

Navigating the Field: Reflexivity and Positionality in Researching Transnational Families Across Serbia, Turkey, and Slovakia

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Abstract: This paper emerges from an ongoing scholarly conversation among three researchers with backgrounds in demography, sociology, and anthropology, based in Serbia, Turkey, and Slovakia, who are engaged in transnational family (TNF) scholarship and share a concern for the more systematic consideration of positionality and reflexivity in this field. While existing transnational family scholarship, as a dynamic and evolving field, has generated substantial empirical findings, existing studies also highlight the inconsistent and often marginal integration of reflexivity and positionality in research on TNFs. The objective of the paper is to contribute to discussions on reflexivity and positionality in transnational family research by examining how these issues are negotiated across different empirical, methodological, and geographical settings, drawing on three case studies: mixed-method research with Serbian students abroad and international students in Serbia, autoethnographic research with mixed-nationality couples in Turkey, and ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee families in Slovakia. The paper shows that reflexivity operates through distinct methodological mechanisms that depend on the methodological approach: from instrument design and team members' positionalities in mixed-methods research, to the negotiation between analytical distance and personal experiences in autoethnography, to the continuous negotiation of boundaries between researcher and participants in ethnographical research encounters. The paper argues that positionality in transnational research is relational, emerging from relationships and interactions, and that it destabilises and transforms across different contexts. Finally, the paper shows that reflexivity in transnational family research extends beyond methodological transparency and also involves affective, relational, and ethical dimensions, particularly in research contexts characterised by vulnerability.

Keywords: positionality, reflexivity, transnational family research, insider–outsider dynamics

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Introduction

Following the “reflexive turn” in migration studies (Dahinden, 2016; Amelina, 2021), there has been an increase in demand for reflexivity, positionality, and critical engagement with epistemologies centred on knowledge production, including within transnational family scholarship (Shinozaki, 2012; Tuzi, 2024; Gemignani, 2025). Transnational family studies, as a field of particular research focus, is multifaceted; family relationships are fragmented across time, space, and law, and researchers enter intimate and morally sensitive spheres such as care, parenting, and separation. At the same time, they work in areas of unequal power relations, migration regimes, legal statuses, and epistemology. Within transnational families, ontological categories such as what constitutes a family, co-presence, or home are destabilised, and these families transcend conventional norms of proximity, temporality, and family roles (Gemignani, 2025). Nevertheless, reflexivity and positionality are often implicit and concentrated on a specific research method, with the context of transnational families (later referred to as TNF) serving more as a background than as a means of understanding how knowledge about transnational families is produced and by whom.

Recent scholarship on transnational families highlights the methodological and epistemological importance of reflexivity and positionality, given the multi-sited and multilingual nature of research contexts and the associated risks of bias and methodological nationalism (McMillan et al., 2023; Sasiwongsaroj et al., 2024; Stock, 2024). This scholarship conceptualises reflexivity and positionality as a dynamic, processual research practice with a significant ethical dimension (Demirkol Colosio, 2021; Tuzi, 2024). However, existing studies also highlight the inconsistent and often marginal integration of reflexivity and positionality in empirical research on transnational families (Shinozaki, 2012). The studies frequently include relatively brief methodological statements on reflexivity, treating transnational families merely as a contextual background, rather than taking a more systematic approach to reflexivity in research (Shinozaki, 2012; Bonfert et al., 2024). This approach contrasts with the explicit focus on specific aspects of transnational families, as seen in post-qualitative and decolonial approaches, which emphasise the challenges that transnational families pose to fixed ontological categories and methodological colonialism (Gemignani, 2025). Additionally, integrating reflexivity and positionality in quantitative and mixed-methods

migration and TNF studies challenges the traditional notion of objectivity and neutrality in quantitative methodologies (Lorette, 2023; Jamieson et al., 2023; Tomiak, 2022).

This paper is a result of ongoing scholarly conversation between three scholars who bring distinct but complementary intellectual trajectories and geographic backgrounds, spanning demography, sociology, and anthropology, while coming from different geographic contexts: Serbia, Turkey, and Slovakia. All of us are academic researchers based in university or research institutes, writing from postsocialist or semi-peripheral epistemic locations; we also share a keen interest in transnational family research. As scholars based in these contexts, we draw on what Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, and Koobak (2016) describe as border thinking, writing from a position that is neither fully centred nor fully marginal within international scholarly debates. We understand this positioning not as a limitation but as a resource that makes us particularly attuned to questions of reflexivity and positionality, and to whose knowledge counts, from where, and under what conditions. The basis for this article is rooted in our active participation in COST Action CA21143 *Transnational Family Dynamics in Europe (TraFaDy)* as leader of the methodological working group (Jelena) and co-leaders of a subgroup on qualitative research methods (Esra and Martina). During the organisation of webinars associated with this project, we identified a need for deepening scholarly conversation in transnational family scholarship concerning critical discussions about positionality and reflexivity. Continuing conversations rooted in our methodological engagement in transnational family studies and drawing on different disciplinary backgrounds, geographical locations, and positionalities inspired us first to develop a joint conference presentation in 2024 and later to expand these conversations into a proposal for the special issue, as well as to develop them into the present academic paper.

