

Liquid cultures: continuity and change in New Town fringe village. Reflection

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Summary of the project

The paper focused on examining how traditional society is reinterpreted in the face of change and loss of a former way of living, practice, and social structure with a particular emphasis on understanding the shifting notion of a *village*, and its function in rural society. It asks how countryside conservation strategies, in the fluid context of the north-west can be reinterpreted from cataloguing the past to progress, and future-driven practice, building on the theory of *potential in loss* as an active method of protecting rural communities, while redefining current economic and social relationship between ruralities and urbanities. In doing so, it proposes a framework to facilitate self-managed design processes to actively protect community values in northwest NT as an alternative to the current value system and revitalisation strategies applied in the east NT context, and as this paper explains limited to it.

PART I

Initial approach

My chosen method of investigation which preceded the research part focused on the investigation into the village condition in the New Territories, Hong Kong began initially by looking at the larger scale of events discussed recently in the context of the development of the area, through proposed *Northern Metropolis* project, and the response among what can be understood as a *rural* community. My primary focus was to understand through tracing past events how villages on the trajectory of urban expansion become integrated into the urban fabric, or in the case of their dissolution what protocols are set in place to understand the cultural losses in such events. In doing so, I hoped to establish a framework which would allow for the conservation of the 'traditional' values of such communities. I investigated three main areas of interest, namely the north-west Yuen Long area, west (Kwu Tung, Fanling, Sheung Shui) and east (Shau Tau Kok) of the North district, and identified them as three different stages in rural-town physical and conceptual integration, and hence, each requiring a different type of intervention from conservation to revitalisation techniques. The northwest Yuen Long would present the highest degree of integration between the two realms and social groups hence, giving the most valuable insight into how such processes occur, with conclusions forming a framework to be applied in the other two areas to undergo similar transitions in the future.

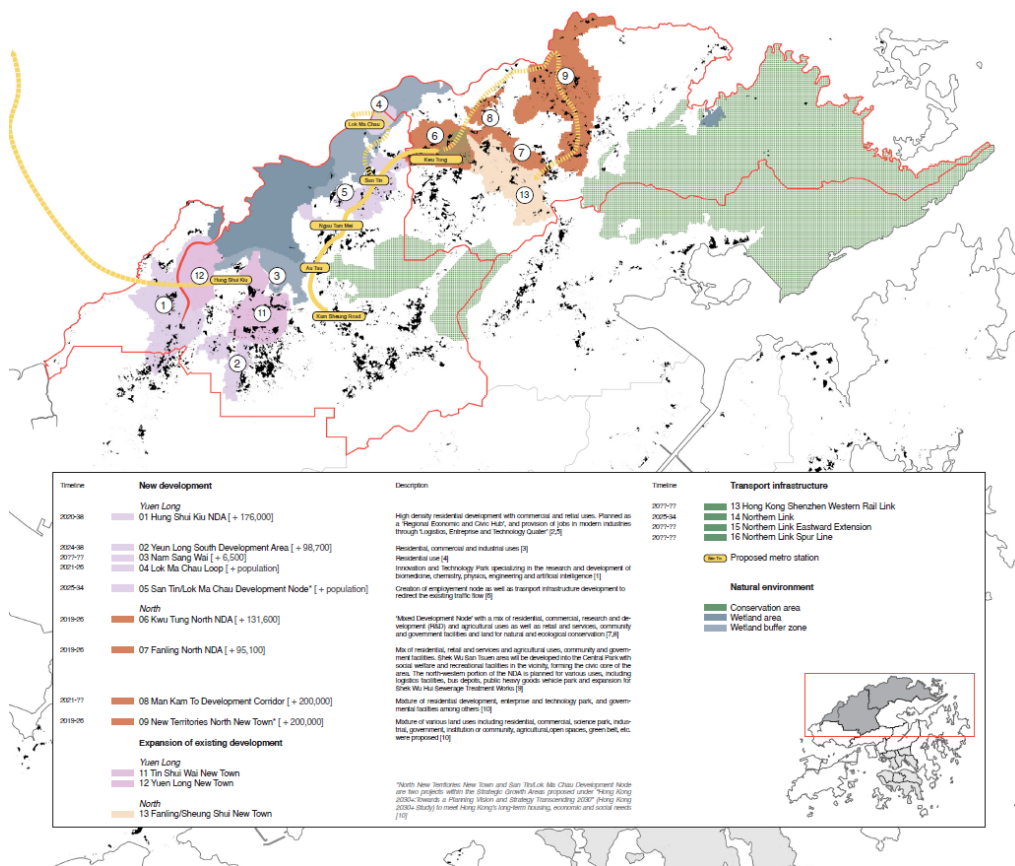


Fig. 1 Initial investigation into the rural-urban interface (Source: author).

