Researching with the Visual
Module 07 Section 04
Lecture 55

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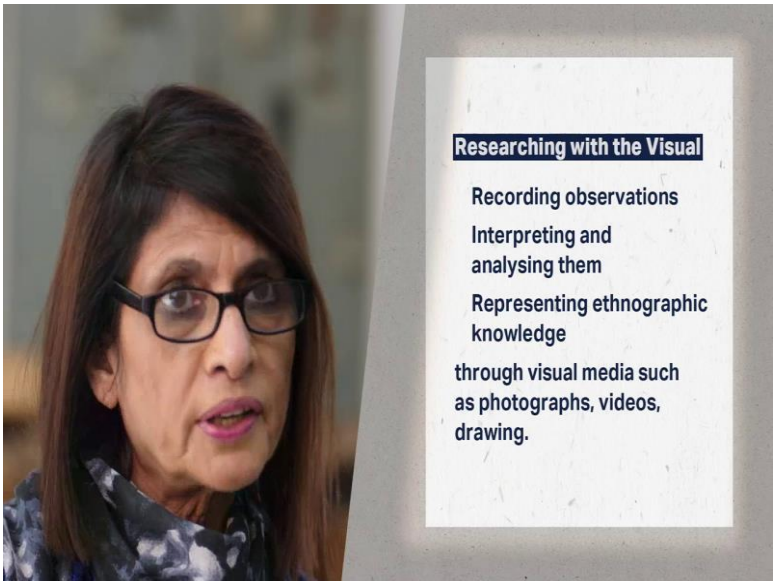

To research with the visual means to create or construct visuals as a way of learning from our participants and to interpret and represent what we learn from these visuals. We can make drawings.

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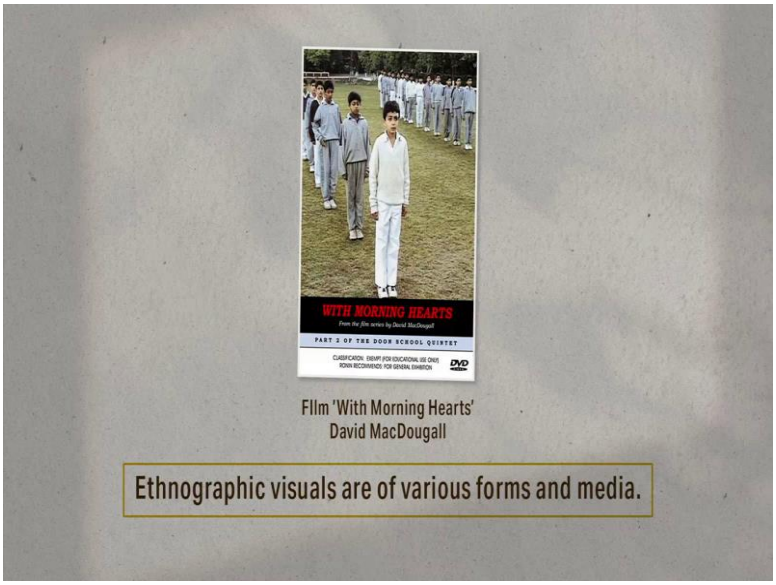