Empirically, our paper draws on reflexive accounts from three research projects adopting distinct epistemic and methodological approaches: mixed-methods research with Serbian students abroad and international students in Serbia; qualitative and autoethnographic research with mixed-nationality couples in Turkey; and ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee families in Slovakia, paying particular attention to the interplay between the researcher, positionality, and care. Although we each reflect on specific aspects of methodology, different positionality and research experience, our collective conclusions address issues that extend beyond the scope of transnational family research.

This article aims to contribute to TNF research in three ways. First, based on a comparison of three transnational family studies employing different methodological approaches, we argue that positionality in transnational family research is not only a characteristic of the researcher but a relational and processual dynamic, produced through encounters and interactions, and continuously transformed across different contexts, languages, and legal regimes. Second, we show that reflexivity functions through different methodological mechanisms in different epis-

temic positions: in mixed methods and quantitative components, it is most visible in the design of instruments, sample selection, and category creation; in auto-ethnography, it is applied through the negotiation of an analytical position on the axis between the embodied position of the insider and distance; and in ethnography, it is continuous negotiation of boundaries between researcher and participants in research encounters. Third, we demonstrate that reflexivity in transnational family research goes beyond standards of ethical practice and methodological transparency and includes affective, relational, and accountability dimensions that shape the creation, interpretation, and representation of data, particularly in research contexts characterised by vulnerability and asymmetrical power relations. Together, these contributions offer insights into where positionality enters into knowledge production and how reflexive practices transform research design and interpretation, both in transnational family studies and migration research more broadly.

Reflexivity and Positionality as Critical Concepts in Migration Studies

Within migration studies, the “reflexive turn” (Dahinden, 2016; Amelina, 2021) reflects broader efforts to de-centre methodological nationalism and recognise that the researcher’s position within global hierarchies of mobility, privilege, and citizenship, as well as social categories of difference (gender, age, class, race, and others) is constitutive of the research encounter, not merely contextual (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002). In this sense, reflexivity is not just a means of becoming self-aware and self-critical of our own biases and positionality; it is also an epistemological practice that questions how the categories of “migrant”, “home” and “host” are produced by particular forms of knowledge. Feminist scholars have argued that knowledge is situated rather than universal, pointing out the fact that a researcher is embedded within social, institutional, and political conditions which influence what can be known (Haraway, 1988). Reflexivity and positionality thus serve as an analytical bridge between structure and subjectivity, and involve recognising that a researcher’s social location – shaped by factors such as class, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and institutional affiliation – influences both their access to the field and the interpretive frameworks they apply (England, 1994; Rose, 1997).

Recently, scholars have further demonstrated that reflexivity must be considered in the context of the geopolitics of knowledge production. Knowledge is not produced from a neutral position but from specific institutional, academic, and geopolitical contexts in which certain questions are asked, certain forms of expertise are valued, and knowledge circulates internationally (Kativu, 2026). Researchers working in post-socialist and postcolonial (among other non-hegemonic) contexts have highlighted the unequal hierarchies that allow certain types of knowledge to be valued while others remain marginalised (Tlostanova et al., 2016). While our

own research has not focused on post-socialist or postcolonial feminist sites, these perspectives serve as a reminder that positionality extends beyond fieldwork encounters to encompass institutional and geopolitical contexts. Consequently, reflexivity requires reflection on the epistemic fields concerning how knowledge is produced.

Researching transnational families, which challenge conventional ontological categories such as “family”, “co-presence”, and “home”, requires particular attention to reflexivity and positionality. Such families’ everyday practices operate beyond normative assumptions of proximity and co-residence, producing epistemic conditions that standard analytical approaches may not fully capture. From this perspective, transnational families are not merely objects of representation but dynamic configurations that actively participate in the production of knowledge. In this context, reflexivity and positionality can be understood as processual, relational, situated, ongoing, and affective as well as political processes through which researchers, their fields of study, and transnational families mutually shape one another – foregrounding how knowledge claims are always produced from a particular (and shifting) standpoint (see Gemignani, 2025).

