

FEATURE ARTICLE

Listening Between the Lines: A Reflexive Journey into the Work–Life–Study Balance of Vietnamese Nurse Scholars

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Abstract

This article presented a reflexive narrative inquiry into the work–life–study balance of Vietnamese nurse scholars pursuing advanced education in the Philippines. Drawing on qualitative interviews and personal insights, it explored the complex interplay of cultural, institutional, and personal dynamics that had shaped their academic journeys. Integrating feminist, intersectional, and decolonial perspectives, the study highlighted the significance of power, positionality, and structural inequities in shaping these scholars' lived realities. Reflexivity serves as both method and critical lens, enabling deeper engagement with ethical responsibilities, knowledge production, and the politics of representation. This inquiry not only foregrounded the voices of Vietnamese nurse scholars but also contributed to broader conversations on transnational education, academic labor, and feminist praxis in qualitative health research.

Keywords: *reflexivity, narrative inquiry, Vietnamese nurse scholars, work-life-study balance, feminist theory, intersectionality, decoloniality, transnational education, qualitative health research*

Introduction

The decision to pursue graduate education abroad is a life-changing endeavor. Such is marked by transitions, disruptions, and profound learning, both within and beyond the classroom. For Vietnamese nurse scholars undertaking this journey in the Philippines, academic pursuit is intertwined with personal, professional, and sociocultural negotiations. These scholars are not only students but also working professionals, caregivers, migrants, and members of transnational families. Their experiences unfold within, and are shaped by, multiple layers of meaning: cultural expectations, institutional norms, language differences, and globalized systems of health and education (Anderson et al., 2009; Higginbottom, 2011).

This article explored the lived experiences of Vietnamese nurse scholars navigating the complex intersections of work, life, and study through the lens of reflexive narrative inquiry. Their voices are situated within a broader framework that interrogates power, positionality, and representation in transnational

education (Pillow, 2003; hooks, 1994). While literature on international students often highlights academic adjustment and support needs, there remains a paucity of reflexive scholarship that centers the nuanced subjectivities and layered identities of health professionals studying abroad, particularly from Southeast Asia (Nguyen, 2017; Tran & Pham, 2016).

Guided by feminist, intersectional, and decolonial theoretical perspectives (Crenshaw, 1989; Mohanty, 2003; Smith, 1999), this inquiry moved beyond a simple cataloging of challenges. It sought to “listen between the lines”, to engage with the unsaid, the silences, and the affective dimensions of academic mobility. Feminist theory underscored the political significance of personal narratives, while intersectionality highlighted the interplay of multiple systems of power in shaping lived experience. Decolonial theory critiqued the hierarchies embedded in knowledge production and calls for epistemic

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justice, especially when research crosses borders and cultures.

By having woven together participants' narratives with my own reflexive account as a Filipino academic, I aimed to illuminate the ethical, emotional, and epistemic complexities of qualitative health research that was conducted across national and cultural borders. This study asked: What does it mean to live, work, and study simultaneously in a foreign academic environment? How are these experiences mediated by structures of gender, class, nationality, and institutional power? And how might a reflexive methodology help us more ethically and insightfully engage with the voices of those often rendered marginal in dominant knowledge systems?

Methodology

This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry grounded in feminist reflexivity. Five Vietnamese nurse scholars pursuing graduate education in Philippine universities were selected through purposive sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to elicit their stories, while focusing on the intersections of academic work, personal life, and professional responsibilities (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. Emphasis was placed not only on what was said but also on how stories were told, including silences and hesitations. Throughout the process, I engaged in critical reflexivity, documenting my own assumptions, positionality, and emotional responses (Finlay, 2002; England, 1994).

Ethical clearance was secured and participants had also provided informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect anonymity. As a Filipino academic with a history of international collaboration, I was mindful of power asymmetries and adopted a dialogic, participatory stance to co-construct meaning with participants. This stance is aligned with decolonial ethics that challenges extractive research practices and that aims to foster reciprocity and mutual respect.

