

Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 4
Module 1: Equality and Empathy

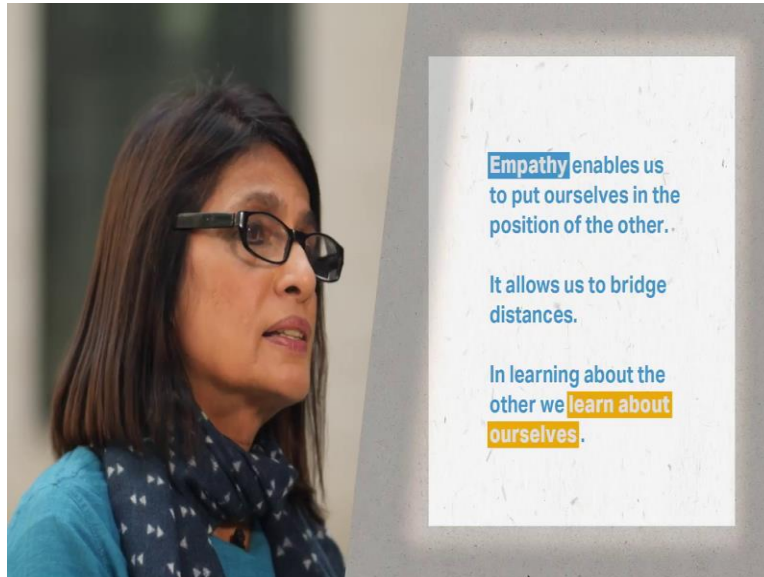
Building an equal and engaging relationship with our participants requires work and thought. This is because the researcher is often from a position of greater privilege, socially or economically. Recognising these privileges is part of understanding the position that we occupy in society and in the research interaction with our participants. This kind of understanding must go beyond politeness or kindness.

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Politeness, devoid of such a recognition may translate into a patronising attitude, which cannot generate an empathetic understanding of the other. Experienced researchers continue to grapple with these complexities. Perhaps the best way to deal with these complexities is through empathy, as we go from project to project, engaging with our participants. Before we go further, let us discuss empathy.

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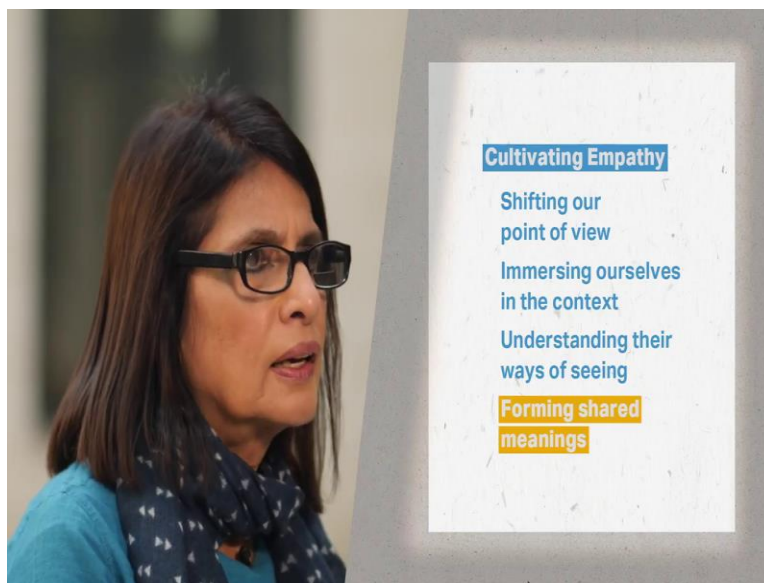
Empathy enables us to place ourselves in the position of the other, allowing us to bridge distances that exist or the distances we sometimes create, between the other and ourselves. At the core of the idea of empathy lies the belief that in learning about the other, we learn about ourselves, and, it is by learning about ourselves we are able to better understand the other.

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Thus, self-reflexivity, or being conscious of our own actions and intentions is a core part of empathy. Empathy and self-reflexivity enable us to be more open, more accepting of world-views and ideas that differ from our own. They help us see the differences in our reality and that of the other, making it possible to bridge the gap created by ‘othering’. But can empathy be actively practised in one’s work? *Is empathy an inherent trait, or can empathy be taught?* Well, we would like to say, “It can be cultivated”, like cultivating respect for others and for oneself.

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Cultivating empathy as a conscious practice is like teaching oneself new ways of seeing what is already familiar. It is, literally, the act of shifting our points of view so that we may be able to share someone else’s perspective. For this, we need to immerse ourselves in the world of the other, which we also refer to as their *context*. Spending time in the physical surroundings they occupy introduces us to the social and material realities of their worlds.

