

The Dynamic Process of Reflexivity: Insider Qualitative Research When Researchers and Participants Experience a Shared Crisis

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Abstract: This paper analyses a qualitative research process shaped by the shared experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for both the researcher and the participants. It examines the researcher's self-reflexive process and introduces the Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF) that illustrates how reflexivity can be applied across different stages of research. The DRF framework is demonstrated through the author's insider, reflexive journey across a series of interconnected qualitative and mixed-methods research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included a longitudinal study exploring how the pandemic shaped the experiences of nearly 600 expatriates and their transnational families across 48 countries (Végh et al., 2023a), alongside qualitative research on accompanying spouses who experienced the pandemic in a host country (Végh et al., 2023b).

Reflexive practices enable researchers to critically examine how their subjectivity, emotions, and positionality shape the research process, recognising unconscious motivations and biases and reflecting on one's paradigmatic stance to ensure methodological coherence (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Rather than treating subjectivity solely as a source of bias, reflexivity positions it as central to knowledge production. The DRF framework presented here was developed through retrospective reflexive analysis and is structured, yet flexible. Its stages may overlap or recur as research progresses, forming a cyclical process. Drawing on qualitative research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the paper proposes a transferable reflexive framework to support researchers working in contexts of shared experience and to help sustain reflexive practice throughout the research lifecycle, particularly in studies characterised by shared vulnerability and insider researcher positionality.

Keywords: Insider qualitative research, reflexivity, dynamic reflexivity framework (DRF), COVID-19, expatriates, transnational families

Introduction

Travel restrictions introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic profoundly altered everyday practices of mobility, limiting cross-border movement and affecting transnational families whose lives depended on regular international mobility associated with expatriate living (Georgiadou et al., 2024; Mello et al., 2023). Beyond disrupting physical movement, the pandemic challenged established transnational practices of caregiving, emotional support, work, and family life, exposing the dependence of cross-border families on the continuity of international mobility and interconnected support networks (e.g., Baldassar & Merla, 2014; Sirkeci & Yucesahin, 2020; Végh et al., 2025).

The empirical basis for this paper is a series of interconnected research conducted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. At its core was a longitudinal investigation of expatriates' experiences, examining how changing mobility conditions affected work, family life, and transnational support systems, complemented by qualitative research on accompanying spouses (Végh et al., 2023a, 2023b). The researcher experienced the same mobility restrictions as the participants, creating a shared research context that influenced access to the field, shaped data generation, and required sustained reflexive engagement throughout the research process.

This paper examines this reflexive process through retrospective analysis. The framework emerged from collaborative research conducted during the pandemic while the author lived and conducted research across Malaysia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Italy, experiencing different national responses to the crisis as both a researcher and a member of a transnational family.

The main contribution of this paper is the development of the Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF), derived from a methodological reflection on the reflexive processes that accompanied these interconnected studies. The paper addresses two methodological questions: (1) How did sharing the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic with participants shape the researcher's reflexive practice? (2) How can these reflexive processes be translated into a transferable framework for qualitative research conducted in similar contexts of shared experience and insider positionality?

Although developed in the context of transnational family research during the COVID-19 pandemic, the **Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF)** is intended as a transferable resource for qualitative researchers working in contexts characterised by shared experience, insider positionality, and heightened uncertainty.

Reflexivity in insider qualitative research: a theoretical framework

Reflexivity is understood in this paper as an ongoing, collaborative, and multidimensional practice that extends across the entire research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Rather than being treated as a discrete methodological technique, reflexivity is conceptualised as a guiding framework for interpretation, translation, and representation (May & Perry, 2014). Sustained engagement with reflexive practice and researcher self-awareness is essential to ensuring rigour and analytical depth, particularly in research that holds personal relevance for the researcher (Finlay, 2002; Frambach et al., 2022; Karcher et al., 2024). From this perspective, researcher subjectivity is not treated as a limitation but as a constitutive element of qualitative knowledge production (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

As a methodological practice, reflexivity enables researchers to examine their positionality, assumptions, and interpretive perspectives, while also supporting critical evaluation of research processes, methods, and outcomes (Finlay, 2002). Reflexive engagement is particularly aligned with a constructivist–interpretivist paradigm (Hibbert, 2021), which seeks to explore and reconstruct participants' experiences through the co-construction of meaning. Within this paradigm, meaning is understood as emerging through interaction rather than being discovered as an objective property of the social world (Finlay, 2002). Reflexivity, therefore, does not aim to minimise subjectivity but to engage with it critically in order to generate more nuanced interpretations.

