

Grey Moments in Carceral Fieldwork: Reflexivity, Emotional Labour, and Ethical Uncertainty among Families of Inmates of District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir

Mr. Faizan Ashraf¹, Mr. Umair Khan²

^{1,2}Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Aligarh Muslim University

Abstract

Fieldwork with the families of imprisoned men is rarely just a matter of asking questions and recording answers. It can pull a researcher into situations where what the methodology demands, what ethics requires, and what a person simply owes another human being in distress are not easy to tell apart. This article reflects on such situations, drawn from qualitative fieldwork with families of inmates of District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir. The wider study looked at the social, economic, emotional, and educational fallout of imprisonment for families left behind; in the course of that work, however, a number of encounters raised harder questions about the researcher's role, emotional involvement, and ethical responsibility. Drawing on interviews, observations, informal conversations, and field notes gathered from 80 families, the article develops the idea of 'grey moments': situations in which emotional intensity, ethical uncertainty, relational expectation, and methodological duty all press in on the researcher at once. Three such moments are examined here: sitting with a mother's grief during an interview, learning through adult relatives how children conceal a parent's imprisonment from their peers, and being asked for legal or financial help the researcher was not in a position to give. Drawing together reflexivity, emotional labour, stigma, and ethics-in-practice, the article argues that grey moments are not simply interruptions to be managed and moved past. Looked at reflexively, they turn out to carry real methodological weight, telling us something about the conditions under which sociological knowledge of this kind gets made. The article's contribution to methodological debates on research with vulnerable populations lies in this insistence on situated ethical judgement, emotional awareness, researcher positionality, and reflexive practice as working parts of carceral fieldwork, not distractions from it.

Keywords: grey moments; carceral fieldwork; families of inmates; reflexivity; emotional labour; ethical uncertainty; stigma; Jammu and Kashmir

1. Introduction

Imprisonment is usually thought of as a punishment aimed at one person, the man or woman who has been accused or convicted. But its effects rarely stay confined to a single body behind a wall. When someone is taken out of a household, that household has to reorganise itself: who earns, who cares for children, who is spoken to and who is avoided in the neighbourhood, who carries the family's name in public now. Research on parental imprisonment has traced links between a parent's incarceration and difficulties in

children's emotional, social, and educational lives, working through pathways of separation, stigma, and economic or social strain (Murray & Farrington, 2008).

Arditti (2012) makes a related point rather forcefully: incarceration ought to be understood as a *family* experience, not merely an individual one. Financial hardship, emotional distress, shifting family relationships, and social stigma are borne by the people who stay outside while they try, often against considerable odds, to hold on to a relationship with the person inside. In that sense, the consequences of imprisonment do not stop at the prison gate; they settle into the ordinary rhythms of family life.

This wider view of imprisonment matters especially in Jammu and Kashmir, where a family's experience of incarceration is rarely separable from the region's broader social and political conditions. Ashraf and Farhad (2022) show that families touched by conflict-linked incarceration in the region face social, financial, and emotional costs that fall unevenly, with women often left to carry the greater share of household responsibility. Their work demonstrates how incarceration reaches into family relationships, emotional wellbeing, and the everyday experience of being looked at differently by others. What has received far less attention, even as scholarship on families of the incarcerated has grown, is the *encounter through which these experiences come to be documented in the first place*. Sitting across from a family member and asking about grief, stigma, disrupted routines, or financial hardship is not a neutral technical exercise. Participants may become distressed mid-interview; they may hesitate before naming something painful; they may, not unreasonably, expect the researcher to do something more than listen and write.

In moments like these, a researcher is pulled in several directions simultaneously. There is a methodological obligation to understand what is being said. There is an ethical obligation not to cause needless harm. And there is, underneath both, a simply human obligation to respond to someone in front of you who is suffering. These obligations do not always point the same way.

The difficulty is sharpened by the fact that a qualitative interview is not a device for extracting information so much as a social encounter in which meaning gets made jointly, in the exchange itself. Behar (1996) pushed back hard against the old image of the detached fieldworker, insisting instead on the vulnerability and emotional entanglement that fieldwork so often involves. A reflexive stance takes this further, treating the researcher not as a camera recording from outside but as someone situated inside the relationships through which the knowledge is produced.

The ethics of qualitative research, too, exceed what any consent form can specify in advance. Guillemin and Gillam (2004) draw a useful distinction between procedural ethics — institutional approval, informed consent, and the paperwork of research governance — and what they call ethics-in-practice: the ethical questions that surface only once the research is underway. Approval, on their account, does not close the ethical question; it opens the field in which further, unscripted judgment will be required.

