

Understanding Ethnography Degrees of Participation Lecture No 5

We can participate in different ways in the lives of our participants. We can be less or more involved and participate in tasks that are peripheral or central to their lives.

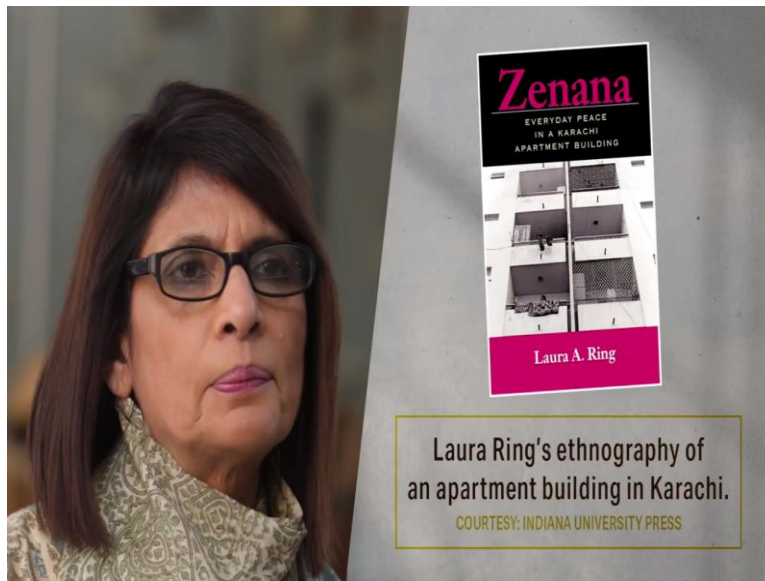
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For the sake of explanation, we can say there are different degrees of participation. Sometimes we find ethnographers taking on the roles of very people they are interested to learn from. In these instances, the researcher attempts to experience the way of life, the daily activities and the

tasks of the participants. So we see ethnographers taking on the role of taxi drivers, factory workers, musicians, midwives, and so on. By critically reflecting on their own experiences in this new role, they try to understand the perspectives of their participants. Some ethnographers choose to live in the context but maintain their own personal space within it.

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Laura Ring's work in Karachi is such an example. For the period of her research, Ring lived in the apartment in the very building that formed the location of her fieldwork. She lived alongside, but not with her participants. Doing this enabled her to maintain a boundary between her personal life and her research.

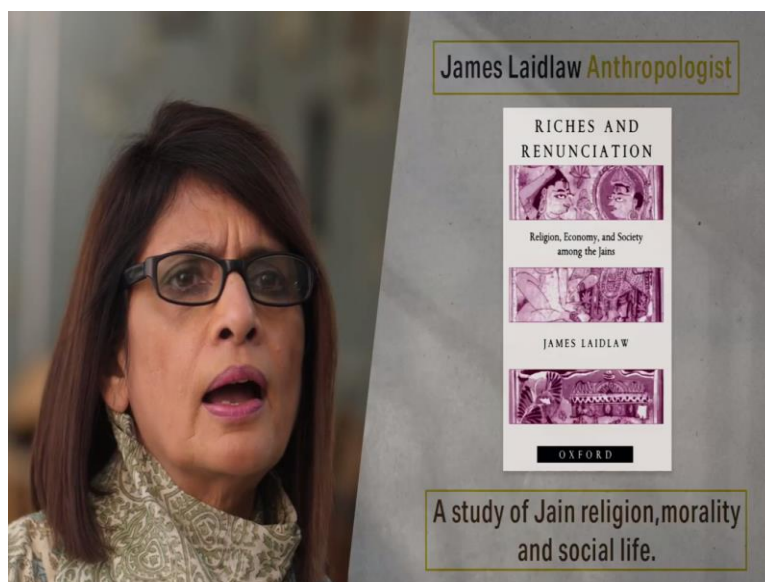
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There are also plenty of cases where researchers step in and out of the context. The work of Beatrice Potter Webb is one such example. Potter Webb is considered among the earliest of participant-observers. She was interested in studying the lives of working-class people in newly industrialised England. So, she would take on certain jobs that enabled her to gain access and study the lives of her participant population. She is known to have worked as a rent collector and as a seamstress in the working-class neighbourhoods of London.

She would do these jobs for brief periods of time, such as a few weeks, or a few months. During the period in which she was employed in one of these jobs, she would go do her research in working-class neighbourhoods, in the daytime. And in the evening, she would return to her home in an affluent part of the city. In this way, she would step in and out of the life of the rent collector and her own life, and her engagement remained limited to the working conditions and not the living conditions of her participants.

