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# Conducting Qualitative Research on Parental Incarceration: Personal Reflections on Challenges and Contributions

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## Conducting Qualitative Research on Parental Incarceration: Personal Reflections on Challenges and Contributions

### Abstract

*Methodological challenges of conducting research with protected populations using qualitative methods are abundant. Inmates and children are two vulnerable populations, requiring rigorous processes and permissions to gain access to individuals in these populations. Qualitative research requires intimate interactions and discussions of sensitive topics, posing challenges related to extracting information and creating emotional responses from researcher and participant. Drawing on interviews with incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated parents, we discuss challenges and benefits of qualitative methodology for research on parental incarceration and offer suggestions for overcoming barriers to access, data collection, and publication.*

### Keywords

Qualitative Methodology, Phenomenology, Parental Incarceration

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## Conducting Qualitative Research on Parental Incarceration: Personal Reflections on Challenges and Contributions

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*Methodological challenges of conducting research with protected populations using qualitative methods are abundant. Inmates and children are two vulnerable populations, requiring rigorous processes and permissions to gain access to individuals in these populations. Qualitative research requires intimate interactions and discussions of sensitive topics, posing challenges related to extracting information and creating emotional responses from researcher and participant. Drawing on interviews with incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated parents, we discuss challenges and benefits of qualitative methodology for research on parental incarceration and offer suggestions for overcoming barriers to access, data collection, and publication.*

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Incarceration has become a fact of life for many American families. According to recent national data, more than half of the 2.3 million inmates incarcerated in America's prisons and jails during 2008 were parents to minor children (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2010). These data further suggest that inmates were parents to an estimated 2.7 million children under the age of 18, or approximately one out of every 28 children in the United States. Researchers from across the social sciences have documented that parental incarceration often has implications for parents' economic prospects and psychological well-being, for children's behavioral, academic, and emotional outcomes, and for family-level processes (for reviews, see Arditti, 2012; Dallaire, 2007; Johnson & Easterling, 2012; Murray, Bijleveld, Farrington, & Loeber, 2014; Murray, Farrington, & Sekol, 2012), underscoring the need to understand when, how, and why incarceration affects children and families.

The majority of research on parental incarceration has utilized quantitative methodological approaches and has relied heavily on secondary analysis of datasets that were not designed to address questions related to parental incarceration, which has limited our ability to identify the mechanisms by which incarceration affects individual and family well-being (Dallaire, Zeman, & Thrash, 2014). Qualitative approaches to incarceration research can help remedy this gap (Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004) and, in general, provide an important complement to quantitative investigations. Qualitative explorations offer detail and texture, give "voice" to participants, and can capture aspects of family processes and functioning that are inaccessible via quantitative protocols. Indeed, a growing body of qualitative work in this area has revealed unique insights about the experience of parenting behind bars (Arditti, Smock, & Parkman, 2005; Enos, 2001; Golden, 2005; Owen, 1998; Shamai & Kichal, 2008), the challenges of reentry among female probationers (Arditti & Few, 2006), factors that influence how children's caregivers are affected by parental incarceration (Turanovic, Rodriguez, & Pratt, 2012), the social and emotional difficulties that children encounter during parental incarceration (Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008; Siegel, 2011), and the conflicting feelings that children often have about parental reentry (Johnson & Easterling, 2015a; Yocum & Nath, 2011). Of particular importance, qualitative studies have also illuminated evidence of positive

functioning that has yet to emerge from quantitative studies. For example, qualitative investigations have revealed that incarceration may serve as a “turning point” or key factor in motivating positive change for parents (Shamai & Kochal, 2008; Edin, Nelson, & Paranal, 2004), that it can help families to pull together in new and productive ways (Arditti & Few, 2006), and that children with incarcerated parents are often resourceful in seeking out social support and enacting healthy coping strategies (Johnson & Easterling, 2015b; Nesmith & Ruhland, 2008).

Despite the promise of qualitative work for research on justice-involved individuals and their families, it poses a number of logistical and ethical challenges for researchers. The purpose of this paper is to describe our method, discuss the challenges we have encountered in our qualitative work with incarcerated mothers and with adolescents who have experienced parental incarceration, and offer suggestions for overcoming these challenges. We build on previous discussions of conducting research in prison settings (Apa et al., 2012; Arditti et al., 2010; Downing, Polzer, & Levan, 2013; Maeve, 1998; Patenaude, 2004) in three important ways. First, our focus is on exploring family issues related to incarceration with qualitative methodology, specifically using what we term a “phenomenologically-informed” approach. Second, we discuss the challenges of interviewing children with incarcerated parents. Third, we offer an interdisciplinary perspective, citing examples from our collaborative work that reflects our backgrounds in sociology (Easterling) and developmental psychology (Johnson). We begin by describing our philosophical and methodological approach to the interviews, followed by a discussion on challenges related to access, extracting information, and publication, and then offer suggestions for overcoming these challenges.