We believe that by immersing ourselves in different aspects of the other’s world, we come to understand their ways of seeing their world. So then, when we interact with them, we are able to better understand the meanings and associations underlying their narratives and descriptions. We are able to form shared meanings with them. This idea of *shared meaning* is central to empathy.

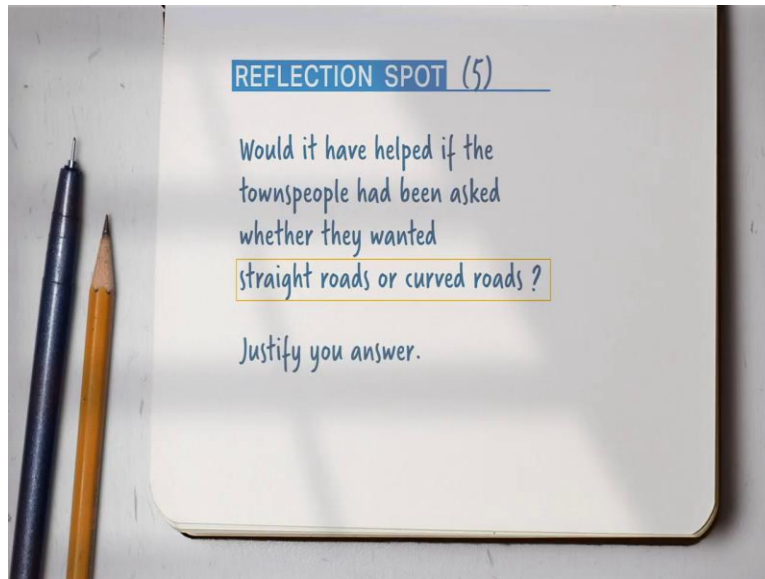
Immersion in the other's context is, broadly speaking, the practice through which we hope to build *shared meanings*, and hence, *empathy*. Perhaps we can explain this through an example.

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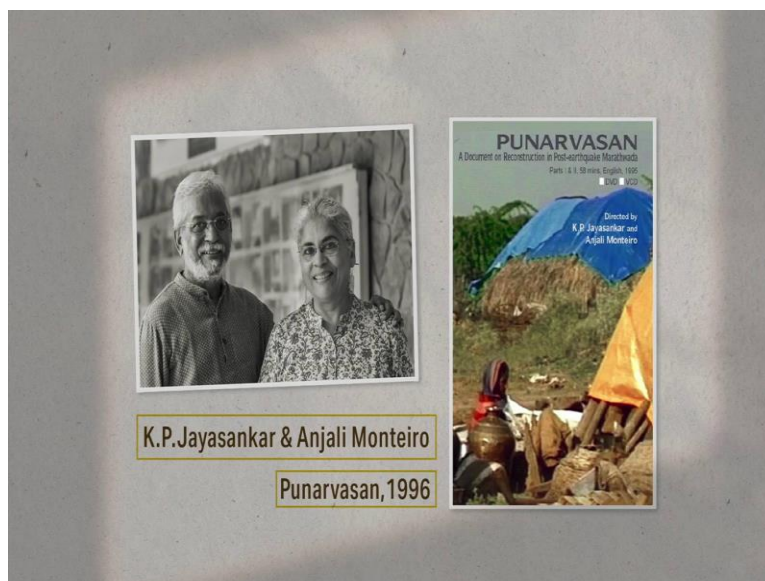
In 1993, a devastating earthquake shook Latur, in Maharashtra. Almost 10,000 people died, and many public amenities were destroyed, including roads. Engineers working on road-building in post-earthquake Latur wanted to find out what kind of roads were required for the town.

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Let's pause the video here. *Do you think it would have helped if the engineers and administrators had asked the townspeople to select what kinds of roads they wanted—straight or curved?* Would this have led the engineers to make a correct assessment of the need of the townspeople? *How would you justify your answer?* Some of you may have thought it is fine to ask the townspeople to choose from two given options. Others might have their doubts. Let us see how things actually turned out.