This distinction has particular force in research with families of inmates. No ethics committee can tell a researcher how to act when a mother begins to cry mid-sentence. No consent form anticipates a family member describing a child's careful concealment of his father's imprisonment from classmates, or a family quietly hoping the researcher might help with a lawyer's fee. These are not procedural failures; they are the ordinary texture of fieldwork with people whose lives have been disrupted, and they call for judgement made on the spot.

The emotional register of fieldwork is bound up with these ethical questions rather than separate from them. Hochschild's (1983) idea of emotional labour — developed originally to describe paid work in service occupations — turns out to travel well into research settings, where researchers must regulate their own responses even as they stay attentive to what a participant is going through. Studies of sensitive

qualitative research report vulnerability, guilt, the sheer weight of listening to hard stories, strained relationships, and researcher exhaustion as recurring features of this kind of work (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

Reflexivity offers another angle on the same problem. Finlay (2002) argues that researchers need to examine the intersubjective give-and-take through which their own presence shapes what gets said and how. Berger (2015) makes a similar case for attending closely to the researcher's social position and its bearing on the research relationship. Reflexivity, understood this way, is not a diary of private feelings tacked onto the "real" findings; it is a way of interrogating how the researcher's position, relationships, and reactions shape both the production and the interpretation of knowledge.

Stigma sits close to the centre of all this. Goffman (1963) theorised stigma as discrediting information that must be actively managed if a person's social identity is to remain intact. Families connected to an inmate frequently conceal that connection for fear of judgement, damaged reputation, or exclusion — and that concealment does not stop at the front door. It follows the family into the research encounter itself, quietly shaping what gets said to a researcher and what stays unsaid.

This article grows out of qualitative fieldwork conducted with families of inmates of District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir. The broader doctoral study of which it is a part examined the social, economic, emotional, and educational consequences of imprisonment for families, along with the ways incarceration reshapes family relationships and encounters with the criminal justice system. Fieldwork — interviews, observation, informal conversation, and field notes — was carried out between April and August 2024.

Over the course of that fieldwork, several encounters raised questions that went well beyond the immediate business of data collection: sitting with a mother who broke down while describing her son's imprisonment; hearing, through adult relatives, how children concealed a father's imprisonment out of shame; and being approached by families hoping for legal or financial help. I have come to think of these as "grey moments." A grey moment, as I use the term here, is a fieldwork encounter in which emotional intensity, ethical uncertainty, relational expectation, and methodological responsibility all converge at once, so that the "right" response is not self-evident. The term is not meant to suggest these situations sit beyond the reach of ethical reasoning — only that formal research procedure does not, in the moment, hand the researcher a ready answer.

A grey moment can arise when pressing on with an interview risks causing further distress, when one more question might tip gentle probing into pressure, or when a participant expects something from the researcher that lies outside the formal boundaries of the research relationship. None of this can be settled by protocol alone; it calls for judgement exercised in real time, with the participant's dignity and the integrity of the research held together rather than traded off against each other.

The concept sits, then, at the meeting point of reflexivity, emotional labour, stigma, and ethics-in-practice. It does not claim to discover ethical uncertainty as some new problem in qualitative research — Guillemin and Gillam (2004) had already established the significance of what they called ethically important moments, and McGowan (2020) has shown how emotional labour and everyday ethical reasoning intertwine in sensitive fieldwork more broadly. What this article offers is a way of drawing these threads together within the specific and, in some ways, particularly demanding context of fieldwork with families of inmates in Doda.

Two aims run through the article. First, it develops "grey moments" as a way of thinking about emotionally and ethically uncertain encounters in fieldwork with families of inmates. Second, it traces how these encounters fed back into a more reflexive understanding of the research process itself.

The central argument, in short, is that grey moments should not be treated merely as disruptions to be managed and set aside. Examined critically, and with some honesty about discomfort, they can become genuine sites of methodological learning — revealing how stigma, suffering, institutional expectation, and power quietly shape both what participants are willing to share and what sociological knowledge, in the end, is made of.

2. Literature Review and Conceptualising Grey Moments

2.1 Families of Inmates and the Extended Consequences of Imprisonment

Scholarship on imprisonment has, over time, moved its gaze outward from the incarcerated individual to the family left behind. Murray and Farrington (2008) show that parental imprisonment is associated with emotional, behavioural, educational, and social difficulties in children, and they identify separation, stigma, and social or economic strain as the principal routes through which this happens.

Arditti (2012) develops the family-centred view further, describing the economic hardship, emotional strain, shifting relationships, and social stigma that family members carry while trying to sustain a relationship with an incarcerated relative. This work unsettles any narrow reading of punishment as something visited only upon the person behind bars.