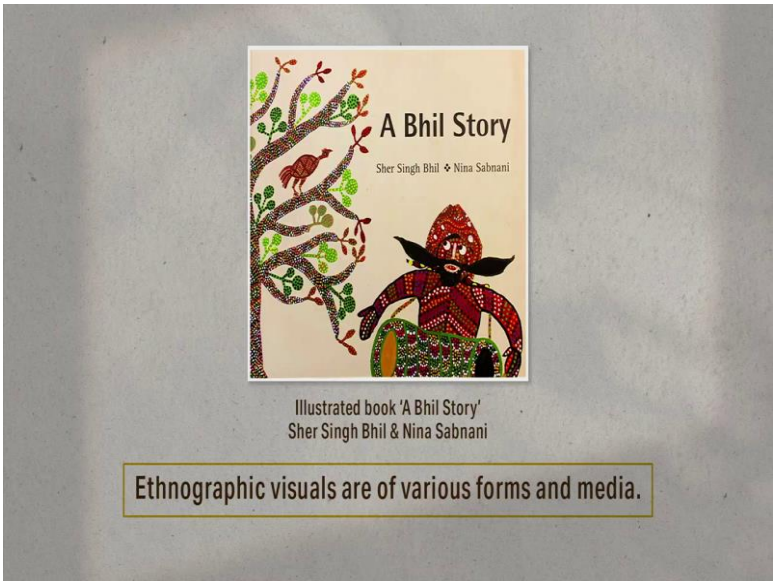

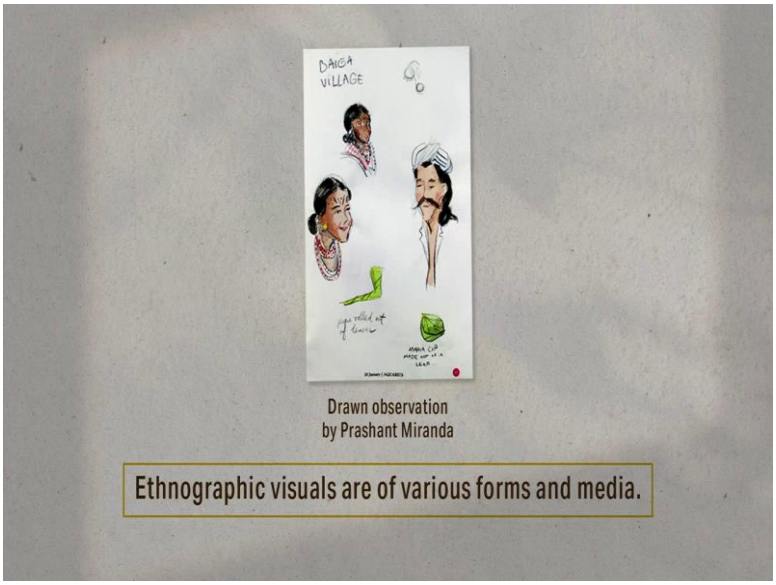

photographs, videos, comics strips, infographics, and so on.

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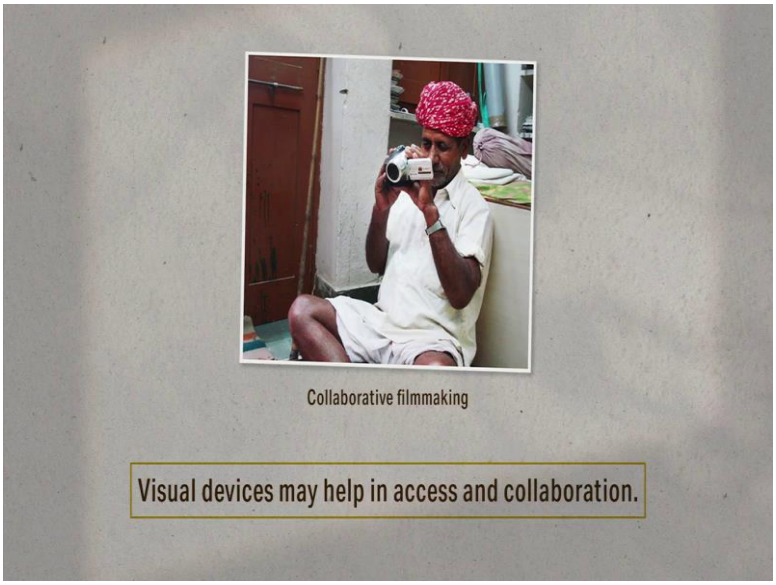

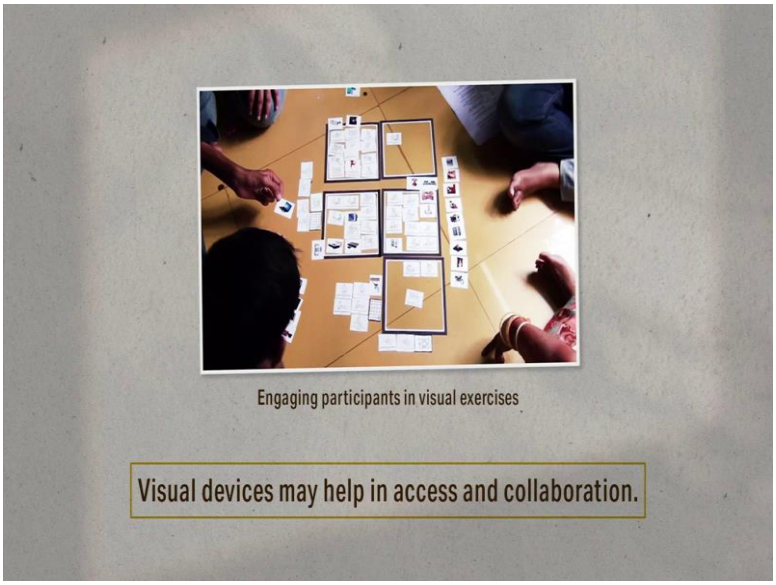

We can also use visual devices to access our participants, their knowledge and their ideas. Among the most ways in which ethnographers use visual methods is recording their field engagements. Here let us recall our discussion on making fieldnotes. We had emphasised then how recording is also interpreting and that the act of making fieldnotes is in fact our first analysis. This applies to visual records as well.

