Understanding Ethnography
Week 5
Lecture 03
What to Observe

And what do we observe? Everything! People, their activities and interactions with each other. The physical environment, and the objects in it, and the way in which people interact with them. But 'everything' is a difficult brief to follow and can be quite overwhelming.

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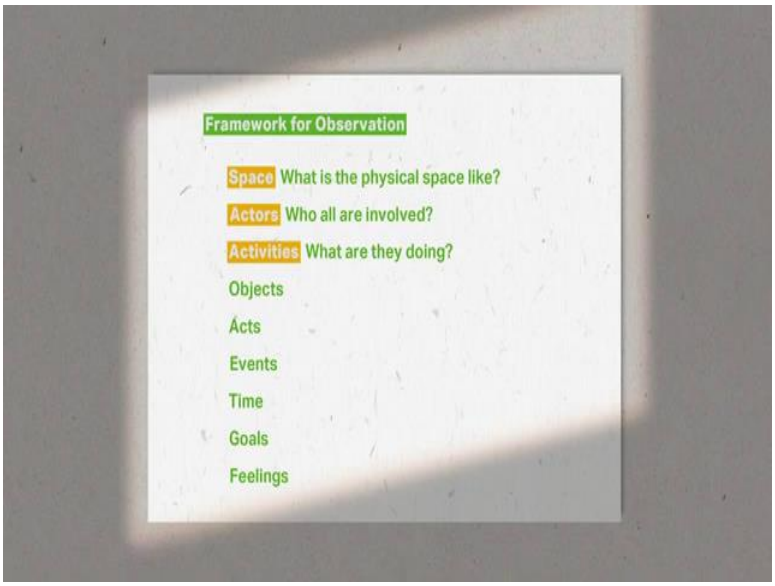

There are some frameworks that help us. Let us look at one of these. Space, actors, activities, what is the physical space like? Who all are involved? What are they doing? Objects, acts events.

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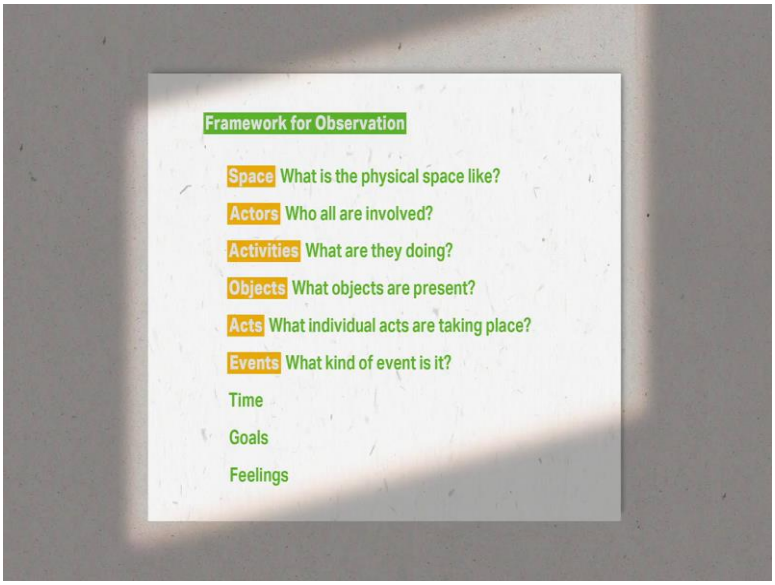

What objects are present? What are individuals doing? What kind of event is it?

