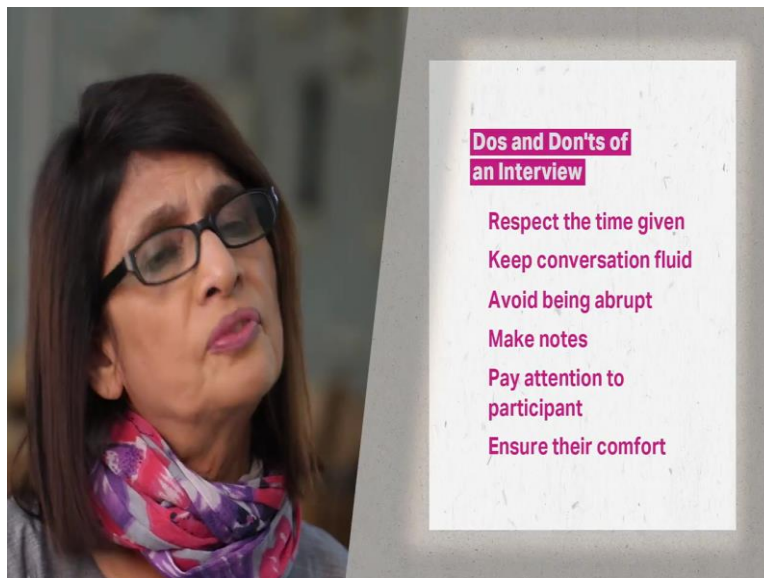


Understanding Ethnography
Module 6 Section 9
Lecture No. 49
Doing the Interview 1

So finally, we are ready to interview our participants. We have prepared our guide to help us steer the conversation, but the interview itself tends to be a lot less predictable. It is, after all, a conversation between two persons and not simply a list of questions that we ask one after the other. Both participant and researcher take turns listening and responding to each other. Words, silences, gestures and non-verbal expressions are used by both in expressing themselves and in responding to the other and sometimes not on commonly interviews include difficult interactions and conflicts too.

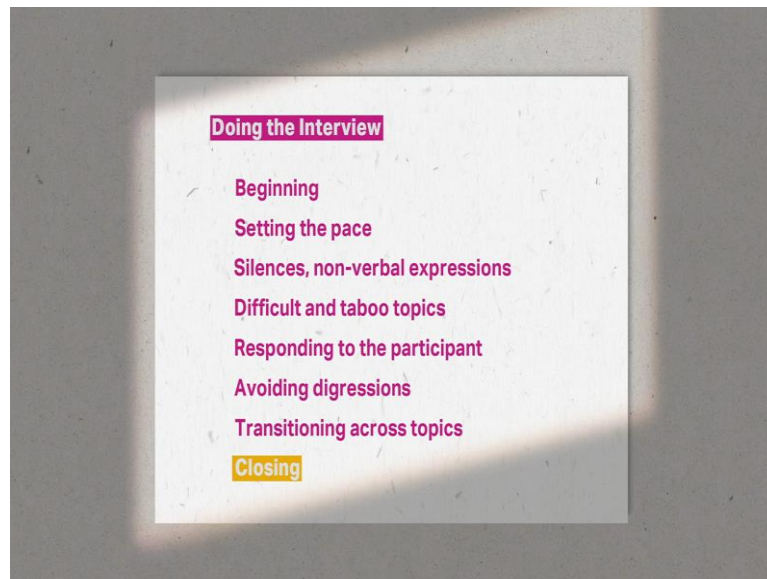
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Being aware of some basic dos and don'ts can help us navigate this terrain. First and foremost, we must respect the time given to us for the interview and not exceed it. We should try to keep the conversation fluid, avoid abrupt beginnings and endings and sudden jumps between topics. We should make written notes or jottings as we converse, but we should not be so enthralled with note-taking that the participant feels they are speaking to a recorder.

And we should ensure the participant's comfort at all times, starting with their agreement to being recorded.