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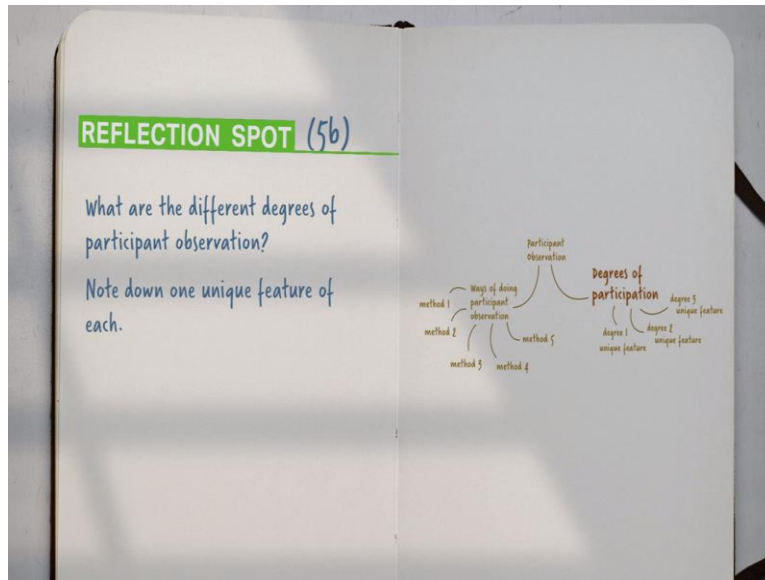




Ethnographers may also participate in tasks that are peripheral to the phenomenon. Anthropologist James Laidlaw spent many years living in Jaipur, studying the Jain community. Laidlaw was interested in exploring how religious ideas of the Jains intermingled with their social and economic practices. And so he became quite familiar with Jain philosophy and religion. He was not living with his participants. Nor was he partaking in their religious practices.

Yet, he was often a welcome observer in their temples, homes and shared spaces. He also engaged in discussions on Jain philosophy and religion with many practitioners of Jainism. In this way, he participated in the context, but in a peripheral way, basing most of his research on observations and conversations.

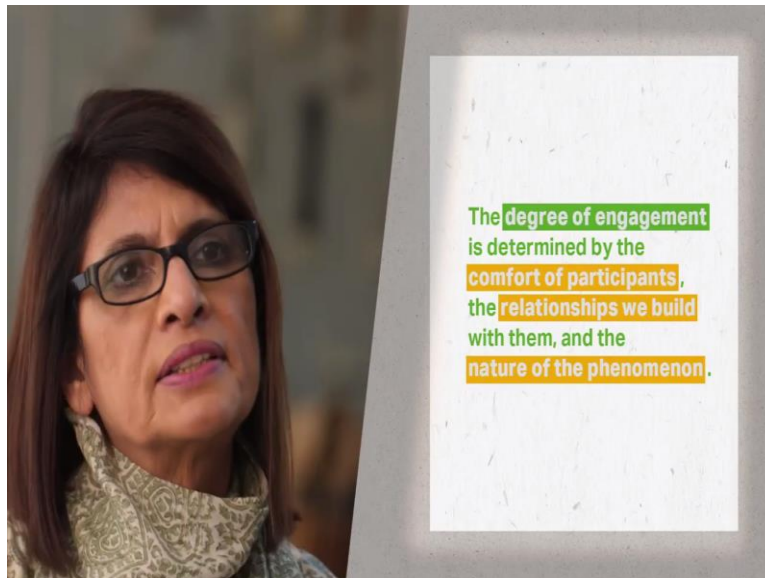
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Let us pause here for a moment and return to the mindmap you made earlier. Add to it the different degrees of participant observation that we have discussed. And for each degree that you note, write down one unique feature. Okay, let us return to our discussion. As we do our fieldwork, we may feel overwhelmed or confused by all the different categories and ways of engaging, active, partial, peripheral, and so on.