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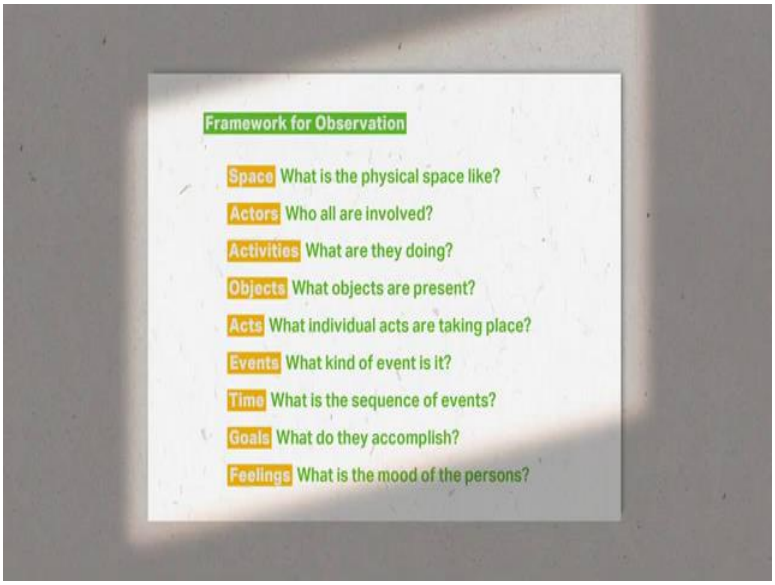

Time, goals, feelings.

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What is the sequence of events? What do they accomplish? What is the mood of the group and of individuals?

A framework such as this guides our attention towards the many different entities and elements that make up a phenomenon. Using one of these, we can construct a fairly comprehensive and detailed description. Material objects in any physical environment form an important part of our observation.

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We can learn the many stories and meanings that participants associate with these objects. In learning these stories, we can learn about our participants' experiences.

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One such work is that of artist and oral historian Aanchal Malhotra. Aanchal tells us the story of the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan through objects. These are objects that people on both sides of the border carried with them as they fled their homes. She starts from her own home. She learns about the kitchen utensils her grandparents brought with them from across the border. Exploring the stories behind these objects, she learns of their experiences. Through these, she constructs a deeply personal narrative of the partition.

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You can read more about Aanchal's project here. Aanchal's work shows us the importance of being alert to the smallest details present in the immediate environments. But as we know, it is not only the immediate time and space that makes up the context in ethnography. It is just as important to learn about the social-cultural context in which a phenomenon occurs and much of this lies beneath the surface. It is not quite visible or observable. How do we learn about this? Let us pause and reflect on this question.

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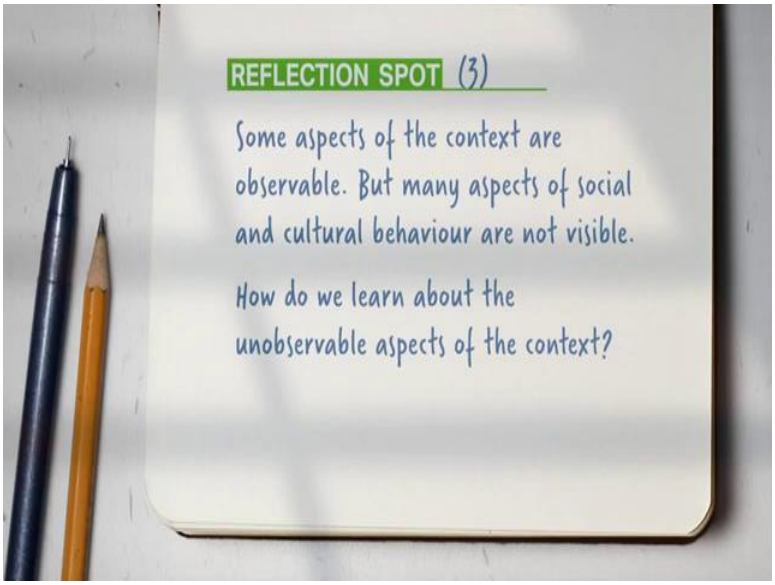

We can observe some social and cultural aspects of the context. But there is a lot of fit that we might not know of, especially when we are new to our participant's culture. How do we learn about the many invisible or unobservable aspects of the context?

Take a minute and note down your response. Some of you may have said; we should pay attention to whatever happens while we are present in the context. The rest we cannot observe, and so it cannot be a part of our study. This is not entirely correct.

