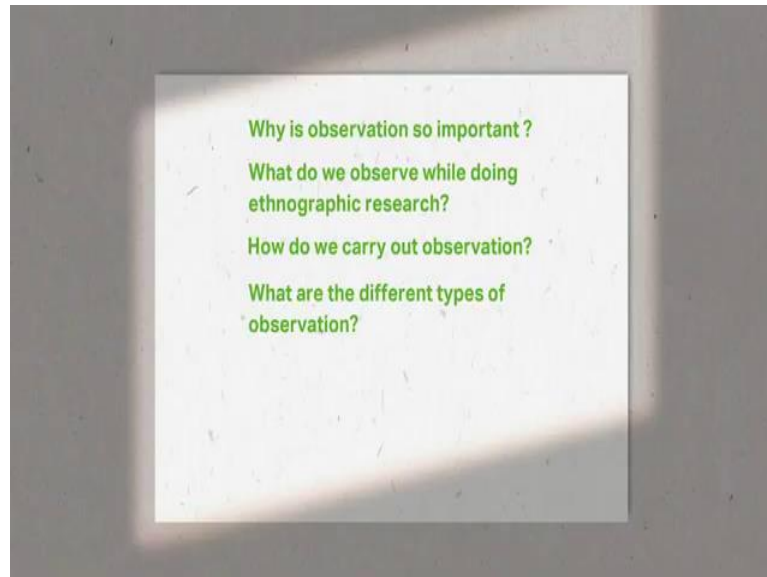


To observe is to be alert, to actively engage with what we are looking at, and to try and make sense of it. Seeing on the other hand, is perhaps the more passive activity, which requires less effort, where we are looking at something but may not be trying to understand it. I am reminded of a Zen story. I was introduced to my teacher Nasreen Mohamedi. A young student goes visiting his Zen master on a rainy day. Of course, he carries an umbrella because it is raining and before entering the house, leaves it outside along with his wooden clogs. The Zen monk greets him warmly and invites him in. And then with a smile ask, I suppose you left your wooden clogs on the porch., I want to know if your umbrella is on the right or left side of your clogs.

" This leaves the student confused and tongue-tied, and he realises that his learning is far

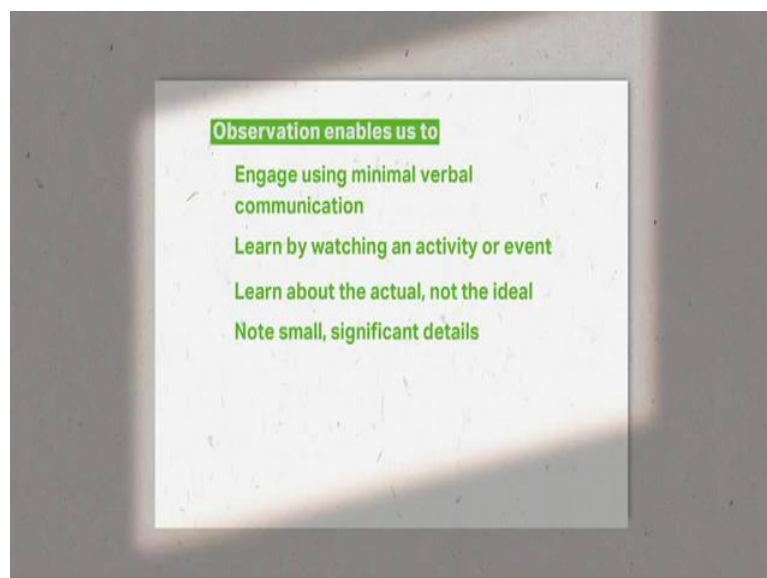
from complete. Now, this was not just a trick question about memory. What the teacher probably wanted to assess was whether the student had the full awareness required of his training. Here full awareness was perceived as observation. There are many questions that arise as we speak of observation as an element of research.

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We could ask ourselves, why is observation so important? And what do we observe while doing ethnographic research? How do we carry out observation? And what are the different types of observation? We will engage with all these questions in this module.