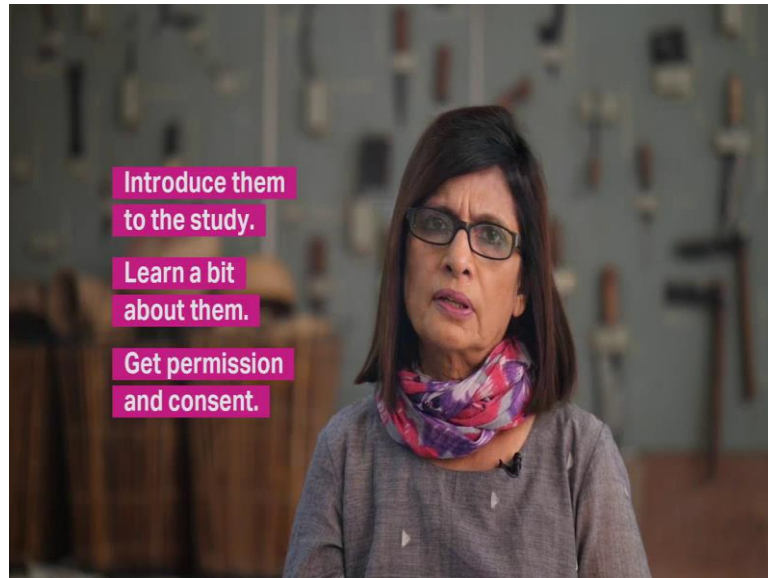
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In this section and the next, we will discuss some practical aspects of the interview. This includes how to begin the interview, how slow or fast to move the conversation, the role of silences and non-verbal expressions in our interview, how to navigate difficult or delicate topics, how to respond to participants, how to avoid digressions while still allowing for new topics to be introduced, how to transition from one topic to another and finally, how to close the interview.

We will discuss some of these in this section and the rest in the next one. As we begin, we may feel a bit awkward around each other. Being the researcher, the onus is ours to put our participant at ease. We need not rush into the interview questions but can start with some general observations or questions that create an environment of comfort. We can make small talk like talk about the weather or picking up topics that may or may not be related to the interview like pointing at some artefacts in their house, complimenting them on it, asking them if they made it themselves.

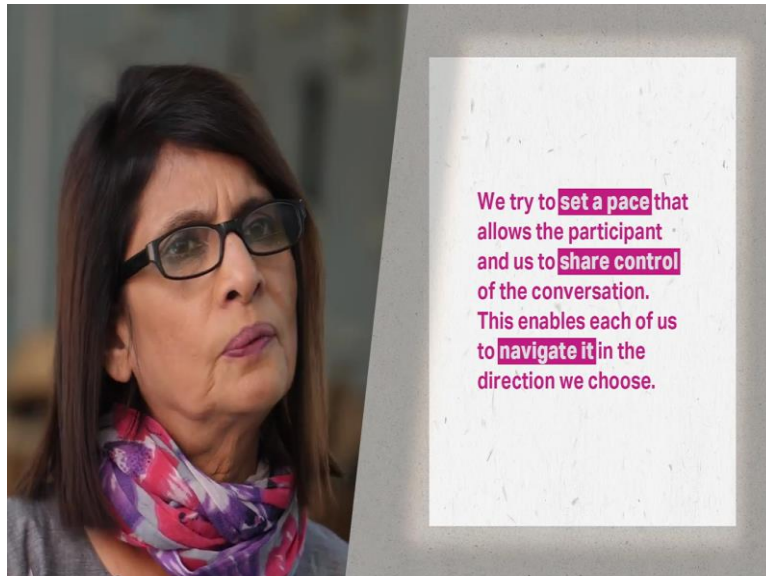
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At this point, we can introduce the participant to our research and to the interview process and we can carry out procedures such as getting consent for interviewing and recording. Here we should again consider the practical concerns of interviewing and recording. Is the environment suitable for audio and video recordings? Is the participant comfortable with being recorded? , do we need to protect their identity and anonymise them? If the participant seems reluctant or uncomfortable with being recorded, we can just stick to making with notes.