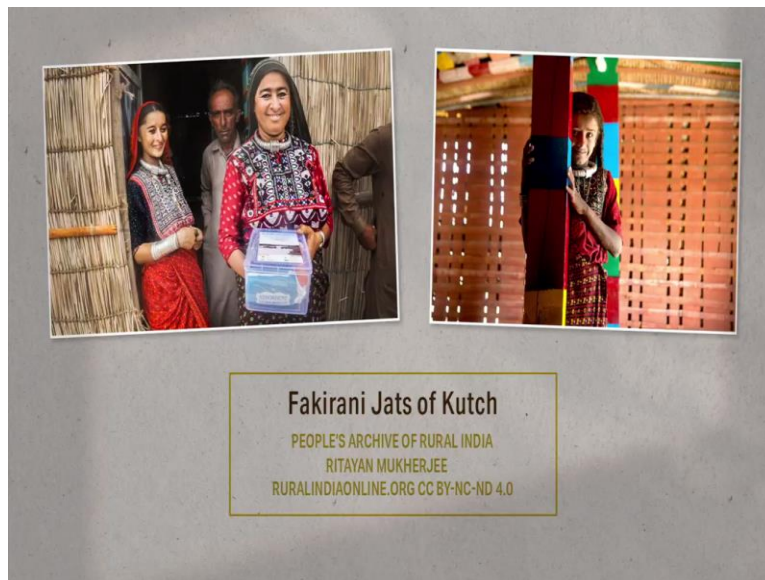
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Sometimes it is hard to know if we are trying to gain access or immerse ourselves. Are we observing our participants or participating with them? These are valid confusions and part of the nonlinear structure of ethnographic research. There is a considerable overlap between one aspect of the practice and another. And the degree of our involvement is also determined by the comfort levels shared between participants and us. As we participate or immerse ourselves, we must be careful not to overstep the line that may make us or the other uncomfortable.

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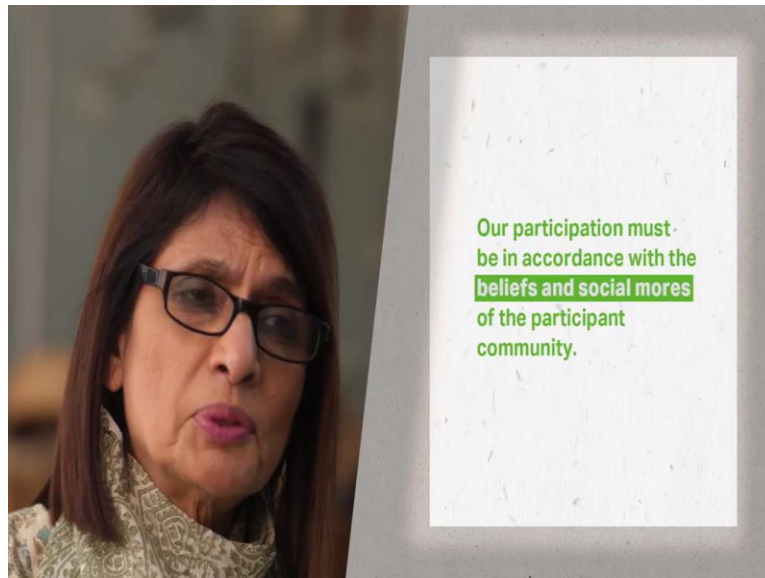
You may recall the story of my interaction with the Fakirani Jats in Kutch. It is important to remember that we may not be welcomed to participate in all phenomena and activities. We should be aware of the role that we have acquired so far in our participant community, and interact in accordance with that role. Let us look at an example to further understand this.

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Karen O'Reilly wanted to study members of a formal club, so she joined in as a volunteer offered to take on the task of making coffee for staff members before a big club meeting. Driven by her enthusiasm, she stayed on to serve the coffee to the members who came for the meeting. After the meeting, the manager of the club was quite upset with O'Reilly. She had upset the regular staff by serving coffee during the meeting. This was supposed to be their job and not the job of volunteers like O'Reilly. She learnt that enthusiasm in participating is not always a good thing.

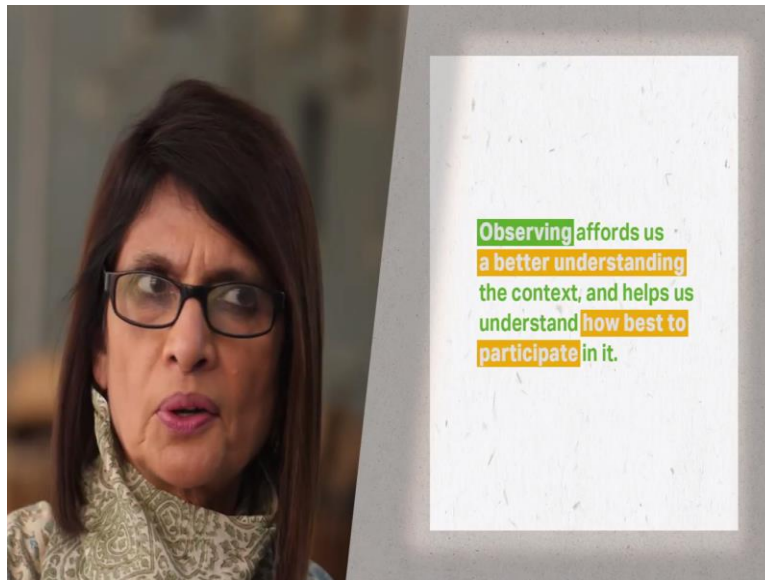
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It is also important to remember the differences between our belief systems and those of the other, and then work in accordance with theirs. A researcher working in a village in North India learnt this. She was invited to a dinner at the home of her participant, an agricultural entrepreneur. She had only known the participant for a few days. So this invitation was an important step in building the relationship. The meal went off just fine.