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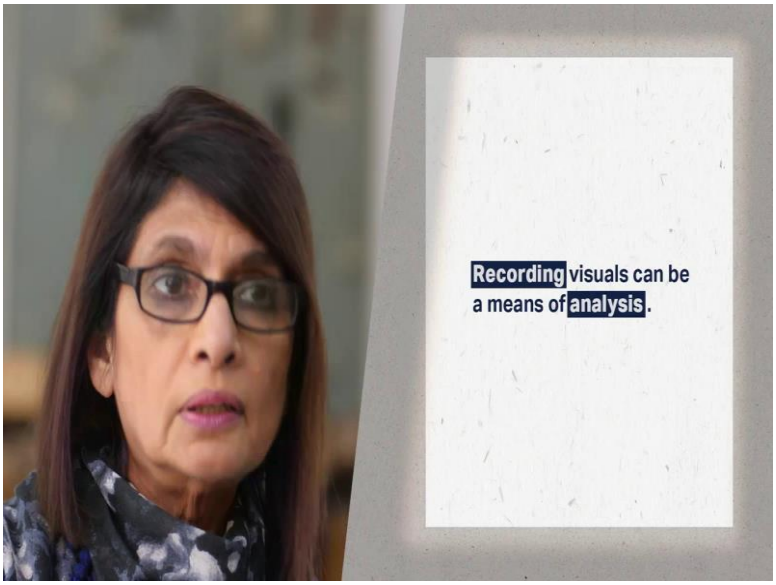

Our objective is not simply to make records but to learn from these records. Let us take an example of how visual recording may be used towards learning from our participants.

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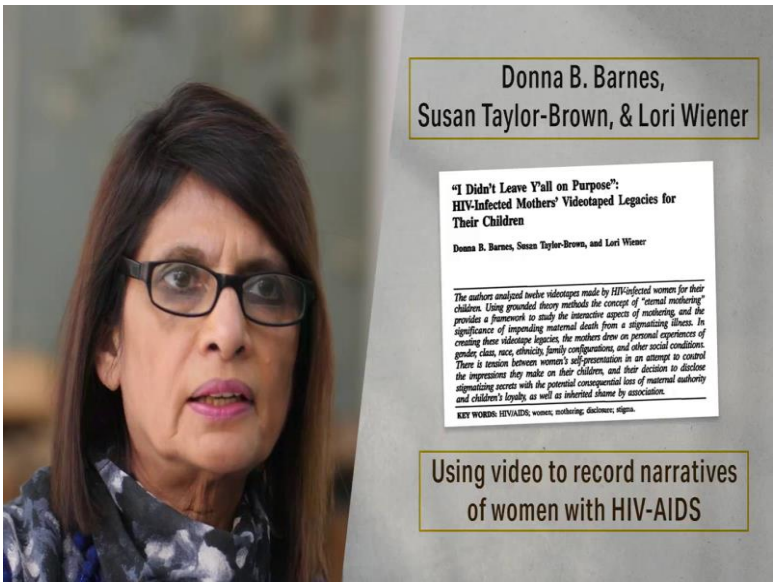

We will discuss a project undertaken by social workers Doctor Susan Taylor-Brown and

Doctor Lori Wiener and sociologist Doctor Donna Barnes in the late 1990s in the United States of America. Their women participants who were infected with HIV and some of them were grappling with the possibility of an early death due to AIDS. The project focused on the women's concerns about the future of their children in light of their illness, the stigma associated with HIV-AIDS,

and their potential death. From their previous engagement with the participants, the researchers had learnt that the women's major concerns revolved around providing mothering

care to the children after they had passed on. This question of providing care became central to the study.

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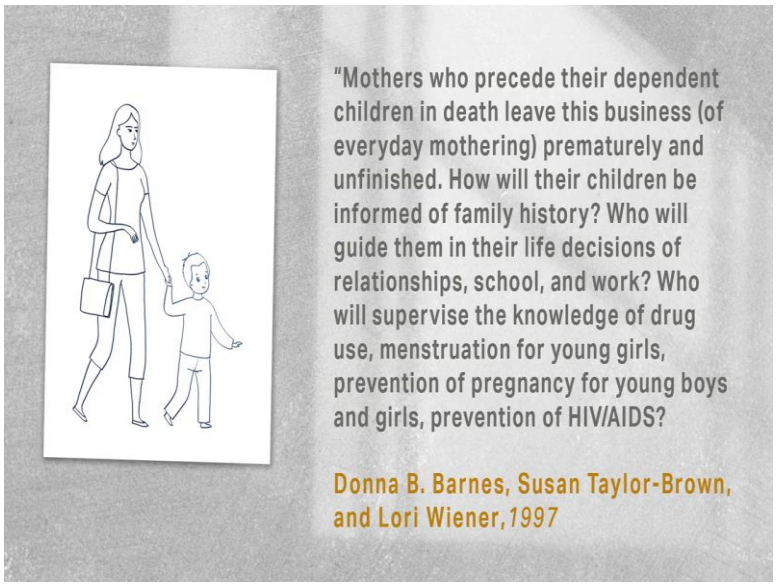