The Indian context sharpens this point rather than softening it. Ashraf and Farhad (2022), studying women affected by conflict-linked incarceration in Kashmir, document social, financial, and emotional costs that ripple through the household long after a family member is taken into custody.

The present study builds on this body of work but turns its attention toward a different, and comparatively neglected, question: what happens inside the research relationship itself when someone tries to document these family experiences?

2.2 Sensitive Research and Vulnerable Participants

Research touching on imprisonment, stigma, bereavement, and family disruption is, almost by definition, sensitive research. Dickson-Swift et al. (2007), drawing on interviews with qualitative researchers, catalogue difficulties around rapport, self-disclosure, sitting with difficult stories, guilt, vulnerability, exiting research relationships, and researcher exhaustion.

These findings matter here because they make clear that sensitive research leaves marks on researchers as well as participants. Fieldworkers routinely meet emotions and situations that no research design anticipated.

Bhatia and Aggarwal (2021) offer a particularly close Indian parallel. Their reflective account of research with prisoners sentenced to death, and with their families, discusses sampling difficulties, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, role confusion, conflicts of interest, and researcher bias — concerns that map closely onto the terrain of the present study.

These issues bear directly on research with families of inmates. A researcher may hold a clearly bounded formal role on paper while participants understand that role quite differently in practice. That gap becomes consequential precisely at moments when families ask for help, or disclose something that calls for a delicate response.

2.3 Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Reflexivity is central to any honest account of how qualitative knowledge gets made. Finlay (2002) distinguishes several forms it can take — introspection, intersubjective reflection, collaboration, social critique, and discursive analysis — and shows across all of them that the researcher is not a detached observer standing outside the process but a participant within it.

Berger (2015) makes a related argument: a researcher's social position, personal history, and professional identity shape both the research relationship and how its findings are interpreted. Reflexivity, then, means examining how that position shapes what becomes visible — and what stays out of view — in the course of the research.

This matters a great deal in fieldwork with families of inmates, since participants are likely to read the researcher through whatever institutional connection, educational standing, or apparent access to resources they seem to carry. The researcher's own sense of the role, in other words, may not match how participants actually experience it.

2.4 Emotional Labour in Fieldwork

Emotion is not incidental to qualitative research; it is often close to its core, particularly when the subject matter is sensitive. Hochschild (1983) defined emotional labour as the management of feeling and emotional display within social interaction — a concept developed for the workplace but one that transfers with surprising ease into the fieldwork encounter.

Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) find that sensitive qualitative research places real emotional demands on researchers, including vulnerability and exhaustion. McGowan (2020) links emotional labour explicitly to reflexivity and ethics-in-practice, showing that ethical decisions in the field tend to emerge out of ordinary, unremarkable interactions rather than only in moments flagged in advance as "difficult."

This study builds on that observation by examining how emotional labour became, in practice, part of how the researcher responded to grief, stigma, and requests for help.

2.5 Stigma, Concealment, and Silence

Goffman (1963) theorised stigma in terms of socially discrediting attributes and the ongoing work of managing a threatened social identity. Stigma shapes not only how people are seen by others but what they choose to say, and to whom.

For families of inmates, association with an incarcerated relative can create real pressure toward concealment — a pressure that becomes especially acute for children, who fear how peers might judge them if the truth came out.

The present fieldwork suggests this dynamic reaches into the research encounter itself. Hesitation and silence shape what participants are willing to disclose. Rather than reading silence simply as a gap in the data, it is worth asking what social conditions produced that silence in the first place.

2.6 Ethics-in-Practice

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) distinguish procedural ethics — formal institutional approval, informed consent — from ethics-in-practice, the ethical decisions researchers must actually make once fieldwork is under way.

This distinction sits at the centre of the present study. The research had institutional permission, and written consent from inmates for household visits was secured before any family was approached. Yet none of this could specify, in advance, how the researcher ought to respond to a participant's grief, a family's hesitation, or a direct request for help.

Ethical responsibility, in other words, did not end once approval was granted; it continued throughout the fieldwork. McGowan (2020) makes a similar case, arguing that ethical decision-making in sensitive research is often worked out through ordinary, everyday reasoning rather than through formal deliberation.

2.7 Conceptualising "Grey Moments"

Several existing concepts bear directly on the experiences discussed in this article:

- **Reflexivity** helps explain the researcher's position and influence.

- **Emotional labour** helps explain the management of feeling within research interactions.
- **Stigma** helps explain concealment and the management of social identity.
- **Ethics-in-practice** helps explain situated ethical decision-making.
- **Positionality** helps explain the expectations participants attach to the researcher.

The present study draws these dimensions together under the concept of **grey moments**, defined as:

A situated fieldwork encounter in which emotional intensity, ethical uncertainty, relational expectation, and methodological responsibility converge, leaving the most appropriate response genuinely uncertain.