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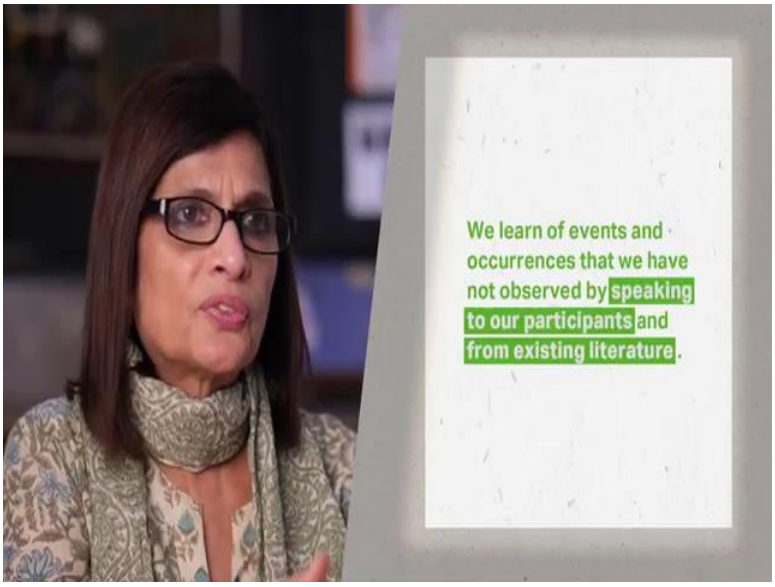

While we can only observe that which happens in front of us, we also learn by speaking to our participants, and from existing literature. Some of you may have responded that we can

learn about the invisible aspects of the context by spending more time there. This is true to a great degree. Often, we spend time during fieldwork observing phenomena that are not directly connected to the focus of our study. These observations contribute to our understanding of our participant's culture.

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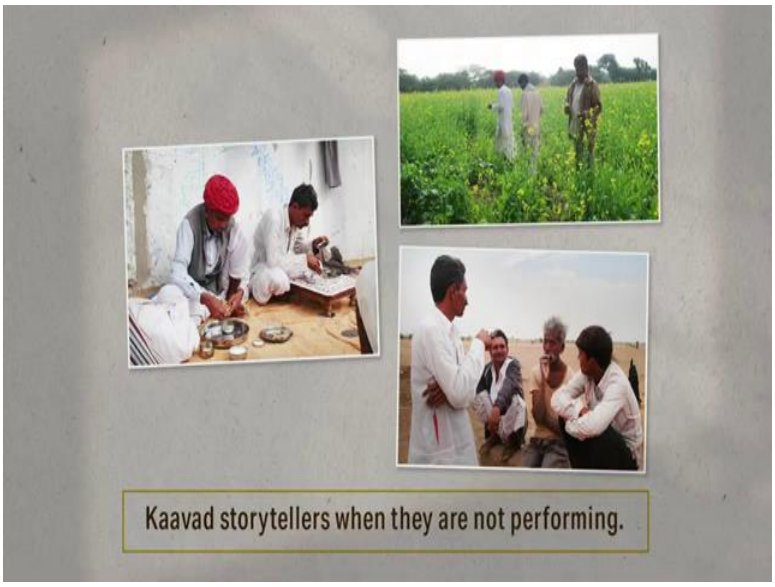

For example, I spent time with the Kaavad storytellers, even on the days when they were not performing or reciting the Kaavad. Doing this, I learnt about the social structure in which their role as non-kaavadiyas was situated. Strangely enough, they were not very keen for me to spend too much time in their village. And I learnt why. I noticed that when they were not performing, they would hide the Kaavad shrine in their homes. None of their neighbours could know that they were storytellers, else they would be ex-communicated. This is because being a storyteller was an undesirable status in their own village.

To ward off the prying eyes of their neighbours, they even changed my identity to that of a tourist. However, in the presence of their patrons in another village, they would speak of their role as Kaavdia Bhaats with great pride. They would claim to be the progeny of Shravan Kumar, the Kaavad bearer and the Bhaat genealogist. And here they would introduce me as a researcher.