### **A “Phenomenologically-Informed” Approach to Data Collection**

Our research agenda focuses on American families experiencing incarceration, with current projects largely focused on qualitative explorations of topics related to mothering in prison and the experience of having an incarcerated parent. One project (referred to as Study 1) explores how mothers in a State women’s prison experience incarceration by shifting their mother roles and identities during the incarceration period. Thirty-five mothers, ranging in age from 24 to 41, were interviewed for this study. Thirty-two of these women were white, 2 were African American, and 1 was Native American. An additional 14 women were interviewed in 2 groups of 7, but demographic information was not obtained due to confidentiality issues within the group setting. The other project (referred to as Study 2) explores the experiences of adolescents with incarcerated parents before, during, and after parental incarceration through a discussion of topics related to having a parent in prison and expectations for reentry and reunification. Thirteen children were interviewed individually for this study. Participants ranged in age from 11 to 16. Four self-identified their racial background as black, 3 as missed (2 black/white and 1 black/Asian), 2 as black and white, 1 as black and Native American, 1 identified as black/white/Asian, 1 as African American, and 1 as White. In each project, we utilized what we term a “phenomenologically-informed” methodology – a qualitative approach informed by phenomenological philosophy and research techniques, but more structured than traditional phenomenological approaches.

Phenomenological interviews are designed to “...attain a first-person description of some specified domain of experience, with the course of the dialogue largely set by the respondent” (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997, pp. 29-30). Toward this end, phenomenological interviews are typically conducted with a single opening question that “is worded to allow for a broad range of descriptive responses from each participant” rather than a list of structured questions (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 32). We deviate from a purely phenomenological approach in three ways. First, we used multiple, semi-structured questions.

Second, we did not engage in a formal bracketing process, although we did reflect on preconceived notions and had informal discussions on such topics. Third, we integrated elements of standpoint epistemology and the biographical-interpretive method into our approach

Although we entered our interviews with a set of possible topics to discuss and therefore diverged from the phenomenological approach in this respect, we nonetheless took great care to ensure that participants set the tone and pace of the interviews. A purely phenomenological approach does not utilize a list of questions, but rather opens with a single question and then allows the participant to dictate the interaction. However, as we will discuss later, because of IRB requirements, we were required to develop a list of possible questions and topics that we planned to discuss. The approach we used is therefore more structured than a traditional phenomenological study, but participants were still permitted to control the nature and focus of the interviews; hence, the use of our phrase “phenomenologically-informed.” For example, in Study 1, participants took the lead in discussing the topics posed by the interviewer. Some participants chose very brief responses without offering additional information while others elaborated on the proposed discussion topics and brought up many topics of their own. The length of interviews, which ranged from 15 minutes to nearly 2 hours, reflect this variability. In most interviews in Study 2, only a subset of topics on the interview guide were discussed. Instead, topics were largely determined by the participants and the interview concluded when participants seemed ready to end rather than when the interviewer had finished asking a pre-determined set of questions. In both studies, the emphasis was on participants’ own descriptions of their lived experiences, with the interviewer merely “ensuring that each experience is discussed in detail and seeking clarification for any statement not fully understood” (Thomas & Pollio, 2002, p. 26).

Our phenomenologically-informed approach is useful when studying participants defined as “vulnerable” from a human subjects perspective as it encourages engagement in social interactions designed to elicit information from groups of people about whom society knows little. It allows us to use collaborative communication to question our participants through an open dialogue. Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healy (1997) note that this technique includes interaction in the interview process and is effective in gaining a deeper understanding of emotional topics. In each of our studies, we largely avoided “why” questions and focused instead on *how* participants experienced daily life as either mothers in prison or youth with parents in prison. We asked mostly open-ended questions or simply proposed topics and encouraged participants to tell stories of their experiences, allowing them guide the conversations. Through multiple interviews, we were able to pick up on “buzz-words” in the communities in which we were studying (i.e., “locked up” as the preferred term for incarceration among incarcerated mothers and “in” for a child describing a parent’s time of incarceration among children with incarcerated parents). Once we picked up on such terminology, we utilized this language in subsequent interviews to build rapport with our participants, while easing the flow of interviews through collaborative communication. Hollway and Jefferson (2000) describe this combination of strategies (numerous open-ended questions, elicitation of stories, avoidance of “why” questions, and follow-up prompts using the participants’ language) as the biographical-interpretive method and note its usefulness in uncovering memories and exploring topics that may be sensitive to interviewees.

Active interviewer involvement is a powerful tool in qualitative methodology. While we had limited time with each participant, we still embraced each interview as a social interaction. As such, our phenomenologically-informed approach takes into consideration the active role the interviewer plays in each encounter. In each study, we recognized our roles as interviewers and our active participation as part of each interview. As opposed to quantitative analysis, where the researcher is essentially an outsider analyzing “solid” data with a primary

research question as a starting point, in qualitative analysis, the researcher is involved in a fluid, social exchange with new research questions emerging through the collaborative process. In her work exploring the narratives of violent men, Presser (2008) describes this social transaction: "I am myself a contributor or *co-producer* of the narrative data" (p. 8), noting how the social exchange of the interviews shapes participants' life stories. The social transactions and our roles in our interviews shaped the stories participants shared and were, thus, part of our data.