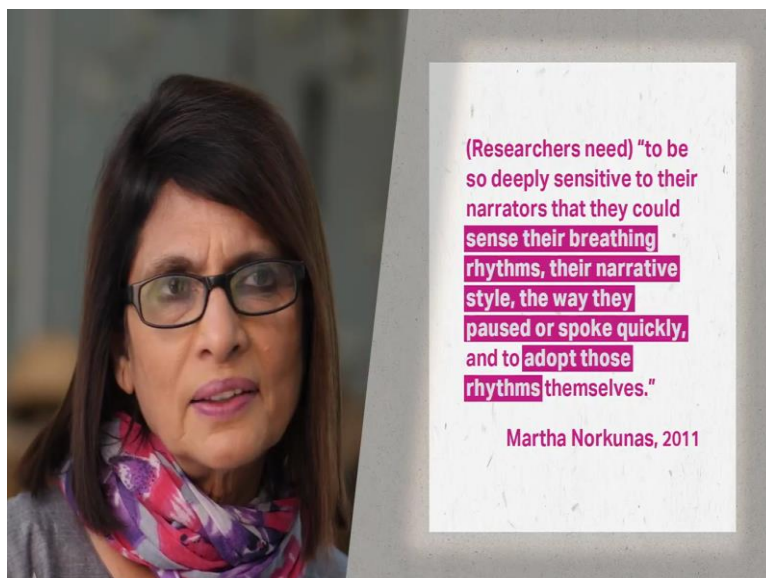
The small talk, procedure and explanations flow to the opening parts of our interview, where we try to learn about the trajectory of our participants' lives. And we find ourselves settling into the dance that is the interview. As with any dance, there needs to be a rhythm to our movements.

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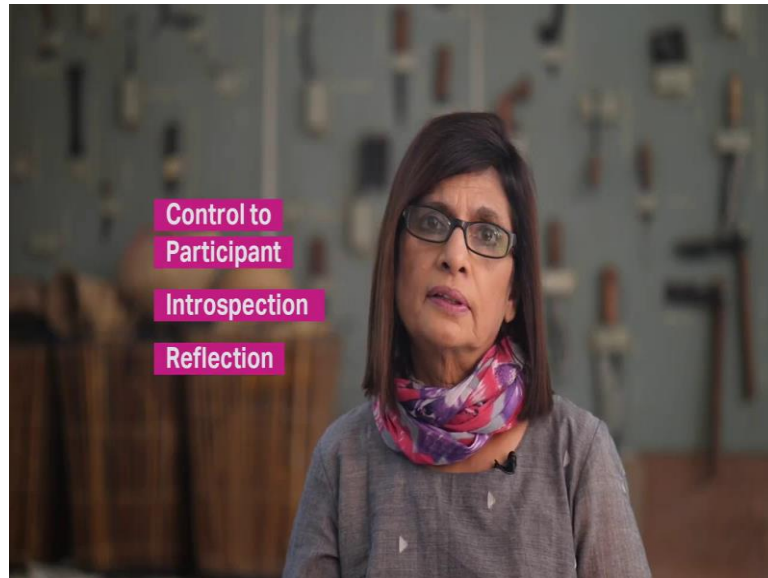
The idea is to create a conversation where both researcher and participant have equal control over the content and flow. As a researcher, we try to understand the pace of conversation, which is comfortable for the participant and then try to match it. And listening is a key part of this. Some participants expect a Q&A kind of session where one question rapidly follows another. In an ethnographic interview, we try to develop an introspective discussion.

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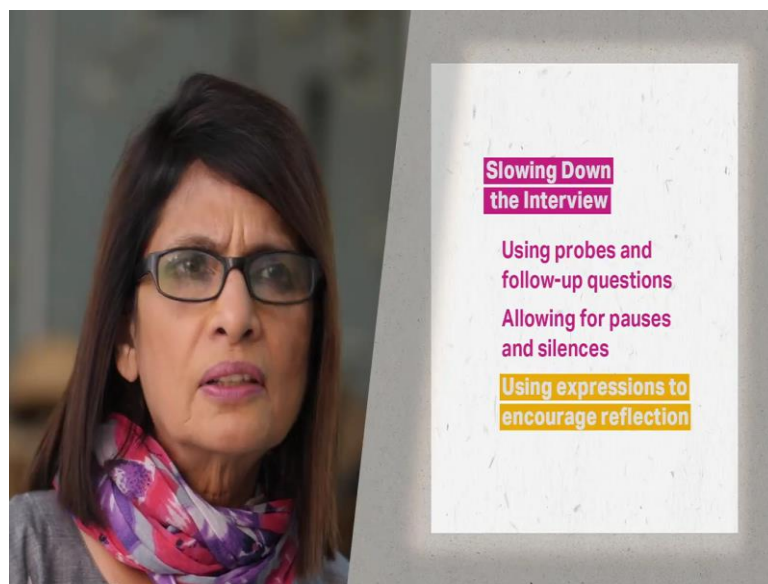
And so we try to find a pace which allows reflection and also keeps the conversation going. As we have emphasised earlier, a careful balance of speaking and listening is required to do this.