Four interconnected dimensions make up the concept.

Emotional intensity. A grey moment can emerge wherever grief, distress, or vulnerability enters the research encounter.

Ethical uncertainty. More than one response may be available to the researcher, each carrying different consequences, without an obviously "correct" choice among them.

Relational expectations. Participants may expect empathy, advice, or practical assistance that goes beyond the formal research role.

Methodological responsibility. The researcher remains accountable for producing credible knowledge while respecting participant dignity and holding appropriate boundaries.

Grey moments, then, are not simply difficult feelings that researchers happen to experience in the field. They are relational situations in which methodological, ethical, emotional, and interpersonal considerations press together at the same time.

The concept does not replace Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) "ethically important moments"; it builds on that foundation, naming a particular configuration of ethical uncertainty, emotional labour, and relational expectation that recurs specifically in carceral family fieldwork.

3. Methodology and Research Context

3.1 Research Approach and Design

This article draws on the qualitative fieldwork component of a broader doctoral study examining the consequences of imprisonment for families of inmates of District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir. That larger study looked at the social, economic, emotional, and educational fallout of imprisonment, and at how incarceration reshapes family relationships and encounters with the criminal justice system. This particular article has a narrower, methodological focus. Rather than presenting the substantive findings on imprisonment's consequences as its main business, it turns instead to a set of encounters that arose during the research process, read here through the concept of grey moments. Interviews, observation, informal conversation, and field notes together made up the data. Field notes carried both contextual observation and reflection on encounters that carried particular emotional or ethical weight.

3.2 Research Setting

The research was anchored in District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir, which served as the institutional point of entry to inmates, while the principal site of engagement with families was the household itself. The household mattered because the consequences of imprisonment are not confined to the prison. They are lived out through changed family relationships, shifted economic responsibility, altered social standing, and everyday emotional life outside the prison walls.

3.3 Institutional Permission and Access

Institutional permission was granted by the Director General of Prisons, Jammu and Kashmir (DG Prisons J&K), allowing visits to District Jail Doda, interaction with inmates, and explanation of the research to

them directly. Inmates who were willing to participate were asked to give written consent permitting the researcher to visit their household and study the family's experience of imprisonment. Out of 204 inmates in the relevant prison population, 80 gave written consent for their household to be approached. The household component of the study accordingly comprised these 80 families, each corresponding to one consenting inmate. Access, then, was built on consent at two levels rather than institutional permission alone: permission from DG Prisons J&K opened the door to the prison, while each inmate's individual written consent opened the door, in turn, to his household.

3.4 Participants

The study drew on 80 families of inmates. Adult participants included parents, wives, and other adult household members. The fieldwork record does not include a numerical breakdown by gender or relationship, and none is presented here. One clarification matters a great deal. Children were not interviewed directly in this study. Where children's experiences appear in what follows, they are relayed through the accounts of adult family members or observed within broader household interactions — never collected as independent child testimony.

3.5 Data Collection

Fieldwork ran from April to August 2024. Interviews were conducted in Kashmiri, Urdu, Hindi, or other local languages, according to what each participant preferred, alongside observation, informal conversation, and field notes. Drawing on several kinds of material mattered because the grey moments discussed here did not emerge only from answers to planned questions. They surfaced just as often through an emotional reaction, a pause, a silence, an aside in an otherwise informal conversation, or a request that had nothing to do with the interview schedule at all.

3.6 Consent and Ethical Access

Ethical access unfolded in two stages. DG Prisons J&K first granted permission to visit District Jail Doda and speak with inmates. Inmates then decided, individually, whether their households could be approached; 80 of 204 gave written consent to this effect. Adult family members subsequently took part in the household-level study once they had been informed about it directly, and their participation was treated as a distinct act of consent, separate from the inmate's permission to approach the home in the first place. This two-stage structure matters because institutional access is not, by itself, the same thing as voluntary participation.

3.7 Confidentiality and Anonymisation

Given the sensitivity of imprisonment, and the stigma that can attach to having an incarcerated family member, confidentiality and anonymity were treated as non-negotiable. Pseudonyms are used throughout, both in the research process and in how findings are presented, and personally identifying details have been removed or altered where necessary. Particular care was taken around children. Since children were not direct respondents, their experiences appear only as relayed by adult family members or observed within household interactions, and no identifying information about them or their families is disclosed anywhere in this account. Anonymisation carried extra weight here given how identifiable the geographical and social setting can be.

