

Essay

Accessing Fellow Academics as Research Participants: Constraints, Collegiality, and “Academic Citizenship”

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Abstract: In this paper I discuss some constraints and implications in accessing fellow academics as research participants, a topic that has rarely been addressed thus far in the literature. I will point out that a lack of cooperation from fellow academics may defeat our research purposes, and will survey some studies involving U.S., European, and Chinese academics as research participants to illustrate education researchers’ efforts to work with fellow academics against the odds. By referencing my personal experience of engaging with Chinese academics, I will then discuss the role of personal contacts in research and reflect upon various constraints in accessing fellow academics as research participants. I will suggest that, when we do participate in a fellow researcher’s project, the incentive is a desire to support our peers in the spirit of “academic citizenship.”

Keywords: accessing research participants; academics as research participants; collegiality; “academic citizenship”

1. Introduction

Over a span of two weeks, I received three email invitations to respond to online surveys, on the topics of giving feedback to students, multiple-authorship in publication, and using e-learning technology in teaching, respectively. These invitations were all from fellow academics: one from a colleague in my own faculty, one from someone in a different faculty at my university, and another from someone based at a U.S. university. When I started to write this paper, I had responded to one, not surprisingly the one from my colleague, because the email invitation, addressing me by my first

name and sent by a colleague who has participated in a study of mine before, made me feel that his request was the first I should respond to.

In an ideal world, we, fellow academics, irrespective of the difference in rank, gender, or seniority, would support each other's research (and hence publications) by responding to requests for help—presumably every response, every bit of contribution to their data would count. (It should be noted that such appeals to fellow academics for help are typically made by academics in education, including language education, where they may have research interests that necessitate the participation of fellow academics across disciplines.) The literature, especially that of health research, has discussed the pros and cons of undertaking qualitative interviews with one's peers in the same profession [1,2]. However, little reflection is found in the literature on the implications of working with fellow academics who are not necessarily in one's own field of profession or discipline. At the same time, while research methodology books give ample advice on accessing participants beyond academia, little discussion can be found on working with fellow academics as research participants. The present paper will address this gap in the literature. The observations shared here represent personal views, which have not been tested by systematic research. However, a discussion of the phenomenon is worthwhile as accessing target research participants is an important issue for many academics in social sciences.

In the following, I will begin with an example from Braine [3] to illustrate what can result from a lack of cooperation from fellow academics as potential research participants. Then, I will draw examples from the literature to sketch a picture of some studies where researchers in education have tried to involve fellow academics in U.S., European, and Chinese universities, respectively, as their research participants. I will then discuss some related issues by drawing upon my own experiences of working with Chinese academics as my research participants, as a female junior academic based at a university in Hong Kong.

2. Lack of Cooperation from Fellow Academics May Defeat Our Research Purpose: An Example

We normally take precautionary measures against a potentially low response rates. For instance, we may aim to reach an extensive pool of a target population, use a “snowball strategy” when selecting participants, or personalize the invitations sent to target participants. When little can be done to change a low level of “cooperation,” however, our research purposes can suffer. An example was given by George Braine [3] in an article entitled “When professors don't cooperate: A critical perspective on EAP research” (published in the journal of *English for Specific Purposes*, a flagship journal in a field where cooperation from colleagues across disciplines is often vital). For his doctoral research, conducted at the University of Texas (Austin) in the early 1990s, on undergraduate writing tasks in engineering and natural sciences, Braine received enthusiastic support when requesting written assignment prompts from professors across disciplines at the university; however, when trying to replicate the study at the Chinese University of Hong Kong a few years later (in mid- to late-1990s), as a faculty member in the English Department, he ran into difficulty. With the support of two research assistants, they sent requests to “223 teachers in the engineering and science faculties who were listed in the timetable as teaching in English or in Cantonese and English, inviting them to participate in the project by sending us their course syllabi and writing assignments” ([3], p. 297):

“Within a week, 80 had replied, citing their reasons for being unable to participate: some were too busy, others were not teaching that semester/year, and the rest did not give writing assignments in their courses. In response to follow-up requests, phone calls, and email messages, only five teachers from engineering and four from science agreed to participate in the project. Despite requests through e-mails and telephone calls, 134 teachers did not respond at all.” (pp. 297–298)

In all, the research team collected 29 assignments from engineering, 22 of which were from two courses, in the form of “instructions for laboratory experiments” but were “too succinct for detailed analysis”; and none came from science (p. 298). The researchers did, instead, receive a generous donation of student reports, and they ended up trying to “retrace and reconstruct laboriously, from the students’ reports, the teachers’ expectations” (p. 298).

