
Scaling the Ivory Tower: Engaging Emergent Identity as Researcher

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ABSTRACT

This article explores a graduate student's process of embracing emergent identity as a researcher in the field of counselling, and how this is facilitated through mentoring relationships. I apply concepts from Winnicott's object relations theory (1958, 1965, 1971) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) sociocultural model of *situated learning* to my own experiences of doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia. Through the use of personal narrative informed by these two theoretical perspectives, the article explores and reflects upon how the relationship between research supervisor and graduate student can contribute significantly to the student's personal and professional development and emerging identity as a researcher and scholar.

RÉSUMÉ

Ce texte explore le processus d'un étudiant doctoral en voie d'identifier une personnalité en tant que chercheur dans le domaine du conseling, et la manière dont ce processus est facilité par une relation de mentorat. J'ai utilisé des concepts provenant de la théorie des relations d'objet de Winnicott (1958, 1965, 1971) et du model socioculturel d'apprentissage en situation de Lave et Wenger (1991) à mes propres expériences d'études à l'université de La Colombie Britannique. À travers l'utilisation de récits personnels, le texte intègre ces structures théoriques afin d'explorer la manière dont la relation, entre le superviseur de recherche et l'étudiant doctoral, peut contribuer de manière significative au développement personnel et professionnel de l'étudiant et à l'émergence de son identité en tant que chercheur et universitaire.

In this article, I draw upon Winnicott's object relations theory (1958, 1965, 1971) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) model of *Situated Learning* in order to reflect upon and convey my own process of embracing an emergent identity as a researcher. Specifically, I propose that research practice is a version of the kind of human experience that Winnicott (1951/1958, p. 232) termed "transitional phenomena" and that the research text functions as a "transitional object," not in the sense of a security blanket or toy, but rather by virtue of being a creation, simultaneously and contradictorily, of the researcher's subjectivity and the external (some might say "objective") world.¹ In this sense, the research text serves as a shuttle or bridge between the inner life of the researcher and the external, observed situation, phenomenon, practice, or person that is the subject of inquiry. Thus, the research text is dually invested with meaning, born simultaneously out of the researcher and the world. These are the very attributes of Winnicott's transitional objects and transitional phenomena. Moreover, research practice is dually transitional for doctoral students, inasmuch as the final dissertation defense is typically

the frontier or portal between studies and professional practice as a counselling psychologist. This article explores my own transitional process as a graduate student researcher, with a focus on how my growing ability to engage in scholarly research has been facilitated in important ways by a supportive and inspiring relationship with my research supervisor and others in the academic research community.

When I entered my current doctoral program in counselling psychology at the University of British Columbia, the idea of doing research at the Ph.D. level was alien to my self-concept. How was I to embrace an identity position of doctoral student/researcher when I could not envision myself engaging in this kind of practice, which I construed as a “not-me” phenomenon? I was certain that my cohort would be full of “real” psychology students, ready to quantify and categorize human experience, and this was “*not-me*.” The image I had of a doctoral-calibre researcher was similarly incongruent with my self-image. This disjuncture between self-concept and new role as Ph.D. student created significant anxiety for me. Over time, through a process of mentorship and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), a form of apprenticeship, in which the learner’s role and responsibilities within a *community of practice* evolves gradually from peripheral to full participation, much of that anxiety has fallen by the wayside, dissipated, or, perhaps more accurately, metabolized into purposeful and rewarding effort. Concurrently, I have increasingly embraced the once alien identity position of nascent scholar and researcher. This transition has involved learning to engage more playfully, as it were, with ideas, words, and other people within the realm of doctoral studies and academia, which once appeared so daunting.

My above use of the term “not-me” purposefully evokes and echoes D. W. Winnicott’s seminal article, “Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena” (1951/1958), in which the British object relations theorist described human creativity as a developmental progression that extends from a child’s use of “the original *Not-Me possession* [which he called] the transitional object” (p. 232) into multiple realms of experience throughout the life cycle. According to Winnicott, artistic expression and appreciation, religious feelings, philosophy, and creative scientific work all evolve from transitional phenomena, which he defined in terms of an “intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute” (p. 230). These and other concepts central to Winnicott’s object relations theory lend themselves well, metaphorically, to conceptualizing and describing the process in which I find myself as a graduate student researcher. Below, I provide a brief overview of Winnicott’s theory, before elaborating on research as a transitional phenomenon.