Reflexive practices further support researchers in recognising emotional responses and motivations related to specific research topics (Karcher et al., 2024) and in critically examining how subjectivity and contextual conditions shape the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). Conscious reflection on one's paradigmatic stance and the systematic use of reflexive practices are necessary to ensure coherence and consistency in methodological decision-making across all stages of qualitative research. In the absence of such engagement, subjectivity risks being reduced to bias, often resulting in defensive or apologetic research accounts (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). By identifying unconscious motivations and assumptions, reflexivity enhances researcher self-awareness (Finlay, 2002). This process also supports more considered and ethically attentive engagement with participants (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

A constructivist–interpretivist approach prioritises the relationship between the researcher and the participant and supports the articulation of lived experience. Within this framework, reflexivity is understood as a systematic form of self-assessment rather than merely a representational or writing practice. It draws attention to the relationship between theory and practice and is considered a methodological as well as an ethical responsibility, rather than an optional strategy (MacLeod et al., 2022). Adopting a constructivist–interpretivist perspective also entails rejecting the assumption that knowledge can be objectively measured or universally validated (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Finlay, 2002). Neutrality and objectivity are therefore treated as problematic, as

knowledge is understood to be socially constructed and shaped by lived experience and subjectivity (Finlay, 2002; May & Perry, 2014). Reflexivity is thus conceptualised as a mindful and iterative process that actively engages the researcher throughout all stages of the research, making explicit how the researcher's subjectivity informs research decisions and interpretations (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015; Russell & Kelly, 2002). The absence of reflexive engagement may undermine the quality of knowledge produced through qualitative research and affect both researchers and participants involved in the process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Although this paper shares certain characteristics with autoethnographic approaches through its use of the researcher's own experiences as a source of methodological insight, its primary aim is not autobiographical representation but the development of a transferable reflexive framework grounded in interconnected empirical research. Similar to autoethnographic inquiry, personal experience serves as a valuable source of methodological insight; however, in this study it is used to illuminate reflexive processes rather than as the primary object of analysis.

Taken together, these perspectives frame reflexivity as a continuous, iterative, and context-dependent process through which researchers critically engage with their positionality, assumptions, and interactions throughout the research lifecycle. This conceptualisation underpins the analysis presented in the following section, which examines how reflexive practice evolved during a longitudinal study of expatriates conducted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and informed the development of the proposed stage-based reflexive framework.

Reflexivity in practice

The pandemic was not only a significant external event but also an integral factor shaping both the research process on transnational families conducted during this period and the methodological framework that emerged from the researcher's reflexive engagement. The researcher's subjective experiences, together with individual and collaborative reflexive practices, played a central role, reinforcing the inseparability of subjectivity from qualitative knowledge production (Karcher et al., 2024).

A key methodological consideration throughout the reflexive process concerned the extent and form of self-disclosure in reporting qualitative research. This is not unique to research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic but represents a broader challenge in reflexive qualitative inquiry. A minimum level of self-disclosure was necessary to ensure transparency, coherence, and interpretive clarity, while ongoing questions remained regarding how much personal experience should be included in academic publications and in what form. As Finlay (2002) notes, reflexive writing requires careful consideration of how researchers position their own voices while representing the perspectives of others.

These considerations continuously shaped the research process across the research trajectory. Two factors were particularly influential in both the conduct of

the research and the writing process. First, reflexive engagement functioned as an organising principle throughout the study and informed research design, data generation, and analysis. Second, the pandemic not only provided the broader research context but also shaped the researcher's role and guided interpretive decisions, particularly in negotiating the relationship between the researcher's own lived experiences and the interpretation of participants' accounts. Together, these factors sustained an ongoing reflexive process requiring attention to personal, interpersonal, methodological, and contextual influences on the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

Reflection occurred on two interconnected levels throughout the research: first, through personal and collaborative reflexive engagement, and second, through reflexive adaptation of the research design and methodology. These reflections were articulated retrospectively once both the pandemic and the empirical studies had concluded. First, reflexive engagement developed through personal reflection and collective discussion with research colleagues. This was a continuous process shaped by uncertainty and rapidly changing circumstances across different national contexts. Daily reassessment and reinterpretation were required, as neither researchers nor participants had established reference points for understanding the evolving situation.