3.8 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher entered the field through an institutional channel but came, over time, to engage with families within the more intimate setting of their own households — a shift that brought with it different, sometimes conflicting, expectations of the researcher's role. Reflexivity, in practice, meant recording observations, emotional responses, and uncertainties as they arose in field notes — not to catalogue

personal feeling for its own sake, but to examine how particular encounters were shaping the research itself. What stood out most, on reflection, were the moments when it grew genuinely difficult to separate the formal research role from an ordinary human response to another person's distress. That difficulty is, in many ways, where the idea of grey moments first took shape.

3.9 Ethics in Practice

Formal ethical approval and informed consent set the basic conditions under which the research could proceed. But they did not settle the ethical questions that arose once fieldwork was actually under way.

A participant's distress raised the question of whether to continue an interview at all. A sensitive exchange about children concealing a parent's imprisonment raised the question of how far to press. Requests for legal or financial help raised harder questions still about where the researcher's role properly ended. Each of these illustrates, in a very concrete way, Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) distinction between procedural ethics and ethics-in-practice.

3.10 Analytical Approach

The article takes a reflexive, interpretive approach. The aim was never to count how often ethical difficulty arose, but to examine specific encounters in which the right response was genuinely unclear to the researcher at the time. Field notes, observations, and interview-related reflections were reviewed for recurring patterns involving: emotional distress and grief; hesitation and concealment around imprisonment; expectations of assistance; uncertainty about the researcher's role; and reflection on the ethical stakes of particular responses.

Three categories emerged from this process:

Grief and emotional uncertainty — moments when a participant's distress called the continuation of an interview into question.

Concealment and stigma — moments when discussion of a parent's imprisonment revealed the pressures shaping what could, and could not, be disclosed.

Requests for assistance and role boundaries — moments when families expected help that lay outside the researcher's formal responsibilities.

The analysis moved, in short, **from field experience to reflexive reflection, and from reflection to conceptual interpretation.**

3.11 Methodological Limitations

This study makes no claim to statistical generalisation across all families of inmates in Jammu and Kashmir. The 80 families involved were those corresponding to inmates who gave written consent for a household visit and whose adult members agreed, in turn, to participate. The fact that prison authorities facilitated access may have shaped how participants perceived the research and the researcher; this possibility is acknowledged rather than set aside.

A further limitation concerns children specifically. Because they were not interviewed directly, their experiences cannot be presented as independently gathered child data — what appears here is necessarily limited to adult accounts and household-level observation.

4. Findings: Navigating Grey Moments in Carceral Fieldwork

Fieldwork produced a number of encounters that reached beyond the anticipated business of asking questions and recording answers. Three stand out in particular: an encounter with grief, an account of a child's concealment of parental imprisonment, and requests for legal or financial help.

4.1 Grey Moment I: Sitting with Grief

One of the most emotionally difficult moments in the fieldwork came during an interview with a mother whose son was imprisoned. As she described how his imprisonment had reshaped her daily life, she began to cry. The interview was paused, and the researcher simply remained with her rather than pressing ahead through the planned sequence of questions.

This created a real tension between the interview's methodological purpose and what was actually unfolding within it. The researcher had entered the conversation to understand the consequences of imprisonment; the participant's distress changed what the encounter was, in that moment, actually about. The question was no longer only what information could be gathered, but whether continuing to gather it, right then, would even be appropriate.

This was a grey moment precisely because neither continuing nor stopping could be treated as automatically correct. Continuing might have let the participant say more; it might equally have felt intrusive. Pausing placed her immediate emotional state ahead of the planned questions — a choice, not a neutral default.

This is the distinction between procedural ethics and ethics-in-practice made concrete: formal approval cannot specify, in advance, exactly how a researcher should respond when a participant breaks down mid-interview (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004).

There was emotional labour here too. The researcher had to stay attentive to the participant while managing his own reaction to what was happening in front of him — a demand that sensitive-research scholarship has documented as a source of genuine vulnerability and strain for researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007).

On later reflection, the silence that followed her distress came to seem less like an interruption and more like part of the interaction itself — a way of registering the emotional weight of imprisonment that did not require further questions to be understood.

What this grey moment brings into focus, then, is the tension between the drive to understand and the obligation to respond. In sensitive fieldwork, responsible research sometimes means putting data collection on hold, at least for a while.

4.2 Grey Moment II: Children's Concealment of Parental Imprisonment

A second grey moment concerned children's concealment of a parent's imprisonment. As noted, children were not interviewed directly in this study; what follows comes from adult family members' accounts and from broader household interactions.

Several adult participants described how children hid a father's imprisonment from their peers, out of fear of judgement. One account, in particular, involved a child who told classmates his father was working in another city, rather than disclosing the truth. When the subject came up in conversation with the family, hesitation itself became a signal of just how sensitive the matter was.

