

Using Ethnographic Approach: Case Studies
Open Design School
Indian Institute of Technology, Bombay
Lecture No. 09
Conclusion

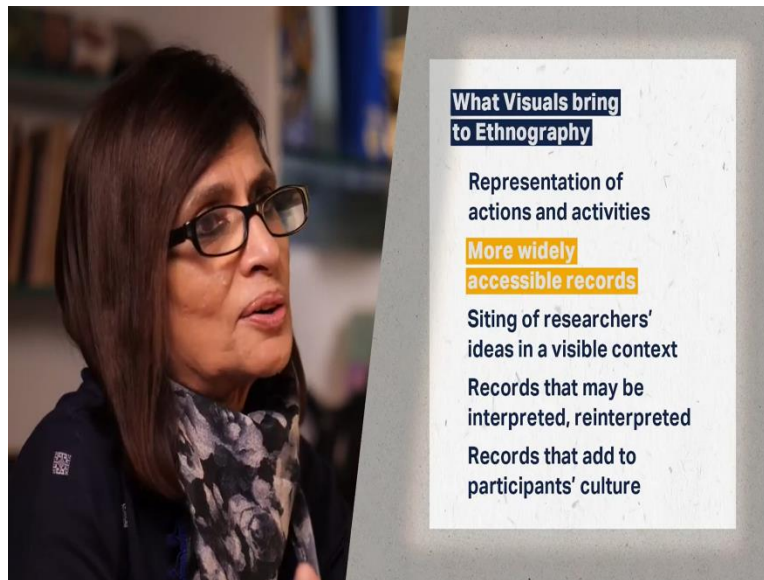
As we come to the end of our module, let us discuss what the visual brings to ethnographic research.

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Often, practices and activities are easily represented through visuals. Film in particular, can record objects and the making of objects. Visual descriptions make it easy to convey and understand complex activities such as tying a shoelace, making pottery and so on. Visuals can convey the visual aspects of an activity such as the colours used in painting a Kaavad or the dots used in Bhil painting. These visual elements we have seen can hold a deep significance for the members of that culture.

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Images are easily read and transported across cultures. This is because they are less likely to be marked by culture-specific conventions of language. Even though the ways of seeing and reading an image differ across cultures, an image made in one culture can still be read in another. For the same reason, visuals enable collaboration and participation among researchers and participants.

By documentation and recording visuals, participants may share authorship and ownership in a project. Moreover, through methods such as photo elicitation, participants can contribute their knowledge and their perspectives to the research.

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Images and words together can help the viewer better understand the context that a research is set in. Together, using these two forms, we can create ethnographies that are richly descriptive and grounded in the context. Visual records lend themselves to multiple interpretations. Visuals can be repeatedly analyzed and from different perspectives. Each time, the same record or the same image may generate new interpretations and new meanings.

Visual ethnographies or the records created in the process are quite likely to become a part of the participants' visual culture. For instance, images we make of our participants may be appreciated by them as portraits or memorabilia of their own lives. Films made as collaborations between participants and researchers often become a way for participants to represent themselves.

In all of these ways, visual ethnography offers us not only new routes to knowledge we may have accessed in other ways, but new forms of knowledge altogether. But there are limitations to the use of visuals in ethnography.

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For one, in using visual mediums, particularly film and photography, it is difficult to maintain the privacy and anonymity of our participants. Also, people are often uncomfortable being represented visually before an audience they might not know. Moreover, participants have less control over where their images may travel in today's internet age.

And finally, visual ethnographies run the risk of placing the visual, physical aspects above and before the intangible emotional ones. For instance, the beauty of a landscape may overshadow the social inequalities that exist there. Or the focus on a craft object may sideline the processes of making it and the lives of the craftsman. Just as images reveal more than they conceal, they may conceal while pretending to reveal.

Thus we need to be conscious, aware and reflexive in researching the visual aspects of a culture or when we use visual mediums to record and represent our participants.