

Understanding Ethnography Module 5 Section 02 - Types of Observation

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So, how do we do ethnographic observation? Let us discuss the different types of observation. Each of these requires a different way of going about it. In participant observation, we join our participants, taking up a role of sorts and getting involved in the activities that form the phenomena we are studying.

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So we may string flowers along with the family of flower vendors.

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Non-participant observation is about observing and not getting actively involved. For instance, we may not participate in a surgery or a dental operation.

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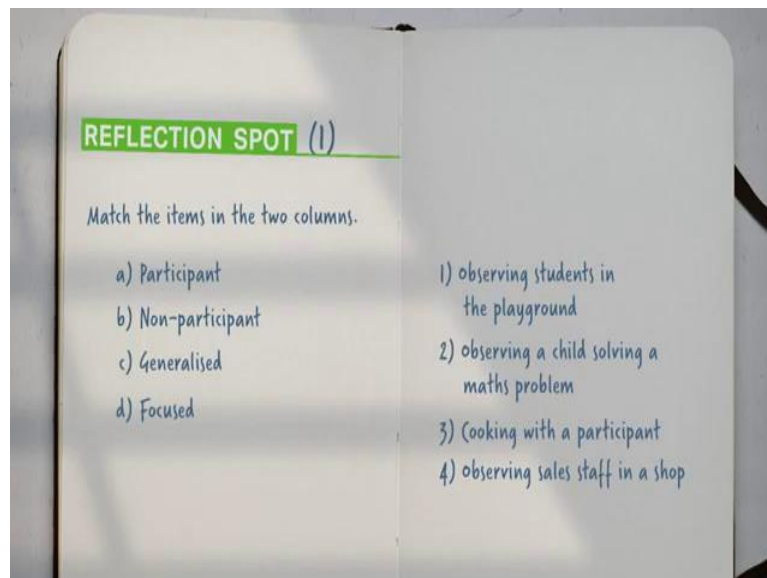
Generalised observation is to observe everything that is taking place around us with equal focus. This applies to early research when we are just about understanding the scenarios and not quite certain what is more important to observe. Observing people shop in a mall is one example that comes to mind.

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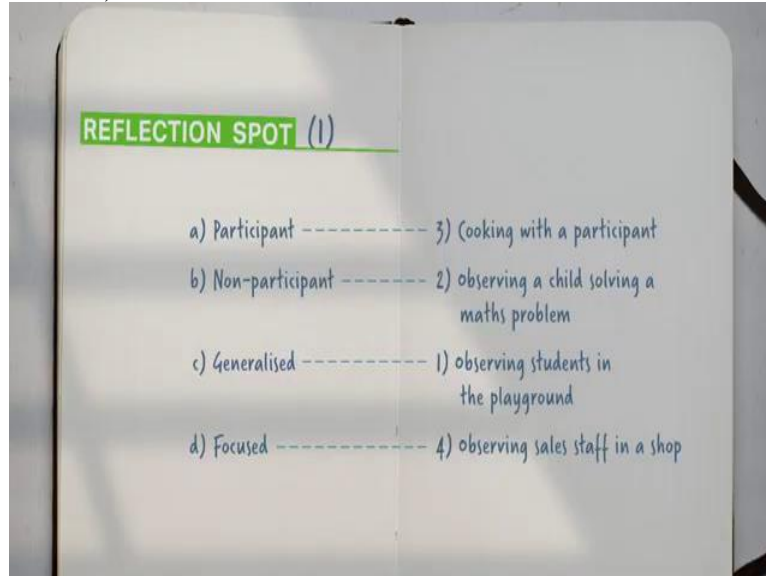
Focused observation is to limit our attention to activities or events that are only related to the phenomena we are studying. This often happens after we have achieved some certainty about the focus of our fieldwork. Of course, as with all of ethnographic practise, we can shift between these forms of observation as we go about fieldwork. Let us pause for a moment here and do a small exercise.

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Here, you can see a list of different kinds of observations. , participant, non-participant, generalised, focused, and another list of examples of observation. Observing students in the playground, observing a child solving a math problem, cooking with a participant, observing sales staff in a shop. Can you match the items on the first line to those in the second one? Take minute and complete the exercise.