In this vein, Hollway and Jefferson (2000) discuss the importance of adopting the "critical realism" in qualitative interviews: "The research subject cannot be known except through another subject; in this case, the researcher" (p. 4). In other words, we as researchers are charged with the task of retelling (and making sense of) very personal stories told by our participants, including our roles in the social exchanges with our participants. While the philosophical debate on critical realism is beyond the scope of this paper, we concur with the notion that what is "real" exists in the minds of our participants. We are seeking to understand and retell social and psychological experiences *from the standpoint of the participant*. Thus, our methodology adopts critical realism to generalize about our findings, reveal mechanisms that may be causal within the social phenomenon we are exploring, and search for explanatory power within our findings (see Danermark et al., 2002, for a more in-depth discussion of the adoption of critical realism within the social sciences). We further recognize that there are "real" consequences of policies and social institutions, our penal system, in this case. Critical realism places significant responsibility on the researcher to retell life stories of her participants. Recognizing the active role the researcher plays is imperative to adequately and accurately collecting and analyzing data. The interview is a social interaction. As such, we become a part of the participants' stories, which we seek to retell.

We find a phenomenologically-informed approach to be particularly beneficial when studying parental incarceration because we are accessing sensitive family topics. The method allows for an intimate interaction and for participants to take the lead role in explaining their perspectives on their life experiences. The approach allows for flexibility, for us to learn as we go, and to elicit information on difficult topics from both adults and adolescents. As Patenaude (2004) notes, the impression is often given that criminological work is primarily quantitative. Nonetheless, "what quantitative researchers often miss, through no fault of their own, is the richness of meaning, depth of understanding, and flexibility that are hallmarks of qualitative research" (Patenaude, 2004, p. 70S). Below, we elaborate on specific examples of our work to illustrate the importance of qualitative methodology and our phenomenologically-informed approach in particular through discussions of filling gaps in our knowledge of the impact of incarceration on the family while supporting family theory and illuminating positive functioning of the vulnerable populations we are studying.

### **Filling Gaps on Incarceration and the Family**

The prison population in the United States has risen dramatically in recent decades, spurring interdisciplinary research on this phenomenon. However, micro-level explorations of how family units are impacted by macro-level policies such as mandatory incarceration, mandatory minimum sentencing, and three strikes you're out laws are still relatively rare, yet emerging in the literature. Our ongoing research fills important gaps on incarceration and the family, expanding our understanding of the experience of incarceration, family roles and identities during incarceration, and the reentry process for families. Implications can be applied beyond the academic community to family practitioners, corrections workers, policy makers, and educators. Specific to methodology, the analysis of our experiences can provide first-hand

accounts of working with vulnerable populations and offer a fresh perspective on the phenomenological approach to qualitative researchers in family studies.

Using a phenomenologically-informed approach in Study 1 allowed the interviewer to obtain an “insider perspective” of how mothers negotiate mothering roles while in prison, including how they redefine their roles during the incarceration period. Even as an outsider, techniques such as identification as a mother (sharing a common bond) and multiple meetings with mothers allowed for trust to build through active participation, where the interviewer is a co-contributor to the research she is gathering; an active player in dialogue with the participant, thus allowing for the discussion of personal, intimate topics to emerge in the data and be retold through the researcher. Though we can never truly understand what is going on within the mind of another human being, our methodology allows us detailed glimpses into the *perception* of “real life” by our participants, thus helping to fill gaps in the previous literature on the topics of families and incarceration. For example, through our methodological approach, Study 1 identified specific “markers” of ambiguous loss (including the experiences of family crisis, depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, confusing loss, difficulties with adjustment, and the lack of rituals and support following loss; see Boss, 1999) for the mothers interviewed, provided a typology of mothers based on how they shifted their mother roles while in prison, and identified tactics utilized in redefining motherhood as coping strategies while incarcerated (Easterling, 2012). In Study 2, using a phenomenologically-informed approach was key to learning about which experiences were salient for youth themselves rather than what the researchers anticipated might be important. This approach was integral, for example, in revealing variability in how youth cope with parental incarceration and in suggesting evidence of empowerment among a subset of youth (Johnson & Easterling, 2015b). Allowing children to tell their own stories also provided new perspectives on the reentry process for families experiencing incarceration (Johnson & Easterling, 2015a).

### **Supporting Family Theory and Illuminating Positive Functioning**

Largely missing in the research on families and incarceration is a strong theoretical discussion of the experiences of families experiencing incarceration. Through the use of our phenomenologically-informed method, we have interpreted our findings within a theoretical framework of ambiguous loss. In Study 1, findings included empirical support for the experience of ambiguous loss among incarcerated mothers and the analyses of additional findings were explored within the framework of ambiguous loss. In Study 2, the relevance of the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss was illuminated through our analyses using our phenomenologically-informed approach. Also absent in prior research findings is a discussion of positive functioning and resilience among incarcerated parents and their children. We have been able to highlight ways in which incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated parents overcome the challenges and risks widely discussed in the available literature, suggesting positive functioning in the face of adversity among these groups.

Both of our projects have yielded results suggesting that incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated parents experience ambiguous loss. Ambiguous loss is an uncertain loss experienced when a person is perceived as physically absent but psychologically present or physically present but psychologically absent (Boss, 1999). In the case of a family experiencing incarceration, one or both of these losses may feel real. Ambiguous loss causes a great deal of confusion, as full detachment and grieving are not as easily attainable, as in other situations, such as death. Boss (1999) suggests:

Ambiguous loss is the most stressful loss people can face. Not only does it disrupt their family by diminishing the number of its functioning members and

requiring someone else to pick up the slack, but more uniquely, the ambiguity and uncertainty confuse family dynamics, forcing people to question their family and the role they play in it. (p. 20)

We find this theory to be of great interest and value for those studying families and incarceration across disciplines, as it is a psychological theory with a focus on the family unit and includes a treatment plan developed by Boss (see also Arditti, 2005; Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Bocknek, Sanderson, & Britner (2009); La Vigne, Davies, & Brazzell, 2008).