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Some researchers suggest that by adopting a slower pace for the interview we can encourage the participant take greater control of the conversation. In a slower conversation, we may tend to speak more with less nudging from our end. A slower-paced interview creates room for greater reflection and introspection on both sides.

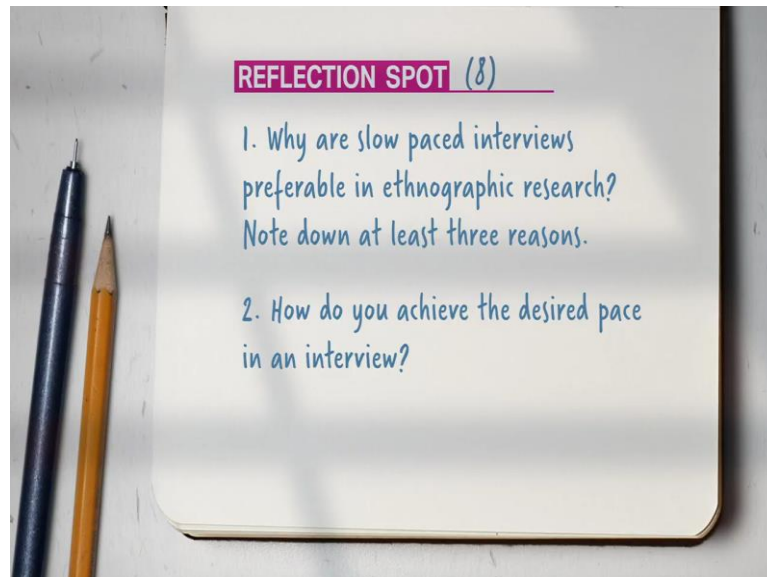
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We can decrease the pace of interview by using probes and follow-up questions, spending more time and thought on a single topic. Short pauses and silences, gestures such as a nod, or sounds such as hmm, huh, can have a similar effect. Responses such as these encourage the participant to speak more on a topic, to expand upon their thoughts. In the space between the two topics or two questions, the participant can reflect some more remember related incidence or connect topics.

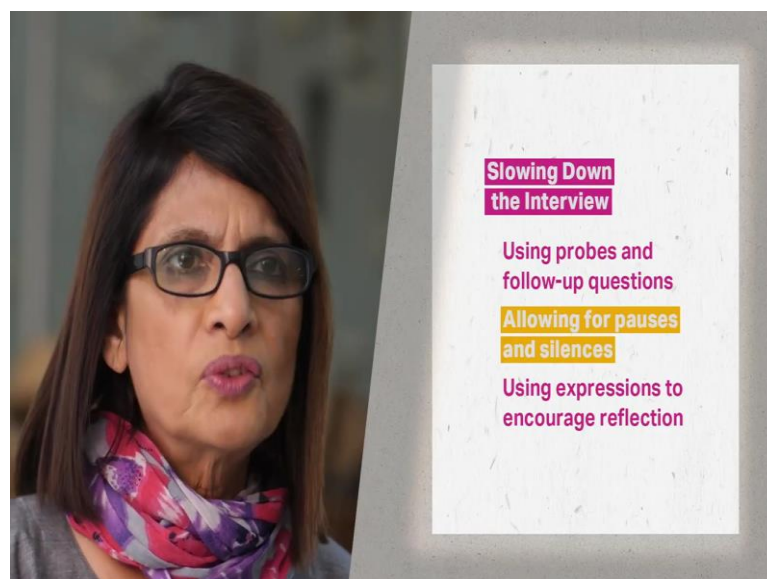
Let us pause here for a moment and revisit a part of our discussion. We have some questions for you here.