The episode illustrates the tight connection between imprisonment, stigma, and identity management. Goffman's (1963) account of stigma is useful here: concealment can be read as a strategy for managing information that would otherwise discredit a person, or in this case a whole family, in the eyes of others. For the researcher, though, this raised a genuine ethical question: how far should the subject be pursued? Pressing further might well have yielded useful material on stigma. It might equally have deepened the family's discomfort. In the end, the researcher chose not to push the matter.

That choice reflects something worth stating plainly: the amount of information gathered is not the only measure of good fieldwork. Respecting hesitation can matter more, ethically, than extracting one more

detail.

The encounter also shows that silence can carry real sociological meaning. Treated only as missing data, hesitation risks obscuring the social conditions that produced it in the first place. Here, that hesitation pointed directly to the weight a family carries in disclosing a parent's imprisonment at all.

This grey moment, then, sat at the intersection of stigma, ethical judgement, and the making of knowledge. The child's experience, as relayed by adult relatives, showed how deeply stigma shapes family life; the researcher's response showed, just as clearly, how ethical judgement shapes what becomes research material in the first place.

4.3 Grey Moment III: Requests for Legal and Financial Assistance

A third grey moment arose when several families asked whether the researcher could help them find legal assistance or financial support. The researcher had no institutional capacity to provide either. Even so, simply explaining the limits of the research role felt inadequate set against the difficulties these families were describing.

These requests made clear that participants did not necessarily see the researcher only as an academic interviewer. He could just as easily be read as someone connected to educational or institutional resources, and therefore as someone who might plausibly be able to help.

This produced a genuine problem of role confusion. The formal purpose of the research was to understand what families of inmates were going through. Participants, quite reasonably, sometimes expected the researcher to do more than understand — to help facilitate access to assistance they badly needed.

Bhatia and Aggarwal (2021) identify very similar concerns — role confusion, confidentiality, informed consent, conflict of interest — in their account of research with prisoners sentenced to death and their families in India.

The dilemma here was not simply whether to provide assistance. It was the harder, ongoing question of how a researcher stays honest about the limits of his role without becoming indifferent to the circumstances in front of him.

The researcher could not become a lawyer, a financial provider, or a social worker. But retreating into strictly procedural distance risked undermining the trust and respect that qualitative research depends on in the first place.

What the encounter shows, in the end, is the need for professional boundaries held together with relational sensitivity — not one at the expense of the other.

4.4 Emotional Labour and Reflexivity

Across all three grey moments, emotional labour and ethical decision-making turned out to be inseparable. Listening to accounts of imprisonment and hardship required the researcher to stay attentive to participants while managing his own emotional response to what he was hearing.

Reflexive field notes proved important here, not as objective evidence of anything, but as a record of how particular encounters shaped interpretation as the research went on.

Finlay (2002) argues that reflexivity means examining the intersubjective processes through which researchers shape, and are shaped by, the research itself; Berger (2015) makes a similar point about the relationship between researcher position and reflexive practice.

The present fieldwork bears this out: the researcher's response to grief, hesitation, and requests for help repeatedly raised questions about how the research relationship itself ought to be managed, questions that emotional awareness helped bring into view.

4.5 Grey Moments as Epistemic Opportunities

At first glance, each of the three encounters looks like an interruption. The mother's distress interrupted the interview. The discussion of a child's concealment produced hesitation. Requests for help pulled conversations well outside the research schedule.

Reflexive analysis, though, points to a rather different reading.

The mother's distress revealed the emotional weight imprisonment carries within family life. The discussion of concealment revealed the social force of stigma. The requests for help revealed how families actually understood the researcher's institutional position, as distinct from how he understood it himself. In this sense, the grey moments became epistemically useful precisely through reflexive examination. Their value did not lie simply in the discomfort or emotion involved. It lay in what reflection on that discomfort revealed about the social world under study, and about the research relationship itself.

This distinction matters and is worth stating clearly. The claim here is not that emotional involvement automatically produces better research, or that researchers ought to go looking for reasons to cross professional boundaries. The claim, more modestly, is that emotionally and ethically uncertain encounters deserve to be examined rather than edited out of how we describe qualitative research.

5. Discussion

Taken together, the findings show that fieldwork with families of inmates is at once an empirical, relational, emotional, and ethical undertaking. The researcher goes into the field to understand imprisonment's consequences and finds, along the way, that the formal research role keeps being tested by circumstances it was never quite built to anticipate.

The concept of grey moments draws these strands together. Existing scholarship has already established the importance of reflexivity, emotional labour, and ethics-in-practice — Guillemin and Gillam (2004) identify the everyday ethical tensions built into research practice, and McGowan (2020) shows how emotional labour and ethics-as-practice become intertwined in sensitive fieldwork more broadly. What this study adds is an account of how these dimensions come together specifically in fieldwork with families of inmates.