Study 1 was designed to explore how incarcerated mothers navigate motherhood while incarcerated. Through the process of analysis, various themes began to emerge, through the process of open coding and collaboration between colleagues, leading the principal investigator to explore the experience of ambiguous loss among her participants (see Easterling, 2012, 2014). Once these themes became evident, a flexible qualitative approach (which allowed for updating questions in future interviews) allowed her to tailor her later interviews to include discussion on topics specific to ambiguous loss. The flexibility of the method was key in making this connection, which was not part of the original research plan or interview guide, but rather emerged from listening to women talk about their experiences. A major conclusion of this project was not only that mothers in this sample were experiencing ambiguous loss, but that they were also exhibiting examples of successful coping strategies in line with a treatment protocol, even though the women did not have any specific intervention related to ambiguous loss (Easterling, 2012, 2014). This is the first research of which we are aware to explicitly frame findings on incarcerated mothers within ambiguous loss theory, highlighting the experience of ambiguous loss with empirical evidence from interviews with incarcerated mothers. Further, findings suggest that, in order to deal with ambiguous loss, incarcerated mothers shift their roles to navigate ambiguous loss and employ specific coping strategies to cope with ambiguous loss. Such findings support the existence of ambiguous loss in a protected population and also highlight a positive outcome of coping for this group.

Though we had considered the relevance of ambiguous loss as it pertains to children with incarcerated parents (see Johnson & Easterling, 2012) prior to beginning Study 2, it was not an element specifically explored in the interviews. Rather, the focus of the interviews was to elicit information on children's perceptions of their incarcerated parents' reentry and the questions and prompts were designed with this main theme in mind. Still, because of the rich data collected and the flexibility throughout the research process through the phenomenologically-informed approach, findings shed light on the experience of ambiguous loss for this group (Johnson & Easterling, 2015b). Because of our familiarity with ambiguous loss, the open coding process naturally highlighted various themes that were consistent with the theory of ambiguous loss. Our findings support the idea that revising the nature of relationships is necessary while at the same time loosening the precise definition of "family" when ambiguous loss is present (Boss, 1999). Among the children with incarcerated parents in this study, we found that many cope with the loss of their incarcerated parent by replacing the incarcerated family member with another pseudo-family member during separation. We recognize that more empirical work is necessary to explicitly explore the experiences of children with incarcerated parents and their responses to ambiguous loss and suggest future research on this topic, such as whether or not deidentification with incarcerated parents is an effective strategy for coping with ambiguous loss. Further, we find evidence of successful coping and empowerment among the participants in Study 2, both positive outcomes not explored in detail in previous studies (Johnson & Easterling, 2015b).

More generally, we have come to recognize the benefits of this method not only for researchers, but also for the participants themselves. Qualitative research can yield an



emancipatory effect for participants (see Arditti, 2014). In Study 1, a few women actually noted that their participation in the interview was “freeing” as it helped them think through some hard topics. They also noted they felt that they were part of something bigger or doing something good by participating in this research, hopeful that their stories could help someone else. Study 2, however, highlights an issue of inequality in access to such emancipatory functions. For example, the individuals who were given a “voice” in this study had caregivers who could bring them to the interview, involved in a mentoring program, and had transportation. As such, we must be aware that these benefits are not equally available to everyone and take this into consideration during data collection, analysis, and presentation as well as in future research (see Arditti, 2014).

### **Challenges of Qualitative Methods with Vulnerable Populations**

Phenomenologically-based inquiry holds great promise for advancing family research and theory. Nonetheless, there are a number of barriers unique to conducting qualitative research with justice-involved families. In this section, we discuss three major challenges we encountered in our qualitative research with incarcerated mothers and children with incarcerated parents: access, extracting information, and publication.

#### **Access**

Patenaude (2004) and Apa and colleagues (1998) cite access as a major challenge to conducting research in prisons and understanding prison life. The first step towards access is approval from the necessary Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Like any other research involving human subjects, research with justice-involved families must adhere to the set of ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (see Health and Human Services, 1979). In addition, research involving vulnerable populations is subject to full board review and approval. For research involving inmates, researchers must also receive the approval of prison IRBs or officials, which can pose an additional barrier to access. For example, in Study 1, the University IRB required prison approval and the prison required IRB approval before either institution would sign off on the project. The principal investigator was able to negotiate an arrangement where the prison would write a letter of support, noting the researcher would have access to the prison pending IRB approval. The IRB approval process took many months, as each revision (three in total) had to go in front of the full University IRB. The IRB requested detailed questions to be asked during the interviews so they could fully assess potential risks to participants. Following a phenomenological approach and the biographical-interpretive method, the study did not begin with many specific prompts. As Thomas and Pollio (2002) note, “from a phenomenological point of view, the very topic we are talking about may be uncertain at the beginning of an interview” (p.25). Nonetheless, the IRB requested specific questions to be asked and, therefore, a more exhaustive list of topics to be discussed was created to satisfy IRB requirements and to ensure adherence to prevailing ethical standards.