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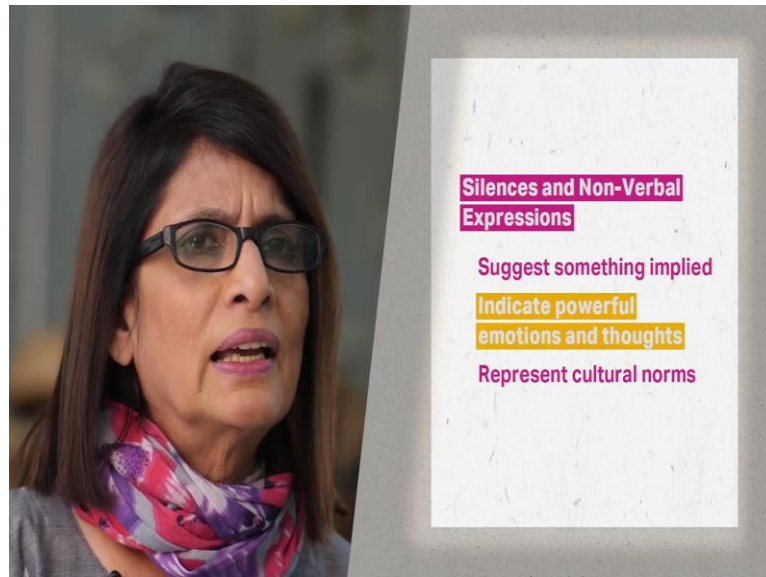
The first one is, why are slow-paced interviews preferable in ethnographic research? Note down at least 3 reasons. And the second, how do you achieve the desired pace in an interview? You may write down single sentence answers for these questions. The answers to these questions are present in the discussion we have had so far. The pace of the interview is decided by the participant and the interviewer, but a slow-paced interview is preferable. This is because a slower pace allows for greater reflection and introspection.

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And how can we slow down an interview? Here are some of the ways that we have discussed. Among these silence and non-verbal expressions play a prominent role. In fact, throughout this module, we have been talking about the importance of silence and non-verbal expressions in an interview.

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Silence on the part of the participant can be as expressive and evocative as speech. It may indicate something that is implied but not spoken about explicitly. It can express powerful emotions and memories. Facial expressions and body gestures often indicate emotions and thoughts that the participant associates with the topic of discussion.

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Teaching to Listen: Listening Exercises and Self-Reflexive Journals
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Abstract: Listening is critical to the oral history process. How does one teach students to listen? This article describes a series of listening exercises the author designed for her students and the reflexive journals they kept to record their responses to the exercises. One of the motivations for the designing of listening skills was to assist students in becoming more sensitive to issues involved in listening to someone who was different from them in significant ways. While many of the students' responses centered around increasing their perceptions of listening in general, some commented specifically on what it means to listen to someone who is racially different from the listener. Students wrote about listening as a very active process that deeply impacts the content, performance, and emotional tone of the narration. They acknowledged the significance of nonverbal affirmations, directed questions, unstructured environments, empathetic

"She described in such lovely, passionate detail what it was like to work so close to the earth...
I could hear her silently acknowledging that in some way her future was in my hands...
With this woman... the most important information was signified in the gaps where nothing was said."

Roger Gatchet, quoted by Martha Norkunas, 2011

Recall the experience of Roger Gatchet as he listened to the old farm worker describing her work and what he learned from her silences and gestures.

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Silences and Non-Verbal Expressions

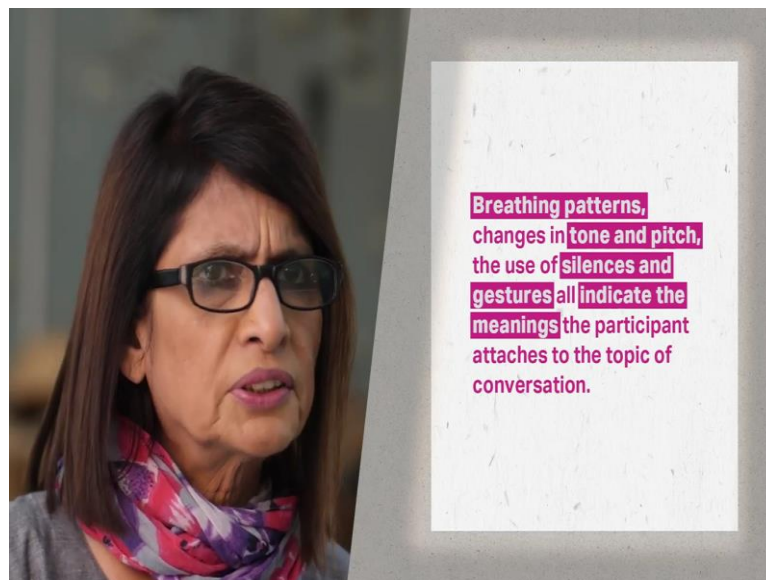
- Suggest something implied
- Indicate powerful emotions and thoughts
- Represent cultural norms

Non-verbal expressions also denote cultural norms. The same expression can mean different things to different communities.