Reflecting on why colleagues in engineering and science faculties were reluctant to share their writing assignments, Braine [3] suggested that “these teachers may have received little or no instruction in writing during their secondary, undergraduate and graduate studies” (p. 299); and even having pursued graduate studies in North America usually also means a lack of training in writing for some. Hence, the professors may either take writing assignments from textbooks or give few writing assignments (p. 298 and p. 302). Another reason for the teachers’ reluctance to share the materials requested, Braine suggested, might be that they did not want to let an English teacher see their “poorly written or poorly designed texts” ([4], p. 33) (cited in [3], p. 302).

Nearly two decades after Braine’s effort to reach out to fellow academics at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, there has apparently been heightened awareness for writing across disciplines in Hong Kong universities, and professors across faculties generally seem to possess relatively strong English writing skills, as, after all, a track-record of English publications, coupled with a PhD degree earned at an English-speaking country, has often been an instrumental factor in faculty recruitment. However, there is no guarantee that Braine would have received more positive responses to his request now than over a decade ago.

3. Academics in Different Parts of the World as Research Participants

In Braine’s [3] study, another factor seems important for the contrast of the responses he received from subject professors at the University of Texas (Austin) and later at the Chinese University of Hong Kong: there was a long-established Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program at the former, so that, presumably, the subject professors were accustomed to working with language teachers on a regular basis; while, at the latter university, with the absence of such a program and with a language specialist—subject specialist partnership largely an alien concept at the time of Braine’s study, the subject specialists might not feel comfortable moving out of the tradition. However, other than this divergence at the two sites, one may wonder if the difference in responding to the same request might reflect some sort of “cultural” difference among the professors on the two sides? Namely, do U.S. academics tend to be more responsive to research-support requests from fellow academics than (Hong Kong) Chinese academics? Such a question will be difficult to answer. However, it may be useful to look into the literature to get a sense of the extent to which academics in different parts of the world

are willing to become research participants, by responding to fellow academics' request of completing a questionnaire.

In the following, I will provide an overview of some studies, which were based on data gathered through questionnaires administered to academics across disciplines in U.S., European, and Chinese universities, respectively. I focus on questionnaire-based studies rather than interview-based ones here as the former tend to give clear indications of the response rate (*i.e.*, the percentage of the responding fellow academics in the total target population). Most of the studies examined below were conducted by researchers in language education (which is my own disciplinary area) and a few by researchers in education more generally. The target questionnaire respondents were typically fellow academics across disciplines rather than in the researchers' own discipline (an exception being Min's [5] study, in which the participants were from the researcher's own disciplinary area, *i.e.*, applied linguistics). It should be noted that my selection of the studies is more of a result of my having knowledge of these studies than due to any other reason. For consistency, five studies have been selected from each of the three geographical locations: the U.S., Europe, and several Chinese-speaking regions. The purpose of the overview is to offer a glimpse into some studies that involved academics responding to peers' request for participation in research. There is no intention to pick "representative" studies or to make any generalizations based on these studies.

3.1. Academics in U.S. Universities as Research Participants

Table 1 summarizes five questionnaire-based studies, conducted by language professionals teaching in U.S. universities. These studies, with an aim of informing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) pedagogy, mostly focused on the communication or, especially, the academic writing requirements for students across disciplines.

Table 1. A summary of five surveys conducted by language professionals in U.S. universities.

Authors	Research site or target respondents' affiliation	Target respondents and mode of survey	Focus of the study	Response rate
Casanave and Hubbard [6]	Stanford University	"distributed 563 six-page questionnaires through Stanford's interdepartmental mail service"; the questionnaires were "sent to all full-time faculty in humanities, social sciences, and science and technology departments" (p. 35)	Writing assigned by the faculty to first-year doctoral students across the disciplines, criteria used in evaluating writing, and native- and nonnative-English-speaking students' writing problems	"Eighty-five usable questionnaires (about 15%) were returned, a rate within the range we had anticipated given the length and complexity of the questionnaire" (p. 35)

Table 1. Cont.

