

Understanding Ethnography: A way to engage with the other
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Lecture No. 5
Module 1: Notions of reality

In the previous section, we saw how each of us may have a very different view of the world, even when we are looking at the same thing. This raises a pertinent question for us as researchers- which of these views is more ‘valid’ or ‘real’?

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What is reality and whose reality is more real are questions that are particularly important to our work as ethnographers because ethnography is a research method that emphasises on engaging with and learning from *the real world*. So, when we observe ‘reality’ of a context, we have to wonder, is this what we are observing, ‘real’? What makes us think that this is actually real, and not fiction? And whose perceived reality is more real - ours or our participants’?

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Is it possible that one person's reality can be another person's fiction? These questions indicate there is more to 'reality' than what we perceive on the surface. It is not like what you see is what you get. We go about our days with an understanding that things are what they are, we take the world around us, and its underlying forces *for granted*.

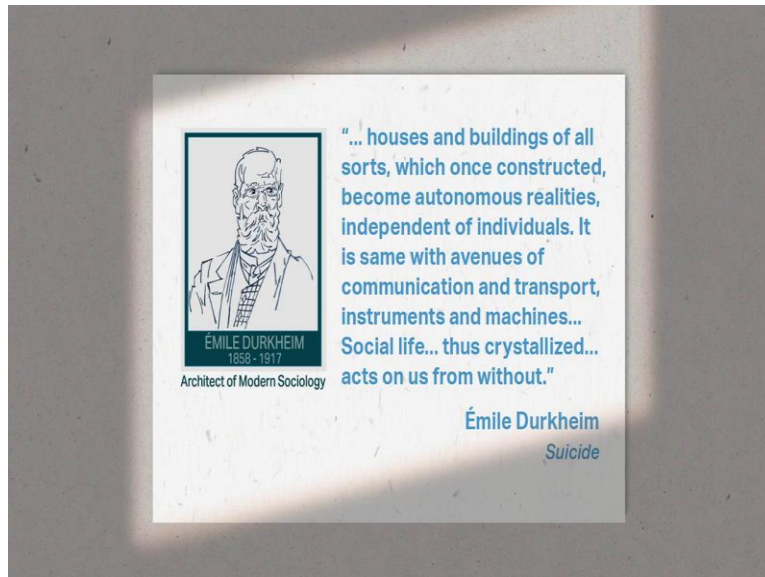
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But underneath this surface lies the machinery of human society- structures such as social and economic hierarchies, beliefs and knowledge systems, social contracts and so on.

This underlying machinery manifests in the everyday interactions, behaviours and functions that we see on the surface. It is through observing this surface that we as ethnographers try to understand the structures that lie beneath.

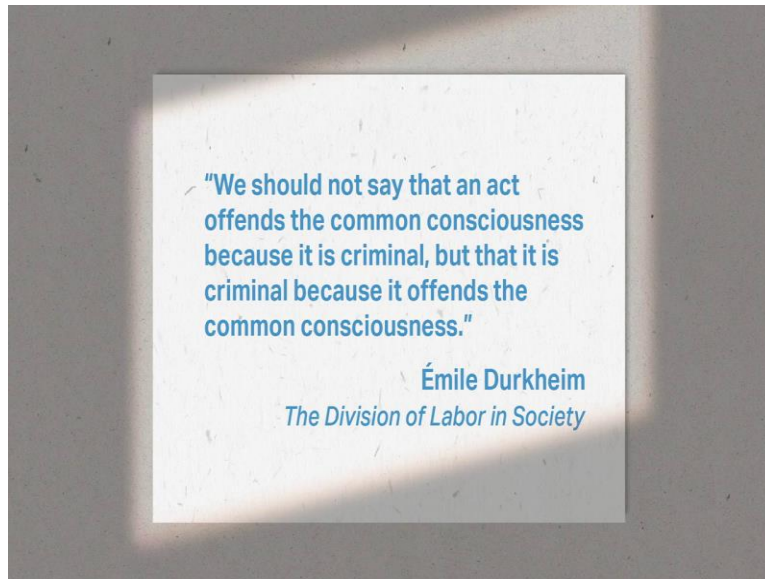
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The sociologist Emile Durkheim put this very simply and beautifully, when he said, ***“Sociality is built into structures and institutions.”*** It is a way of saying that everyday life is governed by social structures. What is right and wrong; what is normal or extraordinary; what is moral or amoral; what is real and what is unreal... Each of this is defined as per the context it is situated in.