Mothers who precede their dependent children in death leave this business of everyday mothering prematurely and unfinished. How will their children be informed of family history? Who will guide them in their life decisions of relationships, school, and work? Who will supervise the knowledge of drug use, menstruation for young girls, prevention of pregnancy for young boys and girls, prevention of HIV/AIDS?

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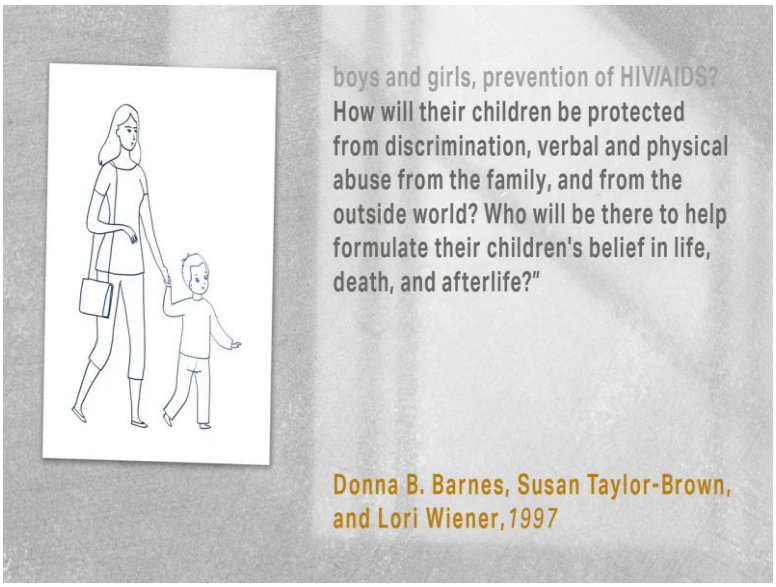

How will that children be protected from discrimination, verbal and physical abuse from the family, and from the outside world? Who will be there to help formulate their children's

belief in life, death, and afterlife? The research's sorted a way through which participants could convey their deepest thoughts to share with their children and also for the researchers to analyse. Through discussions and engagements, they together came upon the idea of making video recordings.

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It was suggested that through these recordings, the mothers could address their children. They could try to answer important questions that their children would face later in life, when the mother may no longer be around. Thus, the videos would enable the participants to create artefacts that help continue the task of mothering. We learn a valuable lesson from the use of video in this study.

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We must understand the particular characteristics of a visual medium and then use it appropriately towards our research objectives. For this study, video was especially suitable. And this appropriateness becomes apparent when the participants' explain their reasons for choosing video over any other medium. Many of the participants were aware of how much their kids loved TV.

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And so they thought their kids would love to see their mothers on the screen. Some of the participants wanted to leave behind a visual memory. They wanted to be remembered as they were at that time well and healthy before the illness started to affect the way they looked.

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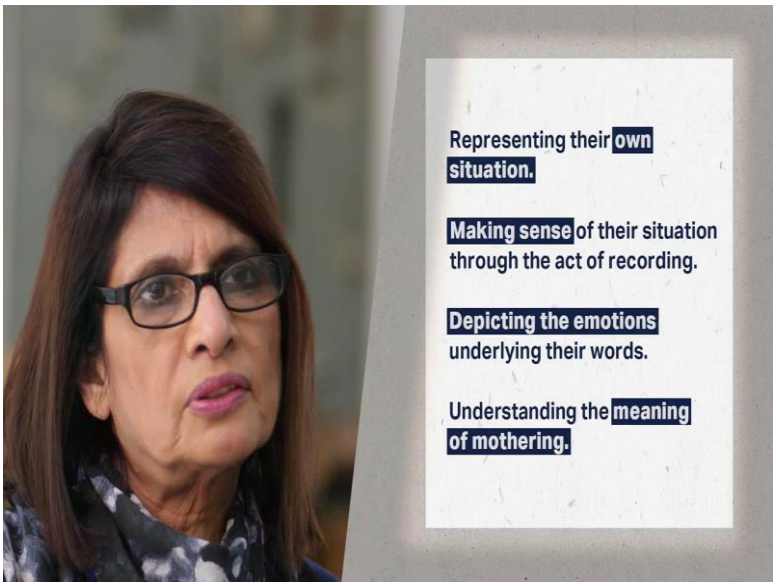