Jenkins, Jordan, and Weiland [7]	The engineering school at six universities	A total of “600 quite complex questionnaires” were mailed to the faculty at six engineering schools chosen due to their large population of non-native-English-speaking graduate students (p. 55)	“the role of writing in graduate engineering programs and its implications for the design of writing courses” (p. 51)	188 or 31% of the mailed questionnaires were returned; “[i]ndividual response rates for each university ranged from 21% to 50%” (p. 55)
Ferris and Tagg [8]	Four different types of tertiary institutions in California	Questionnaires were mailed out to “instructors in the academic disciplines at each school in which ESL (English as a second language) students are significantly represented” (p. 36)	Oral communication needs of EAP learners and ESL students’ difficulties in meeting the requirement	234 (25.4%) of the 921 delivered surveys “were completed and returned”; “the response rate was fairly low” (p. 37)
O'Donnell [9]	College level language programs of French, German, and Spanish in the U.S.	A survey distributed to “145 language program directors and intermediate level instructors of French, German, and Spanish” whose “email addresses were available via an organizational listserv” (of the American Association of University Supervisors and Coordinators of Language Programs (AAUSC)) (p. 655)	“policies and procedures governing foreign language writing at their respective Institutions” (p. 650)	“66 were completed and returned, representing a response rate of 46%” (p. 655)
Hubert and Bonzo [10]	“28 universities chosen at random from 17 different states” (“the West, Midwest, Northeast, South, and Southwest” of the U.S.) (p. 521)	1518 foreign language (FL) instructors working at the chosen universities, receiving an email containing a secure URL link providing access to an online survey system	The extent to which the current university FL instruction is informed by second language writing research	153 (9.92%) FL instructors completed the survey

Ferris and Tagg [8] described the response rate they received from fellow academics (at 25.4%, with 234 responses to the 921 delivered surveys) as “fairly low” (p. 37). In another study, not included in Table 1 but apparently drawing data from the same questionnaire described in Ferris and Tagg [8], the same authors [11] focused on listening/speaking tasks for ESL (English as a Second Language)

students, and pointed to an (understandable) connection between fellow academics' decision over whether to respond and their perceived relevance of the topic of the study for them: "As the survey was rather long, it is likely that the respondents were primarily those who had strong interest in or concerns about their ESL students and may thus not be representative of all instructors" (p. 303).

While the surveys conducted by Casanave and Hubbard [6], Jenkins, Jordan, and Weiland [7], and Ferris and Tagg [8,11], in the late 1980s to early 1990s, were paper-based with hard copies of questionnaire mailed to target participants, over time it has increasingly become a norm to conduct surveys using the Internet, by distributing the questionnaire directly via email (as in [9]) or sending an invitation email containing a URL link to an online survey (as in [10]). Of the latter, as the researchers Hubert and Bonzo ([10], p. 521) described: "The survey was administered using an online instrument to which potential respondents were provided access via a secure URL link. This link was provided to potential respondents via email."

3.2. Academics in European Universities as Research Participants

Table 2 shows five survey-based studies conducted in European universities also by language professionals. In these studies, questionnaires were administered to fellow EAL (English as an Additional Language) academics to find out about their attitudes toward the dominance of English in academia in relation to their first language, perception of difficulties in writing for publication in English, and their related practices in overcoming the potential language barrier.

Table 2. A summary of five surveys conducted by language professionals in European universities.

Authors	Research site or target respondents' affiliation	Target respondents and mode of survey	Focus of the study	Response rate
Duszak and Lewkowicz [12]	A university in Poland	The questionnaire was emailed to "academics in medicine, psychology and language studies" (p. 111)	Polish academics' perception of difficulties in writing for publication in English	"99 completed questionnaires were received"; response rate is unknown as the population size is not indicated
Ferguson, Pérez-Llantada, and Plo [13]	University of Zaragoza, Spain	A questionnaire (written in Spanish) was emailed "through a university server to all 3,000 academic and academic-related staff" (p. 47)	Scientists' perception of disadvantage in using English in academic/scientific publication	"a modest though not impossibly low response rate of 10 per cent", with 300 questionnaires returned (p. 47)

Table 2. Cont.

Moreno, Rey-Rocha, Burgess, López-Navarro, and Sachdev [14]	One research-based institution and four universities in Spain	A cover letter (written in Spanish) was sent to the target respondents, providing access to an online questionnaire (also in Spanish) “hosted on a server to be accessible by means of a password” (p. 165)	Target respondents’ perceived difficulty in writing research articles in English, whether it varies across knowledge areas, and how it may be influenced by their English-writing proficiency	1717 (19.6%) of total 8794 staff with doctorates responded
Olsson and Sheridan [15]	A Swedish university	A questionnaire was e-mailed to 200 academics across faculties, with a cover letter stating the purpose of the research, assurance of confidentiality, and the researchers’ contact information	Academics’ experiences and perceptions of the use of English in their disciplines	“a disappointingly low response rate of 17.5%”, with 35 completed questionnaires; “a relatively even spread of respondents from different faculties” (p. 39)
Bolton and Kuteeva [16]	Stockholm University, Sweden	“online questionnaires which were posted on the university server during the period April-June 2009” (p. 433)	The use of English at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across disciplines, and the target respondents’ attitudes toward the use of English in teaching and research	“highly satisfactory” response rates: 19% of the target students responded, and 668 (40%) out of 1683 staff responded; excluding administrative personnel and PhD students from the staff category, “498 teaching and research staff remained” (p. 433)