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Video: Playing in regional language (5:10 to 5:38)

In his own village, the kaavadiya storyteller hides his identity. In contrast, in the village of the patron, he claims recognition, status and identity from his patrons.

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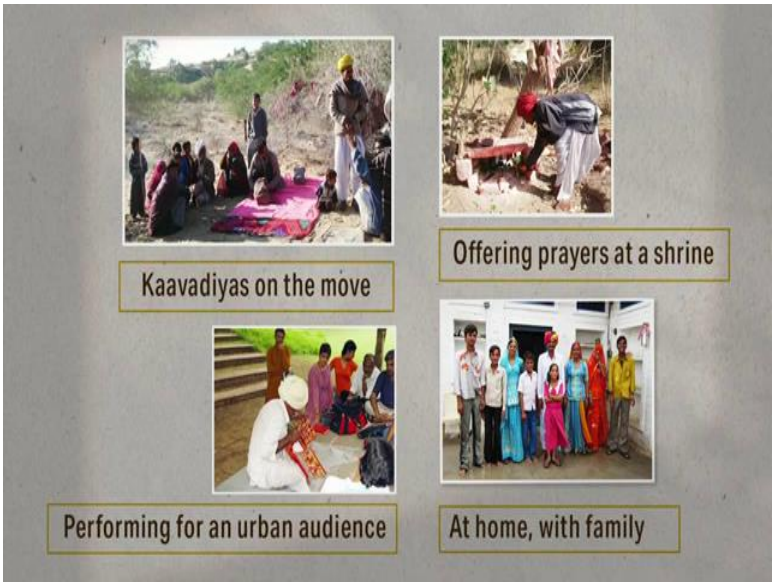

I gained this insight about the kaavadiyas by spending time with them in different villages, and at different times. During the times when they were performing, and the times when they were not. This is an important aspect of fieldwork: observing the different aspects of our participants' lives.

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We observe the many phenomena, people, activities and locations that their context is composed of. We draw connections between different instances of observation. As we do so, we start to see the underlying web of meanings that define our participants' lives. This helps us contextualise the phenomena we are focused on, and understand what it means to them.

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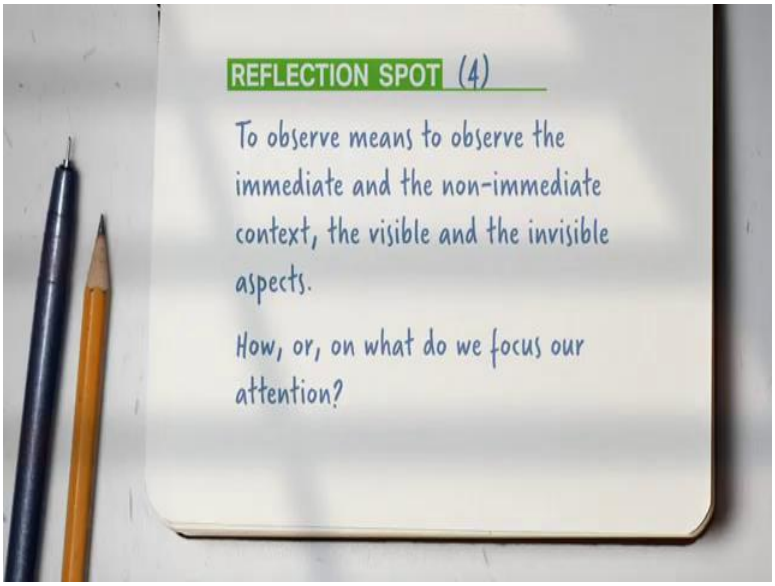

Let us pause for a moment here and think. **If we are to try and observe everything about the**

immediate and non-immediate context, how do we know where to focus our attention?

This is an important, and rather practical question for ethnographers in the field. Some

of you may have said that we need to keep observing. As we analyse our observations, we will know what to focus on.