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And here are our answers. Compare the two sets. If you feel unsure about why your answers do not match us, post your confusion on the discussion forum. Now let us return to our discussion.

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Whichever form of observation we deploy, there are certain concepts that are fundamental to the practice of observing. You may recognise these terms from our previous conversations. Why we have earlier discussed these as abstract concepts? Here we will try to understand how they translate into practice and particularly the practice of observation.

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Let us take an example here, from a film by David and Judith MacDougall, *With Morning Hearts*. The film is set in the Doon School in Dehradun, in the state of Uttarakhand. It is an observation of the life of some students living in one the dormitories of the school. These are primary school children, all boys, who are getting used to the idea of being away from home, and in a boarding school environment. In one of the sequences of the film, the filmmakers observe a class in progress. It is a class of English literature, where the teacher is discussing a certain poem. Let us watch this sequence.

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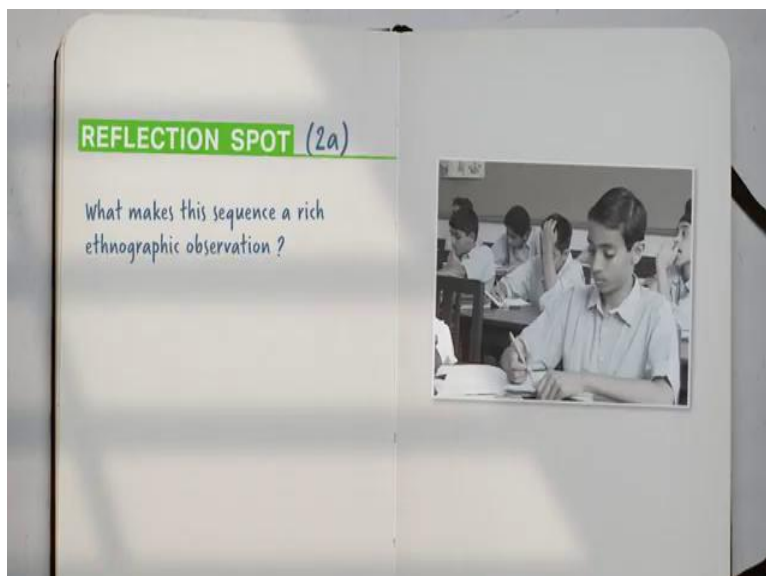
With Morning Hearts 2001



What does conscience do,
when you've done...

