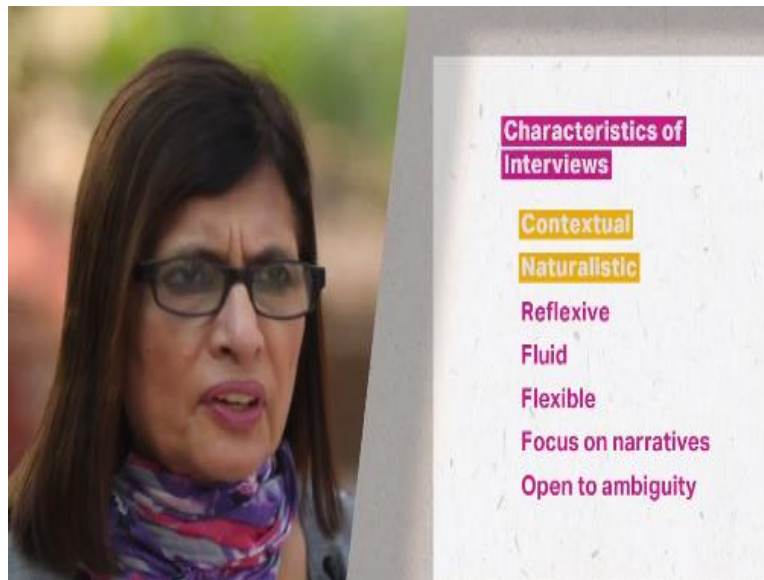


Understanding Ethnography

Lecture No 43

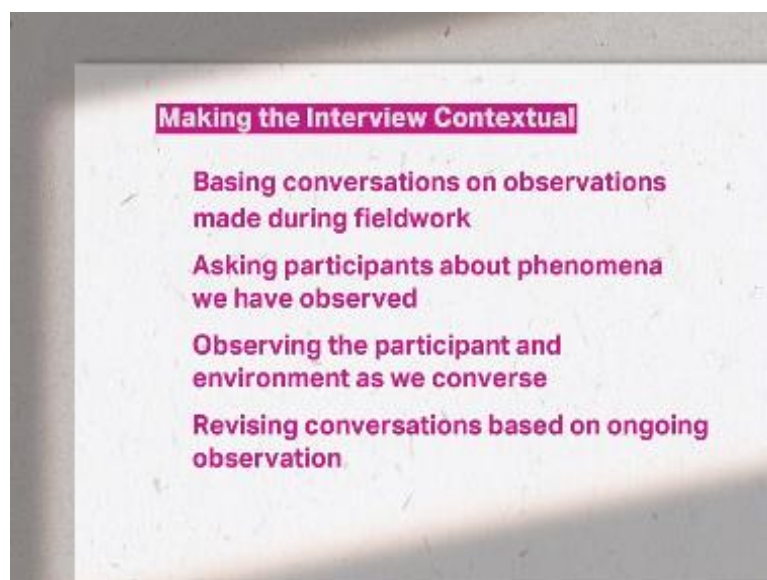
Characteristics of Interviews

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Let us now look at some of the fundamental characteristics of an ethnographic interview, whatever form it may take. An ethnographic interview like observation is situated in the 'natural' context of the participant or the interviewee.

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In doing an ethnographic interview, we bring the context into the conversation. We can do this by basing the conversation on what we have heard or seen in the field. Or by using the interview as a way of better understanding the participant's perspective of certain phenomena.

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Let us look at this example a team of researchers wanted to learn about the ways in which mobile phones were used by working women such as beauticians, tailors, beedi makers in small towns and villages. The researchers wanted to interview with their participants as they went about their day at their homes and workplaces.

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This allows the researchers to understand the context in which the women functioned and the ways in which the phone became a part of that environment and their various tasks. While observing the women, the researchers noted that it was common for the women to take calls from unknown numbers because many of these numbers were of potential clients and would bring in more work. However, some of these calls turn out to be lewd calls or prank calls from strangers.