The researchers believed that the act of recording themselves would enable the participants to make sense of their situation and the video would allow the researchers to learn not only what the mothers wanted to say but also the emotions underlying that information. By analysing the recorded messages, researchers could explore their participants' ideas of mothering, their feelings and their concerns towards their children and themselves. As the study progressed, it became even more clear that the visual device, the video camera, in this case, was not simply a substitute for any other form of recording, it was an integral and essential part of the process.

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The medium helped the participants to depict themselves not only in words or images but through tone and sound of their voice, their facial and bodily language and the ways in which they composed their appearance. Some mothers carefully arranged the frame to include in it objects they associated with the relationship. One mother enacted how the children should give themselves the hug by wrapping their arms around themselves.

Another subconsciously rocked herself to and fro as she recounted the birth of her children. In a sense, video recording offered a certain depth and richness of expression which went way beyond words.

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The combination of staging and the spontaneity that video allows enabled the participants to convey themselves in ways that they did not expect. For one, they were able to express themselves with the urgency that they felt given their situations. And uninterrupted by an interviewer, they were able to express themselves without mediation. Even sharing anecdotes that they had been previously unable to convey to anyone. Let us pause here and reflect for a moment on this study. We have discussed that the choice of making video records of the participants' narratives was not by chance. In fact, it was critical to the design of the study.

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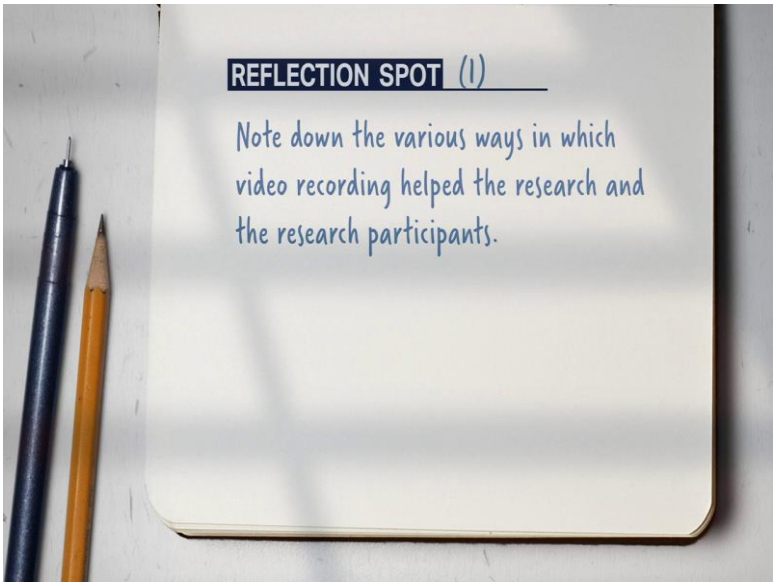

We would like you to note down the various ways in which video recording helped the research and the research participants. If you like, you can replay some parts of our discussion to answer the question.

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You may have listed the comfort that the participants felt in video recording themselves. You may have noted the ability of video to record the spoken as well as unspoken expressions of the participants. Did you note down the value that the participants believed their children would attach to video recordings of their mothers? And that on video, participants could be recorded as they looked at the time of recording before their health failed them. We hope you mentioned the spontaneity and staging that video recording allowed the participants. A similar kind of spontaneity and staging also happens in photography.

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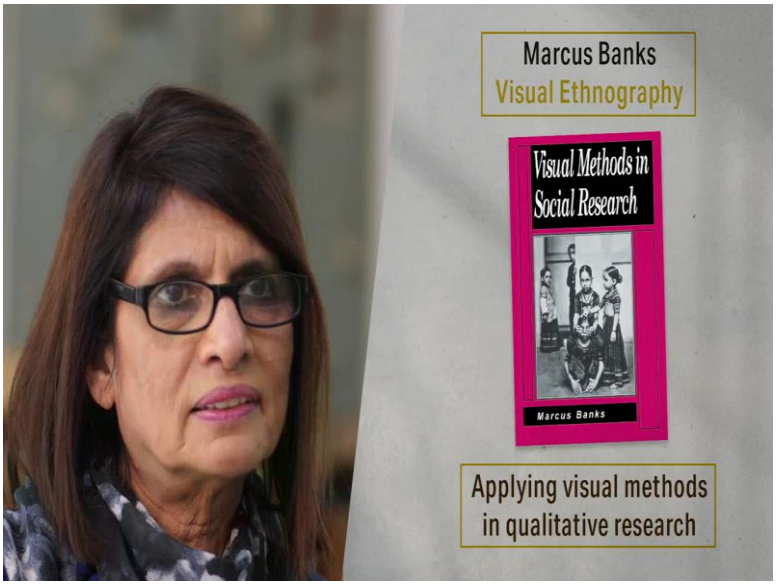