I choose three villages within the Yuen Long district – Shan Pui, Wang Chau and Shui Tau and Mei twin villages, each representing a different level of adaptation in response to changing contexts. The challenge appeared in identifying the 'values' and elements of tradition and measuring its change over time due to the broad scope of such a task and obvious limitations in measuring the change as an intangible unit without particular factors. My judgment of the village

cultural landscape was based mainly on its superficial appearances as well as on my at the time understanding of traditional practices adhering to the mainstream classification of heritage. Additionally, adaptation measures reflected in each village's current lifestyle, even if possible to measure, would differ per individual settlement and hence, even the choice of comparative method between three villages would not be representative of the whole rural community. To narrow down the subject, and understand the changing village life about urban expansion I have primarily focused on the practices connected to land cultivation, tracing its shifts and adaptations throughout time, with a main interest in the current land practice of fishpond cultivation through which I intended to portray the situation. To do so I limited myself to a single village of Shan Pui. Such thinking was augmented through the initial interpretation of a historically fluid, and dynamically changing/evolving landscape, having its reflection in the practice performed by the local people. Such thinking led to falsely concluding rural society was still attached to its land and hence defined by it.

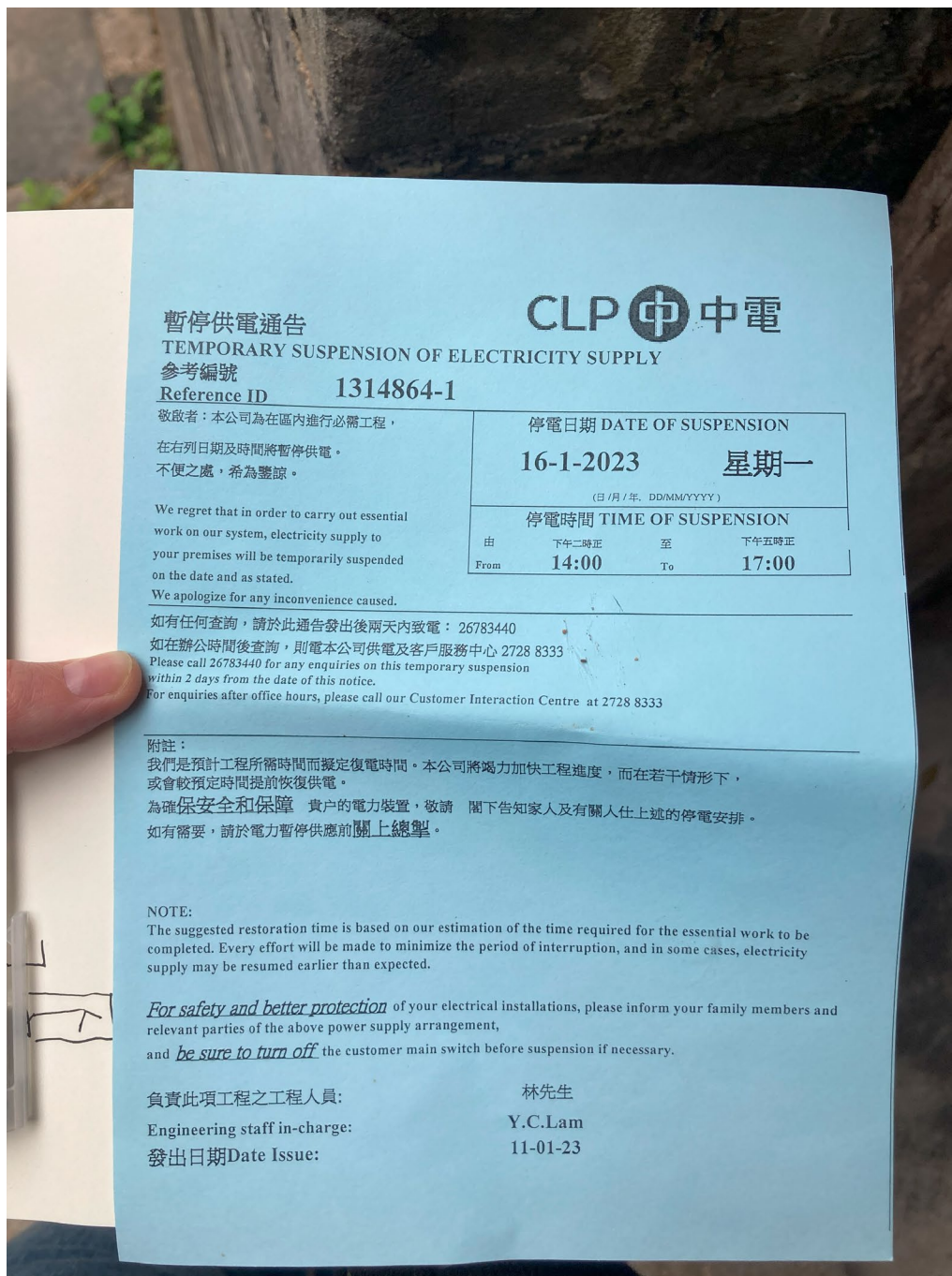


Fig. 2 Notice on electricity supply on one of the abandoned plots in Shan Pui village (Source: author).

Lessons on site

In February and the beginning of March, I conducted a site visit, which brought questioning of my original line of thought and approach. The first observations concluded that, despite my original interest in freshwater fish cultivation the practice was not seen as much as part of local culture or attachment to the land but rather economic necessity. After interviews with the rural community, I was able to conclude that the practice bear little interest to the chosen community under investigation and hence, wasn't a suitable point of reference. In parallel, a false assumption, artificially dividing what I understood as a 'culture' or 'tradition' into tangible and intangible elements, aiming to classify or capture the community lifestyle into a catalogue of practices and beliefs initially biased my interview efforts through, bringing false conclusions and confusion on the relevance of the research and the project itself. While talking with the community I felt initially disappointed with the answers which negated my initial assumption based on a strong literature review on the disapproval of villagers towards the development and expansion of towns, portraying this group in my mind, as turned out in minds of many of urbanities as old-fashioned and set against progress. I expected to hear strong objections against sprouting development and looked for clearly outlined 'elements' which would be defined clearly what the local community is – as I learned, the rural society was much more progressive than I could have imagined and found ways of adapting to changing context and benefiting from it, fully embracing the by-products of new conditions.