For instance, in some cultures, not looking into the other's eyes as we speak is a way of showing respect. In others, it may imply disinterest or boredom or worse still arrogance. The idea is to be able to differentiate between the wink and the twitch and to understand the meaning of each wink and more.

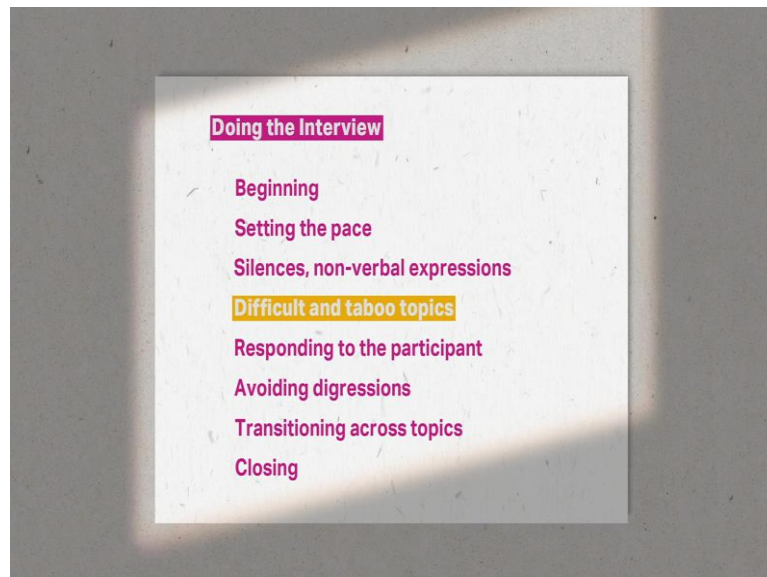
For instance, in some cultures not looking into the others' eyes as we speak is a way of showing respect. In others, it may imply disinterest or boredom or worst still arrogance. The idea is to be able to differentiate between the wink and the twitch and to understand the meaning of each wink and more.

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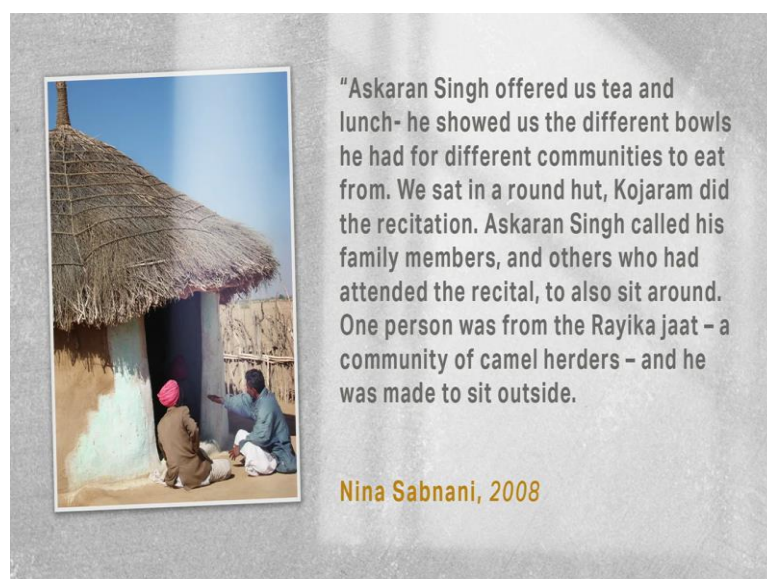
We pay attention to subtle changes of tone and breathing patterns. For instance, when someone is nervous, their speed of breathing tends to increase, and the pitch of their voice rises. The same may happen when someone feels excited. We need to observe all such subtle expressions during the interview. We also need to include them in our notes either by drawing or writing or recording in any acceptable form.