Although Merton’s (1972) insider–outsider dichotomy is still a useful basis for discussing positionality, recent scholarship has demonstrated that these positions are fluid and can change depending on the situation, relationship, and stage of the research. In transnational contexts in particular, this dichotomy is rarely stable, as researchers often occupy shifting roles as insiders, outsiders, and intermediaries, depending on factors such as geography, language, institutional affiliations, and their identities. The transnational field multiplies these positionalities rather than stabilising them. Migration researchers often occupy in-between positions, being both insiders and outsiders depending on the context, field site, or participant group (Carling et al., 2014; Nowicka & Ryan, 2015). From a reflexive sociological perspective, these binaries have the potential to undermine the social conditions that influence knowledge production. Reflexivity requires a comprehensive analysis of the researcher’s position within the research field rather than categorising identity-based proximity or distance (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). While the researcher’s shared experiences or identities, which are intersectional (gender, class/socioeconomic position, age, etc.), may facilitate the development of a relational closeness with participants within the field, this does not necessarily position the researcher as an insider. On the other hand, researchers without migration experience may be able to gain access to field sites due to their institutional affiliations. Yet they may still struggle with issues of trust and cultural competence (Carling et al., 2014). These dynamics demonstrate that positionality is relational and constantly negotiated, shaping study design, access, data collection, interpretation, and the emotional labour of fieldwork. In other words, positionality becomes an empirical characteristic of the transnational field itself and is performed differently depending on the methodological framework – which we illustrate with three case studies.

The ethics of migration research cannot be separated from reflexivity and positionality. The relationship between researchers and participants is shaped by power imbalances, trust, and representation (Kaaristo, 2022). Therefore, reflexivity is not merely a cognitive stance but an ethical practice as well. The ethical dimension of reflexivity also extends into the design of methodologies; decisions regarding sampling, interviewing, or representation are never neutral but are instead embedded within hierarchies between researchers and participants. From this perspective, the fact that most migration researchers work with participants who are vulnerable, displaced, or have an insecure legal status (Bilger & van Liempt, 2009) highlights the importance of relationality, ethics, care, reciprocity, and representation throughout their research. Reflexivity demands attention to power asymmetries: who speaks for whom, and under what conditions of consent and interpretation?

Scholars have emphasised that emotions, such as empathy, discomfort, or guilt, are integral to reflexive practice (Bondi, 2005; Siouti & Ruokonen-Engler, 2025). These affective dimensions shape how researchers interpret narratives and relate to participants. For instance, in ethnographic studies with refugees, researchers must negotiate their own privilege and emotional responses to suffering while maintaining ethical responsibility (Brettell, 2015). Genova and Zontini (2023) demonstrate how emotions are involved in the creation of knowledge at every level of the research process and provide useful strategies for handling emotionally sensitive information, as well as showing how the structural and the personal can be connected through reflexivity and emotional labour, emphasising the significance of the institutional and sociohistorical framework in which research is conducted.

Finally, the call for reflexivity in migration research echoes broader discussions about transparency and credibility in the social sciences (Tracy, 2010). Transparency does not imply confession or self-exposure but rather the disciplined articulation of how knowledge is situated, partial, and co-produced. By explicitly addressing how positionality shapes data collection, analysis, and interpretation, transparency “notably strengthens a study’s rigor and trustworthiness, and outside of it, it may promote the dissemination of data and the acceptance of qualitative research in environments in which adherence to systematization of methods prevails” (Tuval-Mashiach, 2017, p. 10). Reflexivity in relation to transparency must, fundamentally, remain dialogic rather than self-referential. The aim is not to purify the researcher’s perspective but to cultivate epistemic humility, the recognition that understanding mobility and belonging requires an ongoing negotiation between the self and the other, method and ethics, and the local and the global. Reflexivity thus becomes a methodology, an ethics, and an epistemic practice, a way of producing knowledge that requires continuous questioning of how we know what we claim to know about migration and the voices, experiences, and power relations that shape (or are silenced from) that knowledge. Research on transnational families analyses complex social contexts, including cross-border mobility, global

inequalities, diverse citizenship regimes, and migration. In this regard, positionality and reflexivity are not only methodological reflections; both are essential fundamentals for knowledge production in migration and transnational family research.