Second, reflexivity is extended to the methodological level. In some cases, research initially designed as exploratory evolved into longitudinal studies as the pandemic progressed. In other cases, research already underway required adaptation and restructuring when the pandemic emerged as a global crisis. These methodological shifts included adapting research questions to emerging phases of the pandemic, extending exploratory studies into longitudinal research, and revising data collection and analytical strategies in response to changing mobility restrictions and participants' evolving circumstances. Together, these changes reinforced the need for sustained reflexive engagement throughout the research process.

The importance of retrospective reflection

Reflection on the full research trajectory, from the initial idea through writing and the first dissemination of results, made it possible to identify distinct phases and steps within the research process. Through reflexive engagement, key elements shaping both the conduct of the research and the meanings attributed to it became visible. Although these phases were present throughout the study, they became fully apparent only through retrospective reflection conducted after the completion of the empirical work.

This retrospective reflexive process was informed by established frameworks of reflexivity. Probst and Berenson (2014) emphasise the integration of reflexive methods across multiple stages of qualitative research, including the pre-writing phase, reflexive practices during data collection and writing (such as debriefing), and post-writing reflection following the completion of the study. Finlay (2002) proposes a reflexivity framework consisting of five interrelated elements: introspection,

intersubjective reflection, mutual collaboration, social critique, and discursive deconstruction, which together provide a structure for systematic reflection.

Taken together, these frameworks offered an analytical foundation for engaging with reflexivity across the research process and supported a structured approach to retrospective self-reflection.

The dynamic reflexivity framework (DRF): a stage-based model of reflexivity in practice

The phases outlined here were developed primarily through retrospective reflexive analysis and are presented in a structured manner. They are not intended to be linear; rather, the phases may overlap, recur, or be revisited as the research process evolves, forming a cyclical pattern.

When reflexive engagement does not lead to resolution and emotional strain or role conflict persists, sustained self-reflection and peer debriefing become particularly important. In such cases, additional practices, such as reflective journaling or, where appropriate, professional counselling, may support researchers' well-being and reflexive capacity (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Drawing on these reflections, this paper proposes the **Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF)**, comprising three overarching phases (pre-reflection, reflection, and retrospective reflection) and seven interconnected stages that conceptualise reflexivity as a dynamic, iterative process unfolding across the qualitative research lifecycle. The DRF emerged inductively from retrospective analysis of the author's reflexive practice and was subsequently interpreted in relation to the broader literature on reflexivity. It is therefore presented as an original conceptual framework rather than an adaptation of an existing model.

The **Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF)** provides a foundation for the systematic and ongoing application of reflexivity in research. The three phases and seven interconnected stages summarised in Table 1 are demonstrated and explained through the empirical case study presented in the following sections.

Table 1. *The Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF): Stages of Reflexive Practice across the Research Lifecycle*

Phases	Stages	Content
Pre-reflection	Starting Point	The events leading up to a research study, including the formulation of initial questions and steps, and the personal motivations behind a researcher's decision to undertake the research, can also emphasise unexpected turns in the early stages of the research.
	Data Collection	Self-reflection on power dynamics, self-positioning, social critique, and both intrapersonal and interpersonal factors during data collection.
	Incubation	The overwhelming influence of events, information, and uncertainty can demand time before a more profound understanding can unfold. In this process, reflexivity plays a crucial role.
Reflection	Emotional Burden and Role Conflicts	The roles and expectations associated with the researcher can lead to conflicts, where reflection helps resolve them. It provides insights into the social and emotional dynamics of both the researcher and participants, highlighting the importance of introspection and reflexivity.
	Mutual Collaboration	This process enables engagement with multiple perspectives through reflection involving participants and/or researchers, while group dialogue helps move beyond individual biases.
	Refinement and Relief	Through the analysis process, data can uncover new, previously unseen meanings, with a sense of discovery that may lead to refinement. Interpreting the data can bring relief, as fragmented pieces come together to provide clarity for the researcher and validation of the lived experiences captured in the study.
Retrospective Reflection	Processing	Research does not end with writing; it has an important afterlife, especially in terms of self-reflection. Encouraging dialogues about the research's impact is crucial. This dialogue, involving researchers, peers, and other stakeholders, deepens the understanding of the broader implications of the research.