We see an example of this in the work of the British anthropologist Marcus Banks. While doing fieldwork in a small town in India, Banks was invited to a community dinner by his participants or friends as he refers to them. He brought along his camera hoping to take pictures of the event, though at that moment he had not clearly anticipated what he would record. As the dinner progressed, his participants started asking him to take pictures of particular moments. At one point, they asked him to take a photographs of the host, a woman whose generous donation had helped them make the event possible.

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They directed Banks to frame her as she served a rich, yoghurt based dessert into the plate of a guest. He realised that this was their way of recording her contribution.

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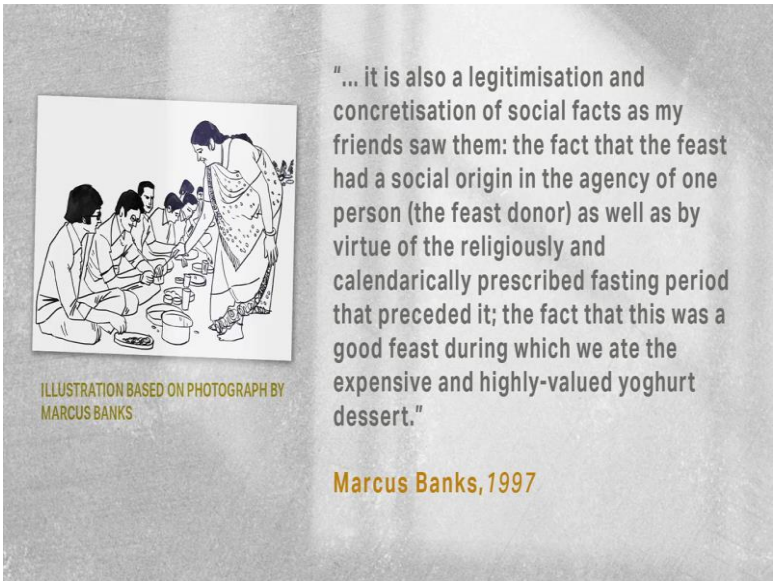

Bank says, it is also a legitimisation and concretisation of social facts as my friends saw them: the fact that the feast had a social origin in the agency of one person the feast donor as well as by the virtue of the religiously and calendarically prescribed fasting period that preceded it, the fact that this was a good feast during which we ate the expensive and highly-valued yoghurt dessert.

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For Banks, the camera acted as a tool for collaboration between him and his participants. In the work of Dona Bans and her colleagues, the camera facilitated collaboration between the researchers and participants. Through these examples, we see the value of visual media in co-

constructing ethnographic records. In the case of doctor Bans and her colleagues, this was done by participants recording themselves.

In Banks' case, it came about because the participants directed the researcher on what records to make. There is another way in which many researchers use the visual to collaborate and engage with participants. The method is commonly called photo-elicitation, though it is not limited to the use of photographs.

Researchers may use drawings, illustrations, even films to elicit knowledge from their participants. The visuals may be used as icebreakers between researcher and participants. They may be used as a way to jog the participants' memory or sometimes as a way to overcome language and cultural barriers.

Ethnographer Karen O'Reilly writes about one such project in which a researcher Helen used drawing as a way of engaging with her participants. Helen was doing ethnographic research in a business organisation. During her conversations with participants, she noticed that the managers emphasised the lack of hierarchy in the organisation.

