

Discomfort as a Methodological Condition: When Reflexivity Is Not Enough in Ethnography

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ABSTRACT

Reflexivity has become a central ethical and methodological imperative in contemporary ethnography, routinely framed as a means through which researchers manage discomfort, resolve ethical tension, and maintain accountability in the field. Yet reflexivity does not always dissolve discomfort, but it can intensify it. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with religious minorities in Pakistan, shaped by asymmetrical power, uneven trust, and unsettled obligation, this article argues that discomfort is not a failure of method to be corrected but a methodological condition through which ethnographic knowledge is produced. Through a series of fieldwork vignettes, I demonstrate how moments of ethical unease when empathy proves insufficient, reciprocity impossible, and responsibility unresolved generate critical insight rather than methodological breakdown. I identify four functions discomfort performs: signalling structural asymmetry, limit-testing ethical frameworks, registering relational excess, and enabling epistemological reorientation. By reconceptualizing discomfort as constitutive rather than incidental to ethnographic practice, this article challenges normative expectations of reflexive resolution and contributes to ongoing debates on ethics, positionality, and method in qualitative research.

KEYWORDS: Reflexivity, Discomfort, Ethnographic Ethics; Positionality, Extractivism

Reflexivity has become a defining methodological commitment in contemporary ethnography (Dietz & Cortes, 2022). Across feminist, critical, and decolonial traditions, ethnographers are expected to account for their positionality, acknowledge power asymmetries, and reflect on the ethical conditions under which knowledge is produced (Ali, 2015; Bieler, et al., 2021). Reflexivity is now routinely framed as both a methodological safeguard and a moral practice, promising accountability, transparency, and ethical attunement in the field (Roshan & Elhami, 2024). Within this conceptual framework, discomfort has appeared as a familiar feature of ethnographic labor, frequently invoked as evidence of ethical sensitivity or reflexive awareness (Hamdan, 2009; Hanni, 2025). However, scholars such as Pillow (2003) have themselves resisted the impulse toward reflexive resolution, arguing instead for ‘uncomfortable reflexivity’ that interrupts rather than settles questions of power and positionality. This article builds on such critical trajectories while extending them to consider what happens when discomfort not only interrupts but endures as a constitutive feature of ethnographic practice. Even though it is frequent, discomfort

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is rarely treated as a methodological problem in its own right. Instead, it is typically positioned as something to be managed, resolved, or overcome in the pursuit of good ethnographic practice. This article addresses three interconnected questions: (1) How does discomfort operate methodologically in ethnographic research conducted across asymmetrical power relations? (2) What are the limits of reflexivity as a framework for addressing ethical tension in such contexts? (3) What would it mean to treat discomfort not as a problem to be resolved but as a constitutive condition of ethnographic knowledge production?

Within much of the methodological literature, discomfort is framed as a temporary disruption encountered during fieldwork: a moment of uncertainty (Gailloux et al., 2022), awkwardness, or emotional strain that the reflexive researcher is expected to resolve (Darling, 2014; Hess, 2018). In this formulation, discomfort functions as an affective signal that marks ethical complexity but is ultimately subsumed within a narrative of clarity, insight, and researcher development (Hamdan, 2009). Reflexivity is positioned as a corrective technology through which discomfort is disciplined and transformed into methodological competence (Orel, 2024), reinforcing an image of the ethnographer as a coherent, self-regulating subject who emerges with enhanced ethical authority (Pugh & Mosseri, 2023). Simultaneously, discomfort is often interpreted as evidence of researcher inadequacy (Amir et al., 2017), particularly in encounters marked by trust, vulnerability, or emotional exposure, which are implicitly recast as failures of preparation, positionality management, or methodological skill. Such readings individualize and psychologize discomfort, locating it within the researcher's affective limits rather than in the structural asymmetries that organize research encounters (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010; Ice, Dufour, & Stevens, 2015). The resulting methodological response privileges improvement, more reflexivity, clearer ethics, stronger training while leaving largely unexamined the conditions under which discomfort is produced and rendered intelligible.

This article challenges these dominant framings by arguing that discomfort is not a failure of ethnographic method to be corrected, nor merely a transitional phase to be overcome, but a methodological condition through which ethnographic knowledge is produced (Gray, 2026). Rather than treating discomfort as incidental to fieldwork, I argue that it is constitutive of ethnographic practice, particularly in research shaped by asymmetrical power relations, uneven trust, and unsettled ethical obligations.

This intervention builds on, but also departs from, existing reflexive traditions. Feminist and critical ethnographers have long emphasized the importance of attending to emotion, embodiment, and ethical entanglement in the field, deploying reflexivity to unsettle claims of objectivity and foreground the researcher's implication in systems of power (Ricker, 2018; Rowlands, 2022; Singleton et al., 2022). However, reflexivity has also become increasingly routinized, valued primarily for producing ethical resolution, the naming of positionality, acknowledgment of privilege, and articulation of care such that discomfort is instrumentalized only insofar as it leads to methodological clarity or moral reassurance. In my fieldwork, however, discomfort often endures, ethical tensions remain unresolved, and reciprocity is unattainable; reflexivity here does not offer closure but instead exposes the limits of empathy, care, and methodological intent.

Through a series of fieldwork vignettes drawn from research with religious minorities in Pakistan, I reflect on moments when I was entrusted with stories of suffering, vulnerability, and expectation, stories to which I could not fully respond or reciprocate. The discomfort these encounters produced did not arise from a lack of reflexivity, but from its insufficiency. Even as I recognized my positionality, acknowledged power, and tried to remain ethically attentive, I confronted the impossibility of offering a meaningful return. Rather than treating these moments

as methodological failures, I approach them as sites of analytic insight, revealing the conditions under which ethnographic knowledge is made. By reframing discomfort as a methodological condition, this article contributes to ongoing debates on ethics, positionality, and responsibility in ethnography. It suggests that ethical ethnographic practice does not culminate in comfort, resolution, or moral clarity, but often requires dwelling within unresolved tension and remaining accountable to relationships that cannot be neatly reconciled within methodological frameworks. Discomfort, in this sense, is not an obstacle to knowledge but one of its preconditions.