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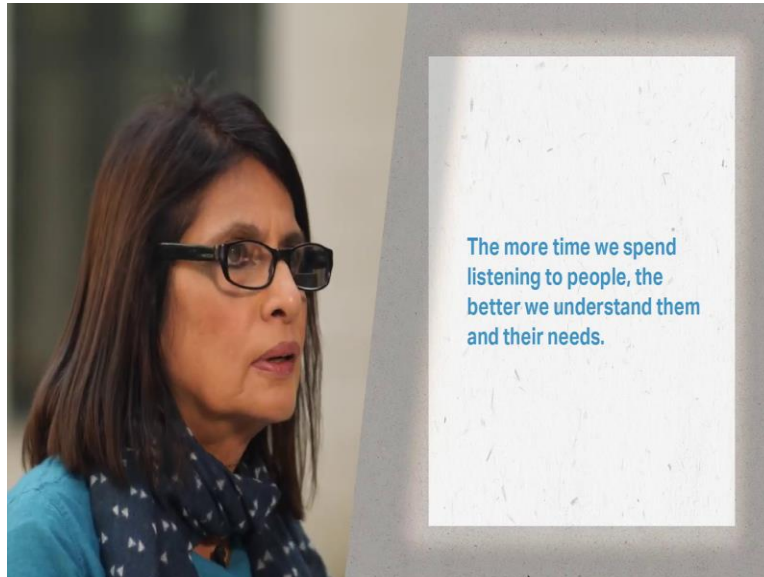
Here we have a short video from filmmakers *Anjali Monterio and K P Jayasankar*. This is an excerpt from their film *Punarvasan*, which is about the rehabilitation process in Latur. [Video being played: Most of the donor constructed villages consist of row after row of identical concrete box-like structures with uniformly broad roads. Such layouts which have perhaps been lifted from urban housing schemes are unsuited to the hot, dusty climate of the area involve unnecessary infrastructural cost and do not take into account specific local needs for community spaces and access to fields.

However, in some village planning exercises done by the government people appear to prefer grid to cluster layouts. The biggest benefit of a linear grid pattern is every house has a road approach and more important nobody encroaches upon any open space in terms of his own influence in the village. So, this is the reason why the linearity is really being preferred.

It is a bad plan, it is a bad space it is, it does not suit their lifestyle but why still people are choosing the same, why? They were, and I realised there were so many mistakes which happened actually that you asking, you ask questions like this that you want straight roads or curved roads? And the obvious answer will be straight roads (bu) by asking this question like you want a straight road or curved road you are trying to get the information explicit and this process of making the implicit information into explicit was distorting the product, the result.[Video ends]

In this excerpt, we see the impact of the engineers'-administrators' approach to road-building in Latur. The options they gave the townspeople were based on *their* knowledge, which had its own assumptions and gaps. It did not take into consideration the needs and knowledge of the townspeople.

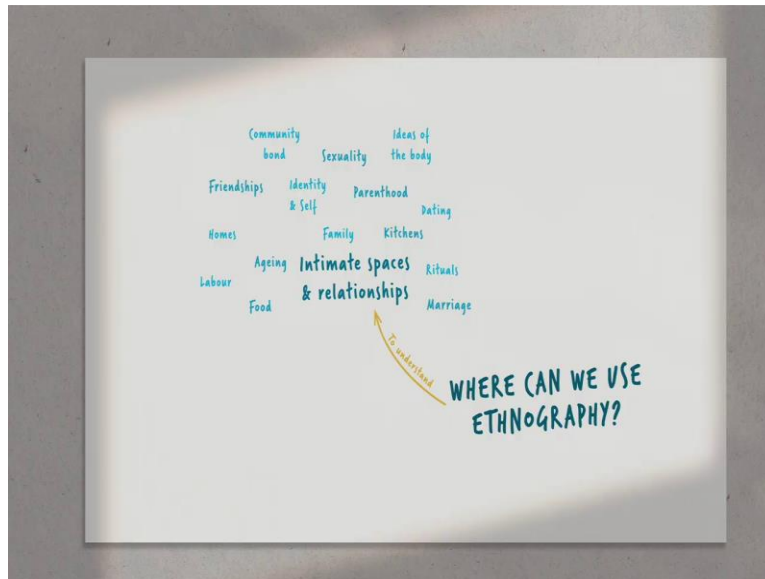
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Had they spent more time talking and listening to people, they may have got more insights into what the people required, and importantly, what different groups of people required. What we want to emphasise through this example is that even a common thing like a road is not simply 'straight or curved'. The road, and everything else that constitutes our lives has many meanings associated with it.

To understand these meanings, we have to understand the persons and their context. It is this kind of multi-layered, complex understanding that we may gain through ethnographic research.

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And it is this that has made it the research method of choice for a wide range of subjects and projects. This includes projects which need to look into intimate spaces - homes, kitchens, ideas of the body, belief systems and so on. These are subjects which are difficult to understand through large scale surveys or even limited duration interviews.