In Study 2, challenges of access largely revolved around how to locate adolescents with incarcerated parents and how to gain enough trust from caregivers that they felt comfortable providing permission for their children to participate in research on parental incarceration. The principal investigator ultimately gained access to the population by developing a relationship with a community-based agency that facilitates mentoring of children with incarcerated parents. This relationship developed over a several year period, and involved significant effort on the part of the investigator to demonstrate to the program staff that she was committed to the work they were doing and that she was interested in developing a long-term, mutually-beneficial

relationship. She helped the organization analyze data, provided feedback on evaluation materials, and delivered trainings on developmentally-sensitive mentoring to mentors. When it came time for recruitment, the organization then distributed materials to eligible families and indicated in the recruitment materials that she was a “friend” of the program. To avoid coercion and to preserve participant confidentiality, a number of precautions were taken to ensure that the program staff were unaware of who opted to participate in the study (and to ensure that children and families knew in advance that their decision to participate or not would not in any way influence the services they received from the program).

Once access to participants is achieved, researchers often encounter issues related to space and time (see Downing, Polzer, & Levan, 2013). Interviewing prisoners, for example, requires that interviews take place within a prison. The researcher herself is constricted by many of the rules and regulations of the prison. In Study 1, no recording devices were allowed in the prison, creating difficulties in recording data with only a pen and paper. This required the interviewer to take extensive notes during the interview and add details immediately following the interview and at the end of the interview day, including personal reflections. This also meant that relatively few verbatim quotes could be obtained. If the interviewer could jot down an exact quote, she was able to note that in her handwritten interview notes, but the majority of notes were summaries of responses. Further, prisoners themselves are limited in the amount of time that they can spend with the researcher. Mealtimes, head counts, and job responsibilities restrict the interview time, which can also provide a barrier to building rapport. Specifically, two interviews were cut short because the all inmates were called for a head count, which coincided with lunchtime. Each of these interviews was moving smoothly and could have exceeded the time we were allotted, but the women could not be excused from the mandatory counts. Other interviewees were late because they could not leave their jobs and, thus, the interviews were cut short because of schedule conflicts with other interviews.

Issues related to the interview setting also emerged for Study 2. One of the challenges in designing the study was determining where to interview participants. Families’ homes and public spaces were initially considered, but ultimately ruled out because the investigator/interviewer was concerned about her ability to protect confidentiality in these spaces. Interviews were ultimately conducted in a University laboratory space to standardize the interview setting and to help protect the confidentiality of participants’ responses. Given the unfamiliar setting, great care was taken to ensure that participants and the family members who accompanied them to the laboratory felt as comfortable as possible. To this end, the investigator/interviewer greeted families in the parking lot, escorted them into the building, offered everyone beverages and snacks, and spent a few minutes exchanging pleasantries with caregivers and children before inviting the participant into a separate interview room that was located just around the corner from the family waiting area.

### **Extracting Information**

During the interview itself, the researcher faces challenges in accessing information. Prior to attempting to learn more about the target population through dialogue, as mentioned, some attempt must be made to immediately establish rapport and a level of comfort with the participants. As Thomas and Pollio (2002) note, “during the phenomenological interview it is important to create an atmosphere in which the participant feels comfortable and safe to talk freely about significant life experiences. Unlike a structured interview with a predetermined list of questions, the flow of dialogue is set by the participant” (p. 26). This takes on additional significance in working with protected populations who may have had previous negative experiences with social institutions (prison, social services, schools, etc.). From the start, the researcher is working to overcome that hurdle and help the participants feel comfortable talking

about sensitive topics, possibly in uncomfortable or unfamiliar settings. Power dynamics are at the heart of this exchange. In each of our examples, the researcher was in a position of perceived relative power (common in such research studies) and therefore made concerted efforts to build rapport and equalize the social exchange of the interview.

Swauger (2011) notes that researcher-participant relationships are typically hierarchical in nature (i.e., with the researcher having higher levels of education, the power to set the research agenda) and careful attention must be paid to avoiding ethical dilemmas. Further, when tapping into intimate or sensitive topics, we must be mindful of ethical dilemmas and adequately handle researcher *and* participant emotions, so as not to cause any undue harm to participants (Bahn & Weatherhill, 2012; Gonzalez-Lopez, 2011). As Swauger (2011) suggests, we faced such potential dilemmas with reflexivity, working on collaborative communication, connecting with our participants, and “critically reflecting on our obligations to participants” (p. 499) to equalize power as much as possible and adequately retell our participants’ stories. In Study 1, the researcher was clearly an outsider, in plain clothes with freedom to leave the prison at any moment while her research subjects were incarcerated. To help build rapport, the principal investigator held an “information session” with all of the women who were interested in the study. During this time, she was very open and forthcoming about herself, offering personal information on her family life, and gave details about her research and professional experience in order to show she was open and approachable to the women at the prison. Then, when the individual interviews took place, the women already knew about the researcher and had some information to begin on common ground—they were both mothers (See Frost & Holt, 2014 for a discussion of researchers’ mother identities in qualitative research).