5.1 Beyond Procedural Ethics

The first implication concerns the gap between formal ethical approval and ethical practice as it actually unfolds in the field.

This study had permission from DG Prisons J&K and written consent from inmates for household visits — necessary steps, but not sufficient ones. They could not, on their own, determine how the researcher ought to respond when a participant broke down, or when a family asked for help.

This bears out Guillemin and Gillam's (2004) distinction between procedural ethics and ethics-in-practice rather precisely. Ethical research does not conclude once approval is granted; ethical judgement continues to be required for as long as the fieldwork does.

Grey moments, in this light, occupy the space between formal ethical procedure and situated ethical action.

5.2 Rethinking Objectivity

The findings also raise a harder question about emotional detachment. The researcher could not remain wholly unmoved while listening to accounts of family suffering — nor, arguably, should he have tried to be.

This is not an argument for letting emotional involvement override methodological discipline. It is, rather, a caution against assuming that emotional distance is automatically the same thing as objectivity.

Finlay (2002) argues that reflexivity requires examining how intersubjective processes shape research as it happens. This study follows that lead by treating emotional response not as evidence in itself, but as a prompt for reflection on what the encounter revealed.

The more useful question, then, is not simply "How did the researcher feel?" but "What did that response reveal about the encounter, and how might it have shaped the research that followed?"

5.3 Emotional Labour and the Work of Listening

The findings make clear that listening, done properly, is itself a form of work. The researcher had to stay attentive to participants while managing his own reaction to grief and hardship — a task that is neither passive nor effortless.

Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour is useful for naming this. Dickson-Swift et al. (2007) show that sensitive qualitative research can leave researchers genuinely vulnerable and depleted; McGowan (2020) connects this emotional labour directly to ethics-in-practice.

This study suggests, further, that the emotional labour of fieldwork carries a moral weight of its own. How a researcher listens, and how he responds, has a direct bearing on the dignity and comfort of the people he is speaking with.

5.4 Stigma and the Production of Silence

The findings on concealment show that stigma reaches into both participants' social lives and the research encounter itself.

Goffman's (1963) account of stigma helps explain why information about parental imprisonment is so often concealed, and the account of a child hiding his father's imprisonment shows how carefully a family can manage what others are allowed to know.

For researchers, this means silence cannot simply be treated as poor data. It may well reflect the social conditions surrounding disclosure — conditions that are themselves worth understanding.

The researcher's decision not to press further on a sensitive matter also shows that ethical decisions actively shape what becomes research data in the first place. Ethics and the production of knowledge, in other words, are not separate processes.

5.5 Researcher–Participant Boundaries

The requests for legal and financial help show that participants can understand a researcher quite differently from how the researcher understands himself.

A researcher may arrive in the field as an academic investigator but be read, not unreasonably, as someone with access to institutional resources — and this can generate expectations that reach well beyond the formal research role.

Such expectations carry particular weight in research with marginalised populations. Bhatia and Aggarwal (2021) identify very similar concerns around role confusion and conflict of interest in their work with prisoners and their families in India.

The answer is not necessarily to withdraw from relational engagement altogether. It is, instead, to hold clear boundaries while communicating them with genuine respect.

5.6 What Does "Grey Moments" Add?

This article does not claim that ethical uncertainty is a new discovery in qualitative research. The existing literature on ethically important moments, reflexivity, and ethics-in-practice already covers this ground well.

What "grey moments" contributes is a way of holding four dimensions together:

1. Emotional intensity

2. **Ethical uncertainty**
3. **Relational expectation**
4. **Methodological responsibility**

A grey moment occurs when these four converge within a single, actual field encounter.

The concept is especially useful for research with families of inmates because such fieldwork is shot through with stigma, institutional authority, family vulnerability, and unequal access to resources — all at once, and often in the same conversation.

It offers, in short, a vocabulary for the micro-level decisions researchers make in sensitive fieldwork: whether to continue, pause, probe, stay silent, draw a boundary, or simply listen.

5.7 Grey Moments and Reflexive Knowledge Production

The findings suggest a process that runs roughly as follows:

field encounter leads to uncertainty, prompting reflexive examination, which then guides interpretation and fosters methodological learning.

This matters because a difficult encounter does not automatically become useful knowledge on its own. It becomes analytically valuable only once it has been reflected on.

The mother's distress prompted reflection on emotional responsibility. The discussion of concealment prompted reflection on stigma and on the limits of questioning. The requests for assistance prompted reflection on institutional expectation and role boundaries.

Grey moments, understood this way, became sites through which the researcher came to understand both participants' experiences and the conditions under which those experiences turn into research knowledge at all.

