

**Understanding Ethnography**  
**Week 5**  
**Lecture 04**  
**Participant Observation**

We have earlier described participant observation. It is a method of learning in which we participate in the everyday and occasional activities of the phenomena that we want to study. By participating in a phenomenon, we try to learn the meanings that the other associates with it.

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Let us refer to my research with Bhil artists, in which I collaborated with them on an animated film. As part of the research, I focused on the traditional art of the Bhils, I wanted to understand the reasons that motivated them to practice their art. And, I wanted to learn what the art meant to them since it is also a part of their rituals. I realised that this would be difficult to understand simply by observing them paint.

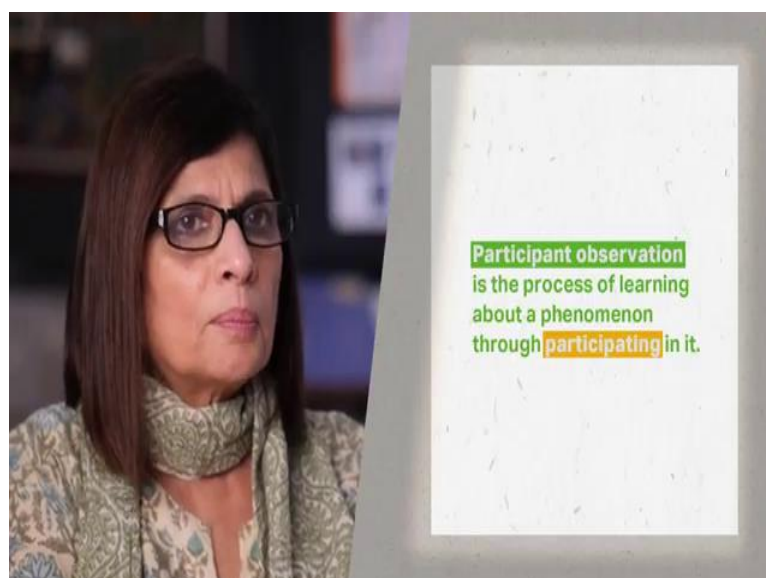
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And it was difficult for the Bhil artists to explain in words how they practice their art so I decided to participate in the art making, learning to paint in the style of the Bhils. In the process of learning I came to imbibe the sense of color and form that define Bhil paintings. I also learned the techniques, skill and discipline that goes into making these paintings. While painting together, we had several informal conversations about why they paint.

These learnings, combined with knowledge gathered from conversations and readings, helped me understand the relationship between the Bhil artists and their art form. The ideas for our film emerged from these conversations. So just like observation is about seeing and trying to make sense of what we are looking at, participant observation is about trying to understand a phenomenon as we take part in it.

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Some ethnographers consider participant observation as the core of ethnographic practice. And as the primary way of immersing ourselves in the context.

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Whether we agree with this or not, participant observation is an invaluable method, which enriches our research engagements in many ways. Let us elaborate. Participant observation enables us and our participants to shift out of roles of observer and observed. We become participants, sometimes even collaborators in a shared activity. This collaboration makes the researcher more of a member of the community and not someone observing from the outside.

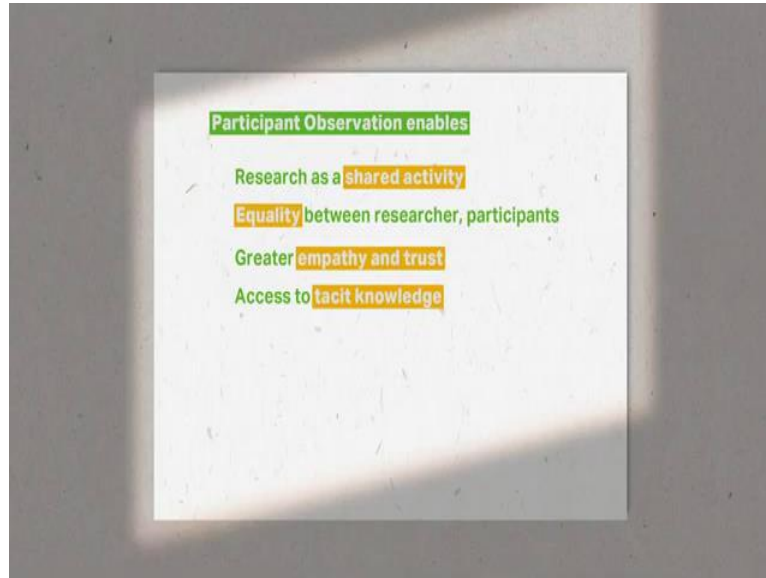
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Video: “Okay, this hand and that hand will go for rice. Good.”