Having observed this, they recognised that there were both pros and cons to owning a mobile phone. In subsequent interviews, they were able to ask the participants nuanced questions about this duality- accessing more business through the phone and becoming accessible to harassment through the phone. Thus, observation opened up a topic of discussion that the researchers may not have otherwise thought of.

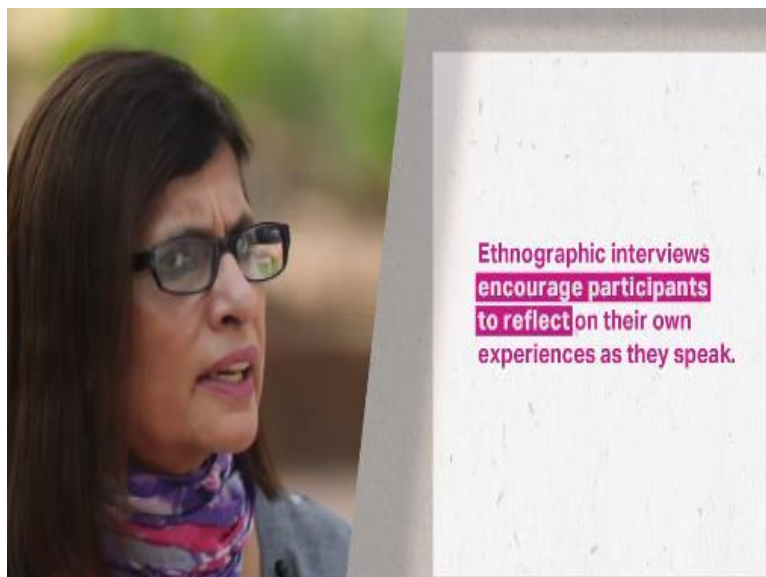
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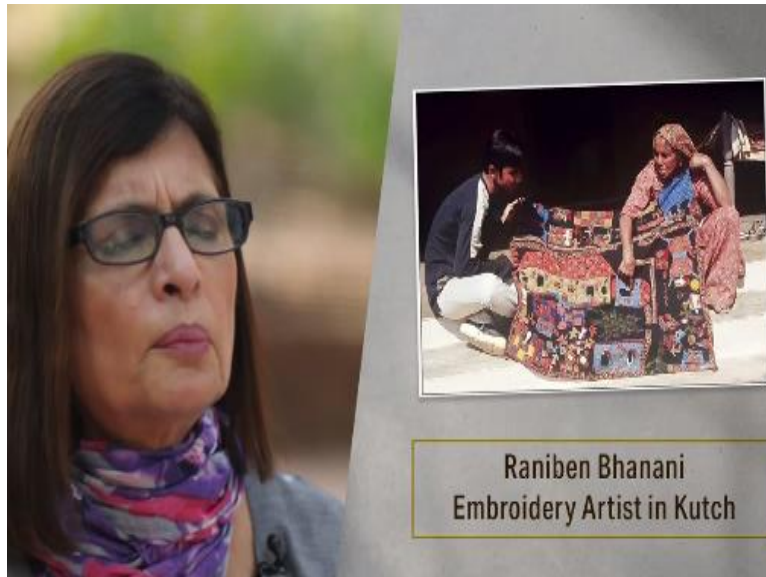
This is an important attribute of ethnographic interviews that they are reflexive in nature. Researchers reflect on observations of the context and on conversations they have had with their participants which lead them to ask more questions, find new directions and dimensions for their research. Ethnographic interviews are also reflexive for the participant.

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The conversation is usually designed in a way that encourages participants to explore meaning and emotions associated with phenomena. In doing this, they often reflect on their own ideas, opinions and experiences.