In Study 2, the researcher was an Assistant Professor interviewing children in a University building with both age and status as obvious indicators of power. The principal investigator had, on average, less than one hour with each participant. She was forced to grapple with building rapport despite a variety of obstacles (differences in race, age, and socioeconomic status) in a very short amount of time. One participant illustrates the importance of comfort with the researcher, and how a deeper level of comfort can still be achieved in a short period of time. At the beginning of the interview, the participant indicated that she did not know anyone who was incarcerated but later offered information about her incarcerated parent. This interaction speaks to the necessity to (often quickly) build comfort with research participants, particularly when they are young, while recognizing and respecting their comfort level, which may change throughout the interview. This participant made it quite clear that she did not talk to other people about her incarcerated parent because it is no one’s business. The fact that she later opened up to the researcher was noteworthy and speaks to the importance of building rapport in order to engage participants in discussion.

As the qualitative researcher navigates interviews and consistently reevaluates goals of the project, it is quite possible that exploring sensitive topics in the intimate setting of one-on-one or small group interviews can elicit emotions of the researcher, which can potentially throw an interview off the planned course, yet the research can be strengthened through an awareness, or even analysis, of such emotions. Arditti, Joest, Lambert-Shute, and Walker (2010) used the phenomenological tool of bracketing to explore researcher emotions and responses to illustrate the usefulness of self-study in “understanding how emotions have a positive impact on our research, how it might inform our work, and ultimately who we become as a result of it” (p. 1407). While the literature on qualitative methods is expanding in such discussions of researcher emotion (i.e., Arditti et al., 2010; Celik, 2012; Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009; Kleinman & Copp, 1993; Maggio & Westcott, 2014), it is still limited. In our experience, the lack of open discussion on this topic was a source of anxiety about our research and we feel it is of the utmost importance that researchers openly discuss such issues. We found that our emotions have the ability to limit our data gathering in the beginning (e.g., grappling with

feelings such as “despair, fear, guilt, anger, and then hope” as Arditti and colleagues (2010) also suggest), while helping us grow as researchers and assist us in data gathering in the future as a result of our awareness of these emotions (See also “researcher vulnerability,” “emotional blowback,” and “negotiating identities” in Huggins & Glebbeek, 2009).

The emotional response of the researcher was a significant issue in Study 1, largely due to the maternal role that she shared with her participants. The principal investigator struggled with her emotions throughout the study, but most intensely in the first days of interviewing. As a mother, she felt deep empathy for her participants. When a mother would break down crying about the loss of her child because of her incarceration, the researcher would begin to shut down. She would work to end the interview or change the topic. She had difficulties reentering the prison after lunch or in the mornings after spending time with her own daughter as the difference in motherhood experience was evident, and she clearly had an advantage. It is obvious in her early interviews that she could have extracted more information from participants if her own emotions did not serve as a barrier. With time and practice (and conversations with mentors), she was able to reframe her position as a researcher. The empathy allowed for a true connection with her participants. It allowed for reflection on how her own emotions impacted the “quality” of her interviews. Such reflexivity served to strengthen her interactions. She learned to bring tissues to every interview. She learned to allow herself to feel for the women and allowed the empathy to gently and genuinely ask more questions, as opposed to encouraging her to shut down. With time, she was able to use this empathetic, emotional response to elicit deeper information from her participants. She learned to reflect on her feelings as *part of the study* and her responses became part of her field notes (a tactic suggested by other researchers, such as Kleinman & Copp, 1993)—they became data. As Arditti (2014) notes, “participant vulnerability can encourage positive adaptations in how we design and conduct research. In short, it makes us better researchers” (p. 7).

With the active involvement in a social exchange to collect (often emotional) data for analysis comes great responsibility: we, as researchers, are charged with the task of retelling these stories, analyzing them for meaning and advancing knowledge. Through a phenomenologically-informed approach, we are searching for the meaning of experiences for our participants, who are part of vulnerable groups. The researcher must recognize her part in the exchange, yet separate herself from it enough to arrive at conclusions that accurately portray the stories participants have told. With this comes the ethical responsibility to accurately tell others’ stories as they have told them and also to situate those findings within a theoretical framework to answer research questions. In each of our studies, we wanted to situate people in their lives and provide context for retelling the stories of their experiences. Yet, we still need to protect confidentiality issues, which can sometimes limit the dissemination of defining characteristics or portions of participants’ stories. We also have the responsibility of choosing which parts of participants’ stories on which to focus. As researchers, we tend to zero in on topics that fit with previous literature or challenge it in some way, as we are generally working toward publication, which we discuss as our next challenge.

## **Publication**

Many of the “main” criminological journals publish almost exclusively quantitative research (see Patenaude, 2004). As such, qualitative researchers studying individuals’ or families’ experiences with the criminal justice system often experience difficulties in getting their research findings published. Unlike quantitative work with cut and dry questions and statistical processes and findings, qualitative research can be more “fluid.” Sample sizes are relatively small when compared to many quantitative studies. Research questions can change throughout the process. No two interviews are exactly the same, different questions may be

asked, and different topics discussed, depending on the situation. Findings through participant observation are articulated at the hands of the researcher, not a statistical program. Thus, finding outlets for publication in top-tier journals can prove challenging. Further, many journals have stringent page limits for manuscript submissions. Qualitative research relies heavily on quoting, which can expand the length of a paper. Reviewers want details and rich data, but the researchers find themselves constrained by page limits. As such, qualitative researchers may find themselves struggling to find a highly visible outlet for their research, even when that research is answering lingering questions in a discipline. This further exacerbates a “stigma” of qualitative research and suppresses the discussion of the importance of qualitative research in various fields.