Through time I have also conducted interviews with members of research bodies in Hong Kong, who with their work touch on questions of cultural preservation and sustainable rural development. Through these conversations as well as analysis and visit of existing projects which concentrate in the eastern part of north New Territories, as explained in the paper itself, I questioned the low interest of such research efforts in the west. Such questioning and what at the time felt like unsuccessful interviews with the local community eventually led me to two questions. Such observations led to questioning the notion of tradition and the very function that the village and in the modern context, the land on which it stands plays in rural society, setting the stage for an adapted approach in the project.



Fig. 3 Interview with a local activist group – Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (Source: author).

The challenge in overcoming the drawbacks of the initial approach lies in defining the tradition and culture through the lens not only Western value system towards the classification and protection of heritage but through implying the importance of the built structures and customs as inseparable elements of local life, maybe even romanticizing its society and its very concept as

a 'traditional' unit which has its roots in colonial past and peculiar rural-town identity crisis in Hong Kong. As I understand it now, such conclusions would define 'tradition' as inseparable from the past of the community. However, despite the very limited time spent on the site, I soon understood that the notion of the village functions more as an economic and family unit and despite still relying on some of, what we could call here 'traditional' practices, it has moved on, quicker than us researchers and is already well in the future. Such a unit as I also explain in the paper extends its existence and activities well beyond the physical boundaries of the village itself, with members of the village, and clan folks living in the urban areas and more often abroad, participating in the village life, mostly on economical level, but also having a strong influence on structuring, and re-structuring of the village through land ownership. In that sense, the village boundary similarly to the context in which it is set is fluid, and its boundary changes with members of the village spreading out. As this happens, the function and role which the village as such a unit plays for its 'members' evolves too. Such observations lead to two somewhat more accurate answer to what tradition is in this context:

- Tradition here is equivalent to progress, despite its usual perception as something stuck in the past. Such thinking can be explained when looking at all the traditions and customs we currently classify as worth preserving and as 'traditional' practices, as past adaptations to its context.
- Despite similarities between different communities and village clusters, the tradition as defined in the time and space differs from village to village, and not in the sense of differences in the practice, or festive decorations, but by what meanings are in said time and space attached to village unit by people living in it. As I learned from interviews and observations Shan Pui has differed from the villages just 5 minutes' walk away.

Lessons from the taken approach

My first-hand experience conducting interviews and in many cases, only an attempt to interviews forced me to shed my previous assumption of the so-called 'tradition' and 'traditional' rural society. My research agenda shifted upon arriving at the site and realising the importance of land ownership, and economic drivers in the current shape of the village. Similar observations become clear in Allen Chun's reflection of current (current to his time) methods of analysis, he writes: "To understand the evolution of rural Hong Kong society to the present day, one must effectively separate the epistemological assumptions and methodological practices that guided the 'indirect rule' from the nature of those social institutions it was meant to regulate" (2000, p.36). In this matter, upon my observations of changing research agenda based on the observations on site, I had a lot of difficulties come from the previously established theoretical backbone, which assumes certain interpretations of what 'traditional society' is and attempted to categorize its values and 'principle elements', hence repeating the mistakes, Chun notes many anthropologists and research already did. The time spent on site would allow me to develop a better understanding of the fluidity of such terms as 'tradition', and challenges posed by its mainstream definition in classic heritage studies, and common perceptions of observers and urbanities in Hong Kong. This understanding would however come not directly on site, but after considerable time spent on reflecting and piecing together gather experiences. At this point, I wish there was a chance for a second visit once the idea has settled.

Throughout my studies and professional practice, in particular, I faced projects in which design has been detached from its context, and conducted based solely on literature review and clients' expectations. As I learned through different conversations with people I had the pleasure to interview during the research phase, each author, often in connection to the institution he or she, or represents, has their agenda in conducting the research and coming toward with projects – this concerns both the location of the projects, their format and program but also a level of participation from the local actors. To contribute to the current condition and state of

knowledge, it becomes invaluable to create one's own opinion and understanding. Despite, as I mentioned before, one own's understanding being always tainted with one's own biases and experiences, it allows for identifying differences in thinking between different sources, and hence the ability to question the relevance of one's thought-process and studies sources.

The studied context of Hong Kong's north-west New Territories proved to be complex in both its history which was shaped by a multiplicity of inter-connected events and actors, also through its current condition of a territory torn between various social, economic, political and more recently ecological concerns and interests. At a certain level of investigation, I understood that the complexity (also explored on different scales) has overshadowed my primary interest. I found it challenging to filter the information, however being careful not to oversee many details which eventually informed the project. What turned out to be a helpful method was to evaluate my thinking and its coherence as I progressed. Given the time of the study presented a limited ability to gain the trust of the local community, which proves to be crucial in the context of recent political events – many residents do not want to share personal reflections and information not knowing who the question is coming from and to what purposes it will be used.

Moreover, I understood that to fully understand the complexity of the change and fluidity of the cultures, this kind of study would need to be conducted over a long period, and with an interpreter on-site, from the inside out. I do however hope that this study first brings light to the potential of loss and change and cultural value in forgotten northwest villages. As well as it brings new insights to the debate on the conservation of fast-evolving cultures in the south-east Asian context.

PART II

Relation between graduation project topic, your master track

I see the topic of territorial transition in the context of the rural-urban dynamic as especially relevant to the question of how our future cities will look like – hence, the theme of the studio. Urban activities are dependent on the vastly neglected or ignored rural realm (Koolhaas, 2017), which sustains the production of food supplied to urban centres along with accommodating back-of-house operations. Despite the extensive agricultural activities being harmful to the natural ecosystems, the land which has not yet been urbanized sustains natural patterns.