Table 2 shows that from the researchers’ point of view, the response rates ranged from “disappointingly low” [15], “modest” [13], to “highly satisfactory” [16], but, apparently, tipping toward the modest and low side. The top reason for a colleague not to respond, as some suggested, is “pressures on academics’ time” ([13], p. 47). In addition, Duszak and Lewkowicz [12] noted that 62% of their respondents were aged between 22 and 45, which is “likely to reflect the fact that younger academics are more willing to respond to requests for data of this nature” (p. 111). This suggestion can be interpreted as implying that younger academics may find the topic of the survey, namely perception of difficulties in writing for publication in English, particularly relevant for them and are therefore more willing to respond. A similar point was made by Ferris and Tagg [8], as noted earlier.

3.3. Academics in Chinese Universities as Research Participants

Finally, Table 3 includes five questionnaire-based studies concerning academics’ teaching/research activities, conducted in universities in Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, respectively.

Table 3. A summary of five surveys conducted by language professionals or education researchers in universities in several Chinese-speaking regions.

Authors	Research site or target respondents' affiliation	Target respondents and mode of survey	Focus of the study	Response rate
Li, Li, and Sun [17]	Zhejiang University, China	"300 printed surveys were handed out to 300 randomly selected HSS [humanities and social sciences] young faculty members" (p. 282)	Young faculty's job perception in terms of job satisfaction, job burnout, turnover, and intrinsic motivation	"268 useful surveys" received; response rate 89.3% (p. 282)
Flower-dew [18]	Six universities in Hong Kong	Questionnaire sent to 2300 Cantonese-speaking academics by mail; reminder and a duplicate copy sent to those who have not responded two months later	The academics' experience in using English, confidence in publishing in English and challenges faced	717 completed questionnaires received: "a response rate of 31%, which is considered to be good for surveys conducted in Hong Kong with academics" (132)
Kwong, Ng, Mark, and Wong [19]	(in addition to target student respondents) "Faculty members of three colleges and two schools of a local university in Hong Kong" (p. 343)	"600 full-time equivalent teaching staff" (p. 343)	To compare students' and faculty's views on academic integrity	"113 completed faculty surveys" received (p. 346) (response rate about 18.8%)
Aiston [20]	"degree-granting institutes of higher education in Hong Kong" (p. 71)	6291 questionnaires were distributed to all the academic staff employed at the universities (part of an international comparative survey conducted in 2008)	"contains questions on career and professional situation, general work situation and activities, teaching, research, management and personal background" (p. 61)	Response rate 12.9%, with 797 questionnaires returned (67% from male academics and 33% from female academics)

Table 3. Cont.

Min [5]	Different universities in Taiwan	Emailed a “20-item open-ended English questionnaire” to “50 academics who have published at least one article in English-medium journals outside Taiwan during the past 5 years” (p. 190)	The challenges faced by Taiwanese applied linguists (ALs) in trying to get published in international journals and the coping strategies they used	38 responses or a response rate of 76%; the 50 target respondents having been identified “[v]ia browsing the websites of NNETS Taiwanese ALs I met at conferences from local universities” (p. 190)
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It can be seen from Table 3 that the studies of Li *et al.* [17] and Min [5] achieved particularly high response rates: 89.3% (268 responses out of a target of 300) and 76% (38 responses out of 50), respectively. However, this is perhaps not surprising, given that, as indicated in the table, Min [5] identified her target respondents from applied linguists (language educators) she had met at local conferences, so that presumably the researcher and the target respondents were members of a local academic community based on professional relationships. In the case of Li *et al.*’s [17] study, “printed surveys were handed out” (p. 282) to the target respondents, apparently through personal connections and with facilitation of the approval of the study by “the leaders of the institution” (p. 279). The potential implication of personal connections (or *guanxi*) in conducting research in the Chinese context will be re-visited later in the present paper, when I reflect upon my own experience of working with Chinese academics.

Incidentally, questionnaire-based research conducted by language educators with fellow academics across disciplines in mainland Chinese universities is hard to find. This seems to echo the current general lack of exchange and collaboration in EAP instruction between language and subject specialists in the country [21,22]. In this sense, it can be suggested that access is only likely to occur when there is a desire to access. On the other hand, potential accessibility of subject specialists and language specialists to each other in Chinese universities might, in fact, be a reminder of the existence of opportunities for collaboration between the two parties in EAP teaching and research, with such collaborations having long been advocated in the literature (e.g., [23,24]).