Note. The Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF) represents the author's original conceptual framework, developed inductively from retrospective analysis of reflexive practice and informed by the broader literature on reflexivity.

Applying the dynamic reflexivity framework: case study

This case study draws on elements of an autoethnographic approach and is based on the author's autobiographical self-reflection during and after qualitative research on transnational families conducted throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. The author's positionality as both researcher and member of a transnational family provides the basis for the reflexive analysis presented here. Further details of the empirical studies informing this reflection are provided in Végh et al. (2023a, 2023b). The case study is not presented as a detailed empirical account, but as an illustrative basis for examining the reflexive process. The case study is organised according to the stages of the Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF), illustrating how each stage was experienced and identified through retrospective reflection across the research process.

Starting Point and Data Collection

I recall the initial discussions concerning the potential severity of the pandemic. As a researcher, I observed Malaysia's announcement of a complete lockdown beginning on March 18, 2020, which prompted a rush of expatriates to leave the country. For many, family became the top priority, and overnight, numerous families packed up and left. Some multinational companies discreetly contacted their employees, inquiring whether they felt safe or wished to return home. My family was no exception. As a researcher, I observed the unfolding situation while simultaneously experiencing its consequences first-hand as an individual and as a member of a transnational family living abroad. In responding to this unprecedented global event, individuals lacked clear reference points for decision-making. No established frameworks were available to support fully informed choices, yet some families remained, while others chose to return to their countries of origin. Expatriate life did not come to a halt; rather, it underwent a profound transformation. As a researcher, I observed the unfolding situation while simultaneously experiencing its consequences as an individual and as a member of a transnational family living abroad. During the course of the research, my family and I lived in Malaysia, Hong Kong, the United Kingdom, and Italy, experiencing different national responses to the pandemic and their implications for transnational family life.

Journey to the First Research

Family and professional paths were deeply intertwined for many during the pandemic. This was also true in my case, as both an expatriate and a researcher, and this intersection significantly shaped my experience. My curiosity continuously reshaped my understanding of the pandemic, with my interpretation of events evolving from day to day. Although critical reflexivity can be challenging (Razack et al., 2022), there was an ongoing dynamic between me as a researcher and observer, sometimes operating under the mistaken assumption that greater awareness would provide

a sense of control, and me as a member of an expatriate family, facing uncertainty in the absence of established reference points. This dual perspective proved valuable during the interviews, as I encountered the same uncertainties as the participants. At the same time, participants often overlooked the fact that I, too, was experiencing the pandemic.

Challenges also emerged through my professional practitioner role. At the time, we had recently established a new organisation in Southeast Asia. In November 2019, we held our first in-person meeting in Singapore, filled with plans and ambitions to create a platform for intercultural issues in the region. As the pandemic unfolded, however, we realised that our inaugural conference would be postponed indefinitely, an event that ultimately did not take place until 2024.

This moment marked a turning point. Rather than discussing future steps, attention shifted to an immediate question: What now? The organisation consisted of six founding members, all expatriates, and discussions focused on how to move forward. Conversations about organisational planning gave way to smaller group exchanges centred on shared challenges. No one had clear answers, but we listened to one another with empathy, sharing experiences and searching for possible ways forward. These discussions gradually expanded into broader questions: How were other expatriates handling the situation? What decisions were they making, and what mattered most to them? This was the point at which we decided to initiate a study. We sought to understand what expatriates were doing and why, recognising that our collective experience held analytical value. During this initial phase, the focus shifted from individual concerns to small-group reflection and, ultimately, to a broader focus on expatriates.

Journey to the Second Research

By late 2019, the first interviews for my long-planned doctoral research had been completed. I aimed to understand how expatriate families experience transnational living from the perspective of the accompanying spouse. The initial interviews were highly engaging, with in-depth personal conversations and rich datasets. We had planned a second interview for early March 2020 with one of the participants. I had a semi-structured interview outline and was set to meet in person at a quiet, secluded terrace at the school. However, as we began, the conversation took an unexpected turn. The questions I intended to ask led to the discussion in an entirely different direction. What followed no longer resembled a conventional interview, no recording, just questions and a sense of unease.

It was already clear that changes were coming, but we did not yet know how extensive or in what form they would manifest. No one had a clear solution. Like many others, my interviewee was uncertain about what to do with their family and was considering whether they should return home quickly.