Analytically, we understand reflexivity and positionality not as separate methodological components but as an epistemic lens through which knowledge about transnational families is produced across diverse epistemic and methodological environments. Building on the previous discussion, we examine three interconnected dimensions in each case:

- (1) positionality as a dynamic and processual field condition (how insider–outsider positions and in-between positions are formed through language, institutions, and legal regimes);
- (2) reflexivity as methodological work (through the design of research tools, access to the field, interaction boundaries, and analytical decisions); and
- (3) reflexivity as ethical and affective responsibility (through which power asymmetries, vulnerability, and the emotional labour of researchers together shape what can be expressed, measured, and represented in the production of knowledge).

These dimensions provide an analytical basis for comparing how positionality enters the research process and how reflexive practice transforms research design and interpretation across mixed-methods, autoethnography, and ethnography.

To address positionality and reflexivity in research on transnational families, we adopt a comparative methodological design (Gray et al., 2007) that aims to integrate reflections on methodological approaches and data-collection practices from three distinct research projects. In our approach, we use various thematic modalities and methodological contexts to support our analysis of positionality and reflexivity in transnational family research: qualitative research and ethnography, autoethnography, and mixed-methods combining qualitative and quantitative components. As our paper draws on various topics and methodological approaches, the units of analysis encompass multiple levels. These include the individual level of the researcher, since researchers are reflexive subjects whose positionality (e.g. insider–outsider status, gender, class/privilege, experience of trauma) influences their approach to, and interpretation of, research, as well as its ethical design. The second level is the relational level, concerning the relationships between researchers and participants. These relationships are key to analysing positionality as a relational and epistemic field, and to considering who has a voice in the research and how this creates a research relationship. The third level is the contextual level of different methodological approaches (qualitative, mixed methods, and autoethnographic designs), reflecting how these approaches structure reflexivity, positionality, and ethical contexts. Adopting this approach, in our article, we aim to enhance understanding of the contributions of positionality and

reflexive practices to knowledge production about transnational families from ethical, methodological, and epistemological perspectives.

Reflexivity and Positionality in Research on Transnational Families: Three Research Contexts

Reflexivity and Positionality in Quantitative and Mixed-Methods Research on TNFs: The Case of Students in and from Serbia

The first methodological reflection, grounded in research practice, draws on mixed-methods research with Serbian university students studying abroad and international students studying in Serbia from various continents – mostly from less economically developed countries (for example, Ghana, Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, Syria, Iran, India, Vanuatu, Suriname). A mixed-methods approach was chosen as it allows for a comprehensive exploration of the complex challenges and experiences related to international student migration (Hernando et al., 2018), including the reconstruction of identity in a new environment, which encompasses the issue of TNF relations and dynamics between the origin and destination. The research project was conducted in 2023 and 2024 in three phases: three focus group discussions with 18 international students, followed by a survey conducted via Lime-Survey with 222 valid responses (126 Serbian and 96 international students), and 19 semi-structured online interviews (for more detail, see Stojšin, 2025). Before conducting the research, permission was obtained from the ethics committees of the institutions involved. Additionally, an interdisciplinary ethics committee ensured the questionnaire's validity, and reliability was assessed through a test-retest method. The research was conducted by a team of six social science researchers in Serbia, working in both Serbian and English. Team-based discussions were organised regularly to address the researchers' positionality (Tomiak, 2022) and ensure a comprehensive and collaborative approach to the study (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives and their rights, and consent was obtained for the use of their data.

The first phase of the research involved focus group discussions with international students studying in Serbia. The focus groups were culturally very diverse, consisting of students from four continents: Europe, Asia, Africa and South America. The research team decided these sessions would be led by me, Jelena, since I have a lot of experience in conducting empirical research with various migrants' groups, including transnational migrants and international students in Serbia.

During the conversation, I got the impression that international students in Serbia were reticent to discuss the role of family members left behind in making decisions about studying abroad and/or future plans, or in maintaining TNF relations and care. Interestingly, this was not the case with the Serbian students

studying abroad who participated in other focus groups. In my report on the focus group with international students in Serbia, I noted that despite my efforts to stimulate the topic of the family/family relations in different ways, only one participant responded, or the responses would be very short. However, this was not the case when discussing topics such as communication with academic staff, administrative staff and faculty peers.