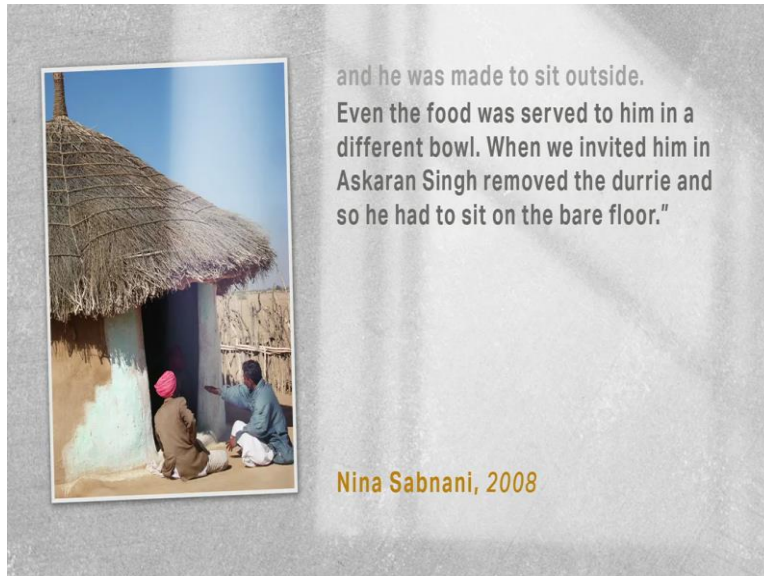
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In all cultures and communities, there are topics that are not spoken about publicly or explicitly. People use euphuisms, metaphors or particular phrases to refer to these. Often the use of tangential references or metaphors indicates that the subject is taboo or difficult to speak about. For example, in many cultures, segregation on the basis of caste, race or gender is not spoken explicitly.

I found such an incident in my field notes from my work with the Kaavad storytellers. I was travelling with my primary participant, Kojaram, a Kaavad storyteller. We were visiting the homes of his patrons in different villages. He would visit each of their houses and perform his Kaavad recitations. Often, the patrons would invite us to eat with them after the recitation. On one such recitation Kojaram's patron, Askaran Singh invited us to stay on for lunch.



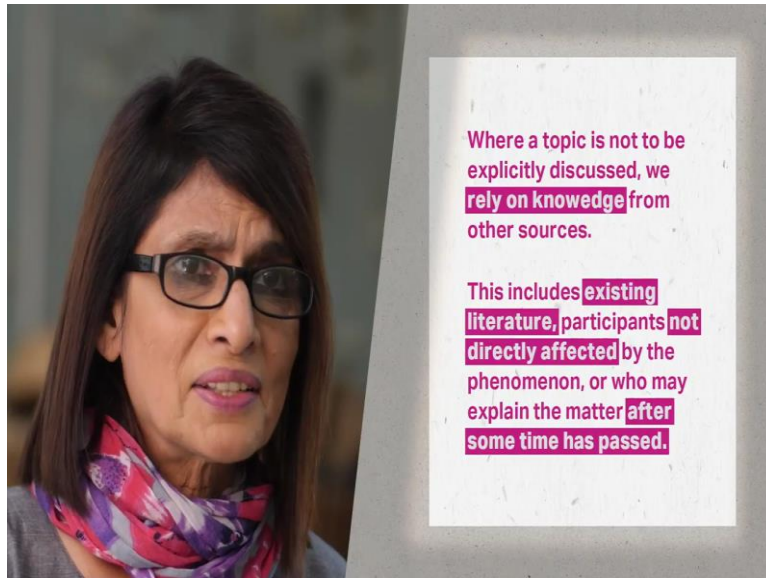


Askaran Singh offered us tea and lunch. He showed us the different bowls he had for different communities to eat from. We sat in a round hut, Kojaram did the recitation. Askaran Singh called his family members and others who had attended the recital to also sit around. One person was from the Rayika jaat, a community of camel herders, and he was made to sit outside. Even the food was served to him in a different bowl. When we invited him in, Askaran Singh removed the durrie, and so he had to sit on the bare floor.

It was uncomfortable for me to be an observer and participant to this incident. However, I was a guest in Askaran Singh's house and an outsider to their community. It would have been presumptuous and judgmental on my part to question their practices. Moreover, it would have embarrassed each of them and perhaps most of all, Kojaram who had brought me there.

Later, after we had left Askaran Singh's house, I asked Kojaram about the incident. He explained it by simply saying, "oh, because he is a Rayika". Thus, without speaking of caste segregation or its rules, he explained the social structure underlying the incident. It was up to me to understand the depth of information behind his brief sentence. Often, subjects such as discrimination or certain beliefs and practices evoke judgement from outsiders. For this reason, communities prefer to simply not discuss them. In situations such as these, we have to build our knowledge from sources other than from our participants.