WINNICOTT’S OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

In Winnicott’s developmental theory, psychological health is perceived to be an inherent human potential, the foundation of which is established in the earliest years of life. Personality organization develops over time, in relationship to environmental responses (typically from the mother or primary caregiver). Win-

Winnicott maintained one cannot consider the infant independent of the mother-child relationship and equated “good enough” (1965, p. 54) maternal care with a “holding environment” (1965, p. 47) in which emotional health and maturity on the part of the child are facilitated by experiences of being met and matched by (or contained within) the shifting yet constant presence of an attuned, ever-adapting good enough mother. According to this theory, the child’s evolving experience is mirrored in the mother’s face, in which the child can see her or his being reflected. The mother’s ability to provide “a live adaptation to the infant’s needs” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 54) is the cornerstone on which later interactions are built. When successfully attuned and adaptive environmental responses repeatedly meet the spontaneity and evolving needs of the infant, this provides necessary containment and allows the child to organize developing experiences of self and the world. These attuned responses facilitate the infant’s progression from a state of total dependence and (theoretical) merger with the environment to one of individuality and, ultimately, mature independence, which involves a capacity for interrelatedness and interdependence.

This theory holds that successfully adaptive environmental responses lead to an authenticity of experience of self that Winnicott names the true or central self. The “true self” is a spontaneous self, whose spontaneity has “been joined up with the world’s events” (Winnicott, 1965, p. 146) within the context of an attuned, adaptive primary relationship. I consider this theory to be applicable to the research supervisor-supervisee relationship in counselling psychology, but in a more metaphoric rather than literal sense.

Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena

Winnicott (1951/1958) defined the transitional object as an infant’s first “Not-Me” object, located “at the border” between inner and external shared reality, “between primary creative activity and projection of what has already been introjected” (p. 230), between inner and outer worlds, as it were. He proposed a developmental trajectory stemming from the infant’s initial use of such an object, dually vested as both an element of the external world and an illusory creation of imaginative inner life. Throughout life, this trajectory extends to other transitional phenomena such as imaginative play, meaningful expression of self through work, and all creative aspects of adult life. At their origin, these transitional phenomena involved “the use of objects that are not part of the infant’s body yet are not fully recognized as belonging to external reality” (1951/1958, p. 230). According to this theory, these intermediate areas of experiencing offer “a resting place for the individual engaged in the perpetual task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related” (1951/1958, p. 230). In health, transitional phenomena eventually “become diffused ... spread out over the whole intermediate territory between ‘inner psychic reality’ and the ‘external world as perceived by two persons in common,’ that is to say over the whole cultural field” (1951/1958, p. 233). I maintain that research practice, particularly qualitative research, is part of this dispersion of transitional phenomena in healthy adult life.

Reflexivity as Transitional Phenomenon

Specifically, the process of researcher reflexivity, which lies at the heart of qualitative inquiry, involves the kind of “intense experiencing” common to transitional phenomena (Winnicott 1951/1958, p. 242). Reflexivity draws upon the inner experience of the researcher in relation to the external world as a means of ethically generating knowledge (Guillermin & Gillam, 2004). In this epistemological tradition, the researcher repeatedly looks inward in order to know the other. Thus, a Winnicottian transitional space delineates the very site of qualitative knowing. Josselson (2007) elaborated on this idea, suggesting that a qualitative approach to inquiry

involves the creation of, in Winnicott’s phrase, “a potential space,” in which the boundaries between self as knower and other as known are relaxed. In this space aspects of the known are allowed to permeate the knower ... Research then becomes a process of overcoming distance rather than creating it, moving what was Other, through our understanding ... into relation with us. The very indeterminacy between subject and object thus becomes a resource rather than a threat. (R. Josselson, personal communication, September 24, 2007)

Playing and Reality

An important part of my evolution as a researcher has involved a growing ability to access the kind of liminal, intermediate area of experiencing Winnicott described as serving as a resting place. For me, this is a place of ease rather than anxiety or dread, of flow rather than blockage. Over the course of my doctoral studies, I have grown to take increasing pleasure in my ability to represent both inner and external life through the generation of scholarly texts, including research texts. I have learned how to engage in scholarly analysis and writing in a joyful, authentically self-involved way, as though my work issued forth from a Winnicottian “true self” whose spontaneity is joined up with the world, rather than sacrificed in an effort to conform to externally imposed expectations. Consequently, the act of writing now feels more creative, genuine, and meaningful.