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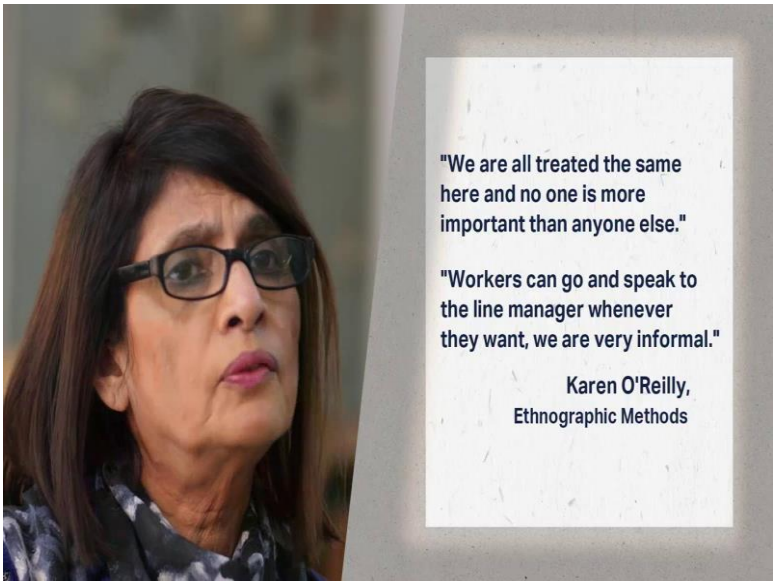

They would say things like, "we are all treated the same here, and no one is more important than anyone else." or "workers can go and speak to the line manager whenever they want, we

are very informal. On the other hand, the workers who were lower down in the hierarchy often spoke about how difficult it was to approach the managers.

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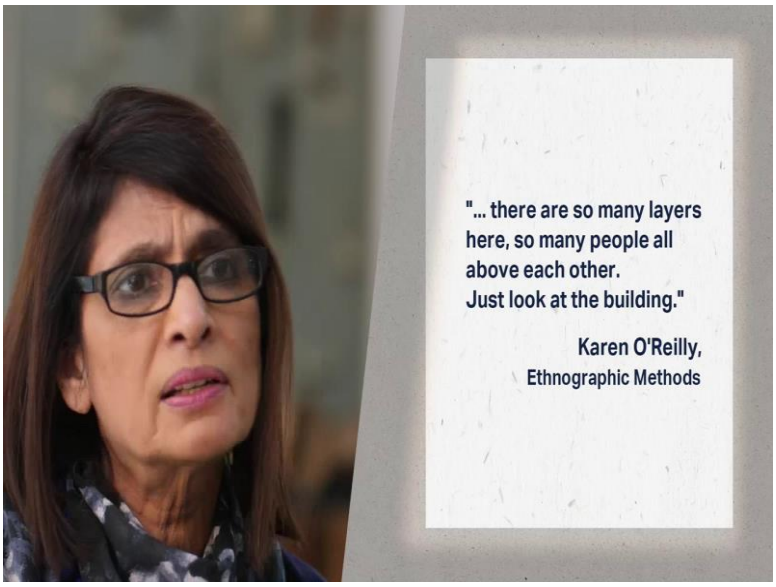

One of them said "..., there are so many layers here, so many people all above each other, just look at the building. Inspired by this quote, Helen decided to bring the building into her conversations with participants. She asked individual participants to draw the structure of the building and mark who sat where. As the exercise progressed, even those who believed that the organisation had a non-hierarchical structure started to see its sharply marked hierarchy.

As participants saw their ideas being contrasted or affirmed by their own drawings, they started to reflect on their assumptions. This led to some very interesting and rich discussions between the researcher and her participants. Photo elicitation is quite popular with designers who wish to learn the needs and desires of their participants. You will see a detailed case study of such a project in our next module.

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Let us return to the photograph made by Marcus Banks at the community dinner. You may wonder what about this image is particularly ethnographic? For one, Banks did not know while going to the event that he would find such an incident there nor that he would be instructed to make any photographs by his participants. Moreover, the image that he made may not have been very different from any other photograph of the event.

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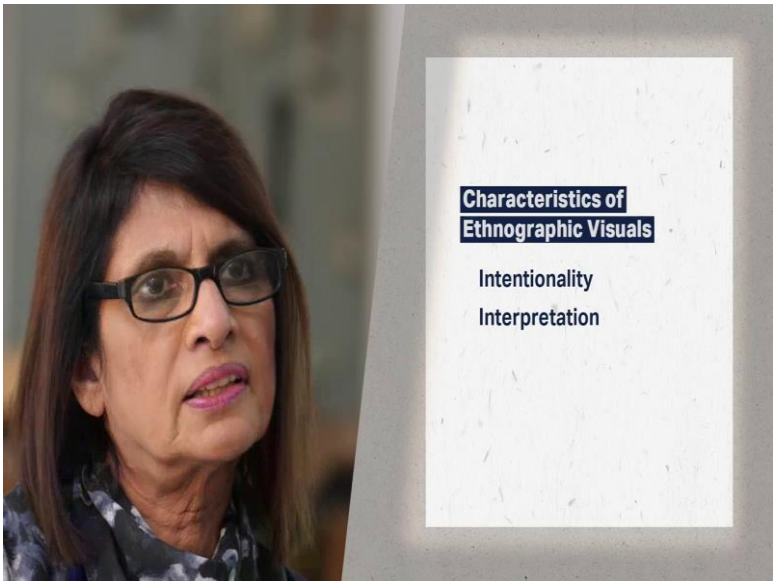

Well, what makes an image ethnographic in nature is the intentionality that goes into its making and the ethnographic knowledge that we access by interpreting the image. Let us discuss this a bit more. The photograph that Banks made had certain meanings for those involved in its making.