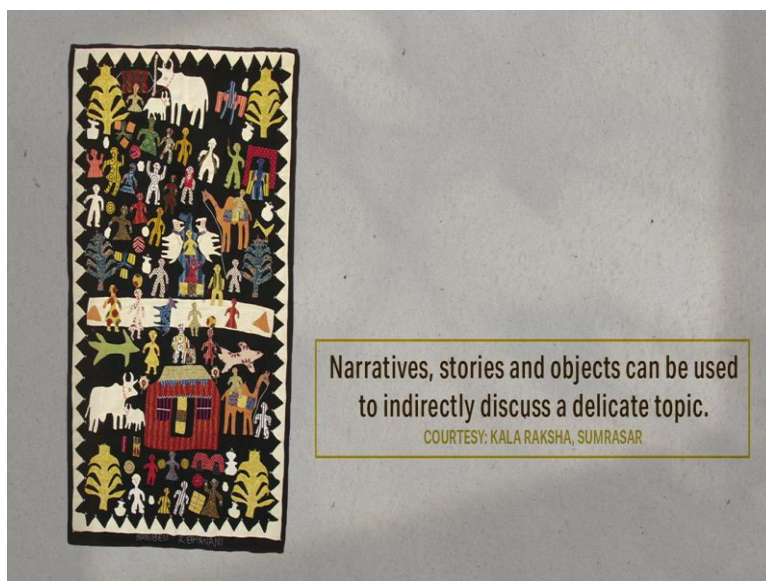
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We do this by reviewing literature or by asking other participants who are more comfortable explaining such matters to us. It helps to ask these uncomfortable questions a little later after the incident has passed. And when there is greater trust between our participants and us, they are more likely to share at that point.

Sometimes it helps to discuss a difficult subject indirectly. By talking about incidence, stories, objects and spaces that are associated with that subject. For instance, asking Raniben about the loss of their homes could have been a very difficult conversation.

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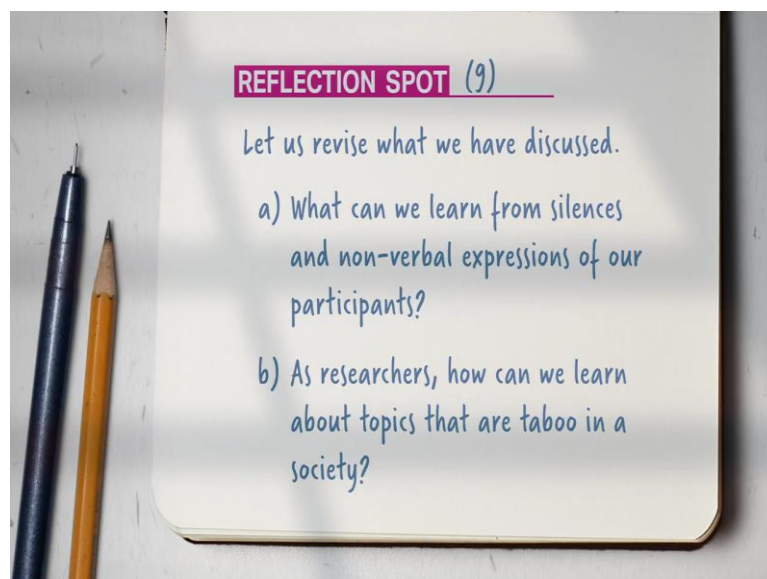


Instead, we talked about the embroidered narratives she had made about the migration and the earthquake. This made it possible and relatively easier for her to speak about the loss. In describing the embroidered narratives, she was able to recount anecdotes and feelings related to that loss. In discussing difficult topics, we should be careful and conscious in our approach. We should frame our questions with utmost care to ensure that our interest in the subject is not perceived as judgmental.

And that in bringing up such a topic, we are not being offensive or triggering emotional pain. Throughout the discussion, we need to be keenly aware of any signs of discomfort. On sensing any, we can either pause or change the subject. Whatever the situation it is important we do not push the participant into a discussion they do not want to have. As they build trust in us, participants are likely to feel increasingly comfortable in having conversations around difficult and delicate subjects.

Before we further on, let us review what we have learned so far. Here are some questions that I would like you to reflect on and answer.

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A, what can we learn from silences and non-verbal expressions of our participants? B, as researchers how can we learn about topics that are taboo in a society? Some of you may have gone through our discussions to find the answers. But you may also have thought of answers that we did not mention. Please post your answers in the discussion forum. Remember to include points we have already discussed and be encouraged to add new words.

And then join us in our next section as we discuss more on the practice of interviewing.