These events not only prompted me to reflect on my own family's future but also set the stage for a research direction I had not anticipated – one that would eventually

form the foundation of my doctoral thesis. As the pandemic evolved, the research expanded from an exploratory study into a longitudinal investigation, with research questions, data collection, and analysis continuously adapted to capture participants' changing experiences across different phases of the pandemic. As Karcher et al. (2024) note, a researcher's deeper involvement can enhance the co-construction of data and interpretations. In this study, sharing participants' experiences facilitated rapport, supported more contextually grounded interpretations, and required ongoing reflexive consideration of how my own experiences influenced the research process.

Incubation

The period following data collection did not transition into data analysis as initially planned. The overwhelming influence of events, information, and uncertainty demanded time before a deeper understanding could unfold. Reflexivity played a crucial role in this stage, as I worked through the balance between stepping back to gain perspective and immersing myself in the data while observing and experiencing the global pandemic situation simultaneously. At that moment, it became evident that governmental policies for managing the situation varied significantly. While some countries experienced easing measures and reopening, others imposed even stricter restrictions. This was the case in Hong Kong in 2021, where I once again witnessed many families leaving the country at the beginning of the year as stricter measures were announced. The overall uncertainty, particularly in a country with more rigorous regulations, made it even more challenging to immerse myself deeper into the data and revisit the initial questions. This difficulty was further intensified by the heightened unpredictability my family and I were experiencing in a closed Hong Kong. Additionally, I was still unable to foresee when I would be able to reunite with my extended family. I felt that immediate interpretation of the data was impossible – it was too intense, with too much happening and too many uncertainties unfolding simultaneously. At times, I set the analysis aside, while at other times, my progress was much slower than usual. Only a small amount of daily work allowed me to deeply immerse myself in the data.

This phase of the research could be described as an incubation period of the research, though it was far from passive. It covered the transition from data collection to the in-depth analytical process across the studies. By May 2021, we began drafting the first paper, and by June 2022, my focus shifted toward writing up the second. These writing processes were not only about structuring findings but also about constructing meaning from the lived experiences intertwined with the research.

Emotional involvement

Reflexive engagement provides insight into both the researchers' and participants' social and emotional worlds, highlighting the importance of introspection and reflexivity. At the same time, the researcher's position may risk overshadowing

participants' voices. The researcher's own experiences should therefore be disclosed purposefully, only insofar as they enhance understanding of the research process and the interpretation of participants' accounts. In this sense, personal disclosure serves as an interpretive tool rather than an end in itself, requiring researchers to move beyond introspection toward critical reflexive analysis (Finlay, 2002).

The dual role of being both a researcher and an expatriate experiencing the pandemic was emotionally demanding, particularly as the research was deeply intertwined with personal experience. Attentiveness to emotional responses and the maintenance of role boundaries were essential for preserving the integrity of the research process (Ide & Beddoe, 2024). However, this dual positioning also imposed an additional emotional burden. Research activities and personal experiences formed a cyclical process in which each continuously shaped and reinforced the other, influencing research design and subsequent decisions.

One of the most challenging aspects involved navigating the dual perspectives of experiencing the pandemic as an expatriate while simultaneously researching that experience. Re-listening to and rereading interview transcripts proved particularly difficult, as a dual emotional response resurfaced. The transcripts intensified feelings of uncertainty, loss, and absence, as though the passage of time itself was amplifying these emotions. Notably, this stage of analysis became possible only after a period of incubation.

Both studies primarily focused on how expatriates managed everyday life during the pandemic. Listening to participants describe their struggles, uncertainties, and doubts – while experiencing similar challenges myself – was emotionally taxing. Observing emotions, role boundaries, and power dynamics within the research relationship is therefore crucial (Finlay, 2002; MacLeod et al., 2022; Ide & Beddoe, 2024). On the one hand, this shared experience deepened my understanding; on the other, it felt like repeatedly reliving the pandemic. Hearing participants speak about missing their families and the uncertainty surrounding reunification intensified my own emotional responses. At times, maintaining the role of a neutral researcher – or even that of a supportive listener – became increasingly difficult.