While we may still be outsiders, we take on the role of someone who is learning to be a part of the context.

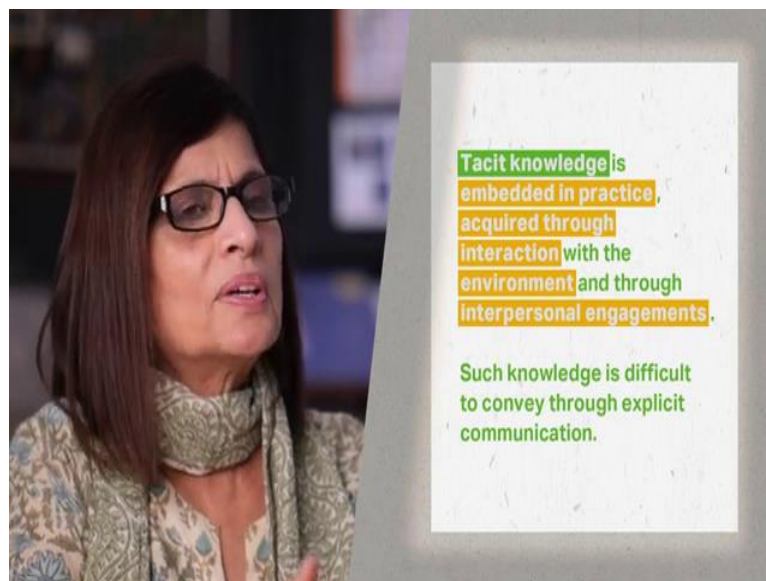
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This blunts the power hierarchy that may otherwise exist between the observer and the observed. And we are able to develop a more equal relationship that of co-participants. As I participated with the Bhil artists, we took on the roles of teacher and learner with Sher Singh teaching me, and eventually, we became fellow artists and collaborators.

In becoming the learner, I opened myself up to trying something new and making mistakes at a task, which the Bhil artists were already adept at. This helped create a sense of empathy between us. They were able to identify with the difficulties I was facing. And I was able to appreciate their skill and craftsmanship and the values they attached to their work.

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Participating in an activity enables us to access tacit knowledge, a knowledge that cannot be articulated in words. This is the kind of knowledge that is often learned through practice and experience.



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In the Bhil form of painting, each image is composed of several dots. As I learned to paint in that style, I realised that this process puts the painter in an almost meditative state. Perhaps that is one of the reasons why for the Bhils, the act of painting is a sacred one. I may not have understood this had I not participated with the Bhil artists. This is the value of participation.