In the same report, in the section on the researcher's self-reflexivity and positioning in that process, I stated that I felt "like an outsider". During the discussion, I constantly questioned my positionality. I tried to keep the conversation going in a relaxed, positive atmosphere with occasional jokes, and I also emphasised the scientific nature of the research. In the introductory part of the discussion, the interviewees – who were Government of Serbia scholarship recipients – emphasised how important studying in Serbia was to them, even though my questions did not address that. From earlier research, I know that such scholarship holders often studied in Serbia because it was their only chance to get a scholarship and/or a residence visa abroad. I wondered their caution and restraint may have been influenced by my social status and institutional role as a senior researcher at a state institute, or by the fact that I was almost twice as old as the interviewees. This could have caused additional power asymmetries, a feeling of marginalisation, or the suspicion that different research goals were hidden behind the scientific ones (for example, I wondered if, despite the clearly stated research goals, they suspected their intentions regarding family reunification or strategies for staying in Serbia after graduation were being examined). I wondered if, as someone who has lived and worked in the same city since birth, I could understand and connect more closely with a culturally diverse group of international students whose stay in Serbia was often their first migrant experience, and better understand their mixed feelings and the wide range of their family contexts. Also, I asked myself whether my knowledge of English, in which the conversation was conducted, and that of the interviewees from non-English-speaking areas influenced the absence of a broader discussion on topics that cause vulnerability.

At regular research team meetings, impressions were summarised and challenges, possible solutions, and adaptations to the research method were discussed. In the end, it was decided that, for respondents from culturally different environments, questions relating to the quality of relations with family members in the country of origin and questions aimed at assessing their impact on the reconstruction of identity would be excluded from the second (quantitative) phase of the research as these questions could be more effectively answered through the third phase of the research, namely, interviews conducted by experienced team members. At the same time, due to doubts about whether all respondents would be able to understand the essence of the question of the influence of TNFs on the restructuring of identity, it was decided to carefully structure the questionnaire. The researchers ensured that survey questions concerning the participant's relationships within the TNF should not be formulated through answers on a scale

for measurement but as specific questions about the family's socio-demographic characteristics and types and frequency of communication.

The Serbian case study shows that incorporating reflexivity, especially relational and collective reflexivity among the research team, was very important for the mixed-methods study of migratory and TNF forms of belonging and communication among international students from highly diverse cultural backgrounds. In this way, it was possible to improve communication, better understand different perspectives, and achieve transparency about the challenges encountered during the implementation of the research, especially during the data collection phase (Alcott et al., 2025). Additionally, the strategy was adapted for more expedient knowledge production, and the work in all stages of the empirical research was adapted to better understand the complex reality (Ibid., 2025) and marginalised perspectives of international students from different cultural settings (Lorette, 2023). Also, research has shown that researchers should be ready to discover gaps in their knowledge, acknowledge certain biases, and continuously negotiate their positioning in research as dynamic and fluid, shaped by situational and contextual factors (Tewolde, 2024; Adley et al., 2023; Chung, 2018).

Reflexivity and Positionality in Autoethnographic Research on Mixed Marriages in Turkey

The second methodological reflection draws on a study of non-Turkish men married to Turkish women examining how family life is constructed in relation to respondents' interactions with both their home and host countries. The research began in 2023 as an autoethnographic study. Starting with this methodological approach, the study is still ongoing. Five in-depth, semi-structured interviews with five Turkish women married to foreign men and living in Turkey, focusing on their daily experiences of family life, mobility, and belonging, form the basis of the empirical data discussed in this section. In addition to these interviews, the ongoing observations and numerous informal interactions in the research enable the establishment of long-term relationships with participants. Regular interactions, alongside the researcher's own questioning of her position, make it possible to observe the changing practices, negotiations, and reflections of mixed couples in transnational family life. In-depth interviews, ongoing conversations, and observations combined provide a multi-layered qualitative data set to examine how transnational families are experienced and understood both in individual lives and in broader social contexts. Autoethnography is also used as a method to explore the challenges Turkish women face in being married to a foreigner and living in Turkey, as I myself (Esra) share this experience. Autoethnography allows researchers to produce "meaningful, accessible, and evocative research based on personal experience" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 2). The use of personal experience enables the creation of complex and comprehensive accounts of cultural norms, experiences, and practices (Adams et al., 2015, p. 39). Therefore, the purpose of auto-

ethnography is not only to write and reflect on personal stories but also to expand the understanding of social realities through the lens of the researcher's personal experience (Chang, 2013, p. 108). The question and investigation of the researcher's identity within the study underpin the entire process of an autoethnographic inquiry. Valentine (2002, p. 120) argues that "our positions in relation to our interviewees are never *a priori*, readily apparent, or defined." The researcher's subjective character shapes their positionality and knowledge production throughout the fieldwork process. At the heart of the challenges and experiences examined, acknowledging the values and assumptions of the researcher within an autoethnographic study enables the culture under investigation to be explored through a shared experience between participants and the researcher.