The article begins by situating this intervention within existing methodological debates on reflexivity, ethics, and discomfort in ethnography, highlighting the limits of reflexive resolution. I then outline the methodological context of the research, including the conditions of access, trust, and asymmetry that shaped the fieldwork. The central sections present a series of ethnographic vignettes presenting moments of discomfort and ethical strain, followed by analytic reflections on what these moments produce methodologically. The article concludes by considering the implications of treating discomfort as constitutive of ethnographic method for qualitative research practice, training, and ethical accountability.

Discomfort, Reflexivity, and the Limits of Ethical Resolution

Reflexivity has long been central to ethnographic method, especially in feminist and critical traditions that challenge claims of neutrality and objectivity (Di Placido, 2023; Roshan & Elhami, 2024). Feminist reflexivity, in particular, has emphasized the need for researchers to situate themselves within relations of power, attend to emotion and embodiment, and acknowledge how knowledge is shaped by positionality (Chilmeran & Hedström, 2022; Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023). Rather than treating the researcher as an invisible observer, reflexive approaches foreground the self as implicated, accountable, and ethically entangled in the research process (Ploder, 2022; Trundle et al., 2025). Within this tradition, discomfort has often been welcomed as an indicator of ethical awareness, a sign that the researcher is attentive to power, difference, and the potential harms of representation (Carr, 2026; Geelhoed et al., 2024). Yet while reflexivity has successfully destabilized methodological certainty, its institutionalization has also produced tensions that reflexive scholars themselves have identified (Mitchell, Boettcher, & Lashewicz, 2024). Pillow (2003) warns against reflexivity becoming a ‘confessional’ practice that seeks catharsis rather than critical interruption. These internal critiques complicate any simple characterization of reflexivity as uniformly resolution oriented. However, even among scholars who resist confessional modes, discomfort is often framed as something to be worked with toward analytic clarity rather than as a condition that may remain fundamentally unsettled (Jones & Huddleston, 2025).

However, as critics of extractivism in qualitative research have argued, care and reflexivity do not automatically resolve the asymmetries embedded in knowledge production (Fine, 2018; Godrie, 2025). Ethnographic research, particularly when conducted with marginalized or vulnerable communities, often operates within structures that privilege the researcher’s mobility, institutional affiliation, and narrative authority (Bourdieu, 1999; Levitt, 2024; Spellman, 2025). Even when researchers are reflexive and ethically attentive, they may still extract stories, affects, and understandings that cannot be meaningfully reciprocated (Bothello & Bonfim, 2023). Discomfort persists not because reflexivity has failed to occur, but because reflexivity encounters its own structural limits (Kinitz, 2022). Critiques of extractivism caution against conflating ethical intention with ethical outcome, drawing attention to how narratives of empathy and care may conceal the unequal distribution of benefit in research encounters (Palacios & Baldauf, 2023). From this perspective, discomfort is not simply an effective response but a structural signal, pointing to unsettled conflicts between relational intimacy and institutional distance, between the immediacy

of fieldwork encounters and the long afterlife of academic representation (Jones & Huddleston, 2025; McAreavey & Das, 2013).

What remains less examined is what happens when discomfort cannot be mitigated, when no methodological adjustment fully addresses the ethical imbalance at stake (Mitchell, Boettcher, & Lashewicz, 2024; Ortner, 2016). Trust is often granted not because power has been equalized, but because participants perceive the researcher as a rare or temporary ally, witness, or conduit (Louw, 2025). In these situations, discomfort does not originate from misunderstanding or lack of preparation, but from the burden of responsibility that accompanies access and trust (Consoli & Ganassin, 2025). The researcher becomes a custodian of stories that carry emotional, political, and moral claims that cannot always be honoured within the constraints of academic research (Soderstrom, Holdo, & Junman, 2025). In such moments, reflexivity does not dissolve discomfort; it intensifies it. To be reflexive is to recognize the limits of one's ability to respond adequately, to see clearly the gap between what is asked of the researcher and what the research can ethically deliver (Ide & Beddoe, 2024; Pillow, 2003). Discomfort here is not a transitional state in route to ethical clarity, but a sustained condition produced by the very structures that enable ethnographic work (McLay et al., 2023). his article builds on feminist reflexivity, ethics of care, and critiques of extractivism, while pushing against their shared tendency to seek ethical closure, asking instead what discomfort does methodologically when it persists and what kinds of knowledge are produced when the researcher remains ethically unsettled.

Framing discomfort as a constitutive methodological condition also invites dialogue with abolitionist and refusal-based critiques of ethnographic research. Scholars such as Audra Simpson (2014) and Eve Tuck (2014) have argued that, in contexts of ongoing colonial or state violence, the very act of research, even when conducted with reflexive care, can be an extractive and non-consensual imposition, rendering refusal the only ethical response. My argument does not dismiss these important critiques but engages them from within the reality of research already undertaken across irreconcilable difference. Where refusal models advocate stepping back from fraught entanglements, enduring discomfort offers an ethical orientation for situations in which researchers are already, and often inescapably, entangled. It asks what responsibility looks like when access has been granted, trust unequally bestowed, and stories entrusted without the possibility of full return (Jia, 2023). Enduring discomfort can be understood as the necessary companion to refusal in contexts where refusal is not possible, shifting the methodological focus from resolution to sustained, accountable engagement with the unresolved ethical tensions of asymmetrical research relationships (Soderstrom, Holdo, & Junman, 2025).