Peer debriefing sessions proved particularly valuable at this stage. Beyond discussing research progress, they provided opportunities to reflect on how rapidly changing national COVID-19 policies affected our own lives as researchers living in different countries. Discussions frequently centred on personal and family dilemmas, including decisions about remaining abroad or returning home, adapting to new jobs without face-to-face interaction, coping with the birth of grandchildren or other major family events from a distance, and missing significant family celebrations because of travel restrictions. These shared experiences not only deepened our understanding of participants' accounts but also created a space for both critical methodological reflection and mutual emotional support. Several scholars emphasise the importance of peer support and both formal and informal debriefing practices in reflexive research (Karcher et al., 2024). Such practices can help prevent, or at least facilitate early recognition of, emotional strain and vicarious trauma among researchers

(Fohring, 2020). Adopting a self-reflexive approach in this way can enhance researchers' self-care and resilience, particularly in emotionally demanding research contexts (Fenge et al., 2019). Regular peer debriefing not only supported analytical progress but also enabled the collective processing of the emotional challenges associated with conducting and analysing research under such conditions.

Role-Conflicts

Practicing self-reflection also involves focused intersubjective reflection, which plays a crucial role in examining the mutual meanings that emerge within research relationships. This form of reflection requires attention to the self in relation to others, while acknowledging both the value of shared understanding and the challenges it may introduce (Finlay, 2002). Additionally, this process was shaped by the multiple roles I held as a researcher, which required continuous reflexivity. Throughout data collection, self-reflection was an integral part of the interview process. Shared experiences and overlapping understandings between the interviewees and me added depth and meaning to these interactions, while simultaneously raising questions about proximity, distance, and role negotiation within the research encounter.

At the same time, I was living in Asia, moving from one country to another. During this period, I did not anticipate that I would soon be unable to see my extended family for an extended time. I was also confronted with the difficulty of explaining why my nuclear family – whether due to work or research commitments – was not immediately planning to relocate. These circumstances introduced additional layers of tension into my reflections, as I navigated competing responsibilities as a researcher and as a family member. Physical distance further amplified the challenges of expatriate life during a period marked by profound uncertainty.

Social critique and power dynamics

The dynamics between my roles as a researcher and an expatriate generated a range of challenging situations, bringing questions of privilege, bias, and power imbalances to the forefront (Razack et al., 2023). Remaining attentive to power relations and their effects on interactions – particularly during interviews – was therefore essential (MacLeod et al., 2022). These tensions became particularly apparent when participants reflected on the discrepancy between public narratives of solidarity and their lived experiences as expatriates. As one participant remarked, *“That’s probably the thing that annoyed me the most about ‘we’re all in it together’ when we’re clearly bloody not”* (Maeve, cited in Végh, 2025, p. 141). While each participant's circumstances were unique, many of the uncertainties and dilemmas they described resonated with experiences I was simultaneously navigating as an expatriate and member of a transnational family. This required continuous reflexive attention to distinguish my own experiences from participants' accounts while acknowledging how our shared context shaped rapport, interpretation, and meaning-making. This tension

reflected the constant challenge of maintaining sufficient analytical distance while acknowledging the shared context in which both researcher and participants were situated. Although they remained relatively manageable during interviews, it became more pronounced during the analytical phase.

As the research progressed, my positionality also evolved. During data collection, my insider position primarily facilitated rapport and shared understanding with participants, whereas during analysis and retrospective reflection it required increasing analytical distance and more explicit reflexive scrutiny of my own assumptions and interpretations.

A central challenge for researchers engaging in reflexivity as social critique is addressing power asymmetries between researchers and participants. Reflexivity, when approached as social critique, enables experiential accounts to be situated within broader theoretical understandings of how power is socially constructed. Its strength lies in recognising the multiple, shifting, and relational positions occupied by both researchers and participants throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002).

Social critique was particularly significant in one **study**, where the primary focus was on the evolving nature of expatriates' perceived privilege. This included not only participants' own understandings of privilege but also the broader classification of expatriates as highly skilled professionals – a status frequently reinforced in academic literature. Previous research has shown how expatriates often benefit from social, economic, and cultural advantages that grant access to resources and opportunities unavailable to others, while simultaneously reproducing hierarchical distinctions, sometimes even through scholarly practice itself (Berry & Bell, 2012). A consciously reflexive approach was therefore essential in examining how expatriates perceived, negotiated, and positioned themselves within these structures.