3.4. Researchers Conducting Questionnaire-Based Studies with Fellow Academics: Endeavoring to Achieve a Higher Response Rate

In the above, I summarized a total of 15 questionnaire-based studies conducted by researchers in education, especially language education, among fellow academics mostly working in disciplines other than their own. It can be seen that when questionnaires are distributed within a relatively closely-knit academic community, where the researcher has personal connections, either in the context of one university [16,17], or a disciplinary/professional community of which the researcher is a member [5] or to which the researcher has access through a listserv [9], a high response rate is likely to

achieved. We also notice that researchers may express an emotional attitude toward the response rates: while for Ferris and Tagg [8], a response rate of 25.4% was “fairly low” (p. 37), for Ferguson *et al.* [13], 10% was “modest” (p. 47), and for Olsson and Sheridan [15], 17.5% was “disappointingly low” (p. 39); in addition, a response rate of 40% was “highly satisfactory” (p. 433) for Bolton and Kuteeva [16]. Thus, researchers do care about the response rates they receive.

Casanave and Hubbard ([6], p. 35), Jenkins, Jordan, and Weiland [7], and Ferris and Tagg ([11], p. 303) all admitted that their surveys were long and complex. The trend over the past two decades is probably for questionnaires targeted at academics to become shorter and easier to respond to. Nevertheless, Ferguson *et al.* [13] suggested that curtailing the number of questions in a questionnaire, including by “overriding the customary practice of including multiple items focusing on the same target”, “can sometimes impact on reliability” (p. 56). Researchers are thus caught in a dilemma: in trying to overcome low response rates, which may threaten the authenticity of the data (e.g., by not being representative of the larger population), they may feel compelled to adopt strategies that can potentially undercut the reliability of the questionnaire. When they do get a low response rate, researchers may have to make a case that the data are trustworthy and usable (presumably justified in doing so). Ferguson *et al.* [13], for example, suggested that despite the “modest” response rate of 10% that their questionnaire received from their target Spanish academics respondents, the data “do appear utilizable within the inherent limitations of the methodology”, “bearing in mind that the sample size is not lower than in many comparable surveys”, plus their survey study was exploratory and would be followed up by interviews with a selection of academics (p. 47).

4. My Personal Experience of Working with Chinese Academics as Research Participants

In the early 2000s, when I first embarked on an academic career, I had ingrained beliefs to dismantle first: having a scholar father specializing in historical Chinese linguistics, I grew up assuming that research should be based on books and study of texts; collecting “data” from human beings (including students) for research felt unnatural, and even unethical, to me. However, having decided to study what difficulties Chinese doctoral science students experience in trying to meet the degree conferment requirement of SCI (Science Citation Index) publication (a requirement becoming increasingly popular at Chinese universities at the time), *i.e.*, publishing in (English-medium) international journals included in the SCI, and how they can be supported in the endeavor, I seemed to have little choice but to muster the courage to approach students to collect “data” from them. With little training in research methodology at the time, it was curiosity and a desire to learn that sent me onto a track of “empirical research”—which was a privileged term in the language education circle in China at the time (and it still is), in reaction to the much-criticized “impressionistic,” “reflective” tradition in Chinese research [25]. I remember the encouragement I received from an American professor at the time: that my project of working with science students and scientists would be very “doable,” as long as I could “penetrate” their “academic tribes” [26].

Over the past decade, in a number of projects on scholarly publication, I have interviewed academics across disciplines in Hong Kong and Mainland China on their attitudes toward and practices in linguistic choice between English and Chinese in research and publication; I have conducted case studies of novice scientists (doctoral science students) in mainland universities writing for publication

in English, which included an examination of how supervisors revise papers for novices, and, in particular, how supervisors perceive and tackle the issue of text-based plagiarism in novice texts. Other than working with university-based academics and students, I also accessed the orthopedics department of a Chinese hospital to investigate how medical doctors with doctoral degrees engage in research activities amidst their busy schedules of clinical practice. The challenge of gaining access to, and maintaining, contact with participants in these projects has not been small. On reflection, I would say that, on the whole, opportunities for access have come mostly from personal contacts, while constraints seem to be often related to my geographic location.

4.1. Accessing Participants through Personal Contacts

Personal contacts were formed by my having taught English at a university in a major city in east China, so that I was able to invite my students—doctoral students across disciplines—as my initial participants in my doctoral research project on Chinese novice scientists writing for international publication. The literature is rich with examples of English language professionals working with ESL students to study the latter's academic literacy practices (e.g., [27,28]). In conducting such research, language professionals are able to draw upon their insider knowledge [29] while capitalizing on the advantage of access. As Casanave [30] commented on Spack's [28] three-year study of a Japanese student (named "Yuko") at a U.S. university: "Like many other qualitative studies of writing, this case study used Spack's insider knowledge, contexts, and contacts at her own university to comfortably get access to what she needed from and about Yuko."