Conceptual Distinctions: Methodological Condition, Ethical Remainder, and the Work of Discomfort

Before moving to the field, it is necessary to clarify three interrelated concepts that anchor this article's argument: methodological condition, ethical remainder, and the analytic work of discomfort. By 'methodological condition,' I refer to the constitutive features of ethnographic practice that shape what can be known, how, and under what constraints. Unlike an 'obstacle' or 'challenge,' a condition is not external to method but internal to it: it structures the very possibility of knowledge production. Discomfort as a methodological condition, then, is not an interruption of otherwise smooth research but an inherent feature of research conducted across asymmetrical relations. It operates like what Haraway (1988) calls 'situated knowledge', not a problem to be eliminated but a ground from which seeing becomes possible. 'Ethical remainder' draws on Derrida's (1992) notion of undecidability and Tronto's (1993) discussion of care's incompleteness.

captures what persists after formal ethics, reflexivity, and good intentions have been exhausted: the unresolved obligations and asymmetries that research relationships inevitably produce. Rather than signalling failure, it highlights the limits of ethical frameworks, which cannot fully account for these excesses. Discomfort, in this sense, becomes an important indicator of this gap between what research ethics promise and what they can realistically achieve. This conceptualization extends existing reflexive theory in three ways. First, it shifts focus from reflexivity as a practice of self-clarification to reflexivity as a practice of remaining with opacity. Second, it repositions discomfort from a transitional state to a structural feature of ethnographic encounter. Third, it reframes ethical responsibility not as achieving resolution but as sustaining attentiveness to what exceeds resolution. This builds on Pillow's (2003) 'uncomfortable reflexivity' while specifying what discomfort reveals: not simply the researcher's limits but the structural asymmetries that make research possible."

Discomfort does not operate uniformly across all ethnographic contexts. Its form, intensity, and stakes shift depending on the direction of study. In research with marginalized communities, discomfort often arises from excess, too much trust, too much responsibility, the weight of stories that cannot be returned. In research with elites, discomfort may take the form of deficit, strategic opacity, managed performances, epistemic blockage. When the researcher occupies a minoritized position, discomfort may circulate around exposure, safety, and the demand for self-disclosure. Recognizing these variations is essential: discomfort is not a single phenomenon but a family of experiences whose methodological significance must be interpreted in relation to specific power geometries.

Methodological Context: Field, Identity, and Asymmetry

This article draws on ethnographic research conducted between 2023-2025 across rural and urban field sites in Sindh and Punjab, Pakistan shaped by religious difference, historical marginalization, and uneven power relations. The broader research project examined the lived experiences of religious minorities in Pakistan, with particular attention to how religious identity, social class, and state policies shape everyday encounters with exclusion, vulnerability, and belonging (Fine, 2018). Fieldwork comprised 60 in-depth interviews with members of minority communities (20 Hindu, 20 Christian, 20 Sikh), 15 expert interviews (60-150 minutes in Urdu, Punjab and Sindh), and sustained engagement within community spaces, including homes, workplaces, and local institutions. While the research applied conventional qualitative methods, the conditions under which access, trust, and disclosure emerged were neither uniform nor methodologically neutral (Bayeck, 2022). Participants were recruited through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling (Campbell et al., 2020). Initial access was facilitated through community contacts, civil society organizations, and professional networks developed during prior human rights work. Snowball referrals followed, particularly in rural settings where trust was relational and collectively negotiated. Sampling sought variation across gender, age, and socio-economic background in order to capture differential experiences within minority communities. While the broader study analyzed patterns of differential treatment and politicization of religious identity, this article focuses specifically on methodological tensions that recurred across sites. Data were analyzed using an iterative, abductive approach combining thematic coding with reflexive memo-writing (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Transcripts were coded first for substantive themes (e.g., discrimination, mobility, state interaction, gendered vulnerability), and subsequently for relational and affective dynamics within interviews. During transcription and analysis, I maintained detailed analytic memos tracking moments of hesitation, silence, ethical unease, and shifts in tone. These memos became central to identifying discomfort not as incidental reaction, but as patterned feature

of the research encounter (Dado, Spence, & Elliot, 2023). Fieldnotes documented emotional responses, interruptions, and perceived asymmetries of trust. Rather than seeking statistical generalizability, this study aims for theoretical transferability. The analytic model developed here, understanding discomfort as emerging when relational surplus exceeds institutional capacity may be applicable to ethnographic research conducted across asymmetrical difference, even where the specific sociopolitical context differs.

My positionality as a Muslim Pakistani woman was central to how the research unfolded. As a member of the religious majority, I entered minority spaces marked by histories of suspicion, dispossession, and unequal citizenship. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have long argued that positionality is not a static attribute but a relational and situational accomplishment that shifts across contexts (Bayeck, 2022; Gani & Khan, 2024). At the same time, my identity as a woman and my prior professional experience as a human rights worker complicated these dynamics. In some contexts, these aspects of my identity facilitated access, particularly among women participants, who framed me as culturally proximate or politically sympathetic. In others, my religious identity positioned me as an outsider whose presence required careful negotiation.

Access to participants emerged through a series of negotiated encounters shaped by intermediaries, reputation, and hesitation. Entry into field sites was frequently mediated by local contacts who framed my presence in specific ways, at times emphasizing my professional background, at other times foregrounding my religious identity. As feminist ethnographers have shown, such acts of framing are not merely logistical but deeply epistemic, shaping who speaks, how, and under what conditions (Turkmen, 2023). These introductions mattered. They shaped not only who agreed to speak, but also the terms under which participation occurred and the kinds of narratives that could be shared.

In some settings, access was facilitated by guarded hope. Participants agreed to speak because they perceived me as someone who might listen differently or carry their accounts beyond local circuits of disbelief (Karcher, McCuaig, & King-Hill, 2024). In other contexts, access was marked by ambivalence, as potential participants posed indirect questions about my affiliations, intentions, and the possible afterlives of their words. Such moments of hesitation were analytically significant, signalling an acute awareness of the risks attached to speaking and of the uneven distribution of consequence between those who disclose experiences and those who document them (Bourdieu, 1999). Some participants initially declined and later agreed; others consented but limited what they were willing to discuss. These partial and conditional forms of consent complicate any straightforward understanding of access as a methodological achievement (Muthanna & Alduais, 2023).