Research influence on design and design influence on research

The research and design processes have been intricately interconnected, with each informing and enriching the other throughout the project. The research has played a pivotal role in shaping the building concept and initiating the design of the proposed management scheme. Simultaneously, the design phase has guided the research towards exploring more specific subjects and areas of investigation.

To gain a deeper understanding of how the proposed program might evolve in response to local needs, the project has delved into the timeline of program development. This examination of the program's progression is not only crucial in terms of programmatic relevance but also influences the structural aspects of the proposed building, considering factors such as easy assembly and disassembly. By analysing the demands and responses at different scales, including the village, Yuen Long (regional), and Hong Kong (macro), the research has revealed the village's capacity to adapt to changes and the time required for such adaptations to occur. This understanding sheds light on the relationship between programmatic changes, their magnitude, and the time frame in which they manifest, ranging from incremental interior changes to substantial transitions like structural alterations or new constructions.

The proposal of temporary structures emerged as a direct reflection of the research findings, which highlighted the potential of underutilized plots in the village. Aligning the site conditions and design proposal necessitated further research into the legal and administrative dimensions of such interventions. Additionally, investigations into the materiality of the proposed structure, coupled with design recommendations from mentors, sparked an interest in incorporating resource management principles into the proposed scheme. The exploration of potential village alliances drew upon context-specific research, including the mapping of resource availability and processing capacities in neighbouring villages.

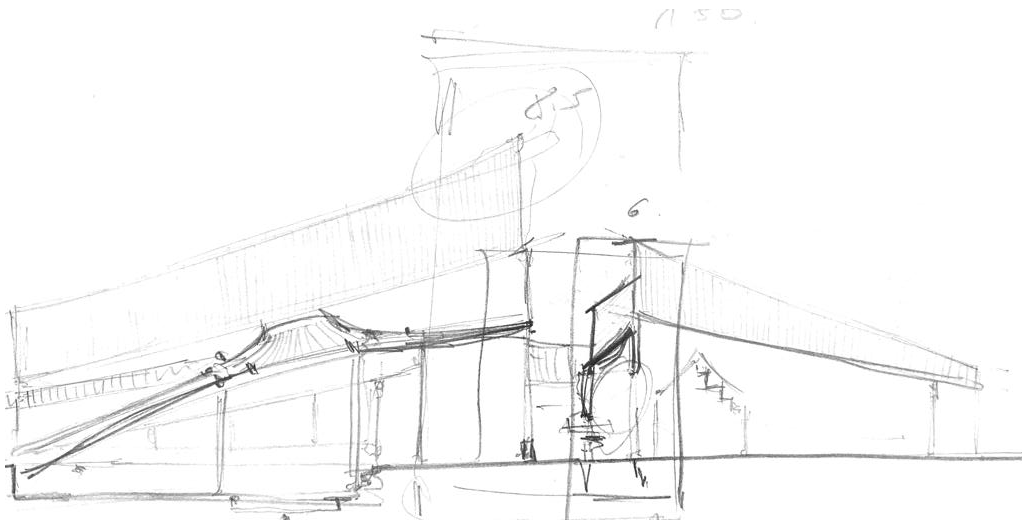


Fig. 5 Sketch section of the proposed scheme (Source: author).

The academic and societal value of the Graduation project

Academic

- The study aims to explore the changing functions, roles, and meanings attached to villages as an aggregation of households and symbolic, organizing entities in rural society. The study also aims to provide a different perspective on the concepts of tradition and progress and suggests possible new approaches to cultural persistence and rural revitalization in a fluid cultural context. The findings of this study could be relevant for policymakers and stakeholders involved in urban planning and rural development, particularly in Hong Kong and potentially in other regions facing similar challenges.
- Re-interpretation of 'tradition' as equivalent to progress, can be seen as an important step in evaluating heritage conservation towards sustainable development of rural communities in Hong Kong.