This is an acceptable answer. However, this approach may lead us into many different directions. Everything seems interesting, and everything seems important. Observing as much as we can, we may find ourselves buried under our own material. So what may be an alternative approach? As important as it is to learn from everything in the context, it is just as important to set some boundaries for our fieldwork.

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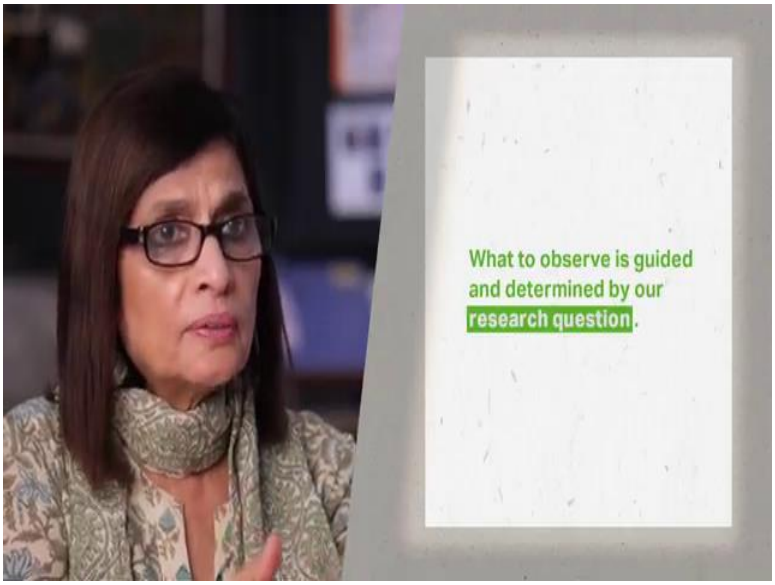

What to observe is guided and determined by our research question. While preparing for fieldwork, we had learned to break down our research question. In fieldwork, these various dimensions of the research question must guide our focus.

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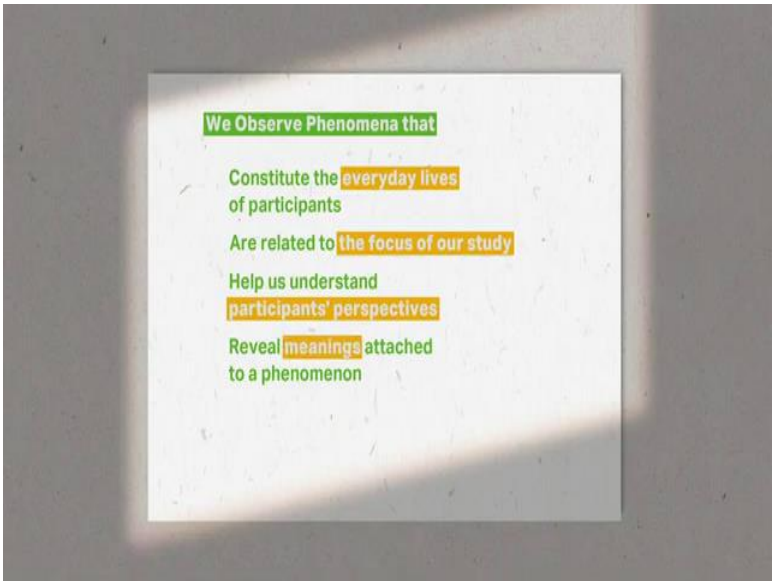

What to observe is guided and determined by our research question. While preparing for fieldwork, we had learned to break down our research question. In fieldwork, these various dimensions of the research question must guide our focus. We can also use some simple parameters to determine what to observe. We must try to observe phenomena which constitute the everyday lives of our participants, events and rituals we are interested in learning about. The events and activities we observe should help us understand our participants' perspectives of their world, and reveal meanings that people attach to a phenomenon. If a phenomenon adds to our understanding of any of these, we should observe it. In the early stages of our fieldwork, we learn about various phenomena in our participants' lives.