Ensuring Trustworthiness

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this inquiry required attentiveness not only to methodological rigor but also to ethical and relational accountability. Guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework, I sought credibility through sustained engagement with participants, careful listening, and multiple rounds of reading and interpretation. Throughout the process, I shared preliminary insights with participants to

confirm that my interpretations resonated with their lived experiences, a dialogic exchange that honored their voices as co-constructors of meaning. I also engaged in **peer debriefing** with academic colleagues, whose critical feedback helped surface my assumptions and refine the analytic narrative (Nowell, et al., 2017).

To ensure dependability and confirmability, I maintained a reflexive journal and analytic memos that traced my decision-making, emotional responses, and interpretive shifts. These records formed a transparent audit trail, reminding me that analysis is never detached but always situated within a web of relationships and power dynamics. Finally, transferability was supported by providing thick, contextualized descriptions of participants' worlds that invite readers to discern connections to other transnational educational contexts. Through these interwoven practices, I aimed to craft a study that is both credible and ethically grounded. One that readers can trust, not because it claims objectivity, but because it acknowledges its situated and reflexive nature.

Reflexive Engagements

Positionality and Ethical Reflexivity

As a researcher immersed in the narratives of others, I recognize the imperative of reflexivity—not merely as a methodological add-on but as an ethical and political stance. My position as a Filipino academic interviewing Vietnamese scholars studying in my country is fraught with multiple dynamics of power, solidarity, and cultural difference. I am neither fully insider nor outsider. This in-betweenness, according to England (1994), compels an ongoing interrogation of how my own history, values, and institutional affiliations shape what is seen, heard, and silenced.

Ethical reflexivity demanded more than adherence to procedural norms—it required continuous self-interrogation of how my interpretations might represent or distort participants' meanings (Finlay, 2002; Berger, 2015). It required continuous self-interrogation: How do my interpretations represent or potentially misrepresent the participants' truths? How might I unintentionally reproduce hierarchies within postcolonial knowledge production? These questions pushed me toward a more relational and accountable form of inquiry (Pillow, 2003).

In moments where I sensed discomfort or hesitation in my participants' voices, I asked myself whether I had created a space that allowed for vulnerability and dissent. This reflexive stance also extended into how I framed the research, chose

what to include or omit, and wrote about my participants, not as data points but as complex, agentic individuals navigating difficult terrain.

Feminist and Intersectional Reflexivity

Feminist theory foregrounds the personal as political, making visible how gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of experience are embedded in larger structures. The stories of the Vietnamese nurse scholars were shaped by intersecting identities—as women, professionals, migrants, and students (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 2000; Hesse-Biber, 2014). Their narratives reflected emotional labor, caregiving responsibilities, and struggles for academic legitimacy in a language and educational system that is not their own.

Feminist reflexivity enabled me to see how my own gendered experiences as a working academic mother both resonated with and diverged from theirs. Their resilience and silence about suffering and their tendency to downplay struggle—were patterns that were culturally shaped but also deeply gendered. I had learned to “listen between the lines,” while attuning to what was not explicitly said.

Intersectionality added further layers, allowing analysis of how multiple systems of oppression co-constitute experience. One participant spoke of her anxiety about sending money home while keeping up with academic deadlines—her stress was not merely psychological but structured by economic precarity and transnational family obligations. Another hesitated to speak critically of her host institution, reflecting power-laden dynamics between student and system, foreigner and host. These silences are themselves forms of speech—encoded messages about safety, trust, and the limits of expression (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Ahmed, 2017).

Decolonial Reflexivity

Conducting research across borders necessitates a decolonial stance—one that resists reproducing epistemic hierarchies or exoticizing the Other. As a Filipino scholar trained in Western methodologies, I was acutely aware of the colonial legacies that continue to shape academic practices in the Global South. The privileging of English, Eurocentric frameworks, and standardized notions of “rigor” can marginalize local knowledges and voices (Smith, 1999; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021).

I tried to resist these tendencies by embracing plural knowledges and valuing the cultural specificities embedded in participants' narratives. Silence, for example, was not always absence but a culturally meaningful form of expression. I also critically examined the pressure to “translate” their

experiences into the language of Western academia and sought to maintain narrative integrity while still engaging scholarly discourse.