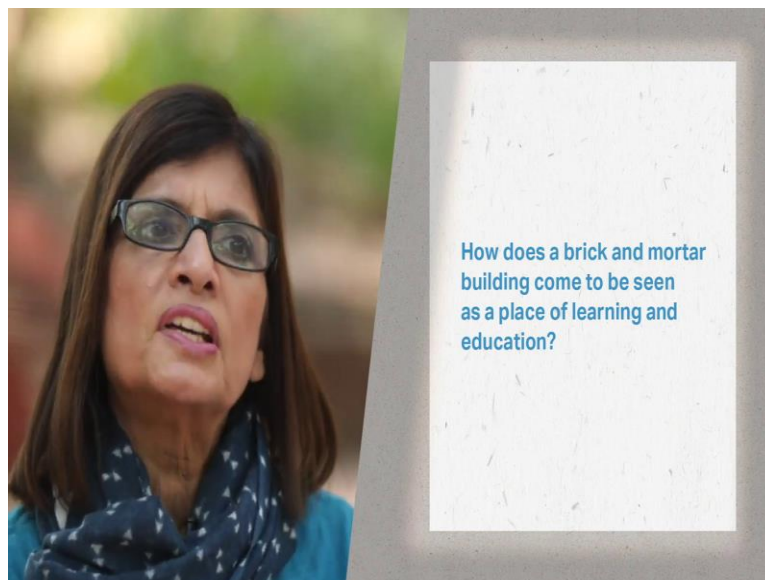
What is ordinary in one context may be completely bizarre or strange in another. The institutions and structures that we see around us, such as marriage, family, friendships and other relationships; or institutions such as governments, educational institutions, offices...

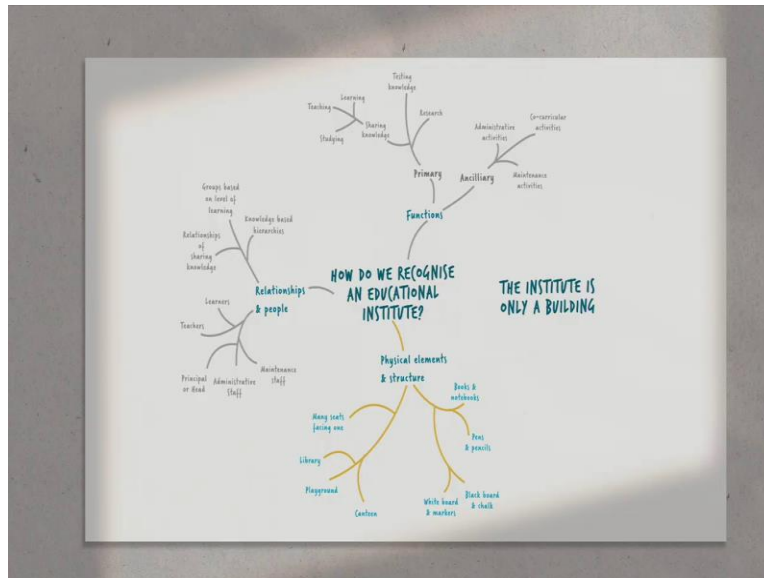
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These are all governed by an underlying logic of social agreements and contracts defined by the cultural context in which each of them operates. But not everybody has the same beliefs. Reality is not one reality. In fact, realities are constructed. Let's consider an educational institute:

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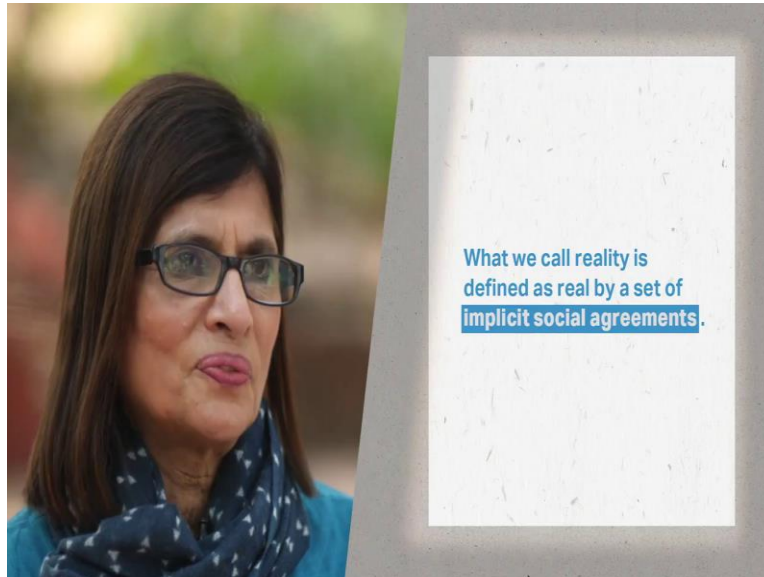