My religious identity operated ambivalently within these negotiations. In some cases, being Muslim enabled access by signalling cultural familiarity or political proximity. In others, it produced guardedness or silence, particularly when conversations turned toward experiences of religious violence, dispossession, or state neglect. Such ambivalence reflects what Narayan (1993) describes as the “fractured” positioning of the researcher, simultaneously insider and outsider. Trust, when it emerged, was rarely unconditional. It was often accompanied by reminders of risk or requests for discretion that exceeded formal ethical protocols, echoing broader critiques of extractivism in qualitative research (Palacios & Baldauf, 2023).

These circumstances varied across field sites. In rural contexts, access was often collective and mediated through family or community figures, making refusal more difficult but disclosure more fraught. In urban settings, participants exercised greater individual autonomy but were also more likely to express research fatigue or doubt, having encountered multiple researchers before (Burdick & Sandlin, 2010). The unevenness of these encounters meant that discomfort did not arise

from a single source, but from the cumulative labor of negotiating trust across contexts shaped by different histories of exposure and expectation.

Not all forms of asymmetry produced immediate or visible discomfort in the field. Some emerged retrospectively, during transcription and analysis, when the implications of what had been shared or withheld, became clearer. Reviewing interviews, I became increasingly attentive to silences that structured them: topics avoided, questions deflected, narratives curtailed. Participants' willingness to share narratives of discrimination, fear, and endurance did not arise from methodological neutrality, but from relational calculations shaped by their own vulnerabilities and expectations. In several instances, participants explicitly framed their decision to speak as a risk rather than routine participation. Such disclosures carried ethical weight, positioning me as a witness to experiences that exceeded the formal parameters of research exchange (Scraton, 2016). This trust did not operate symmetrically. While participants assumed the risks of disclosure, the forms of reciprocity available to me as a researcher remained constrained by institutional affiliation, ethical protocols, and the temporal limits of fieldwork. These asymmetries were not incidental, nor could they be resolved through methodological refinement. They were produced by the structural conditions of ethnographic research itself (Clarke, Chadwick, & Williams, 2017).

The three vignettes presented in this article are analytically selected rather than exceptional events. Variants of these tensions, questions of reciprocity, scepticism toward research impact, gendered disclosures followed by withdrawal, and moments of quiet refusal, recurred across field sites. While not every interview produced explicit confrontation, discomfort surfaced repeatedly in different forms, including hesitation, post-interview questioning, requests for continued contact, and retrospective unease during transcription. The selected vignettes condense these recurring dynamics into analytically legible moments and are not intended as statistically representative, but as theoretically illuminating instances through which broader patterns of asymmetrical trust and institutional limitation became visible. Each vignette foregrounds a distinct dimension of discomfort, unreciprocated trust, the limits of empathy, and gendered relational expectations, and together they build a cumulative argument about discomfort as constitutive of ethnographic practice.

Vignettes of Discomfort

Vignette 1: Being Trusted with What Could Not Be Returned

During an interview with a middle-aged Hindu woman in a rural field site, our conversation began, as many interviews did, with what felt safe: schooling, water access, the rising cost of food, her responses measured, often glancing toward the doorway as she talked. During the conversation, her tone changed. When I asked about recent changes in the village, she hesitated, then began speaking about fear, how it had become ordinary, almost unremarkable. She described keeping her daughters inside after dusk, avoiding certain routes, lowering her voice in public spaces. These were not stories told with urgency, but with a practiced steadiness, as though repetition had drained them of immediacy. Toward the end of the interview, after a long pause, she leaned forward and said quietly that she had agreed to speak only because I was Muslim. She explained that she wanted someone "from the other side" to hear what had happened in the village during earlier episodes of communal violence. "You will understand how it sounds when we say it," she said. "People don't believe us."

Her statement reframed the encounter in real time. What I had approached as a research interview became, for her, an act of trust that exceeded the procedural language of consent. The interview was no longer simply about documentation; it had become a transfer of responsibility. In

positioning me as a listener from the religious majority, she implicitly tasked me with carrying her story beyond the village, into spaces where it might be heard differently. I felt an immediate and visceral discomfort, not because the disclosure was unexpected, but because of the expectation embedded within it. Her trust positioned me as a conduit, someone who could make her suffering matter elsewhere. Yet I was aware of the limits of what I could offer in return. I could listen, record, and later write, but I could not guarantee safety, redress, or recognition. The familiar tools of ethnography, interviewing, documenting, archiving, suddenly felt inadequate in the face of the moral weight of what had been entrusted to me.

When the interview ended, she stood and offered tea. I declined politely, conscious of time and of not wanting to overstay my welcome. While packing my notebook, she asked where I would go next and whether I would return. I answered honestly but vaguely, speaking of future visits “if possible.” The conversation ended without resolution. As I stepped back into the courtyard, I was aware of the ordinariness of the exit. The discomfort did not dissipate after I left. It stayed with me as I walked back toward the main road, replaying her words and the confidence with which she had placed her story in my hands. I found myself asking what it meant to be trusted with someone else’s fear when I could provide so little in return. Reflexivity allowed me to name my positionality and acknowledge the asymmetry of the encounter, but it did not offer a way to discharge the responsibility that now accompanied that trust.

In another situation, I was asked if I had ever witnessed a blasphemy trial when I interviewed a Christian woman whose brother had been wrongly accused of blasphemy. I paused. I had not, although I had previously prepared legal briefs that detailed these cases for a human rights non-governmental organization. I recall nodding and saying, “I have worked on a few,” and the weight of that statement hit me instantly. “Then you must know how they silence us before we even speak,” she said sharply afterward. The appearance of mutual understanding was broken at that instant. Besides being a researcher, I was also seen as someone who previously had worked within the very systems that tried to give voice to suffering through bureaucratic mechanisms that often failed (Komial-Burley, 2021; Czerniawski & Thomason, 2025). The insider-outsider binary often fails to capture the fluidity of fieldwork when both complicity and care coexist.