This reflexive orientation guided how I designed the interviews, how I analyzed the data, and how I wrote this paper—not merely as a conduit of their voices, but as a co-learner situated in a matrix of power, privilege, and partial knowledge (Haraway, 1988; Chilisa, 2020; Bhambra, Gebrial, & Nişancioğlu, 2018).

Work–Life–Study Balance: Emergent Themes

Several themes emerged from the narratives:

Negotiated Time: Participants spoke of constantly adjusting their schedules, balancing hospital shifts, coursework, and family responsibilities. Time was not a linear resource but a negotiated terrain, often involving sacrifice and improvisation. One participant recounted how she studied on the bus during her commute to work, using fragmented moments to stay afloat.

Embodied Strain: Physical and emotional exhaustion was a recurring motif. Sleepless nights, stress-related illness, and feelings of isolation signaled the toll of overextension. Yet these were rarely framed as complaints, more often, they were normalized as part of the academic journey. This normalization spoke to cultural scripts around endurance and the valorization of sacrifice among women in caregiving roles.

Cultural Translation: Navigating classroom norms, academic expectations, and institutional bureaucracy involved continuous cultural translation. Participants had to adapt to a different pedagogical culture while retaining their own professional values. The implicit codes of classroom interaction, writing conventions, and mentor–mentee relationships required careful decoding and strategic negotiation.

Support and Solidarity: Despite challenges, participants found strength in peer networks, spiritual practices, and family back home. Moments of solidarity with classmates and mentors, Filipino and fellow Vietnamese, served as critical support systems. These networks, though informal, often provided the emotional and practical scaffolding that institutional support systems lacked.

Listening Between the Lines

To “listen between the lines” is to engage with the unsaid, to attune to pauses, emotional undertones, and context. It is a

practice of care and responsibility, especially when participants downplay difficulties due to cultural norms of saving face or maintaining harmony (Nguyen, 2017). Silence, hesitation, or laughter sometimes carried more weight than the spoken word, often revealing layers of meaning that demanded careful and empathetic interpretation.

This listening also extended inward, to my own reactions, biases, and interpretive frameworks. At times I felt implicated: Was I expecting participants to express struggle in ways legible to me? Was I projecting my own academic anxieties onto their stories?

By engaging in dialogic reflexivity—journaling, discussing emerging insights with peers, and returning to participants for feedback—I sought to co-construct meaning rather than impose it. This process underscored the relational nature of knowledge production and the need to remain open to being unsettled, challenged, and transformed by the research encounter.

Implications for Qualitative Health Research

This inquiry demonstrated how reflexivity can deepen both ethical engagement and analytical insight in qualitative health research. By situating researcher and participant within intersecting fields of power, reflexive practice fostered more nuanced and accountable scholarship.

For researchers working with transnational students or health workers, it is vital to consider how cultural scripts, institutional norms, and systemic inequities shape what is shared, how it is received, and what remains unspoken. Reflexivity must be embedded not only in data collection and analysis but throughout the research process, from framing questions to disseminating findings.

Furthermore, embracing decolonial and feminist perspectives invites a rethinking of “rigor.” Rather than seeking detached objectivity, we might aim for situated knowledge, relational accountability, and epistemic humility (Haraway, 1988). These orientations are not only more ethically just, but also more attuned to the complexities of global health and education contexts.

Conclusion

This reflexive journey into the lives of Vietnamese nurse scholars highlighted the layered complexities of navigating graduate education in a transnational context. Their narratives, rich with resilience and negotiation, offered insights into the structural and affective dimensions of academic mobility.

By integrating ethical, feminist, intersectional, and decolonial reflexivity, I have attempted to honor their stories and challenge dominant modes of knowledge production. This inquiry called for a more relational, reflexive, and justice-oriented approach to qualitative research, one that listens not only to what is said but to the silences that speak volumes. In doing so, we not only documented lived realities but also contributed to transforming the very structures that shape them.

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“Ethical nursing
begins with
attentiveness—an
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