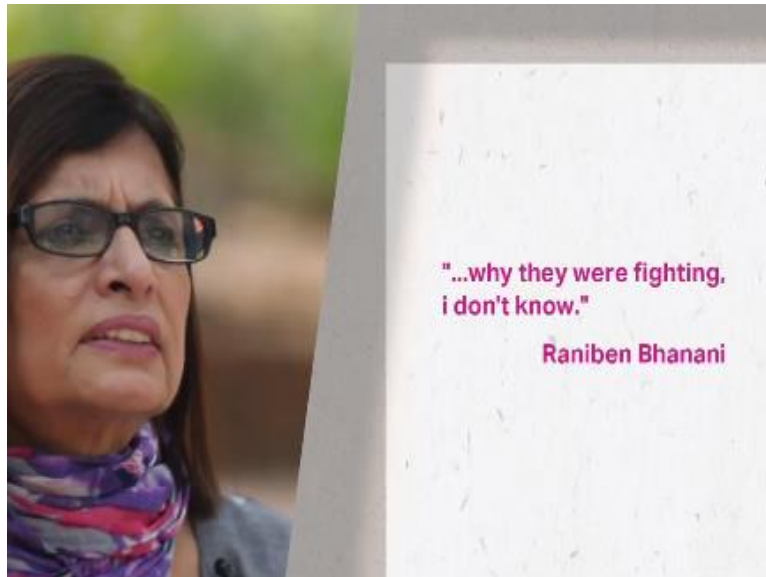
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Here is another example. While I was speaking to Raniben my participant in Kutch about her history, she spoke about having to leave her home in Pakistan because of the Indo-Pak war. As she spoke about that period of her life, she reflected on the causes of the war. At one point in our conversation speaking about the conflict between India and Pakistan, she said why they were fighting I do not know.

Video: Playing in regional language (3:13 to 4:07)

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This phrase expresses the complete lack of agency and control that she must have experienced in the face of the war. Even though she and her community had nothing to do with the conflict between the two countries, the outcomes of this conflict changed the course of their lives. In speaking to me, she was able to reflect on these circumstances and on the impact of wars on ordinary people.

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This reflexivity makes the interview processed fluid in nature.

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In survey-based research, we often go out with a fixed questionnaire asking the same set of questions to all participants. In contrast, an ethnographic interview is organic in nature. While we do prepare a set of questions and topics that we want to discuss these are by no means fixed. The questions, the order in which they are asked, and even the topics of discussion evolve based on what participants share with us.

In fact, ethnographic interviews need to be fluid to enable greater reflection and introspection on the part of the researchers as well as the participant. If you have to go out with a fixed set of questions, then only stick to those chances are we would miss out on something that could surface as a part of a free conversation. This brings us to an important discussion on one of the characteristics of interviews.

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Their structure or rather the flexibility of their structure. Ethnographic interviews are often free-flowing or unstructured not based on a fixed, standardised questionnaire. This does not mean, however, that they are casual conversations. Sometimes we go out with a list of questions and sometimes we do not, but we all must always have a more or less defined set of topics that we want to talk about.

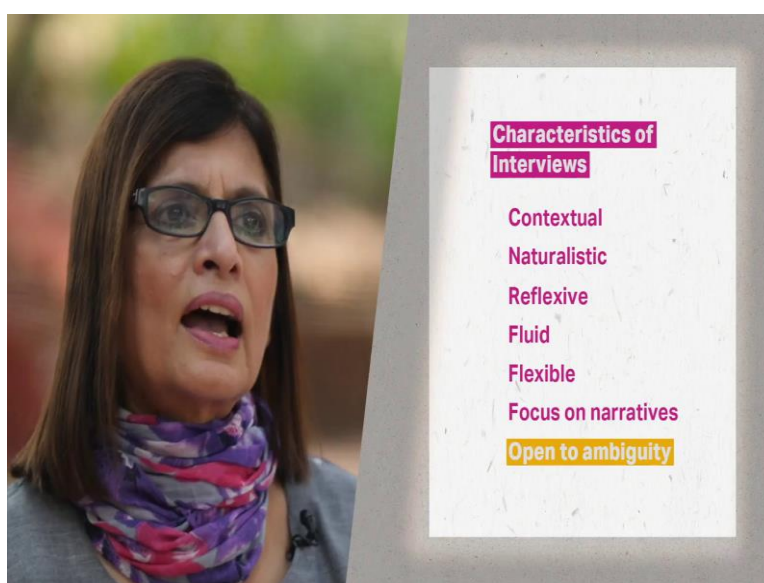
Working from this set which is also called an interview guide, we construct a conversation that moves organically between these various topics and importantly is also open to new ones. This makes the conducting of such interviews a very skilful process. The interviewer walks a tight rope between the possibility of exploring new topics and the conversation going completely off tangent.