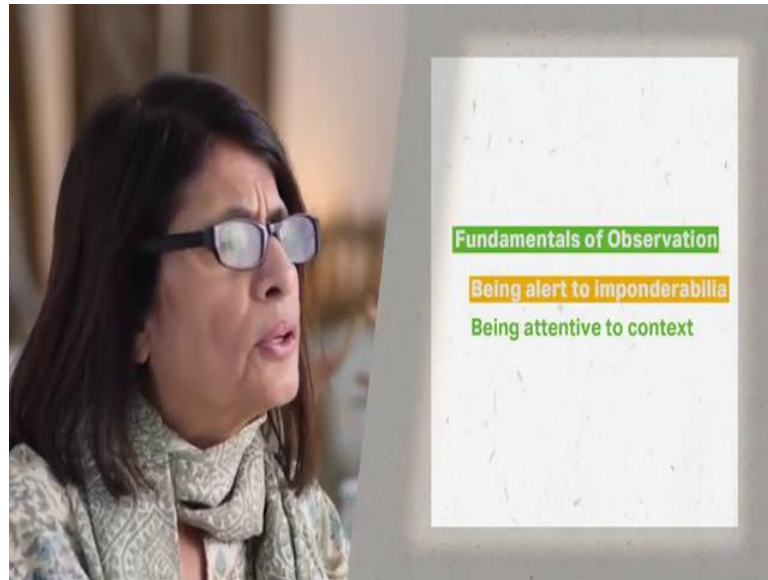
With Morning Hearts 2001

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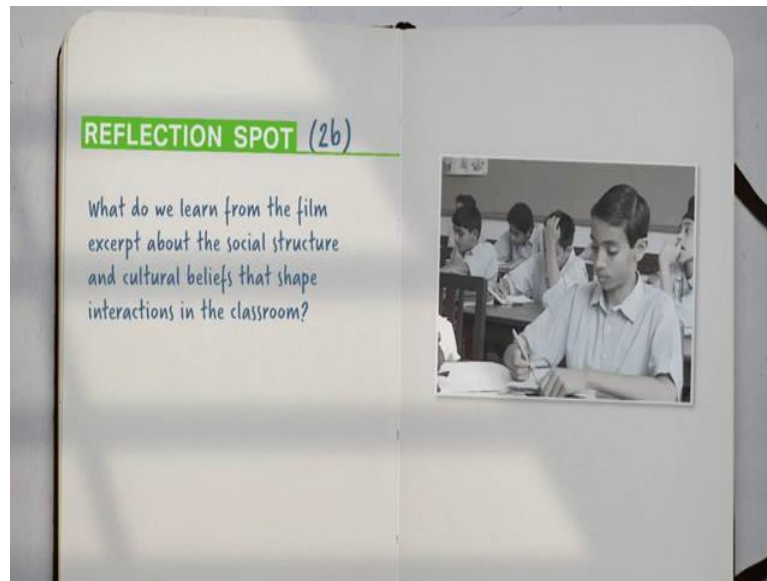
Let us reflect on what we just saw. Can you note down what makes this sequence a rich piece of observation? Many of you may point out the details that the filmmakers observed. Some of you may have noticed the students' expressions while the teacher is asking some questions; others could have noted how the students engaged with what the teacher is explaining to them.

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These are all very important details and constitute the imponderabilia of the classroom. The decision of the filmmakers to pay attention to these is evident of rich ethnographic observation. But it is not only imponderabilia that makes an observation ethnographic in nature. You might recollect our discussion on thick description. We had said that an ethnographic description is considered thick if it is able to convey the web of meanings, or culture, which underlie our observations. For this, we need to pay attention to the context. This includes the immediate physical environment, the social structures and cultural beliefs in which the phenomenon is located.

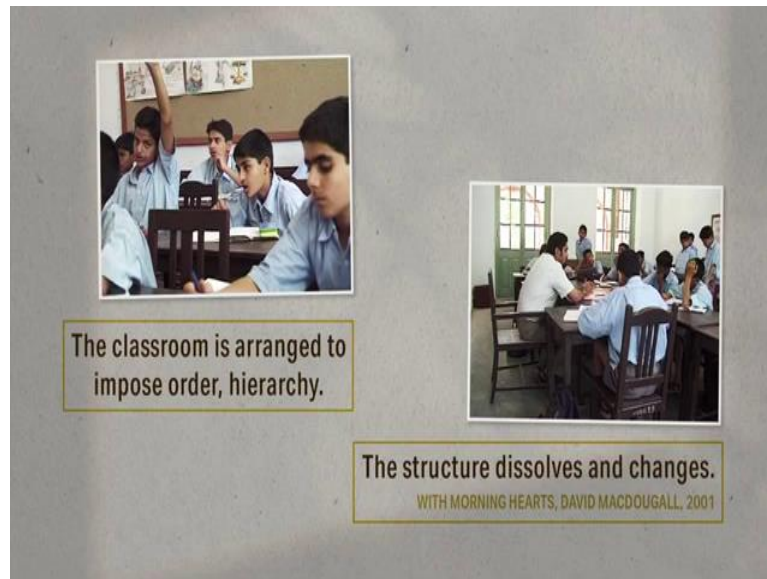
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What do we learn from the film excerpt about the social structure and cultural beliefs that shape interactions in the classroom? Think for a moment and note down your answers. Some of you may say that the classroom is a hierarchical space with a clearly defined structure with the teacher as an authority figure. Some others may say that the classroom interactions are defined by rules such as raising hands, or not speaking out of turn. You might also have noted that the structure sometimes dissolves and it becomes a less formal space. But how did we learn all of this from this short video clip?