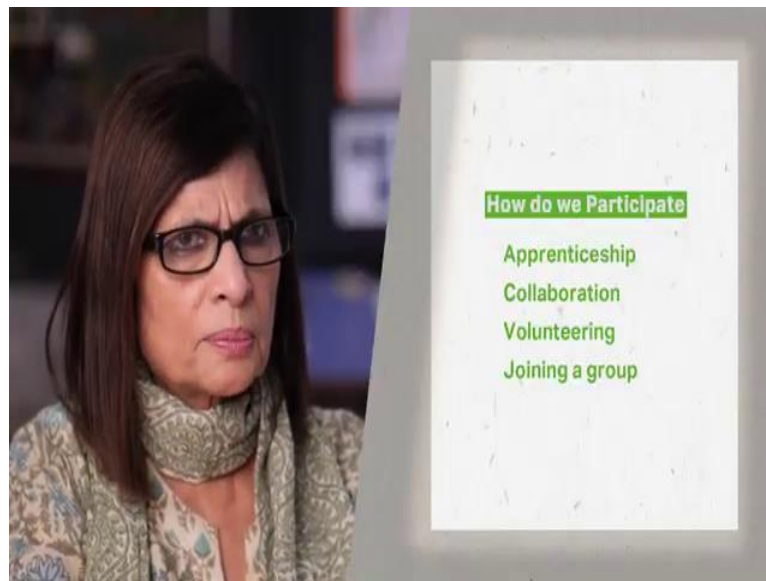
By participating in activities and routines that make up our participants' lives, we place ourselves in the physical and emotional conditions that they experience. It is like the old adage of understanding someone by walking in their shoes. Here, we may not be walking in the shoes of our participants, but we are often quite literally walking with them to wherever they might be going.

This brings us to the key question, how to do participant observation or rather how to be a participant-observer? It requires us to do two tasks simultaneously! This is very similar to asking to immerse oneself in the context. In fact, the practice of participant observation is quite similar to immersion.

Participant observation, like immersion, is an attempt to find a role and place for ourselves among our participant community. But there is also a significant difference. In participant

observation, the emphasis is on participating, not simply on spending time in the context. A good way to learn how to do participant observation is to look at the work of other ethnographers who have used this method.

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And there are some standard ways in which researchers participate. Apprenticeship or learning is a great way to be a participant observant.

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An example of this is the work of Robert Desjarlais among Yolmo community in Nepal. Desjarlais was studying healing practices that the community follows. In the process of this research, he trained to become Yolmo shaman or healer. This is participating through learning. It is similar to my work with the Bhil artists, where I participated in their world by learning their art form.



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My work with the Bhils is also an example of collaboration as participant observation. In working together to make a film about their art tradition, we became collaborators.

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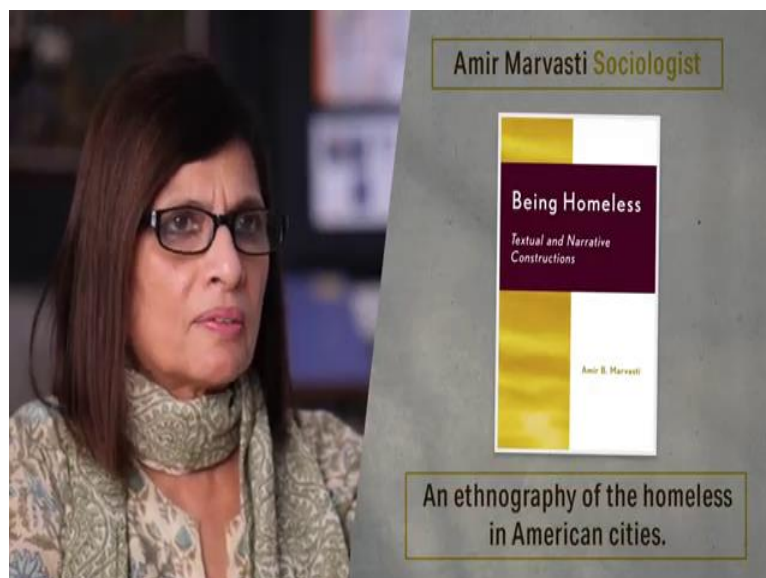
This gave me a new way of participating and learning about the Bhils, and the film became a shared project, which each of us owned and worked on.

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Volunteering or working with the community we want to study is another way of participating. Researchers studying buying behaviour, for example, often play the role of salespersons at shops, assisting customers and learning about the factors that drive buying decisions.

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Qualitative researcher, Amir Marvasti, in trying to work with homeless people took on the job of a volunteer staff at the homeless shelter. Even though he was not living as them or with them, he was able to play a certain role in their world of which the shelter was a part

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Sometimes there are more structured or formal groups within the participants' community that we can become a part of.