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In interviewing people more often while using in-depth interviews than say during opportunistic chats we ask for narratives, stories and anecdotes. These may be narratives recounting the experiences of a person or a group, or they may be stories such as myths and folktales. We believe that by listening to narratives and stories, we can learn the meanings that our participants associate with the phenomena that the story is about.

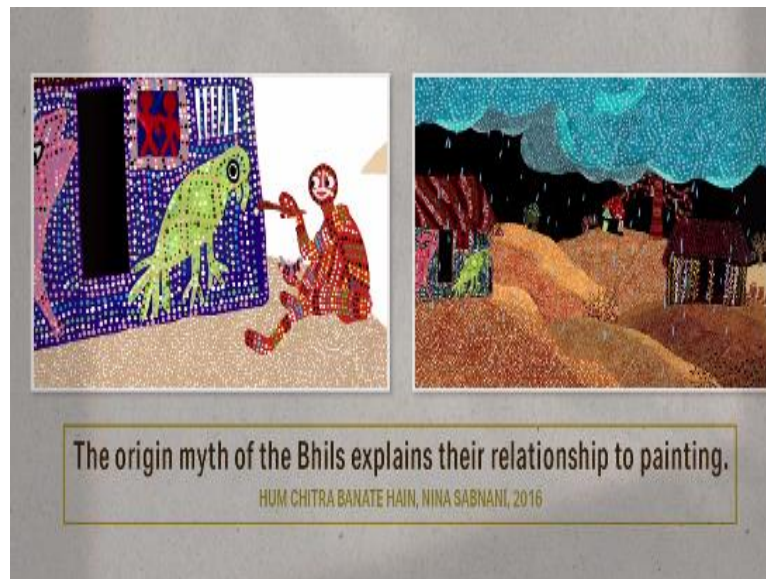
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And the last of the defining characteristics of the ethnographic interview is its acceptance of ambiguity. An ethnographic interview is not a search for 'facts' per se. Unlike a journalistic

interview or a survey in these interviews, we are seeking the participant's perceptions and perceptives.

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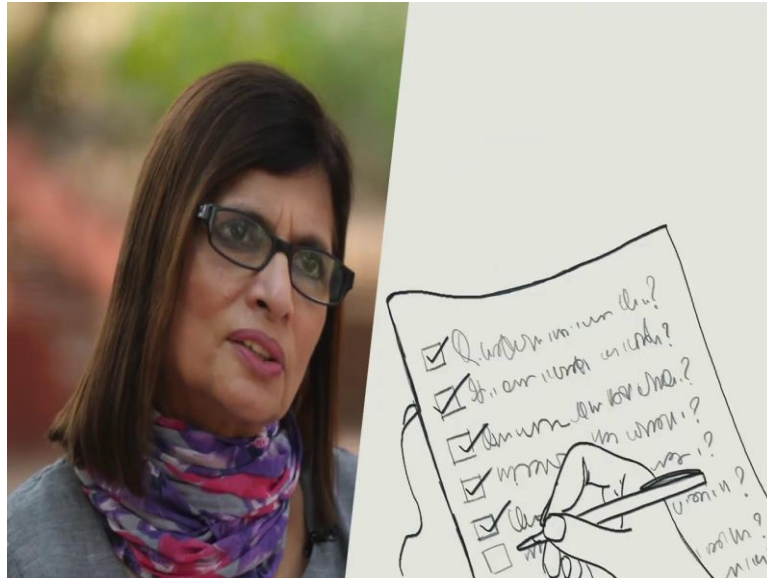