There is a transporting quality to this type of intellectual play—I can get lost at it, and the hours fly by, not unlike days long gone by when I could play with my little stuffed “JoJo the monkey” among the houseplants and furniture alone in an otherwise empty room, mysteriously filled with my inner imaginative life. I don’t know how I did it then, and I don’t know precisely how I do it now, but I know it is different than the anxiety-ridden approach I took the first semester of doctoral studies. Instead, I now engage in an iterative process of reading, self-absorbed writing/thinking, rest, play, reworking, and rewriting. Although the process still involves hard work, my efforts as a graduate student researcher and nascent scholar often feel generative now, rather than depleting. This kind of labour, in service of inspiration that comes from both within and beyond the individual, is well described by Lewis Hyde (1983) in his extraordinary treatise on the generative life of objects, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, in which he explores the tensions that exist between the creative spirit and the physical, material world.

When I invest this kind of trusting labour, whether analyzing data or writing up a research-related text, the product typically emerges to my satisfaction. Perhaps the most important aspects of this involve faith in the unfolding process, internal locus of evaluation, and the taking of breaks, rather than driving myself to the point of exhaustion, born out of anxiety and the belief that unless I strive relentlessly, there will be no tangible, material consequence for my efforts. I believe the mentoring relationship I have developed with my research supervisor has played a powerful role in my ability to trust in myself enough to work in this way.

The Capacity to Be Alone: A Developmental Paradox

Surprisingly, my relationship with my research supervisor parallels aspects of the mother-infant dyad as described by Winnicott (1965), who theorized that in order to learn to be alone, free, and able to play spontaneously, an individual must first have the paradoxical experience of being alone in the presence of a good enough other. Winnicott believed that an individual's capacity to enjoy solitude is an important element of emotional health and maturity, which, paradoxically, is first developed in relationship to the presence of a reliable other. He suggested one first learns to be at ease with oneself (and sufficient unto oneself) in the presence of a well-boundaried, dependable, and sensitively responsive person. This kind of other does not engage in surveillance or monitoring, but rather mirrors and reflects the experiences of the developing individual without intruding on their solitude. I hypothesize that this kind of relationship is facilitative of the creative or generative aspects of graduate student research.

Supervisory Relationship as Holding Environment

According to Winnicott (1958, 1965, 1971), optimal development requires an environment buffered from external impingements and a relationship with a good enough other who is able to offer an attuned, adaptive presence that is facilitative of health and growth. In order to be free to engage with our data and generate findings, we need the secure base and *holding environment* provided by a good enough supervisor who lets us be alone in her or his presence. Funding bodies also contribute to the research holding environment: student recipients of Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) or other scholarships gain an increased buffer from impingements by the world that exists beyond the dyad of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Freedom from these external impingements affords greater latitude to engage in the kind of relationship to self that allows for the iterative process of transitional phenomena, the shuttling back and forth between the observed/experienced world (of shared reality) and the inner reality of reflection and reflexivity, required to generate an effective research proposal or other research texts.

Curiously, I was accepted into my doctoral program without being assigned a research supervisor, unlike other members of my cohort. In many ways, I felt adrift and rootless during the first year of my Ph.D. studies, as though I did not have a

home or an anchor, a secure base (to use a term from Bowlby's attachment theory [1988]) in the world of academia. It was not until I established a relationship with the professor who became my research supervisor that I began to feel grounded and to gain a sense of belonging in my department. The shift I experienced was profound and in keeping with a metaphorical application of object relations theory to the consolidation of a graduate student researcher identity position.