When I began working with mixed-couple transnational families in Turkey, I particularly thought about how my position as a researcher would facilitate my access to fieldwork while also presenting various difficulties. As a Turkish woman married to someone who is not a Turkish citizen, conducting this study with women in the same situation as me and their spouses not only involved questioning the lives of the women I met but also led me to question my own life story. This questioning is considered a natural part of the autoethnographic approach, but a key issue for debate is how self-reflexive a researcher who is so deeply involved can be throughout the process. In other words, how can researchers conduct studies that reflect their own lives and look at those studies from the outside? While drawing on their own life stories during fieldwork and analysis, how can they move beyond those stories and position themselves as researchers?

My own experience of transnational marriage served as the most significant bridge, enabling me to conduct my fieldwork. Having experienced first-hand how being married to a foreigner is perceived by Turkish society, how the bureaucratic processes work, and how women's communities and families evaluate such a marriage, I was able to recognise the invisible emotions present in my participants' responses during our interviews. This sense of empathy is often an advantage: my participants' perceptions of me as "being one of them" made them feel safe and encouraged them to open up. This closeness did not seem to be the result of our shared experience of a transnational marriage alone. The level of similarity in terms of gender, age, and education also seemed to influence how participants identified with me and what they were willing to disclose. However, establishing a close relationship based on these similarities also presented difficulties, particularly from my perspective. Most importantly, I believe it made it difficult to maintain an analytical distance. It was precisely at this point that self-reflexivity became functional: it allowed me to realise what it meant to be an insider, to be so close to my participants, how this affected my interpretations, and what it might cause me to overlook or exaggerate.

During the interviews, I often found myself agreeing and saying, "Yes, yes, I know this, too." Much of what was said seemed to me to be a different example of my own story. This revealed some blind spots. For example, when interlocutors

spoke about their husbands complaining about Turkish bureaucracy in terms of paperwork for their marriages, I immediately felt the same way about the situation in my own household and how it creates a burden for me. However, when I paused to think about it properly, I realised that, for me, having to do the paperwork was simply an additional burden, whereas, for some, it could be seen as empowering. Therefore, during and after the interviews, I tried to understand how my own experience could influence the research process. Was I interpreting what my interviewees told me through my own experiences, or from within their world of meaning? This dilemma made me realise that self-reflexivity and positionality were not just methodological necessities. They were also ethical requirements, necessitating the clear and explicit statement of my position as a researcher in the knowledge production process. This questioning process went beyond personal narrative, making visible the knowledge production process fundamental to the research.

Questioning my position through self-reflexivity gave me the opportunity to remind myself that, even though I stood somewhere inside with the women I interviewed, we all came from different family structures and socio-economic conditions. It also reminded me that I was not so much inside as outside, and that outsidership was always present. This experience made me question whether I was right to assume myself to be an “insider”, and actually showed me that my position contained both an “insider” and an “outsider”. Therefore, self-reflexivity became a fundamental tool that enabled me to constantly re-evaluate my position.

In the end, this study involved more than just listening to others’ stories; it also required me to reveal the connections I have formed with my personal experience. Self-reflexivity, a core component of autoethnography, encourages me to look inward, challenge my viewpoints, and disclose the standpoints from which I generate knowledge. These reflections enhance the accountability of the research, and I believe that I can only convey the stories of others by revealing my own position and the limitations that it entails.

Reflexivity in Qualitative Research as a Means of Care: Research among Ukrainian Refugees in Slovakia

The third methodological reflection grounded in research practice draws on experiences of researching care within transnational families of Ukrainian refugees in Slovakia. Ethnographic research was conducted in Slovakia between February 2024 and February 2025 and involved 19 women and five men, including semi-structured, informal, and repeated interviews and participant observation. Thematically, the research addressed care practices, social support, transnational family practices, and housing in Slovakia. Throughout the research, to increase ethical commitment, transparency, and credibility and to minimise biases (Ameilina, 2021; Cassell et al., 2018; Dahinden, 2016; Tuzi, 2024), positionality, power asymmetries, and participants’ vulnerability were acknowledged. While conduc-

ting the research, apart from its academic concerns, I (Martina) have continuously asked myself: Can the research process with transnational families, beyond methodological rigor, also be relational and caring, including in its approach to knowledge production?