Qualitative researchers do have options at their disposal (see LaRossa, 2012, for a discussion on publishing qualitative family research). In our studies, we have sought outlets that publish qualitative research and responses to our projects have been very favorable thus far. Still, three challenges to publication have arisen to varying degrees. First, reviewers often ask for more extensive backgrounds on participants than we have at our disposal. Using a phenomenologically-informed approach, we have focused on what is relevant to the participants themselves rather than objective “facts” of their lives. Working within time constraints while striving to build rapport and keeping within the boundaries of IRB constraints (for example, in Study 1, the researcher was not allowed to specifically ask about participants’ crimes), we do not always have the detailed background information requested by reviewers. Second, we have to be very careful about how much information we provide for publication because we do not want to jeopardize confidentiality. For example, in Study 2, we did not want to provide caregiver information in our publications because of the relatively small sample size and the potential for identifying characteristics. Third, journal space limitations can be a barrier to publication. Qualitative research, at its core, can be wordy. We are challenged to retell our participants’ stories through their own words and then are tasked with the analysis of our findings. This can take a significant amount of page space. Cutting data in the form of rich quotations and details from field notes becomes a daunting process in fitting within page limit constraints while accurately retelling participants’ stories and explaining findings. It is worth noting, however, that we have found editors and reviewers to be understanding of these constraints during the resubmission process; we therefore present these as issues for researchers to consider and anticipate as they prepare manuscripts for submission and resubmission.

### **Strategies for Conducting Qualitative Research with Protected Populations**

To help overcome the challenges we have just discussed, we now offer some suggestions for conducting qualitative research with vulnerable populations. These strategies are useful before, during, and after a research project and are, thus, ongoing processes that can help one set up, conduct, and reflect on their research, despite the challenges sometimes associated with the method. We find collaboration, flexibility, and reliance on method to be crucial to overcoming the challenges discussed in the previous section.

#### **Collaboration**

Collaboration is essential when conducting qualitative research, particularly when seeking access to a vulnerable population. As discussed above, relationships are helpful in accessing justice-involved families. In Study 1, the principal investigator was able to identify a prison that was welcoming to researchers through some colleagues who had completed research in that institution (and was able to benefit from their experiences of *not* being

successful in gaining access at other prisons). These colleagues were able to guide her through the IRB process and provide contact information for the prison that was supportive of researchers. Though staff members had changed, she was still able to take advantage of “inside” telephone lines to the prison to begin the approval process. The simple act of conversation by reaching out to those with similar research interests allowed a smoother path to access. In Study 2, the principal investigator worked with a community agency for several years before asking for their assistance with project recruitment. When working with community organizations, we have also found that it is extremely important to acknowledge the demands on their time and also offer assistance in some form before asking them to help with research. Keeping in mind these community organizations exist to help their target populations, researchers should strive to make such relationships mutually beneficial.

## Flexibility

Remaining flexible is essential in extracting information when involved in qualitative research with vulnerable populations. The method allows one to learn from her mistakes and expand the topic as the project progresses. In Study 1, the initial goal was to interview both incarcerated mothers and their children. Access to children proved difficult for a variety of reasons and the principal investigator did not get enough response to make that portion of the study worthwhile, though she gained some valuable data and insight which can be used in later studies. Therefore, the premise of the project had to be changed. Instead of viewing this as a limitation, the researcher instead viewed it as an opportunity to more deeply explore the experience of motherhood in prison. As mentioned, interviews were “strengthened” throughout time and the researcher allowed herself to learn from her mistakes and reflect on her emotions. Later interviews included more in-depth questions on specific themes and in both studies, the interviewer was able to use the language of the participants to help build rapport. As C. Wright Mills (1959) notes, “the most admirable thinkers within the scholarly community...do not split their work from their lives” (p. 195) and a researcher in the social sciences “must learn to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine and interpret it” (p. 196). As qualitative researchers choosing to immerse ourselves in research that can invoke strong emotions, we have the choice to be self-reflexive and use our own emotional responses to further enhance our research, remaining flexible every step of the way.

In Study 2, the order of questions was changed throughout the data collection process. Initially, the interviews commenced with a drawing exercise that facilitated a discussion of family relationships, followed by asking participants to talk about themselves and their interests. Later this order was switched because, after a few interviews, it seemed like a more logical and comfortable progression. Also, instead of asking about parents in particular, participants were asked if they knew anyone who was in prison or had ever been in prison and let them tell me who was salient to them. As interviews progressed, the interviewer tried to focus on the discussion topics brought up by the participants themselves and spent less time relying on the interview guide. Given developmental differences in children’s abilities to understand interview questions and to articulate their experiences (Nelson & Quintana, 2005), researchers need to be prepared with a variety of questions and prompts (along with a plan for asking them in different ways based on age, family circumstances, and the tone of the interview that the children set). Having “tools” (such as an ice-breaker exercise) are essential to help children understand the questions and open up about their lives. A qualitative, phenomenologically-informed approach allows for such flexibility throughout data collection, which can, in turn, help overcome the challenges associated with extraction of data with protected populations and allow the participants to highlight what is important to *them*.