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As we proceed with fieldwork, the focus of our study gradually narrows down, we start to focus on aspects which are more closely related to our research question. In looking closely at a narrow set of phenomena, we see that there is so much more to them. It is like looking through a microscope. Often, at this stage, new questions may emerge.

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These may force us to rethink the research question we had started out with. We should be open to this possibility. I had started out wanting to learn about the Kaavad as a form of storytelling, but as I got closer to the phenomenon, my understanding of it evolved.

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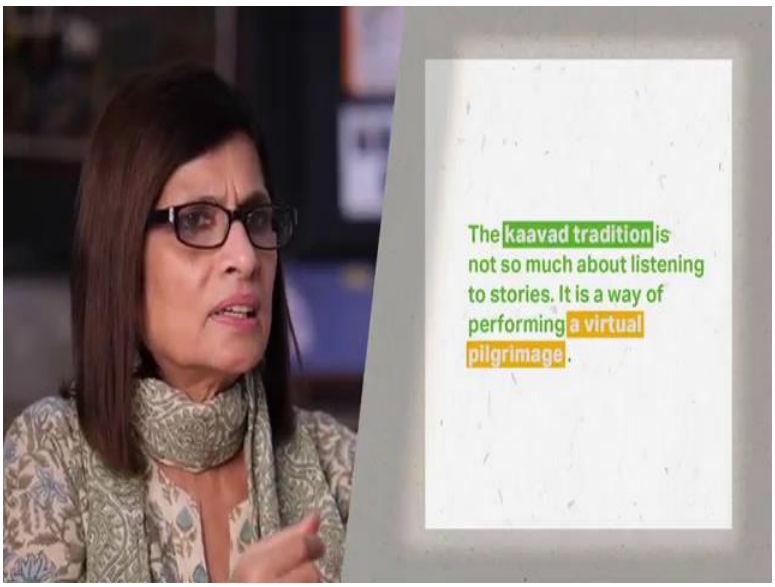

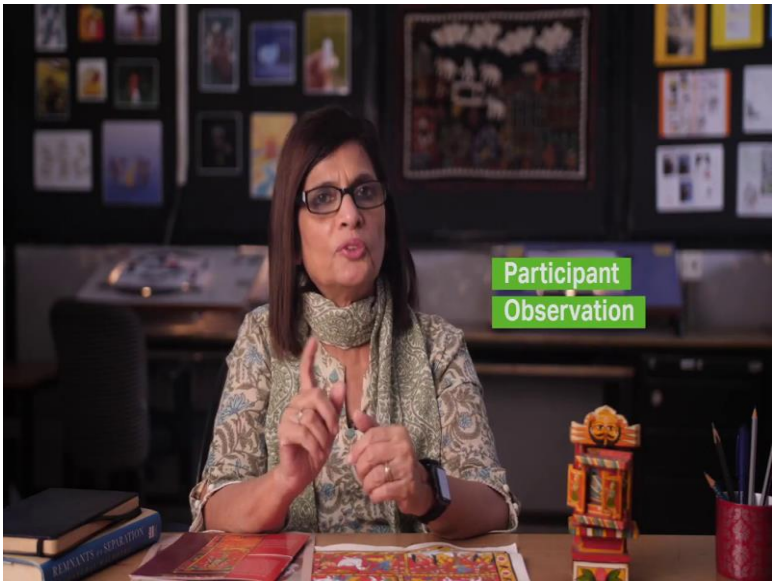

I realised that it isn't simply about reciting and listening to stories. It is a way of performing a virtual pilgrimage. Perhaps this, more than anything else, keeps the phenomenon alive. So as my focus narrowed, I recognised new dimensions to the phenomenon, which took my research towards new and interesting directions. I guess you could say that the structure of fieldwork is something like an hourglass.

It starts out broad, then narrows, then the narrow bit expands into unexpected directions or dimensions. Sometimes, it is not enough to observe our participants from a distance. Sometimes, we need to place ourselves in their positions to actually understand their perspectives and the meanings that they assign to the phenomena. This is when we carry out participant observation, which will be the subject of our next session.