From an ethics of care perspective, adhering to ethical principles and being reflexive in qualitative research is a form of care. This approach emphasises the importance of critically considering the well-being of participants and researchers throughout the research process, while acknowledging that well-being is context dependent (Bell, 2014, cited in Moralli, 2024, p. 6). Tronto and Fisher (1990) define care as all species of activities that maintain, continue, or repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible, and this is also applicable to research practice. In this sense, when applied to Tronto's phases of care (Tronto, 2020), ethically and reflexively conducted research represents both "caring about" and "taking care of": caring about others and the world we are researching, and taking concrete actions of responsibility towards participants and the social consequences of research. Adherence to ethical principles such as informed consent, confidentiality, respect for vulnerable groups, and minimising harm, and to reflexivity regarding biases and one's own positionality, is not just an ethical standard but also about practical expressions of caring for others (Moralli, 2024; Rallis & Rossman, 2010).

Approaching the research on care practices within transnational families through an ethics of care yielded several insights. Research encounters were not merely data-collection situations but relational moments of shared experience, shaped by attentiveness and responsiveness. Research meetings were shaped, in line with participants' preferences, to become temporarily caring, relational spaces that enabled them to share experiences and knowledge relevant to their lives. In this sense, the research encounter itself became a moral and caring relationship through which knowledge was co-produced, as articulated in the concept of caring reflexivity (Rallis & Rossman, 2010). Rallis and Rossman (2010) describe ethical research practice as relational, grounded in moral reasoning, and enacted through relationships that recognise and honour participants in their specific context. Attention to micro-forms of care – such as uninterrupted listening, time beyond the formal interview, and the sharing of practical information (e.g., support services, education, housing, or employment opportunities) – contributed to building trust. I maintained long-term contact and relationships with participants over time, seeking opportunities to meet and talk whenever possible to sustain trust and continuity, even when such engagement was emotionally demanding. At the same time, the research encounters (involving the researcher, the participants, and the interpreter) were marked by laughter and tears. Some situations were emotionally challenging, requiring the management of emotions as part of the methodological rigor (Hochschild, 1983). For some women, the research provided a sense of relief and a safe space to be heard. Listening to complex life stories often left me emotionally exhausted, sad, or even angry, and evoked feelings of helplessness and concern for participants' well-being. These affective responses encouraged me to

reflect on the limits and possibilities of providing support within the boundaries of research. For deliberate reasons, I did not ask questions about traumatic experiences unless the interview partners mentioned them spontaneously. When particularly stressful topics arose, the scenario was adapted either by discussing other issues or ending the interview to prioritise participants' well-being.

Caring reflexivity does not offer clear or fixed boundaries of responsibility; rather, its limits are situational, affective, and ethically negotiated within concrete research encounters. Attentiveness, emotional availability, and sustained engagement generated affective labour that could lead to exhaustion and raised questions about where responsibility towards research partners necessarily ends. The boundaries between care within the research process, methodological responsibility, and human concern, therefore, remained fluid and were continuously reshaped in the course of the research. Acknowledging these boundaries is an integral part of reflexive research practice, acknowledging participants' well-being and the sustainability of care within research itself.

Positionality as a Continuous Reflexive Negotiation

The three cases demonstrate that reflexivity takes on distinct forms depending on the methodological approach employed. In mixed-methods research with students in Serbia, reflexivity was most evident in the research design. Reflexive consideration of the silences or unequal engagement of research participants, given their cultural backgrounds or limitations in addressing sensitive questions about transnational families, directly informed modifications to the questionnaire and interview strategy. Reflexivity here functioned as an epistemological intervention in TNF research by shaping how research tools are designed and what can be asked, measured, and ultimately known. In autoethnographic research on mixed couples in Turkey, reflexive practice was an ongoing negotiation between analytical distance and embodied research experience, involving recognising the risks of an insider position and the active maintenance of analytical openness. Reflexivity, in this context, was enacted through the writing process and self-interrogation, functioning as both a method and an outcome. In the ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugee families in Slovakia, reflexivity was enacted through the continuous negotiation of boundaries between researcher and participants in research encounters, shaping the pace of conversations, topic selection, and consideration of the well-being of research participants, including the researcher, in all research phases. Reflexivity extended into the affective and ethical dimensions of the research process in ways that the other two cases did not require to the same degree. This comparison shows that reflexivity incorporates multiple practices related to the methodological framework within which it operates.