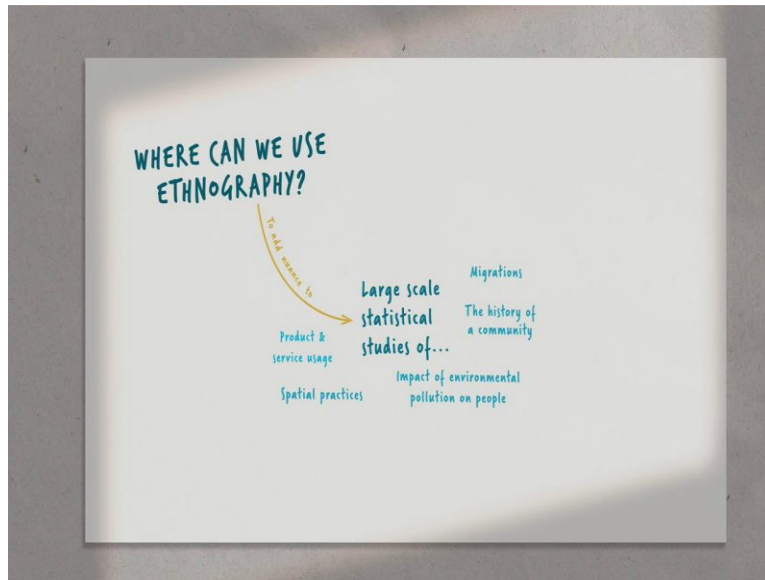
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Ethnography is increasingly applied to projects where one is trying to understand practices that are both widespread and locally rooted. It has also proved useful for

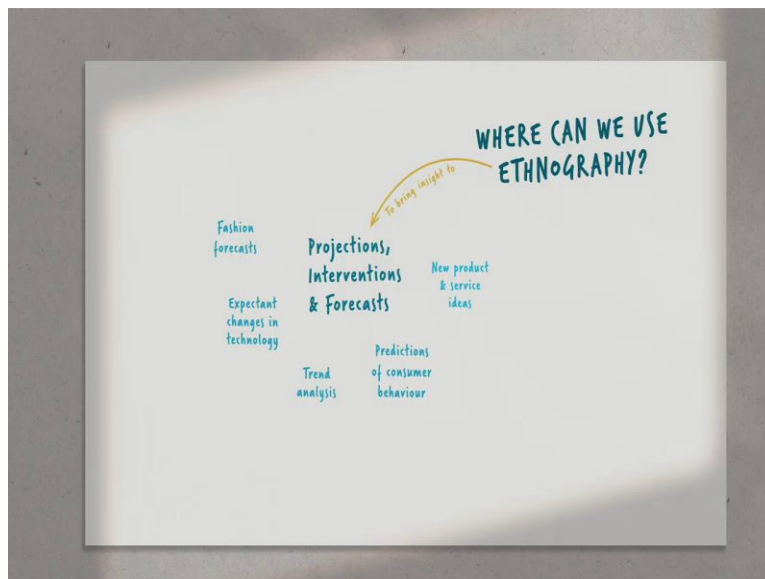
understanding complex systems like healthcare and education, where one needs a nuanced understanding of people's interactions with these systems.

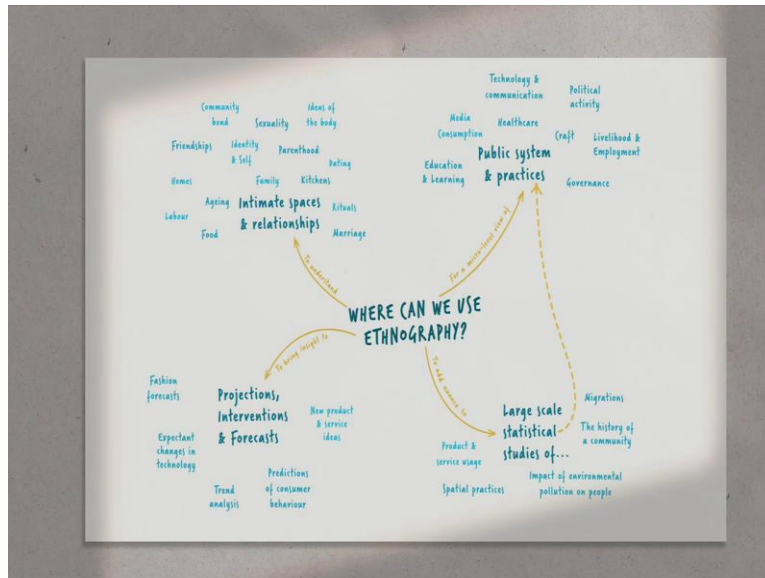
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Even when we need numbers and statistical analysis, ethnography provides a nuanced understanding of the phenomenon that may validate or interrogate or further elaborate upon the numerical data.

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Similarly, when a project requires some kind of projection - like fashion forecasting or trend analysis, ethnography can provide additional insights to the statistical or survey data collected for such an endeavour. For those of you interested in exploring ethnography for social development issues and design projects, see the additional material provided. And there is a quiz that you can take to test your understanding of this material.