Before I had established the supervisory relationship that subsequently evolved into one of mentorship, I observed the value to my peers of their respective relationships with research supervisors. One colleague told me that during conversations about his research, his supervisor looked at him as though he were the person who mattered most in the world. If he had expected this to be true beyond the duration of his supervisory conversations, that would have been problematic; however, I believe this type of caring attention is generative and powerful. I know that I experienced an increased sense of inner peace, and trust in myself as well as in my potential, once I had established a working relationship with an academic mentor.

There is an affective component to this kind of mentoring relationship, which I think has been particularly generative. I was surprised by the degree and depth of affection I felt toward my research supervisor. Certainly our relationship was inspiring; however, I think that part of his role has also been to create the kind of loving buffer from environmental impingement that Winnicott (1958, 1965, 1971) described. Within this metaphorical *holding environment*, I have come into myself. Like Winnicott's infant or Bowlby's (1988) toddler, I repeatedly returned to the secure base of my research supervisor's supportive, well-attuned, adaptive regard, and in his eyes, I saw myself mirrored as a developing researcher and an evolving, scholarly being. I am grateful for my experiences of having been seen and heard by this experienced scholar who is helping me navigate the academic process without constraining my growing abilities. Of course, our relationship has encompassed temporary frustrations, and from my perspective, my supervisor has let me down at times. However, in Winnicott's terms, loss of illusion is part of the growth process into maturity, the grounds for which are laid through opportunities for repair of momentary relational ruptures. Part of the good enough other's role is to help the developing person survive the vicissitudes of reality, in which the environment cannot meet his or her every need.

Graduate Student Research: A Developmental Transitional Phenomenon

Because I have shifted within the mentoring relationship with my supervisor, it is hard to recapture how I previously experienced it; however, in its early stages this developing professional relationship felt similar, at times, to an infatuation. Our relationship has been more than a meeting of two minds, and I believe that what I have gained from it transcends enhanced self-efficacy due to effective modelling and social learning. There is definitely an intimate quality to the relationship, and while it is mutual, it is also asymmetrical. At the beginning of our supervisory relationship, I typically basked in my supervisor's attention. I enjoyed his

interest in and curiosity about both my research interest and my life experiences. As described above, I believe this attention was facilitative, in the Winnicottian sense, of my development in the world of graduate student research. Over time, as our collaboration has developed and evolved, our supervisory conversations have become less one-sided, as though I experienced more capacity for mutuality in the relationship.

The question that I mean to raise here, ultimately, is whether there is an affective component to research supervision that is facilitative of development? Can we, as students, love our supervisors and mentors, and be loved by them, and might this facilitate our professional development? It feels somehow shameful or, at the very least, unprofessional and, at the same time, valid to broach the subject in this forum. My research supervisor described this kind of non-erotic love in terms of *agape*, a selfless, non-conditional loving presence, as contrasted with *eros* (M. Westwood, personal correspondence, October 17, 2006).

Disillusionment

At one point, a fellow cohort member who recognized the depth of my relationship with my supervisor warned me, "Richard, you know it isn't going to last. Someone new is going to come along and replace you as his favourite." I replied that I both expected and wanted this to happen. After all, that is the nature of his job. Moreover, I would be worried if this did not take place. I recognized then, as I do now, that the intimacy of our mentoring relationship is *transitional*. The unique and privileged qualities of my relationship with my mentor serve a developmental purpose, but these would become maladaptive if the relationship did not evolve and shift. I told my well-intentioned colleague that I appreciated her concern; however, I also intended to move on to other, more autonomous professional interactions and relationships that will become more capturing of my interests (even if these might never feel as intimate, as charged, as potent, as the research mentoring relationship that came at a pivotal, transitional period in my professional life). If I did not, that would be reason for concern, in my opinion. Much as I enjoy being the mentored one, I do not want to stay in this position indefinitely, because the protective comfort would become incapacitating and infantilizing.

Winnicott (1958) wrote that one of the tasks of educators and parents is disillusionment, a metaphorical weaning of those under their tutelage. In keeping with this idea, I suggest that a primary purpose of the good enough supervisory relationship is to facilitate the trainee's evolution into an autonomous being-in-the-world of scholarly research, who stands in healthy relationship to self and others. This requires adaptation on the part of the supervisor, as the supervisee grows in ability and self-concept as scholar. Fortunately, I chose a supervisor who is not threatened by but rather delights in my success, and who takes pride in my ability to function autonomously. Someday I hope and intend to similarly mentor others, which both my research supervisor and I consider to be a way of honouring the mentorship that I have received.