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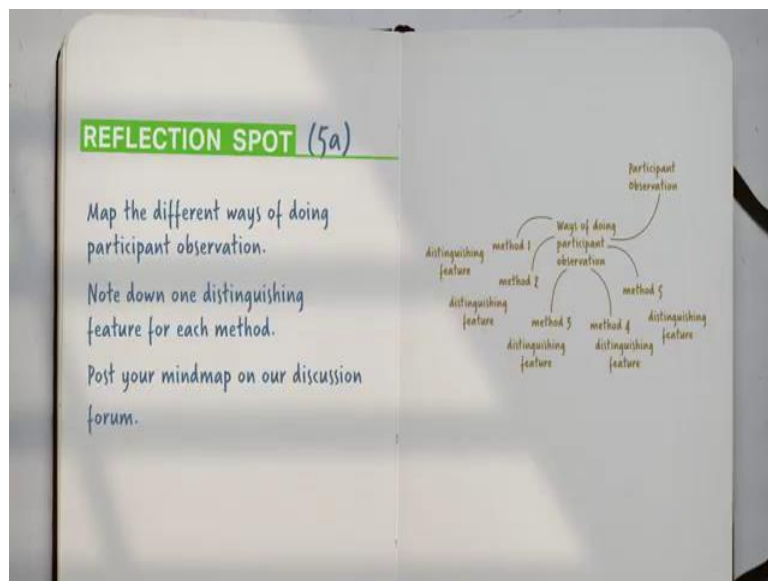
In conducting research on British migrants to Spain, Karen O'Reilly found clubs which some of the migrants were a part of. These clubs played an important role in their social lives. O'Reilly joined some of these clubs as a way of accessing her participants. By becoming a part of the club's activities, she automatically became a part of participants' social lives. Let us take a minute to revise what we have learnt. Over the course of this section, we have been discussing different ways of doing participant observation. I would like you to make a diagram or a mindmap of these. Here is how you can go about it.

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Go to this mind map tool, or take a sheet of paper and some pens.

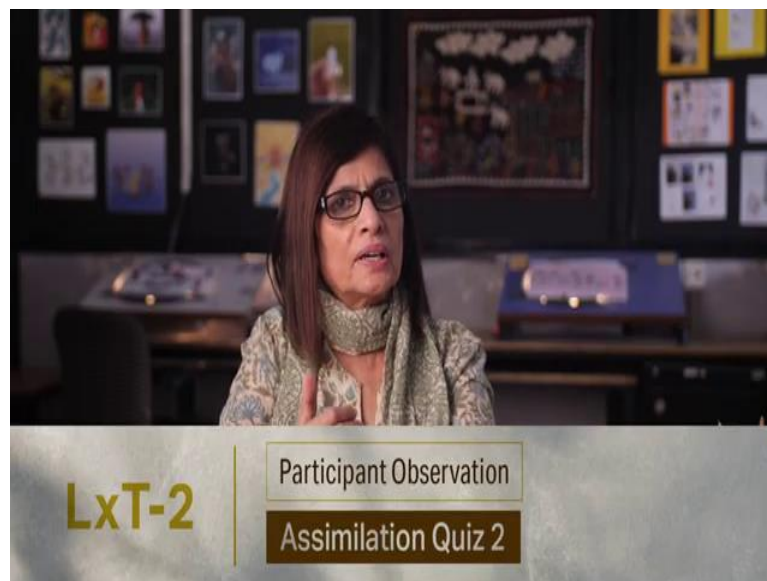
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Think of the different ways of doing participant observation that we have discussed. Map these onto your mindmap, for each way of doing participant observation note down one distinguishing feature. Then take a picture or a screenshot of the map you have created and post it on our discussion forum. Take a minute to make your notes.



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Here is a collection of case studies of participant observation. Go through these and then you can take a quiz to revise and test what you have learnt just like with immersion, there are also degrees of participant observation. We will discuss this in our next section.