During my doctoral years I made painstaking efforts to stay in touch with my participants, so that the number of words I wrote in emails greatly surpassed the total number of words of my doctoral dissertation. In those emails, I played the roles of friend, English teacher, and researcher. I observed the principle of reciprocity [31], and did what I could for my student participants, above all by editing English papers for them. Over time I got to know some of the students' supervisors, who also participated in my research. Later through the introduction of colleagues and friends, I reached more academics across disciplines, who, regarding me as a previous colleague, kindly accepted my invitation to participate in interviews. Additionally, the relevance of my topic of research, namely the impact of English and English publication requirements, for my target participants may have been a facilitative factor in my access. Examples of such reciprocal relationships between EAP language specialists and EAL academics, or students in disciplinary areas who need to publish in English, can be found in the literature: the former providing instruction, training, or editorial support to the latter, and the latter becoming research participants in interviews, case studies, or questionnaire surveys in return (e.g., [32,33]).

Other personal relations, or family relations to be more specific, have facilitated my access to researchers beyond academia, *i.e.*, doctors and medical students at a Chinese hospital engaging in research for publication (e.g., [34,35]). Evidence can be gleaned from the literature to indicate that family relations can sometimes be an important factor in shaping one's research path. For example, we learned that for Dorothy Winsor, an accomplished professional and technical writing researcher, access to engineers through family relations has been critical: "Winsor realized that with her access to engineers via her husband's profession she was in a position to learn something about engineering

writing” ([36], p. 355). Similarly, we learned from Dressen (or “Dressen-Hammouda” in her later publications) [37] that her husband was a geologist so that she had opportunities to learn about the discipline “through osmosis” (p. 284) and built her research path over time around geology text and geologists’ genre mastery.

4.2. Researching in a Periphery Context as an Academic Based in a Semi-Periphery Region

To employ notions widely adopted in the literature, in terms of social science power, I am located in a “semi-periphery” region, but have conducted research in a “periphery” setting, and published in “center”/“semi-periphery” journals [38,39]. (“Semi-peripheral social science power”, according to Alatas ([38], p. 606), “may be defined as a social science community that is dependent on ideas originating in the social science centres, but which themselves exert some influence on peripheral social science communities”. From this perspective, Hong Kong may be regarded as a semi-peripheral social science power.) I am aware of the connection between my practice and the scenario described by Canagarajah [40]: that scholars from better-resourced and English-dominant countries/regions utilizing research data in the periphery to develop interpretations, typically through the lens of center-originated theories, and, henceforth, claiming leadership in scholarship by publicizing their work in English-medium journals. In contrast to this scenario, had local scholars “enjoyed similar resources”, they “would have also possessed the power to orchestrate the whole research enterprise under their own leadership” and “present the discovery in a manner favoring their community’s interests, knowledge, and values” ([40], p. 5). Canagarajah is sharp in his observation.

As a Hong Kong-based academic conducting research with Chinese mainland fellow academics, I am conscious of the way I might be perceived: unlike some of my target participants, I am not a returnee (having completed graduate studies outside Mainland China and returned to become a mainland-based academic). I suspect that this kind of background gives me both an advantage and disadvantage when I approach my target participants. There may be perceptions that I cannot change; but I do have a clear goal in my research. With the advantage that I may enjoy—e.g., resources and, perhaps, the name of my home institution—my central concern in my work with Chinese academics has been to let the outside world hear their voices. I am indebted to their support of my research; and I decided that the best thing I can do for them in return is to do good research and disseminate my findings so that there will be a more balanced view about Chinese academics on the international stage: that other than corruptive practices that seem to be wide-spread in some quarters of Chinese academia [41,42], the general Chinese academics’ diligence and studious efforts to achieve success in research and international visibility and impact should also be made known.