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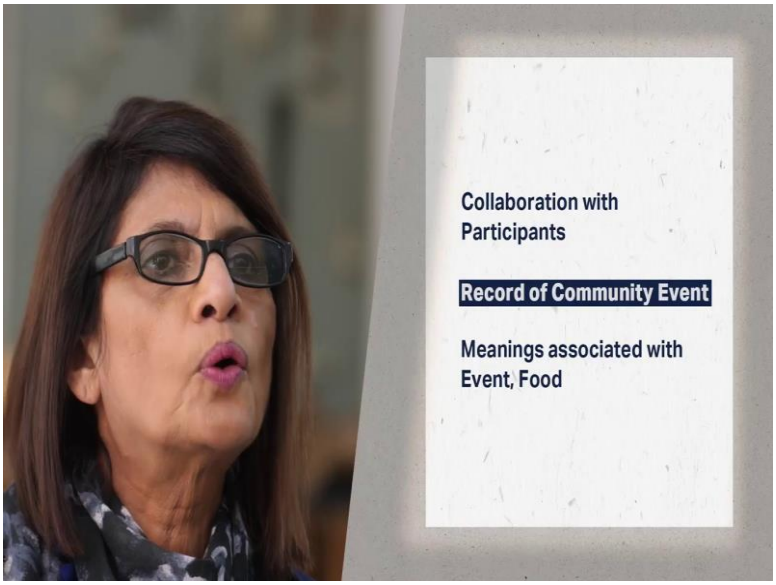

For Banks, it represented his collaboration with his participants. For his participants, it was a record of the host, an important person and her role in their community. By interpreting the photograph and the moment of its making, Banks was able to understand the meanings that his participants attached to the event, the host and even the dessert the dessert that she served.

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It is this process of interpretation through which we analyse an image for meaning that makes the image ethnographic. And even though the clicking of the photograph may seem like a coincidence, it is hardly so. This particular photograph was preceded and made possible by weeks and months of fieldwork. Time and work were put into building relationships and familiarity with participants. It was due to this camaraderie and trust that Banks was made the 'designated photographer' of the event.

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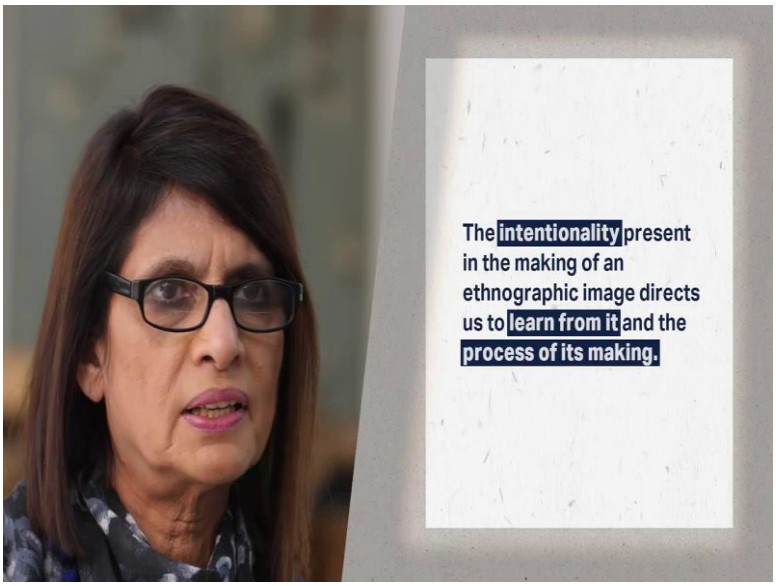

And so we see there is an intentionality present in the making of the ethnographic image. This intentionality directs us to learn from the image and from the process of its making.

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In taking this photograph, Banks learnt that social relationships are made tangible in events like the one he attended and in objects like the special dessert served at the event.

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He learned of the meaning of photographs for his participants. They are a way of depicting social relationships and of documenting behaviours. Experience shows us that underlying the intentionality and the interpretation is a desire to learn from the other. And so image-making in ethnographic research has to be an act of engagement. The choice of visual media can play a crucial part in this engagement. This will be the topic of discussion in our next section