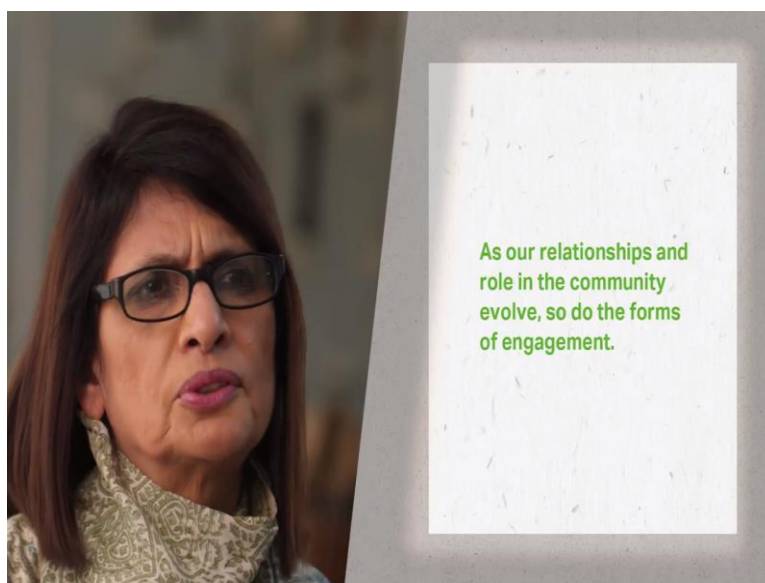
As she finished her food, the researcher insisted on putting away her used plate. In her logic, she was being a well-mannered guest. But to her host, this was an insult to their hospitality and against the norms of their home. Her small act of politeness resulted in an uncomfortable situation; she did not even anticipate. In both these examples, we see that sometimes we need to participate less and observe more.

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As we observe, we are likely to learn the social behaviour of our participants, and we may act accordingly. But there are also contexts where we cannot participate. These include areas of highly specialised skills, such as that of a doctor or a surgeon a dentist. Or areas and activities where outsiders are simply not allowed to participate, such as sacred rituals and religious ceremonies.

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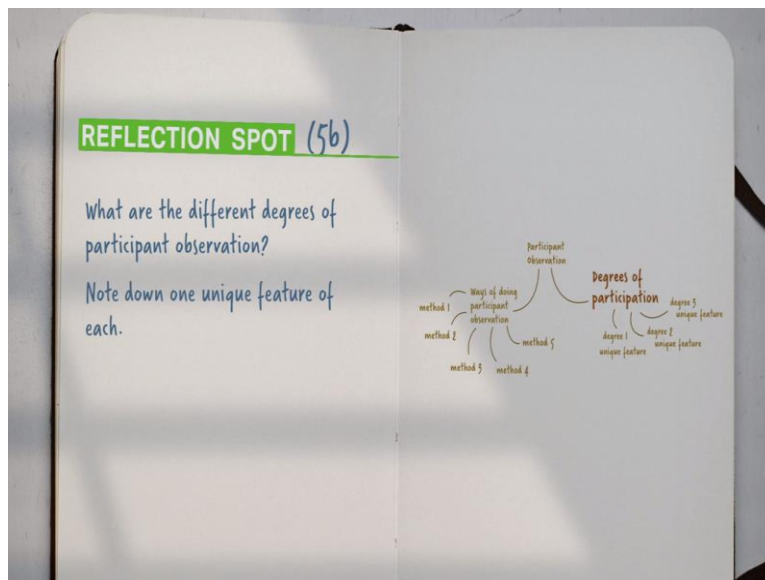


The and don'ts of participant observation change as our role changes among our participant community. For instance, recall the researcher who caused discomfort by putting away her used

plate. Perhaps if she had spent more time getting to know the household members, building familiarity with them, her action may have been more acceptable. As someone familiar to them, the participants may not have minded her entering the kitchen or the washing area to keep her plate.

Or possibly if she had been invited to a meal with only the women of the house, she may have been treated differently. Who knows she may have even been invited to help with cooking the meal. Either way, when we feel that our involvement may discomfort participants, we should focus on learning through other methods such as observation and listening. Let us take a moment here and return to the mind map exercise.

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Can you think of a few situations where you may not be able to do participant observation? Add these to your mindmap, and note down possible reasons for not being able to participate. And post this on the forum where we can discuss your answers.