## Reliance on Method

Careful attention to the method itself can assist with both extraction of data and overcoming barriers to publication when conducting qualitative research. Often, quantitative research is the preferred method in criminology, despite the fact that, in this field, we are often working with vulnerable populations. Ironically, with these populations, we do not generally have a wealth of prior research or access to large samples, particularly regarding topics related to social issues, namely family matters of those dealing with incarceration, which would allow for quantitative analyses. Relying on the qualitative methods of previous research pertaining to a specific topic is a first step in qualitative research, just as it is with any method. Further, field notes and researcher experiences become part of the data in qualitative methodology. As qualitative researchers, we are tasked with the duty of retelling the stories of our participants, both in their own words and through our interpretations, based on theory and our intimate experiences and connections with our work. Detailing the methods used and relying on the rich data that method provides can provide the validation and proof of methodological rigor editors are looking for in publication.

We are also responsible for communicating the benefits of this method. Again, we do not have easy access to large numbers of people in vulnerable populations. We cannot simply walk into a school or youth program and ask children with incarcerated parents to raise their hands. Through collaboration and a flexible approach, we can, however, gain access to small groups of our target populations. We need to bring these issues to the forefront of discussion in family studies. Even small samples allow us a glimpse into the worlds of these understudied members of society.

Reliance on the method is also key in theory-building. The flexibility of qualitative methodology allowed through data collection and analysis permits us to “test” theory in a unique way. As discussed, through both of our studies, we have been able to connect findings to ambiguous loss. Utilizing the tools of the qualitative methodology, and specifically the phenomenological method, encourage individualized responses as suggested by Thomas and Pollio (2002), interactive interviewing as described by Ellis and colleagues (1997), and biographical-interpretive methods as discussed by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), allowing us deep insight into the nuances of various aspects of the theory, which we cannot simply glean from analyzing numbers and interpreting statistics. In the example of expanding ambiguous loss through our research, relying on the method to guide us and let the participants tell their stories and set the tone of interviews allowed for the emergence of key elements of this theory in participants’ stories in each study. Once themes of ambiguous loss began to emerge in Study 1, the researcher was able to tailor later interviews to explore these elements deeper. In Study 2, allowing the participants to talk freely resulted in elements of ambiguous loss emerging through the coding process, offering hypotheses for current manuscripts and laying groundwork for further research on the topic. Describing these methodological tools is helpful in working toward publication, as well as offering future researchers suggestions on which to build future studies.

## Discussion

Our goals with project are to articulate challenges and to identify strategies for overcoming these challenges while recognizing the benefits of using qualitative methodology in family research among vulnerable populations, spurring discussion among qualitative researchers across disciplines. We note, specifically, that a flexible methodology can help fill gaps in research on the family and incarceration while illuminating positive functioning of families experiencing incarceration. We recognize the multi-level difficulties to access of

protected populations, particularly when exploring family issues. We have summarized three of the major challenges that we meet with optimism and flexibility. We have provided personal examples from our research projects and suggest strategies for accepting and overcoming barriers to physical access and access to information. Once physical and information access barriers are shattered, we must tackle extracting information. Then, our research still yields what is considered by many to be small samples. This can create an additional challenge: publication.

Through collaboration with academic and community individuals and organizations, we can begin to overcome barriers to access. By being flexible, we can find strength in the fluidity of a qualitative, specifically a phenomenological, method to gather rich data. By focusing on the method in concert the rich data it provides, we can make others aware of the usefulness of findings, even from “small” samples. Reflexivity throughout these processes is key in every tactic to better ourselves as researchers and improve our data collection and dissemination (see Downing et al., 2013 for a broader discussion on the importance of reflexivity).

Our work builds on other scholars’ explorations of the challenges of qualitative research and strategies for overcoming these challenges. While many of the issues we have discussed, including access and extracting information, apply to multiple research areas, they take on added significance when we are working with vulnerable subjects. Our discussion is also unique in that we focus on exploring *family* issues among protected populations. While those before us have discussed challenges and strategies of qualitative methodology as they pertain to prisoners or in health-related settings, we expand the discussion to include the study of children with incarcerated parents and the exploration of family dynamics among those experiencing incarceration from multiple vantage points. Further, we note the positive findings that have emerged, helping fill gaps and further research on the incarceration and the family.

Future research, on incarcerated parents as well as other vulnerable populations, may consider the usefulness of various methodological innovations to better reach target populations. For example, Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) involves participants *in* the research process. This can assist in lessening the effects of power differentials by actively involving the participants in exploring solutions to social problems they may be facing in their own communities. As we witnessed in our own interviews, individuals who have been involved in the criminal justice system can be mistrusting of people who are part (or appear to be a part) of “the system.” Utilizing a methodology employing CBPR strategies has the potential to lessen the “vulnerability” of marginalized populations, build trust among researchers and participants, and provide positive outcomes for researchers and participants by equalizing power differentials and encouraging active involvement by participants in research.

Through the challenges and strategies discussed in this paper, we hope to open further discussion to explore the usefulness of qualitative (including phenomenological) research when studying protected populations, particularly in family studies. Our own research has resulted in three important outcomes. First, we have tapped into first-hand accounts of populations that are largely understudied, particularly in context of the family. Second, our research provides rich answers to important questions while providing a glimpse into the worlds of our participants. Third, our findings are useful in proposing future research, quantitative and qualitative. We hope this creates a dialogue to more openly discuss the challenges and triumphs of qualitative research, suggest future strategies, and continue to champion the strength of this method in the empirical literature.



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