Mutual Collaboration

Participatory research conceptualises research as a co-constructed process in which participants, understood as reflexive actors, may take on the role of co-researchers. Co-operative inquiry extends reflexivity further by positioning researchers themselves as participants who engage in cycles of mutual reflection and shared experience. Scholars of collaborative research argue that dialogue within groups can help move beyond individual biases and support the representation of multiple voices. Collaborative reflexivity, therefore, enables engagement with diverse perspectives and potentially conflicting positions (Finlay, 2002). From the participants' perspective, interviews also provided opportunities to make sense of their experiences, articulate decisions, and reflect on their responses to the pandemic.

Collaborative reflexivity was similarly embedded in the peer debriefing process, which was shaped by our shared, yet diverse, experiences as expatriates navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. Building on the collaborative reflections described earlier, these ongoing discussions created a space for mutual support, critical reflection, and collective sense-making, while enabling us to examine how our experiences influenced

methodological decisions, interpretations, and emotional responses throughout the research process.

At the analytical stage, reflexivity consistently required collective discussion. In the first study, this took place within a small research team of three, where we engaged in iterative and dialogical reflection. In the second study, external feedback from fellow researchers and co-authors became particularly important, supporting the refinement of interpretations and the identification of deeper layers of meaning.

Refinement and Relief

As the analysis began, an unexpected shift occurred. Beyond the emotional weight that had characterised earlier phases, a sense of emerging excitement took shape. The data revealed previously unseen patterns, including the tension between expatriates' perceived privilege and their simultaneous experiences of exclusion, uncertainty, and disrupted transnational family life. Recognising these patterns brought a growing sense of analytical clarity and helped organise previously fragmented observations into a coherent interpretation. This gradual shift from emotional uncertainty to analytical understanding felt like working through a complex puzzle, bringing not only intellectual satisfaction but also a growing sense of resolution.

The interpretation of the data following analysis brought a sense of relief, facilitated by continuous self-reflection. As fragmented insights gradually came together, the emerging analytical picture provided clarity for the researcher and offered a form of validation for the lived experiences captured in the study.

This phase was closely tied to the parallel progression of the research and the pandemic itself. As time passed and the study advanced, the emotional intensity of the initial shock gradually diminished. At the same time, this period required sustained perseverance – both in maintaining the research process and in navigating the ongoing uncertainties of the pandemic, particularly those affecting expatriate mobility and freedom.

Ultimately, this phase became a learning process for those involved in the research. Each step, from data collection to analysis and interpretation, deepened understanding – not only of expatriate experiences but also of our own positions as researchers and individuals living through an unprecedented global event.

Retrospective reflection – Processing and sense making

Reflexivity takes multiple forms, encompassing personal responses as well as analyses of researcher–participant dynamics. It can challenge established meanings and explore how research is co-constructed (Finlay, 2002). In this study, the deconstruction of meanings and constructed realities was an ongoing process that evolved alongside the research. Retrospective reflection played a central role in this process, enabling continuous reinterpretation of findings. Through this process, meta-meanings emerged, shaped by the data, research process, and analysis.

While ongoing reflexivity during data collection and analysis is widely emphasised, retrospective reflection – extending beyond the writing phase into what might be described as the afterlife of research – is equally important. This form of reflection becomes particularly salient in later stages of the research process, beginning with data analysis and continuing through dissemination. Each conference presentation contributed to this reflective process, creating opportunities to revisit, refine, and reinterpret both findings and experiences. Conference feedback, together with self-reflection, highlighted the importance of relational dialogue among researchers and peers (Drozdowski & Dominey-Howes, 2015).

Presenting the research at conferences fundamentally shifted my perspective. Despite emphasising the cognitive role of self-reflection throughout the process, I had unconsciously become one of those who downplay the importance of this research topic. As an expatriate researcher working through research challenges, I recognised a tendency – shared by many – to view oneself as privileged, not in superiority but in the belief that one should not express struggles and should not complain. This silencing, based on the assumption that others face greater hardships, led both participants and me to withhold our difficulties. While I discussed how expatriates and accompanying spouses often suffer in silence, I had internalised the same mind-set.

One conference, in particular, marked a critical turning point. In 2023, a round-table discussion addressed topics such as children left behind with grandparents while parents work abroad, cross-national marriages marked by status disparities, and the experiences of Asian immigrants in Europe. During this discussion, I became aware of a dual position: simultaneously remaining silent about certain struggles while giving voice to the same group through research. Learning to distinguish and critically reflect on these positions required external perspectives and collective reflection.