I am also aware that I am just one of many education and social science academics in Hong Kong universities who conduct research in Mainland China and publish in English journals (for illustration of this phenomenon, see, for example, [43]). The steady growth of the number of SSCI (Social Science Citation Index) journal articles co-authored by Chinese and overseas academics [44] seems to indicate a growing interest in exploring Chinese research sites. As the joint publications would indicate, a primary means for academics outside China to access Chinese research sites is to form research partnerships with their Chinese counterparts, with the latter’s role possibly ranging from mere data collection to participating in the design of research and writing for publication. Over the years I have

not made special efforts to forge research partnerships with mainland Chinese counterparts (of my discipline), partly due to the absence of linguistic or cultural barriers in my doing research in Mainland China—an advantage enjoyed by multilingual researchers, as having been discussed in the literature (e.g., [45]). Of course, I have often needed the assistance of “gatekeepers” [46] in my efforts of access. Yet I have perhaps been viewed as an “outsider” sometimes. Outsiders from a reputable university in Hong Kong, a privileged semi-periphery region, are likely to be treated with some politeness; but this does not guarantee their target participants’ cooperation. It has been suggested that collecting data in “emerging societies” is difficult, “as there is little tradition of independent enquiry” and “asking questions in any form is viewed with suspicion” ([47], p. 164). If this applies to collecting data in Chinese business organizations [47], this should arguably be less true when working with Chinese academics. However, connections, or what is commonly known as *guanxi* in the Chinese culture, would still be crucial.

4.3. Accessing Fellow Academics in Hong Kong

While having mostly worked with mainland Chinese academics, I have also reached out to academics in Hong Kong on two occasions, the first to interview some scholars in humanities and social sciences to find out how they negotiate between local engagement and international participation through publication [43], and the second in a project on university students writing from sources, with my own university as the research site. In the first study, I approached the target interviewees one-by-one by emailing them, and most agreed to be interviewed. In the second study, in an early attempt, I only got three positive responses to my email invitations sent to over three-hundred Turnitin instructors (academic staff who have a Turnitin account) on campus to recruit interview participants in order to explore the issue of plagiarism among students. All these three respondents were expatriates (*i.e.*, English-speaking academics, two from North America and another from the UK). I surmised what has led to the poor response to my request: firstly, an interview is perceived to be more time-consuming than answering a questionnaire online; secondly, the topic of plagiarism is perhaps not an attractive one for busy colleagues; and thirdly, the fact that three expatriate colleagues responded might indicate that they are probably a little more interested in talking about the issue of plagiarism than the general Cantonese-speaking professors, having come from the Anglo-American academic culture where a concern of the issue has been long institutionalized. As the invitation for voluntary participation did not work, later, with the help of a research assistant, I utilized personal contacts and a snowball sampling approach ([48], p. 89) to access target interviewees.

5. Providing Incentives to Fellow Academics for Them to Become Our Research Participants?

Reciprocity [31] can be an important principle in our research relationships with fellow academic participants, an obvious example being an English language professional editing English papers for her EAL participants, as mentioned earlier. In this scenario, the two sides are assisting each other in a high-stakes commitment, *i.e.*, research and publication. Nevertheless, such reciprocity, in the form of the researcher giving support to the researched on the latter’s work, is not always possible or required. In this situation, I have tried to pay my participants. Some may think paying academics for their participating in research is “unusual” (as a reviewer has written in commenting on the budget portion

of a research proposal of mine). However, if it is appropriate to compensate research participants, such as by paying patients in health research [49], it seems reasonable to pay fellow academics a certain token amount to express appreciation of their time and contribution of data, if it is also considered culturally acceptable to do so in a given context. Indeed, the payment can only be a symbolic compensation. An academic's hour spent on being interviewed cannot be measured by a modest honorarium. At the same time, it has to be said that the amount of such a payment is restricted, both by budget and by the consideration that it is important not to give an impression of bribing fellow academics into participation. A question here may be: how much is considered appropriate as a token fee (rather than an act of corruption) in paying a participant academic? It seems that the researcher's judicious judgment, in light of the local culture, will have to be relied upon in the decision. One may also suggest that if it is justifiable to pay a token fee to a fellow academic who participates in an interview, then one who completes a questionnaire should also be paid—yet, the latter is not usually possible, given the typical anonymity of respondents in questionnaire surveys.

It should be pointed out that, when participant fellow academics are one's own colleagues at the same university, or have been colleagues with the researcher at one time, payment of token fees may be inappropriate. It is also very likely that, despite not having been a colleague of the researcher, a fellow academic may decline to be paid. In this case, needless to say, the fellow academic's preference should be respected. To be fair, when an academic does become a fellow academic's research participant, and gets paid a token fee, the incentive should not be the honorarium, but rather, a desire to support the fellow academic. This is “academic citizenship” [50] at play.