Analytical pause

This moment of discomfort did not stem from methodological error or insufficient reflexivity. Rather, it emerged from the structural asymmetry of ethnographic research, in where trust can be extended without a corresponding capacity for reciprocity. The participant’s decision to speak transformed the interview into an ethical encounter that exceeded the transactional logic of research. Discomfort here functioned as a methodological signal, revealing the gap between access and accountability. What this discomfort produced was not paralysis but heightened analytic attention to the conditions under which trust is granted in contexts of vulnerability. It forced an assessment with the fact that ethnographic method frequently depends on forms of moral surplus, expectations, hopes, and claims, that it cannot fully absorb or repay. Knowledge did not arise despite this tension, but through it: the discomfort revealed how minority narratives are offered not only as data but also as ethical demands placed upon the researcher.

Vignette 2: When Empathy Failed to Do Ethical Work

In another field site during earlier research with Christian sanitation workers in an urban setting. After a group discussion on occupational stigma and everyday humiliation, one participant

asked whether my research would improve working conditions or only “add another report somewhere.” Another interjected, asking bluntly why their stories were repeatedly documented while their material circumstances remained unchanged. At that instant, the collective nature of the questioning made the limits of empathy even more apparent. Empathy, expressed through attentive listening and verbal affirmation was not enough to address the structural fatigue he described. The interview continued, but the ease of the meeting had shifted. The method no longer felt ethically neutral; it felt exposed.

Similarly, after another particularly heavy interview with a Christian sanitation worker who had lost his brother to a mob attack, I cried in the car. Not because his story was unfamiliar, such violence is systemic in Pakistan (Khan, Mahmood, & Rasool, 2023), but because of the clarity, he said: “We know nothing could be done for us, no government, NGO’s or activists can stand up for us, you people only come to write about us. We are your chapters.” That moment cut through me. He was right. His pain had turned into my data. He was not just questioning my research. He indicted a whole system in which suffering becomes data, and documentation becomes a substitute for justice (Jamieson & McEvoy, 2013). This encounter forced me to question the adequacy of my past advocacy work and re-evaluate how proximity to structural power unknowingly dilutes empathy into bureaucracy.

These responses were not just morally devastating, but methodologically disruptive. I could not write “clean” research fieldnotes. My fieldnotes were messy, tear-stained, full of doubt, and guilt. I realized that these emotive traces were the analysis itself, not a barrier to it. The humanitarian instinct that had motivated my work, the need to observe, record, and act, now seemed politically sensitive and morally urgent. I saw this desire not as pure intention but as a moral economy. In this economy, my role as an empathetic listener was not neutral. It was part of a system that trades in pain for visibility, and visibility for legitimacy. Nevertheless, not listening felt equally violent. This experience confirmed a series of ethical dilemmas I was facing. What did it mean to be trusted with someone else’s suffering when I could provide little in return? Was I participating in extractivism under the guise of empathy? Could I write with participants rather than merely about them? (Nikidehaghani et al, 2023). These questions cannot be answered once and for all. They must be carried forward, returned to, and revisited throughout the research process. In both encounters, participants did not reject research outright; rather, they questioned its promise. Their scepticism was directed not at the researcher personally, but at the institutionalized cycle of inquiry in which attention substitutes for action.

Not all encounters in the field produced stories. In one rural neighbourhood in Tharparkar, Sindh, I had arranged to meet a Hindu woman (Whose daughter was abducted and forcibly converted to Islam) through a local contact who had assured me she was willing to speak. When I arrived, she greeted me politely but remained standing near the doorway, her body angled toward the street rather than the interior of the house. We exchanged a few words about the weather and about my journey. When I explained the purpose of the research, she listened without interruption. After a pause, she said simply, “I don’t think I can talk today.” Her voice was composed, not apologetic. She added that people had visited previously, researchers, journalists, and that speaking had brought no change, only trouble. She did not elaborate. I asked whether another time might be better. She shook her head slightly and said, “It’s better not.” The refusal was quiet, almost gentle. There was no confrontation, no visible fear, no appeal for reassurance. Yet the finality of the exchange was unmistakable. The interview ended before it began. As I stepped away, she closed the door without looking back. I walked a short distance before stopping, unsure where to direct the discomfort that followed. Unlike other encounters, there was no story to carry, no testimony to analyze, no trust to reciprocate. And yet the refusal itself felt heavy. It called attention to the

accumulation of previous encounters, other researchers, other questions, other promises that had gone unmet.

Analytical pause

This vignette stresses the limits of empathy as a methodological resource. While ethics of care frameworks emphasize responsiveness, attentiveness, and relational closeness, these moments reveal how care might fail when participants explicitly question the value and consequences of research itself. The discomfort I experienced was not a failure to empathize, but an awareness that such empathy alone could not resolve the ethical imbalance at stake.

Methodologically, this discomfort increased my understanding of extractivist dynamics, not as abstract critique, but as lived interruption within the research encounter. Participants' questions disrupted the smooth functioning of the method, drawing attention to the temporal and institutional asymmetries that shape research relationships in which stories circulate far more easily than material change. Knowledge emerged here through interruption: the discomfort marked moments in which the method's limits became visible, compelling a more critical engagement with what research can and cannot ethically promise. The moment of refusal to interview did not register as a failure of access or rapport, but as an ethical interruption. The absence of data was itself methodologically instructive.

Vignette 3: Gendered Trust and the Weight of Witnessing

Several interviews with women participants occurred in domestic spaces, often in the absence of male family members. My positionality as a Muslim woman facilitated access to these spaces, enabling conversations that might not have been possible otherwise. In one such interview, a Sikh woman spoke at length about restrictions on mobility, intergenerational fear, and the emotional labor of maintaining communal respectability. As the interview concluded, she expressed relief at having spoken "without being judged" and asked whether I would stay in touch. In this instance, the requests were modest, continued contact, return visits, but they carried an implicit desire for continuity and recognition. I agreed in the moment yet felt discomfort almost immediately. I knew that sustained contact would be difficult once fieldwork ended and that the forms of care implicitly requested exceeded what I could realistically offer. The method, bounded by timelines, funding, and institutional expectations, offered no clear guidance on how to ethically manage such relational afterlives.