Societal & Ethical

- Understanding of local agencies over rural revitalisation proposals allows for the study to become relevant in the context of understanding participatory practices in rural revitalisation as their top-down approach on the very fundamental policy and funding level, with a lack of ability from the communities themselves to apply for the financial support, showing the low trust between the government and the rural residents. Such a soft top-down approach brings a level of control over the course that the community will eventually take affected by the project. Despite the proposal being aware of such influence and incorporating measures to allow for as much as possible of community ownership and space for idea initiation, it cannot predict precisely what effect it would have on the structure of the community or inter, and intra-community unity relationships. Hence the outside intervention naturally poses ethical concerns, which however doesn't imply that no action should be taken.

Transferability of project results

The transferability of project results can be answered on all scales to which it responds directly and indirectly:

Local (New Territories, Hong Kong)

The project realises the need for scalability and applicability of the proposed scheme to other contexts which has become one of the drivers of the proposal in the first place. It proposes a program which empowers residents to turn underused plots into productive 'pocket' projects. Proposing the use of locally sourced building materials to be implemented in the construction of temporary structures to fill in or reinvent neglected plots, allows for the establishment of new alliances between villages in the area. In this way, it hopes to allow for local (and unique) industries which represent local villages to be supported through financial and resource exchange as well as building solidarity between rural communities. The such exchange has been inspired by the traditional alliances between different villages, which would exchange their resources (at the time mainly based on agricultural products, but also building materials). Such alliances become particularly important in the light of progressing development and increasing interest of the government in the land from one side, and increasing interest in the research bodies and NPOs with 'rural' areas as places of future experimentation, which might come at the cost, or if planned well in favour to the residents. The positive by-products of such collaborations potentially are the increase in regional use of local materials, and the increase of interest in adaptive reuse of existing structures allowing for slowing down of land extraction in ecologically sensitive areas.

Global (with a focus on East Asia)

The research, taking northwest Hong Kong as a case study, concentrates on cultural conservation in a fluid, ever-evolving context, responding to global questions on heritage preservation and development in rural areas. However, the specific context and character of Hong Kong's countryside have shifted in the last 50 years to what in many Western countries could be described as a suburban context (here not to say that this is also not a future, however distant, in the western context), this study remains in this time most relevant in other high-density cities, which expand its urban boundaries into rural context on unprecedented speed. It becomes especially relevant in understanding countries which in decades of their fast development given birth to New Towns, such as Mainland China, Singapore, Korea, Malaysia and the Philippines, and through lack of established heritage protection policies have seen the disassembly of rural communities together with the built and immaterial heritage they hold. This research outcome and resulting proposal suggest a new way of approaching cultural loss, the local agency in cultural conservation (see proposed definition of 'traditional') and looking at rural communities as a progressive part of society.

In general, I do believe that both my research and especially the design results can be transferred into a different context. In terms of the latter, this should not, however, be done in a copy-paste manner, but should always consider the unique qualities of the site and its context – the project proposal takes into account this 'individualism', creating a framework to work with, which allows for different outcomes driven by residents interpretations of their context, meanings and functions they attach to it.

Reflection questions about my proposed scheme

Examining my approach, I question its limitation (however, described in the research paper) by asking two questions on political and scale relevance.

Firstly, the political tension between the *Heung Yee Kuk* (the representative body for indigenous villagers in Hong Kong) and the government has been growing since proposals for amendment of current land ownership rights of the villagers, and the proposal made in 2021 to reduce their privileges to restrict illegal trades of the land in rural areas. This event was followed by the implementation of the proposal and under the pressure of *Heung Yee Kuk* it was withdrawn only a year later. Such conflicts, however, confined mainly to the political battle of forces, do reflect in the broader perception of rural society by urban residents, especially following the 2019 Yuen Long incident (also known as the *721 incident*), growing an ideological boundary between two groups, despite their increasing physical proximity. Hence to what extent consolidation of currently, separated villages can pose a risk of the emergence of stronger opposition, and in response, how this be avoided, and instead create the opportunity for bringing the actors closers and creating a field for more peaceful co-existence and collaboration.

Secondly, the studied subject balances between multiple dimensions in which rural society operates, as well as it engages or affects various stakeholders, creating a complex system of co-dependencies. It is worth reflecting upon the scope limitations of similar studies and asking how many realities the study allows to reflect upon.