Take back to the origin myth of the Bhils that we started our discussion with. It is not a historical incident but a mythical one. This myth tells us so much about the Bhils, their relationship with making images and their conception of the world. It is these perspectives, revealed through narratives of personal experiences and folktales that are important to us. Now that you have heard about the characteristics of an ethnographic interview let us pause and do a small exercise.

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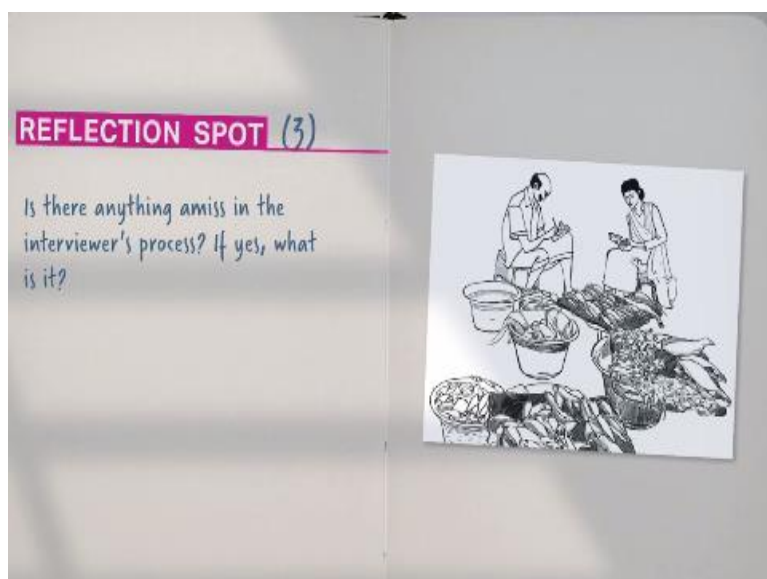


An ethnographer is studying the lives of fishermen in the city of Bombay. She goes to interview some of our participants as they bring in the early morning catch from the sea. She has done her literature review and based on that has prepared a detailed set of questions. She goes through the interview questions one by one engaging her participants in a conversation.

As they are engaged in a conversation, the fisherman is approached by a fishmonger woman who wants to fish from him. The participant takes a break from the interview, bargains with the woman and finally sell her some of his produce. Then he wrote down something in his

book. After this short break, the interview continuous with a researcher religiously following her list of questions. Consider this scenario carefully.

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Can you spot something amiss in her process of interviewing? Think about it for a moment and note down your answer. Some of you may have answered that the researcher is spot on with her interview process. She has done her homework, prepared her interview questions and is able to engage the participant in a conversation.

The participant takes a break when he needs to, so the interview does not intrude on his livelihood. It is correct that the researcher follows her process. She is well prepared and sensitive to the immediate needs of the participant. But there is something that she does not take into account, and that is the events and circumstances surrounding the interview.