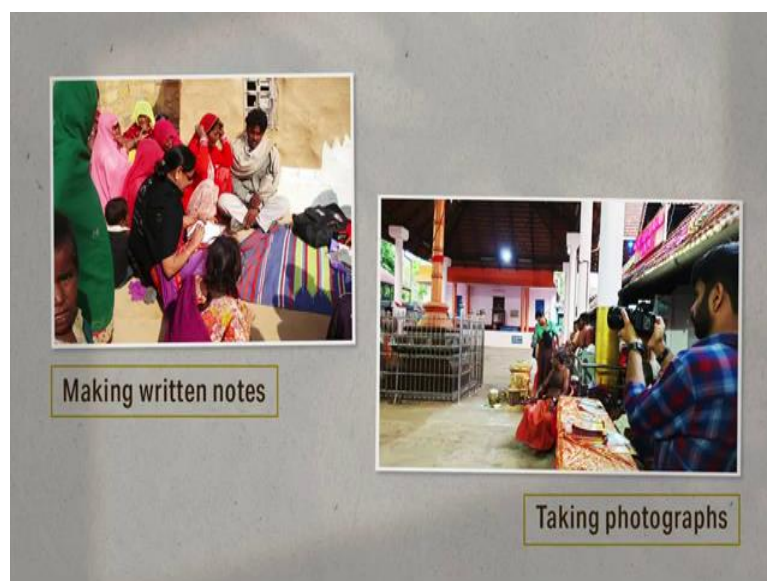
It is by paying attention to observable behaviour that we learn about the intangible aspects of the context. The ways in which children react to a question asked by their teacher by raising their hands, hoping to be picked. The expression on their faces denotes excitement and anticipation. This reveals that there is a desire to showcase knowledge to the teacher and other students. The social structure of the classroom is mirrored in its physical layout.

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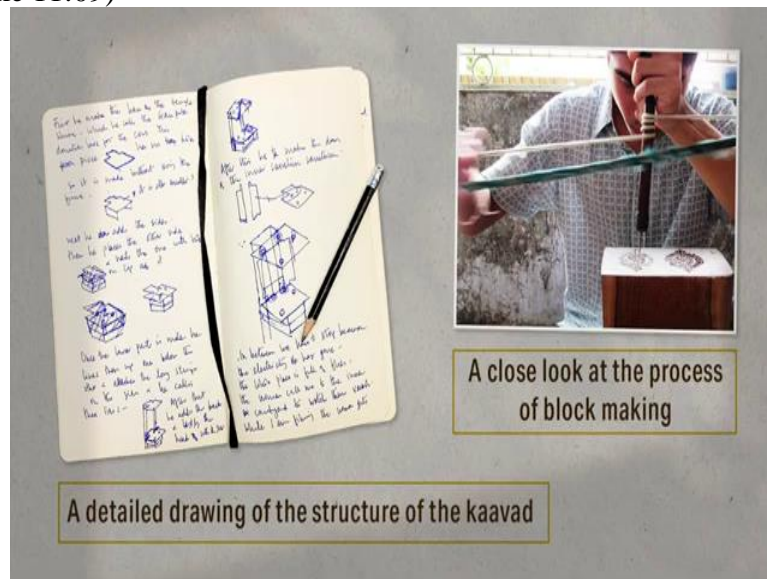
The teacher sits in the front, facing all of the students. And the students' desks are all arranged in a strict row- by- row formation. But this structure also dissolves. When the students gather around the teacher, the layout of the classroom is temporarily disrupted. And so is the authority that otherwise separates the teacher from students. So you see, this short video clip is a great example of ethnographic observation. Because it pays careful attention to the imponderabilia. In order to be attentive in such a manner, we need to be completely present and alert as we observe physically, intellectually and emotionally. We have to be attentive to whatever is happening in the immediate time and space around us.

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Acts of recording such as writing, drawing, making photographs, or even speaking what we observe into an audio recorder can help us be more alert to small details.

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In drawing something, for example, we pay attention to its details. Similarly, in photographing, or writing about an occurrence, we need to articulate into words what we are observing. The act of note-taking makes us look at something carefully, to notice its details with as much accuracy as we can.

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So, in fieldwork, we make records, not simply to document, but to observe, with greater alertness and attention. For those of you who want to read some more examples of imponderabilia in ethnographic writing, we have a very interesting paper for you. And after that, you can take a quiz. The quiz we have for you here is based on the reading, and on the video clip that we just discussed.