A similar dynamic emerged during an earlier phase of my fieldwork among Hindu women in a rural setting. When I asked women about experiences of forced conversion or sexual violence, answers often came in metaphor or quiet deflection. One Hindu mother, when asked about her daughter, said only: "She is not with us anymore. The state has taken her." The words fell like a curtain. There was no elaboration, only the knowledge that asking further might end the conversation entirely. Silence, ellipsis, and a menacing reference to the state not as a guardian, but as an abductor mark the sentence. According to Butler (2016), hegemonic structures make some lives unimaginable. The disappearance of the people cannot be narrated because their presence was never fully acknowledged. This tension manifested in participants' responses when narrating discrimination. From coded references to job discrimination to indirect disclosures of harassment, their speech carried the signs of surveillance, state, familial, and internalized. One Christian nurse hesitated before detailing workplace discrimination, and after a long pause, said: "If I speak, they will say I am insulting Islam." Here, the fear is deeply material rather than metaphorical.

Blasphemy laws and everyday vigilantism not only shape what can be said but also limits what can be thought aloud. This regime of truth suppresses dissent and reshapes memory, as marginalized communities internalize the need for silence (Butler, 2016).

Moreover, the silences that permeated interviews functioned as powerful articulations of epistemic resistance rather than gaps in data. This self-silencing became more intense due to patriarchy. Religious persecution of women was frequently presented as “family matters” rather than as a kind of structural injustice. Frequently, statements like “This may sound petty,” “I do not want to create a bad image,” or “Please do not quote me” were used to pre-empt accounts of sexual harassment, domestic abuse, or mobility restrictions. These disclaimers were not modesty; they were survival strategies, the internalization of worth, and the sense that their suffering was too banal to matter (Trinh, 1989). Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) theorizes that silence is not always absent; it can be a deliberate refusal to comply with the voyeuristic demands of the researcher or the state. In this sense, the participants’ hesitations, coded language, and cautions were indications of political awareness rather than narrative errors. They handled their truths appropriately because they were aware of the price of speech. As a researcher, I was not immune to these discursive constraints. I had to walk a tightrope between intervention and listening. Could I explore further without hurting anyone? Was I only reproducing the patterns that silence imposed, or was I making room for voice? Autoethnography as methodological approach provides particularly generative frame in this context (Chang, 2016).

Analytical pause

This vignette highlights how gendered access can produce forms of trust that go beyond the time frames of research. The discomfort here did not arise from ethical missteps or methodological error, but from the mismatch between relational intimacy and methodological closure. Feminist reflexivity often emphasizes the value of such access, particularly in enabling women’s voices to be heard, but less attention is paid to what happens when relationships initiated through research cannot be sustained. In these situations, gendered trust positioned the researcher not only as listener but as custodian of experiences that participants framed as fragile, risky, and easily erased. Discomfort functioned as a methodological reminder that access is never neutral; it carries ethical consequences that last beyond data collection. The knowledge produced through these encounters was inseparable from the anxiety they generated. Rather than undermining the research, this discomfort clarified the conditions under which gendered trust operates, revealing how ethnographic relationships are shaped by expectations of care, continuity, and remembrance that cannot always be honored within academic frameworks.

In humanitarian and development discourse, there is often a silent assumption that stories from the margins will “speak truth to power.” This idea, often animated by liberal-humanitarian ideals of “giving voice,” assumes that visibility alone can disrupt power. In Pakistan, these regimes of truth are animated by a fusion of state-sanctioned Islamic orthodoxy, patriarchal morality, and nationalist suspicion. These forces do not simply silence; they reconfigure speech itself, molding how religious minorities, especially women, learn to narrate or withhold their suffering.

Synthesis: What Discomfort Does Methodologically

Across these vignettes, discomfort emerges not as a personal reaction to difficult fieldwork but as a methodological condition produced by asymmetrical trust, uneven vulnerability, and the limits of reciprocity (Baker et al., 2018; Louw, 2025). In each case, discomfort constituted a point at which ethnographic method strained against the ethical demands placed upon it. Rather than

signalling failure, these moments generated critical insight into how knowledge is produced through relationships that are structurally unequal and ethically unresolved. Reflexivity is frequently characterized as a corrective practice, a means of identifying ethical tension and working toward clarity (Türkmen, 2023). While reflexive awareness can illuminate asymmetries of power, it cannot eliminate them, nor can it reconcile the gap between what participants offer, stories, trust, emotional exposure, and what researchers are institutionally able to return (Leonard & Ward, 2026). Discomfort persists not because reflexivity fails, but because reflexivity encounters the structural limits of ethnographic practice.

Understanding discomfort as a methodological condition, therefore, requires shifting attention away from resolution and toward endurance. Ethnographic method is often imagined as progressing toward interpretive coherence and ethical stability, yet the field encounters described here suggest that some ethical tensions are not meant to be resolved (Trundle, Araújo, Khan, & Phillips, 2025). Instead, they must be carried as ongoing obligations that resist closure. Methodological work, in this sense, involves remaining accountable to what cannot be fully addressed or repaired (Darling, 2014). Rather than smoothing over ethical friction, discomfort intensifies analytic attention to the uneven terrain of trust and vulnerability that makes ethnographic access possible, without offering the reassurance of moral resolution.