5.8 Implications for Researchers

Several implications follow for researchers working with families of inmates, and with vulnerable populations more broadly.

First, research designs should anticipate emotional distress while staying flexible enough to handle what cannot be anticipated.

Second, researchers should reckon with the fact that stigma shapes disclosure — silence and hesitation are themselves meaningful, not just gaps to be filled.

Third, researchers need clear boundaries around requests for assistance, communicated with sensitivity rather than simply asserted.

Fourth, reflexive field notes should record ethically significant encounters, and the decisions taken in the midst of them, as they happen rather than in retrospect.

Finally, ethics committees and research institutions might do well to recognise that ethical responsibility does not end at the point of approval. Researchers in sensitive settings would likely benefit from structured opportunities to talk through emotional and ethical difficulty, both during and after fieldwork.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the methodological and ethical experience of qualitative fieldwork with families of inmates of District Jail Doda, Jammu and Kashmir. Where the broader study looked outward, at imprisonment's consequences for families, this article has turned inward, toward the research encounter itself.

Three forms of grey moments were identified: an encounter with grief, a child's concealment of parental imprisonment as relayed by adult relatives, and requests for legal or financial help. Each showed how

emotional response, ethical responsibility, relational expectation, and methodological duty can converge in sensitive fieldwork, often without much warning.

The concept of grey moments offers one way of making sense of these encounters. It does not claim that ethical uncertainty is unique to research on imprisonment, or that existing methodological scholarship has somehow missed it. What it does is bring together dimensions that are usually discussed separately, and apply them squarely to fieldwork with families of inmates.

The study also shows that formal ethical approval and individual consent, however necessary, do not resolve every ethical question that fieldwork throws up. Ethical responsibility continues once a participant is in distress, once sensitive information surfaces, or once participants come to expect something from the researcher that the research was never designed to provide.

Reflexivity matters here not as a record of the researcher's private feelings, but as a working method — a way of examining how particular encounters shape the research relationship and, through it, the knowledge that eventually gets produced.

Methodological rigour, the study suggests, should not be confused with emotional detachment. Researchers working with families of inmates are likely to meet grief, stigma, silence, and requests for help that no interview schedule or ethics protocol can fully anticipate. Responding well to these calls for methodological discipline held together with ethical sensitivity and honest reflexive awareness — not one substituting for the other.

The concept of grey moments should be read within the limits of this study. It emerges from fieldwork in one particular setting, among families connected to District Jail Doda, and makes no claim to statistical generalisation. Whether similar grey moments arise in research with other prisons, other regions, or other vulnerable populations is a question for further research to take up.

Future work might also ask how researchers can be better prepared for encounters of this kind before they happen. Training in reflexivity, emotional preparedness, boundary management, and ethics-in-practice would likely serve researchers well before they walk into sensitive institutional settings, not only after.

In the end, grey moments bring into view something about qualitative research that too rarely gets said out loud: some of its most consequential decisions are made in the field encounter itself, in the moment, without the luxury of hindsight. Researchers must decide, often quickly, whether to continue, pause, ask, hold back, listen, or draw a line. Taking these moments seriously, rather than editing them out of the account afterward, is part of what it means to do sociological research that is both ethically attentive and reflexively rigorous.

1. References

2. Arditti, J. A. (2012). *Parental incarceration and the family: Psychological and social effects of imprisonment on children, parents, and caregivers*. New York University Press.
3. Ashraf, I., & Farhad, S. (2022). Conflict linked incarceration of a family member: Women and their experiences. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, 61(1), 20–36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10509674.2021.2017383>
4. Behar, R. (1996). *The vulnerable observer: Anthropology that breaks your heart*. Beacon Press.
5. Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
6. Bhatia, P., & Aggarwal, P. (2021). Lessons learned from conducting research with prisoners sentenced to death and their families in India: Ethical considerations and methodological challenges. *Journal of*

- Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, 21(5), 403–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24732850.2021.1904808>
7. Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007). Doing sensitive research: What challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 327–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107078515>
 8. Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, 2(2), 209–230. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205>
 9. Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice-Hall.
 10. Guillemin, M., & Gillam, L. (2004). Ethics, reflexivity, and "ethically important moments" in research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(2), 261–280. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800403262360>
 11. Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press.
 12. McGowan, W. (2020). 'If you didn't laugh, you'd cry': Emotional labour, reflexivity and ethics-as-practice in a qualitative fieldwork context. *Methodological Innovations*, 13(2), Article 205979912092608. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2059799120926086>
 13. Murray, J., & Farrington, D. P. (2008). The effects of parental imprisonment on children. *Crime and Justice*, 37(1), 133–206. <https://doi.org/10.1086/520070>