Selling to the fishmongers may be an important part of the fisherman business. The researcher could have learnt much from observing his interaction with the fishmonger woman and what he noted down. She could have revised her interview plan and included in it

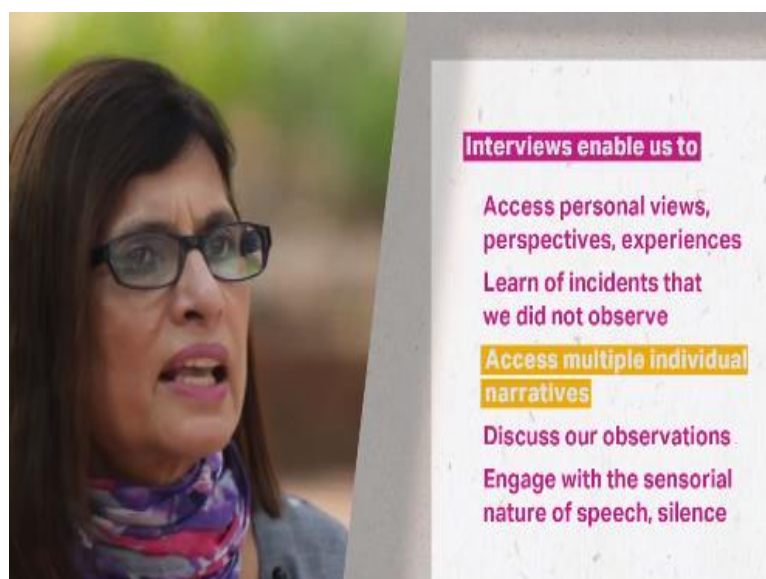
questions based on this interaction. By doing this, she could have learnt about the participant's relationship with petty traders and their role in his livelihood.

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Therefore, besides being fully prepared with questions, an ethnographic interview requires us to be open to occurrences and possibilities that we could not have planned for. Learning from these brings greater depth and insight into our understanding of our participants.

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Like stories, there are other pieces of knowledge that become accessible to us through interviews and conversations. These interactions allow us to access the personal views of our participants. Often there are things about our way of life or our beliefs that do not match

those of the society we are a part of. We rarely discuss these contradictions in our everyday interaction with the world.

In-depth interviews often focus on the subjective view of a single participant. This allows us to hear their perspectives and understand the contradictions that often exist between individual desires and societal norms. Take an example here. A researcher was interviewing a young woman, who was also a mother to a small child. The participant was an outgoing person who enjoyed travelling, eating out and chatting with friends.

Until the birth of a child, she had been employed as an administrative staff in a small firm. And now she enjoyed the role of being a parent. She had fun playing with her child, building a bond with him and took pride in being responsible for all his needs. As the interview progressed, the participant expressed her sadness and not being able to continue working or going out as much as she would have liked to.

As much as she loved being a parent, it meant having to give up things that were important to her, especially her financial independence. Her desire for independence conflicted with the role of a mother as defined by social norms. The researcher was able to see something of the conflict that affected her participant's life through the process of interviewing. Interviews enable us to access narratives of incidence that occur when we were not present on the field.

This could include events, long past or more contemporary events that took place when we were simply not present in the context. We can also access different narratives of the same incident by speaking to different participants. This would give us multiple perspectives on the same event. Each individual narrative lends a granular understanding to our research. Community tales like myths and folk stories give it further depth of meaning. In this way interviews bring a diversity and complexity to our understanding of a phenomenon.

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For example, when I was working with the Kutchi embroiderers, one of them had made a map of their region depicting various elements, houses, people, vegetation and so on. Among these elements was a strip of white cloth I had assumed that it was simply a dividing line between two narratives. Then I asked the artist Raniben who had created that elaborate map to explain all that she had made. She pointed out that strip of white saying it was the desert they had crossed in the night, the desert that divided the two countries.

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I would have never guessed this. Had we not had this conversation, I would have gone on thinking of it as a line that simply separated one event from another. Besides their content

there is also a sensorial quality to conversations- the sound and tone of the speaker's voice the manner and style of speaking the words used the enunciations,... all these add to our understanding of our participants.

Even the language the dialect and the accent are reflective of the culture or community that the speaker belongs to. Additionally, the emotion reflected in a person's voice gives us a close reading of their state of mind and how the discussion on the subject is affecting them.

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In all of these ways interviews help us bring the voice of the participant into the research.