If a building is designated as an educational institute, the way it functions will be defined by the characteristics that we, as a society, associate with the idea of an educational institute. We designate it as a place where people go to learn and to teach and to administer other related functions. If, for whatever reason, students stopped going to classes, or teachers stopped teaching, or the institution lost its funding, then it will stop being an educational institute. It will become just a building, or at most, a building that used to be an educational institute.

The reality of the building will change- not because its structure or shape has changed, but because, as a collective, we no longer assign the same value or characteristics to it as we did earlier. What was, so far, the obvious reality of this building will no longer be the same.

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Therefore, our worlds are really made up and defined by a set of social agreements, of the ways in which to interact and function, but also of commonly agreed-upon beliefs and knowledge. A really interesting example of this is the idea of ‘money’. All of us use money in pretty much the same set of ways- earning, spending, saving, donating, and so on.

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We base a lot of our life’s functions and even desires on the amount of money we have or

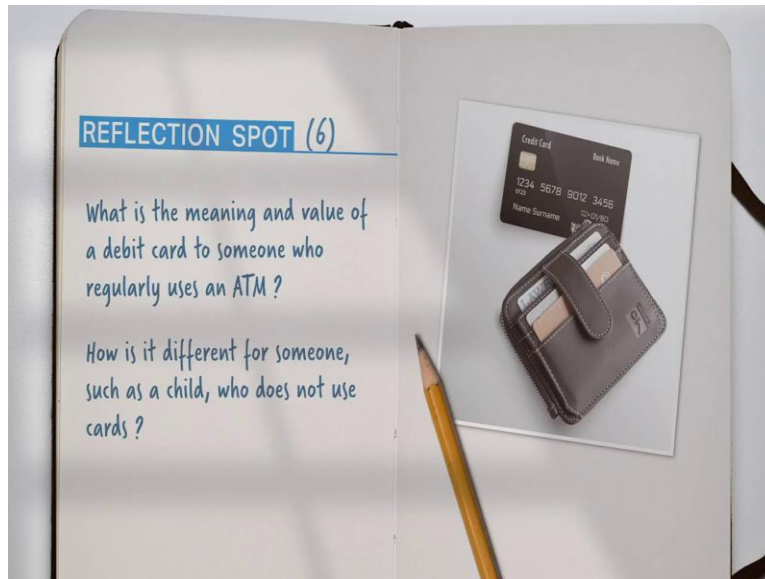
hope to have. But if you stop and think about it- what is money? It is an idea, a medium through which we can compare cotton to gold, or equate the time and effort of a person to some material, tangible objects like a set of banknotes.

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Looking at the idea of money in this manner, we realise that as a society, we have come to a shared understanding of giving value to things so that we can compare them to each other. Otherwise, can we really compare time and effort to pieces of paper? Are there really any attributes that can be used to compare gold to cotton? But we have all agreed to the idea of particular pieces of paper, or metal or plastic, minted in particular factories and signed by a particular authority, as the physical manifestations of this value. Let's pause the video here and ask ourselves this question.

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What is the value and meaning of a debit card to someone who uses an ATM regularly, and to someone who does not, for example, a young child? Think carefully and justify your responses. Some of you may have said the value and meaning of a debit or credit card is the same for all people. And some of you may have answered that the meaning of the card remains the same, but different people associate different values with it. Let us discuss the question some more.

Imagine what happens when we lose our wallet with our money and our bank cards in it. For many of us, the first step of action is to call the bank hotlines and block our cards.

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This is because the cards are the access points to our bank accounts and all the money in them. Now, imagine that this wallet, and the cards in it, are found by a young child. If the child has no experience of using debit or credit cards, or even an idea of what they are, she won't attach any value to them. She may throw them away or stash them in her toy basket.

In either case, she will not give these pieces of plastic the same kind of importance as someone who is aware of their usage. This shows that even when we agree almost universally on an idea, such as the idea of money, the values and meanings attached to it are far from universal. Each person, each group, has their own reality, which transforms as circumstances and situations change.

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Each person's reality shapes the world that they live in. What they define as valuable, relevant, and meaningful, is a function of the reality they inhabit. This is a complex idea but an important one. Let us discuss this in detail in our next section.