This experience highlighted the importance of recognising and articulating the challenges faced by accompanying spouses. Experiences such as illness, relationship breakdown, mental health difficulties, and social isolation often remain unspoken, not because they are insignificant, but because they are perceived as less legitimate than other forms of hardship. In earlier studies, accompanying spouses described gradually losing professional identity following international relocation, struggling to establish meaningful social connections, and feeling that their own emotional needs became secondary to supporting their partner's international assignment (Végh et al., 2023a; Végh et al., 2023b). Others reflected on the emotional consequences of prolonged separation from extended family and the inability to be present for significant family events during the pandemic. These accounts reinforced the importance of making such often-overlooked experiences visible. Without acknowledging these challenges, they remain difficult to address.

Initially, I assumed that research on this group would attract limited interest due to the perception that expatriates face relatively few urgent problems. Contrary to this expectation, conference discussions showed substantial interest and raised questions about the difficulty of accessing this community. Being part of this group enabled participants to share experiences that often remain hidden, while many

researchers without insider access encountered challenges in building trust or gaining research permissions.

Engagement with this group highlighted how expatriates, despite often being perceived as privileged, experienced unexpected vulnerability through their structurally positioned identity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Végh et al., in press). Recognising this challenged my own assumptions about privilege and vulnerability and reinforced the value of structured retrospective reflection and external perspectives in revealing insights that might otherwise have remained overlooked. Professional platforms such as academic conferences thus play a critical role in sustaining reflexive practice beyond the immediate research process.

This retrospective engagement reinforced two key insights: first, the necessity of sustained reflexivity and attention to positionality throughout the research lifecycle; and second, the need for further research into the often-silenced struggles of expatriates and accompanying spouses. The continued reference to this research in conference settings emphasises its relevance and ongoing contribution.

Conclusion

In qualitative research, sustained self-reflection is essential. The Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF) presented in this paper conceptualises reflexivity as a dynamic process extending across the entire research lifecycle. Organised into three overarching phases – pre-reflection, reflection, and retrospective reflection – and seven interconnected stages, the framework illustrates how reflexive engagement evolves from the initial formulation of research questions, through data collection and analysis, to post-publication dialogue and continued methodological learning. Rather than treating reflexivity as a discrete methodological technique, the framework demonstrates how it can systematically inform methodological, analytical, and ethical decision-making throughout qualitative research.

The principal methodological contribution of this paper is the development of the Dynamic Reflexivity Framework (DRF), a stage-based methodological framework derived from a programme of interconnected qualitative research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Grounded in shared researcher–participant experiences and informed by insider researcher positionality, the framework makes explicit reflexive processes that often remain implicit in qualitative research. By systematically organising these processes across the research lifecycle, it offers a practical methodological resource that supports analytical depth, methodological transparency, and critical self-awareness while remaining sufficiently flexible to be adapted to different qualitative research contexts.

The framework emerged from a specific empirical context: interconnected qualitative research on expatriates, accompanying spouses, and transnational families conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic across multiple national settings. The researcher simultaneously occupied the roles of researcher, expatriate, and member

of a transnational family while participants experienced many of the same mobility restrictions, uncertainties, and disruptions associated with the pandemic. Consequently, the transferability of the framework may be influenced by this combination of shared crisis experience, insider positionality, and the transnational research context in which it was developed.

Future research should examine how the proposed framework operates across different qualitative traditions, research designs, researcher positionalities, and social contexts, particularly in studies conducted beyond crisis settings or from outsider perspectives. Comparative research may further explore how reflexive processes differ when researchers do not share participants' lived experiences and whether the proposed stages require adaptation under different methodological and contextual conditions.

Although the framework is not intended as a universal model of reflexivity, it offers a transferable structure for supporting systematic reflexive practice in qualitative research. Its value lies not in prescribing a single pathway for reflexivity but in providing researchers with a practical means of recognising, documenting, and critically engaging with the evolving relationships between researcher, participants, and research context throughout the research lifecycle. By making these often implicit processes explicit, the framework contributes a practical methodological resource for qualitative researchers working in contexts characterised by shared experience, insider positionality, or rapidly changing social conditions.

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