SITUATED LEARNING

Just as the micro-universe of the Winnicottian mother-infant dyad is situated within a larger societal context, the holding environment of the supervisor/supervisee relationship is nested within an extensive community of research practice. The nascent student researcher's development is fostered by interactions with multiple community members who participate in the practice of research to varying degrees. These other research community members include fellow students, professors, committee members, university administrative staff, scholars and researchers at other institutions, peer reviewers, journal editors, and funding bodies, among others. Lave and Wenger (1991) articulated a model of *situated learning*, akin to apprenticeship, which can further elucidate the process through which a graduate student in counselling comes to embrace emerging identity as researcher.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The concept of "legitimate peripheral participation" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29) is central to understanding this sociocultural model of learning. Initially, a trainee or learner's position within the given community of practice may be quite peripheral and s/he may be only indirectly involved in its execution; however, over time, the learner's roles and responsibilities within the community become increasingly central to the practice. For example, within the Yucatec culture, a trainee in midwifery may begin during childhood to accompany her grandmother when she attends to the prenatal needs of expectant mothers. Initially her participation in midwifery practice may only involve silent observation of conversations or her grandmother's comings and goings at odd hours of the night; however, these are legitimate peripheral aspect of her training. Gradually over time she may begin to do activities more central to the practice in question, such as gathering needed supplies. After having given birth herself, she may begin to assist her grandmother at other women's births. Eventually, if she chooses, she may "move ... from peripheral to full participation in midwifery" (Lave & Wenger, p. 67).

Lave and Wenger's (1991) model is highly compatible with Winnicott's (1958, 1965, 1971) developmental theory of object relations. Winnicott's mother-infant dyad is itself a form of situated learning, in which the mother's attuned, adaptive responses gradually allow the infant to become a full participant in shared reality and the practice of being-in-the-world. However, for the first 18 months of life (and then some), the child's position is one of legitimate peripheral participation in autonomous, independent, human *being*.

Research as Community of Practice

Many aspects of graduate student research involve situated learning within a community of research practice in which legitimate peripheral participation occurs. Over time, and with support, a student's position within the academic research community typically evolves from that of an observer on the periphery to a more central and responsible role of active researcher. It is difficult to pinpoint precisely

when I first joined the community of practice of academic or scholarly research. Was it during junior high school when I wrote that first “research paper” in science class? Or perhaps earlier, when I first learned to use the card catalogue in the library or how to read? I have come to recognize that the term papers and major assignments that I have written as a graduate student at both the master’s and doctoral level were actually a form of legitimate peripheral participation within a community of academic research. Researching these kinds of class assignments allows students to get close to and engage with, without being responsible for, the research designs, methods, and findings of other researchers’ studies. In hindsight, it seems obvious to me that this was an important component in my training as a researcher; however, at the time, I was not aware of this. Rather, these assignments seemed to serve the purpose of evaluation more than legitimate peripheral participation in the practice of research.

Certainly, my dissertation research affords me an important opportunity to take up a more central position in the practice of research within a scholarly community. Although my research supervisor is named as the principal investigator, I initiated the idea for the study. Together we developed the research design over the course of numerous conversations, and with each successive stage of the process, I return to my supervisor and other committee members for consultation and guidance, in order to most effectively assume my increasingly central position in the community of research practice. Opportunities to present my findings at academic conferences and in journal publications further extend my participation beyond the local realm of my university, into a larger community of research practice whose boundaries are not defined by geography or a unitary institution.

Another instance of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation in academic research occurs when a graduate student joins a research team led by tenured faculty. As a research assistant, students can be introduced to important components of the practice of scholarly research including literature review, grant-writing, the ethics review process, participant recruitment, data collection, analysis, and the dissemination of findings in journal publications and conference presentations. Over time, a student’s role on the research team can evolve to more closely resemble those of tenured faculty. Several of my peers coordinate research teams for their supervisors, and some have co-written major grant proposals with senior faculty members.