The comparative perspective also reflects that the distinction between insider and outsider is analytically insufficient for understanding the researcher's

positionality. We found ourselves in diverse research situations with positionalities that depended on the methodological context or our roles within the research process and research teams. These positionalities have also changed across research phases, interactions, and methodological contexts. The analytical comparison between cases and our experiences thus reflects that the positionality of researchers in transnational family research is shaped by the specific configuration of the research, substantially exceeding the social characteristics of the researchers. Each of the three presented cases clearly shows that the distinction between insider–outsider, including respective tensions, depends upon methodological contexts. In mixed-methods research, the insider status of some research team members posed a complication that required collective attention. Researchers with insider status, given similar cultural backgrounds to participants, experienced richer discussions and conversations, whereas those without such a position struggled to have open discussions on certain sensitive topics. Importantly, in this case, the dynamics of insider and outsider positions involved the research team, thereby also requiring collective rather than individual reflexivity. In the autoethnographic research, the insider position was an important resource, as shared experience enabled access, empathy, and depth of interpretation. The mixed positionality involving both insider and outsider positions required constant negotiation between analytical distance and personal experience. In ethnographic research, positionality was primarily an ethical question, continuously negotiated in relation to the vulnerability of the research participants. The researcher's position as an outsider, in terms of direct experience of displacement, made the power asymmetry between researcher and participant more visible and ethically pressing, requiring reflexivity and ethical rigour. Together, these three cases show that the distinction between insider and outsider positions is unstable, taking different forms and carrying different methodological and ethical consequences depending on the research design.

However, the relationship between vulnerability as a research context and the very nature of reflexivity also becomes apparent in a comparative context. The comparison across three cases shows that the greater the vulnerability of the research context, the more reflexivity extends beyond methodological transparency into the affective and ethical dimensions. In the mixed-methods research with students, reflexivity was primarily a methodological and epistemological practice, important for ensuring the validity and reliability of the research design. In the autoethnographic research, reflexivity took on a more personal dimension, requiring the researcher to examine her own life story as data while staying in a research relationship with other interview partners and negotiating her own positionality. In ethnographic research with Ukrainian refugees, reflexivity was closely tied to the ethics of care, shaping every aspect of the research encounter. This facet underscores that future transnational family research, while considering reflexivity, must also take into account, beyond methodological context, the affective and ethical demands that different research contexts place on researchers.

Finally, our collaboration in writing this article was a reflexive exercise about our theoretical thinking, the methods we employ, and also about our own positionalities. Being situated in different disciplinary backgrounds – demography, sociology, and anthropology – alongside different methodological approaches and geographical locations while engaged with transnational family scholarship, our discussions made visible what each of us had taken for granted within our own research contexts. What some of us considered a self-evident methodological or reflexive choice, others approached as requiring explicit justification. In particular, the discussion of the specificities of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and epistemologies, addressing transnational families, was fruitful in this context. The same is also true for traditions of knowledge production from the particular locations of border thinking (Tlostanova et al., 2016). The experience with these conversations about how we, as scholars, recognise and reflect on our positionalities deepened our collective understanding of the nuances of both reflexivity and positionality and sharpened our argument that reflexivity is fundamentally a relational practice, one that emerges not only between researcher and participant but also among researchers themselves. In this sense, our collaboration also reflects the very dynamics we analyse in our case studies: positionality is continuously negotiated in dialogue and relations with others, and this process carries its own reflexive, affective, and ethical demands.

Conclusion

Building on three case studies, this paper shows how researcher positionality and reflexivity within transnational family scholarship shape, change, and are reconfigured across various empirical contexts depending on the variety of methods employed, the insider–outsider dilemma, and emotional and caring engagements. Empirical findings show that reflexivity in transnational family research is not only a tool for methodological transparency or bias control but also an active epistemic actor through which questions, categories, and boundaries of what can be known in research are co-created. In this article, we understand and demonstrate that positionality, as the situated position of researchers in transnational fields, is shaped by power asymmetries, mobility regimes, and relational dynamics. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is understood as ongoing analytical, methodological, and ethical work through which these positions are examined, negotiated, and made accessible in the process of knowledge production.

Research on transnational migrant families often acknowledges reflexivity and positionality, yet rarely examines how these dimensions are shaped by the transnational configuration of family life itself. When family members are separated across countries of origin, transit, and destination, reflexivity becomes inseparable from the intersecting social, economic, political, and cultural contexts through which care, expectations, and obligations are negotiated. Against this

backdrop, many studies on transnational migrant families examine how families maintain long-distance relationships, but they do not adequately address the positionality and reflexivity of the researchers who study these families. Since transnational family relationships are interwoven with power inequalities, these inequalities subsequently influence research interactions, narratives, and findings, and therefore need to be reflected in data collection and interpretation.

We argue that critically analysing and reflecting on one's position in transnational family research – regardless of whether the methodological approach is qualitative, mixed method, or quantitative – increases transparency and encourages critical reflection on one's own assumptions and biases. Rather than considering reflexivity as an additional methodological approach or component, this article demonstrates that, in the context of transnational family research, reflexivity is a pivotal area where epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations converge.

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