Toward an Analytic Model of Discomfort as Methodological Condition

The vignettes presented above do not merely illustrate discomfort; they reveal its patterned operation across different dimensions of ethnographic practice. Drawing these moments together, I propose a preliminary analytic model that identifies four interrelated functions of discomfort in qualitative research. First, discomfort operates as a signal of structural asymmetry. In Vignette 1, the participant's trust, extended precisely because I was Muslim, revealed asymmetry not as individual failure but as structural condition. Discomfort signalled that research relationships are never neutral transactions but are embedded in histories of inequality that method cannot dissolve. What discomfort made perceptible was the gap between what ethnography can document and what it can reciprocate. Second, discomfort functions as a limit-test for ethical frameworks. Vignette 2 showed how empathy, often celebrated as an ethical resource, proved insufficient when participants questioned whether documentation could substitute for justice. Discomfort here marked the point where ethics of care encountered their outer limit: care alone could not address the structural fatigue produced by repeated research encounters. This suggests that discomfort tests whether ethical frameworks can acknowledge their own incompleteness. Third, discomfort registers temporal and relational excess. Vignette 3 demonstrated how gendered trust produced expectations of continuity that exceeded fieldwork's temporal boundaries. Discomfort emerged not from ethical failure but from the recognition that research relationships generate obligations, to return, to remember, to remain in contact, that institutional timelines cannot accommodate. Discomfort here signals that ethnographic responsibility extends beyond data collection, persisting as an ethical remainder. Fourth, discomfort enables epistemological reorientation. Across all three vignettes, discomfort did not paralyse analysis but redirected it. In Vignette 1, discomfort forced attention to the conditions under which trust is granted; in Vignette 2, it foregrounded extractivist dynamics as lived interruption; in Vignette 3, it revealed silence and withholding as ethically charged rather than data to be overcome. Discomfort thus reorients the researcher from seeking narrative closure toward sustained attentiveness to what remains unresolved.

These four functions, signalling, limit-testing, registering excess, enabling reorientation, do not exhaust discomfort's methodological work, but they suggest a pattern. Discomfort operates as

a “contact zone” where the structural, ethical, temporal, and epistemological dimensions of research converge (Soderstrom, Holdo, & Junman, 2025). The model suggests criteria for evaluating ethnographic practice that differ from conventional measures of rapport, access, or interpretive closure. Good ethnography, from this perspective, is not work that eliminates discomfort but work that remains accountable to what discomfort discloses (Roshan & Elhami, 2024).

When Discomfort Is Not Generative: A Necessary Caution

The argument advanced here risks implying that discomfort is always and necessarily productive. This requires qualification. Discomfort can also obscure, distort, and misdirect analytic attention. First, discomfort may lead to projection rather than insight. When researchers are affectively unsettled, the impulse to resolve discomfort through narrative can result in interpretations that center the researcher's emotional experience over participants' realities. The risk is that analysis becomes a working-through of researcher anxiety rather than sustained engagement with what participants have shared. Reflexivity, in such cases, can collapse into self-reference. Second, discomfort may paralyse rather than mobilize. Sustained ethical unease, particularly in contexts of extreme vulnerability, can produce withdrawal or avoidance. Researchers may unconsciously limit their questions, avoid difficult topics, or prematurely exit relationships not because participants request this but because the discomfort becomes too heavy to bear. Such responses, while humanly understandable, can reproduce the very extractivist dynamics they seek to resist by leaving stories partially told or relationships unacknowledged. Third, discomfort may invisibilized participant agency. When analytic attention fixates on researcher feeling, (my discomfort, my responsibility, my ethical limits) participants risk becoming backdrop to researcher self-examination. The methodological condition I have described must remain oriented toward what discomfort reveals about structural conditions, not what it reveals about researcher virtue. Discomfort is generative only insofar as it illuminates the asymmetries that shape knowledge production, not when it becomes the subject of the research itself. Discomfort is not an ethical achievement but a methodological starting point, one that requires ongoing, critical engagement rather than celebration.

Discussion: Extending Reflexivity Through Discomfort

This article has argued that discomfort should be understood not as a methodological failure or transitional disturbance, but as a constitutive condition of ethnographic knowledge production. Drawing on field encounters shaped by asymmetrical trust, unreciprocated expectation, and institutional limits of response, the analysis demonstrates that discomfort emerges when relational surplus exceeds institutional capacity. Participants offer stories, vulnerability, and trust that carry moral weight beyond what research frameworks can fully absorb or reciprocate. The resulting ethical remainder does not simply persist as unresolved obligation; it actively shapes interpretation, representation, and analytic attention. This discussion elaborates three key contributions, rethinking reflexivity, theorizing ethical remainder, and unsettling disciplinary norms, before addressing the argument's limits and proposing future directions. Three key contributions follow from this argument.

Rethinking the Normative Arc of Reflexivity

First, the article challenges the implicit assumption that reflexive ethnography culminates in ethical clarity. Feminist and critical traditions have long emphasized the importance of positionality, embodiment, and power in shaping knowledge production (Falconer Al-Hindi & Eaves, 2023). Yet reflexivity is often institutionalized as a trajectory toward coherence, where discomfort is identified, processed, and ultimately transformed into methodological competence. The analysis here suggests that reflexivity does not necessarily resolve ethical tension; at times, it intensifies it. By making asymmetries visible, reflexivity exposes the gap between what participants entrust and what research can return.

From Ethical Remainder to Methodological Structure

Second, the article advances a conceptual distinction between ethical remainder and methodological condition. Ethical remainder refers to the obligations that persist beyond procedural ethics and formal consent (Drenten & Gurrieri, 2025). What this analysis demonstrates is that such remainders are not external to method but structural to it. When relational surplus exceeds institutional capacity, discomfort emerges as methodological pressure. It interrupts interpretive smoothness, destabilizes claims of analytic mastery, and reorients attention toward the conditions under which knowledge is produced. Knowledge is not generated after discomfort is resolved; it is produced through sustained engagement with what cannot be repaid or reconciled. This extends reflexive theory by specifying not only that discomfort matters, but how it operates and what it produces methodologically.