For the past two years, the University of British Columbia Faculty of Education offered an innovative Graduate Student Mentorship Grant to fund research assistant positions for graduate students working in collaboration with a faculty mentor on a research project situated at a juncture of both research partners’ interests. With the support of this initiative, my research supervisor and I together developed, designed, and conducted a group-based study of successful aging among gay men post-retirement. This study, positioned at the crossroads between our respective interests in healthy aging and the developmental life cycle of gay men, has afforded me extraordinary opportunities for situated learning, in relationship to both my supervisor and the gay elders who were co-participants in our research group. We

have subsequently collaborated with an international colleague of my supervisor on an operating grant proposal submitted to the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, in order to extend our study. If funded, this grant, on which I am a co-applicant, will afford further valuable experiences of mentorship and situated learning in the practice of academic research, for myself and others.

Hoops or Portals?

Many of my Ph.D. student peers refer to the various markers and milestones encountered over the course of doctoral training as “hoops” they must “jump through.” These include course work and the aforementioned related assignments, comprehensive exams, defense of research proposal, ethics review, internship, and of course, the final dissertation research and defense. Personally, I prefer to think of these as portals (J. Vadeboncouer, personal communication, March 2006), each of which opens upon on a new realm of identity and practice within the research community. Rather than having been asked or made to jump through hoops, I maintain I have accepted invitations, within a context of facilitative mentorship and situated learning, to pass through these portals and increasingly embrace my emergent identity as researcher.

CONCLUSION

Through the various experiences and relationships described above, I have come to recognize that research can be a creative practice. By this, I do not mean that I am making things up. Rather, in the practice of research, I am engaged in a version of Winnicott’s (1951/1958) transitional phenomena spread out into adult life. This creative work issues forth from an “intermediate area of *experiencing*, to which inner reality and external life both contribute” (p. 230). Research practice involves shifting between sensory input and interpretation, between what I take in and what I make out of my perceptions, between my subject position and those of others in the world, with whom I am in relationship through inquiry. My current situated practice within the research community also spans two realms and thus demarcates a transition in my professional identity. I am shifting from identity position of student to professional psychologist. In this sense, dissertation research is a liminal practice situated in between pre- and post-doctoral worlds, and the dissertation research text itself is literally a transitional object.

Unexpectedly, I have come to experience academia, and counselling psychology in particular, as a field in which I can play and contribute generatively. Facilitative experiences of mentorship and situated learning have helped me engage in a process of personal and professional alchemy, in which anxiety dissolves and shape-shifts into creative scholarly expression. The dawning realization that the self of the researcher plays an important part in the research process and the generation of the research product, which can itself simultaneously evoke the voices of multiple persons (research participants, author, and readers), has freed me up to engage in

this practice. Increasingly, I embrace research as something that I do and can do well, as well as something that I am learning to help others to do. A supportive, evolving, adaptive relationship with my research supervisor, characterized by attunement and agape, facilitated this important transition in my identity position within the community of academic research.

SUMMARY

Graduate student research is doubly transitional. In the Winnicottian sense, my research texts are transitional objects, simultaneously products of my inner reality and the external world of shared reality. The graduate student research text is also transitional in a more conventional sense, in that it is an artifact of a student's progression from legitimate peripheral position of newcomer/apprentice, to initiate, "old timer," or master (Lave & Wenger, 1991), who is habituated to a more central position of full participation within the community of practice of academic research and knowledge dissemination. Through my dissertation research study, I have progressively taken up a more central position in the community of scholarly research practice. Concurrently, I have undergone a transition in professional identity: I have become increasingly autonomous and less in need of mentorship. This transition in professional identity has been facilitated by an important mentoring relationship with my research supervisor and other experiences of situated learning within the community of scholarly inquiry.

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Note

1. By this I mean that a researcher's understanding of a phenomenon is not identical to the phenomenon itself. Rather, the practice of research involves an interaction between the researcher and the object of inquiry, which yields knowledge claims generated by the researcher about and in relation to the world. For example, if I were to study, measure, and generate a comprehensive description of an orange, you still could not squeeze and drink its juice from my research report. The latter ultimately conveys my perspective on the fruit of my study, subjective knowledge claims that, however replicable, are inevitably informed by context and culture.

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