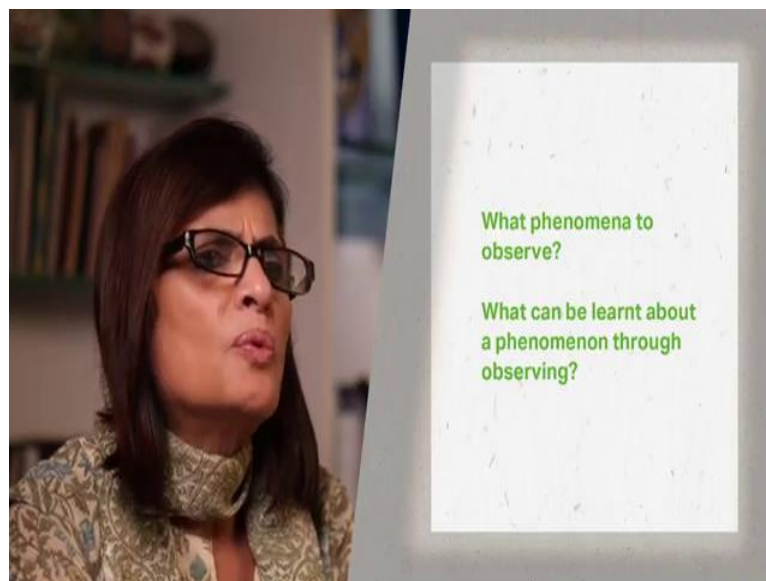
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Let us begin by discussing the value of observation. For one, it allows us to understand and learn in situations where the participants and the researcher speak different languages. Or when the participant feels uncomfortable articulating their ideas in words like when carrying out an activity, it is difficult for people to put into words their process and the details of what they are doing. Think about it. How difficult it is to describe the process of tying a shoelace? It is so much easier to just show how it is done or just observe how it is being done.

In observing, we do not learn about the proper or the ideal way of doing something. Instead, we learn about how it actually happens. We see the mistakes and alterations, adjustments, the many different ways in which the same activity might happen. Observations reveal to a small but significant details which are very much a part of every process, but which we might forget when describing an activity from memory. To summarise, observation allows us to see details and particularities instead of generalisations.

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And what are the activities, or phenomena that are best learned through observation? When we need to learn about a particular activity and understand it in close detail, like someone working with an instrument or a tool or performing a specialised activity, like embroidery, pottery or cooking. We also use observation to learn about less specialised activities like shopping or driving behaviour, where we need to observe the small actions and decisions that make up a larger journey. Let us now quick recall here.

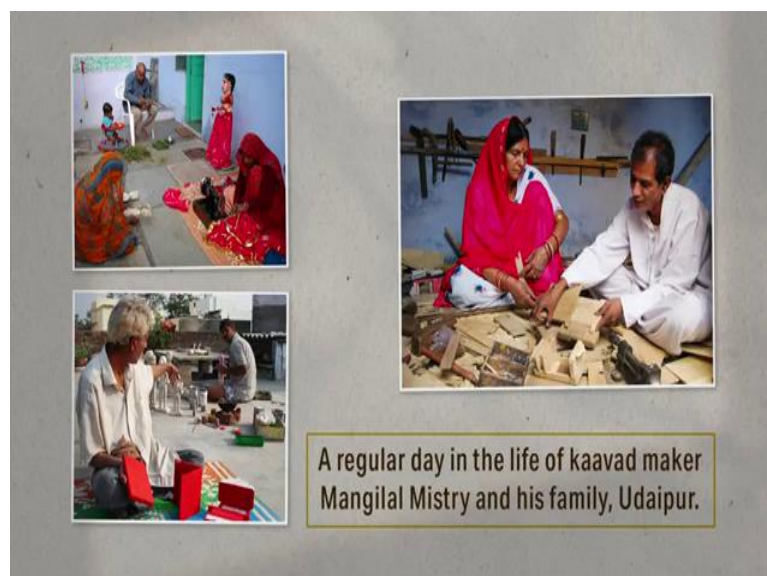
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In one of our earlier modules, we had discussed with you the work of Satish Krishnamurthy and his team in designing a FinTech app. The team wanted to learn about the payment behaviours and processes that take place at shops. Using ethnographic research methods, they were able to observe these behaviours as they happened. So you see, through observation, we can learn of the small activities and actions that make up larger habits and decision-making processes.

Besides the details of a phenomena, observation can also help us understand its overarching nature. For instance, we want to learn about the crafts and the lives of craftsmen in a given region

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We can learn about these by observing the daily life of the artisans, their processes of making craft objects, and the other activities of their day. We can also observe their interactions with customers and sellers, family members, and so on. Through observing these multiple different components that make up our participants' lives, we can learn about many overarching themes

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We could learn about the process of craft making, the networks that form the community, the role of family members in the crafts cycle, and many such themes. Through observation, we can learn about relationships and social structures in a context. Observing how people interact with each other, how they speak, gesticulate and express themselves, we can learn about their relations with each other. Observing these interactions also teaches us about socio-cultural customs. For example, observing the interaction between patient and doctor, we can learn about the rules that define the environment of a clinic and the patient-doctor relationship. And so, through observing interpersonal behaviour, we can learn about the conventions that dictate interactions in the context.