Discomfort and the Norms of Ethnographic Evaluation

If discomfort is understood as structural rather than incidental, it carries important implications for how ethnographic work is evaluated and recognized within the discipline. Ethnography is often assessed through markers such as rapport, depth of access, narrative coherence, and ethical clarity, criteria's that privilege accounts in which fieldwork appears to progress toward understanding and interpretive mastery (Clarke, Chadwick, & Williams, 2017). Discomfort, particularly when unresolved, sits uneasily within these frameworks, disrupting expectations of methodological competence by foregrounding moments where access does not produce clarity, where trust generates obligation rather than insight, and where ethical tensions resist resolution. Within professional narratives of fieldwork, such discomfort is frequently smoothed over, as accounts tend to emphasize adaptability and control, reproducing an image of the ethnographer as a competent and contained subject. Treating discomfort as methodologically significant therefore requires a reorientation of what counts as rigor: rather than signalling analytic weakness, unresolved discomfort can be understood as evidence of ethical attunement to asymmetry. Smooth narratives of access and understanding may, at times, reflect not ethical success but the normalization of inequality within research encounters (Ahmed, 2014). Retaining moments of hesitation or incompleteness in ethnographic writing is therefore a deliberate methodological choice, one that resists converting ethical unease into analytic certainty and shifts attention away from individual researcher competence toward the disciplinary norms that shape what counts as rigorous and successful ethnography (Simpson, 2014).

Limits of the Argument

The argument developed here is grounded in research conducted across asymmetrical religious difference in Pakistan and shaped by my positionality as a Muslim Pakistani woman with prior human rights experience. The forms of trust extended to me, and the discomfort that followed, were relationally produced within this context and may operate differently in other research settings. In studies of political or economic elites, discomfort may arise from strategic opacity or restricted access, while in contexts where the researcher is structurally minoritized, it may center on exposure, safety, or credibility rather than unreciprocated trust (Bylica, 2026). Participatory or collaborative methodologies may redistribute, though not eliminate, these asymmetries, suggesting that discomfort is shaped by the distribution of power within specific research encounters. Discomfort also extends beyond the field, resurfacing during transcription, analysis, and representation, as decisions about what to include or anonymize reactivate unresolved obligations to participants. It is therefore not a transient effect but a methodological condition that persists across the life of ethnographic research. At the same time, not all discomfort is analytically generative; it can obscure interpretation, encourage projection, or recenter researcher subjectivity. Analytic discipline is required to distinguish between discomfort that reveals structural asymmetry and that which reflects personal unease.

Toward an Ethics Without Closure

Ultimately, this article suggests that ethnographic ethics may require moving beyond models oriented toward closure. Even when researchers act with care, transparency, and attentiveness, something remains unresolved: an excess of responsibility that cannot be fully absorbed within methodological procedures or institutional ethics frameworks (Karcher, McCuaig, & King-Hill, 2024). This ethical remainder is not evidence of failure, but a trace of the asymmetries that structure ethnographic encounters. Discomfort, in this sense, keeps ethical relations unsettled. It prevents the researcher from mistaking methodological competence for moral resolution and invites a sustained engagement with the limits of what research can do. Enduring discomfort does not mean abandoning responsibility; it entails recognizing its incompleteness.

Reconceptualizing discomfort as methodological condition opens several avenues for further inquiry. Comparative research could examine how discomfort operates across different methodological paradigms, including elite research, participatory approaches, and digital ethnography. Further work is also needed on the institutional dimensions of discomfort, particularly how ethics review frameworks might better account for the ongoing relational obligations that extend beyond formal consent procedures. In addition, pedagogical research could explore how discomfort is framed within qualitative methods training. Preparing researchers not only to manage but to interpret enduring ethical tension may better reflect the realities of fieldwork in contexts marked by inequality and precarity.

Conclusion: What This Means for Ethnographic Practice

This article began with a set of questions: What happens when discomfort cannot be resolved through reflexivity? How does enduring discomfort shape interpretation and accountability? And what does this reveal about ethnographic practice across asymmetrical difference? Drawing on field encounters with religious minorities in Pakistan, I have argued that discomfort is not a methodological failure to be corrected nor a transitional phase on the path to ethical clarity. Rather, discomfort emerges when relational surplus exceeds institutional capacity,

when participants extend trust, vulnerability, and expectation beyond what research frameworks can fully reciprocate. The resulting ethical remainder does not sit outside the method; it organizes it. Discomfort becomes a methodological condition through which ethnographic knowledge is produced.

Three implications follow: first, reflexivity must be understood not as a trajectory toward resolution but as an ongoing practice of inhabiting structural limits. Reflexive awareness may illuminate asymmetry, yet it cannot dissolve the gap between what participants entrust and what researchers can return. Ethical seriousness lies not in transforming discomfort into coherence, but in remaining accountable to its persistence. This is what the earlier analytic model described as discomfort's signal function: it reveals structural asymmetry without offering the reassurance of closure. Second, discomfort challenges prevailing norms of ethnographic evaluation. Smooth narratives of rapport, access, and clarity may conceal the uneven conditions under which knowledge is generated. When discomfort is treated as analytic signal rather than error, unresolved tension becomes evidence of attentiveness to asymmetry rather than methodological inadequacy. Third, reconceptualizing discomfort as methodological condition reorients how ethnography is taught, governed, and written. In writing, this means resisting the disciplinary pull toward narrative closure and instead preserving the ethical remainders that mark research conducted under asymmetry. Research training often prepares scholars to manage or mitigate ethical tension. Yet in contexts marked by inequality and precarity, tension may endure despite best intentions. Institutional ethics frameworks, similarly, tend to treat responsibility as dischargeable at the moment of consent. The analysis here suggests that responsibility often exceeds those procedural boundaries and continues into interpretation and representation. This reframing does not romanticize discomfort. Nor does this argument suggest that asymmetry is inevitable or unchangeable. Rather, it insists that where asymmetry persists, as it often does in research across difference, discomfort marks the terrain on which ethnographic knowledge is forged. Ethnography, at its most serious, does not culminate in ethical comfort. It proceeds through unresolved relations, carried forward into writing, interpretation, and afterlives of representation. Discomfort, in this sense, is not an obstacle to good ethnography. It is one of the conditions that make good ethnography possible.

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Javeria Shams: Conceptualization, Investigation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Data Curation, Writing Original Draft, Review & Editing.

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Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Due to the sensitive nature of the data and the potential risks to participants, interview transcripts and related qualitative materials are not publicly available. Anonymised excerpts supporting the findings are included within the article. Further information may be provided by the author upon reasonable request (j.shams@deakin.edu.au)

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