6. “Academic Citizenship” in a Performative Culture

It seems that nowadays whether we as academics are willing to sacrifice some of our time to help a fellow academic is often hinged on our schedule: the pressure of publication, coupled with the often growing, rather than reducing, load of teaching and administrative duties, means that we have become highly selective in whether or not to respond, not to say that the frequency of such requests that we receive may have led to a sense of fatigue. Of the large number of emails we receive on a daily basis, those addressed to us personally from students, department colleagues, research collaborators, and certain professional colleagues are to be filtered in; while the rest is likely to be filtered out. It does take some conscious collegiality and a desire to support fellow academics for us to respond to a request to fill in an online questionnaire, to participate in an interview, or to share our syllabi or writing assignments (the request made by Braine [3] to fellow academics). It may be fair to suggest that academics nowadays, in general, have become more pragmatic than before: more often than not, we invest time only when something is judged to be “relevant” to our personal interest or duty.

It might be suggested that if Braine's [3] study were to be conducted today, nearly two decades after it actually took place, he probably would not even get as many as 80 (36% of his total targeted 223) responding and citing reasons for *not* being able to participate. Olsson and Sheridan ([15], p. 39), who reported that their survey among Swedish fellow academics got “a disappointingly low response rate of 17.5%” with 35 completed questionnaires, noted their questionnaire was partly based on Phillipson and Skutnabb-Kangas's [51] questionnaire, which was administered to Danish scholars two decades earlier and received a nearly 50% response rate with 83 completed questionnaires. Evidence is lacking

to claim that the difference in the response rates between the surveys represents any general trend, but we probably have a telling pair of examples here.

Macfarlane [50] has insightfully discussed the “apparent decline of academic citizenship” (p. 296) and emphasized the essential role of “service” to “the preservation of community life” (p. 299). “Service in academic life”, as Macfarlane put it, “is fundamentally about citizenship inasmuch that it demands participation as a member of a community of scholars rather than simply the individualised (and perhaps, selfish) pursuit of research and teaching interests” (p. 300). Clearly, supporting fellow academics by playing the role of being their research participants, thus indirectly helping to push forward understanding of educational issues, Macfarlane would agree, is a form of service, just as “teaching observation, mentoring, reviewing of academic papers and the organisation of conferences” are (p. 299). However, institutional forces, propelled by a performative culture which emphasizes “efficiency, effectiveness and profitability” ([52], p. 17), threaten to “disengage” [50] academics from their service role. Macfarlane ([50], p. 309) called for “more explicit emphasis on the importance of the service role within reward and recognition structures” to reverse the trend of disengagement. It would be fair to suggest that, even if such structural adjustment cannot occur in the near future, intellectuals can still justifiably resist the trend of disengagement on a personal level, and, henceforth, on a community level.

7. Coda

Researchers may be taking many issues into consideration in order to maximize the chance of fellow academics’ participation: e.g., the mode of surveying (which, nowadays, is typically sending an email invitation, embedded with a link to an online questionnaire, as noted earlier), the design of the questionnaire (user-friendly and focused), the timing of administering the questionnaire, and the mobilization of personal contacts. In addition, researchers make sure the cover letter or invitation is composed professionally, shows their credentials, and connects to the target respondents in a personalized way; they would also aim to clearly state the purpose of the study, what participation in a study involves, what sorts of questions will be asked, *etc.*, all of which are, of course, also required in the application for ethical clearance. On the whole, they may demonstrate an understanding of the pressures in academia, and remarkable resilience and willingness to accommodate the target participants’ schedule. An example of a request follows:

“E-mail Request for Participants”

“I know you are very busy, but I am asking for about half an hour to interview you about intellectual property issues from an administrator’s point of view... I am willing to conduct the interview at your convenience during the next two months. ... Please reply if you would be willing to help me with this, and I’ll try to arrange a time that works for you.” ([53], pp. 154–155)

After every effort has been made to incentivize fellow academics’ participation, how many will give a positive response may be out of a researcher’s control.

Silverman [54] reminded us that, in qualitative research in particular, we may aim to turn the negative (such as the difficulty in access) into a positive factor. He said: “Remember that the beauty of

qualitative research is that it offers the potential for us to topicalize such difficulties rather than just treat them as methodological constraints. This is an issue of the creative use of *troubles*.” (p. 153) Silverman did not illustrate how “creative use of *troubles*” might be achieved. However, it should not be difficult for an experienced researcher to name a couple of examples of how this might be done. Researchers, including those education researchers who need to engage fellow academics as participants, are resilient. Still, lack of cooperation from fellow academics may defeat our research purpose, as suggested earlier in the present paper.

By the time I finished writing this paper, I had responded to all three requests from fellow academics, mentioned at the beginning of this paper. I even emailed the requesting colleague in my faculty, after responding to his online questionnaire, that I would be happy to participate in an interview at a later stage if necessary, to elaborate on my responses in the questionnaire. I am glad I have added my two cents in a few fellow academics’ research projects.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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