

Narratives of becoming a researcher: A realistic, idealistic, and self-nourishing journey

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Abstract

This narrative delineates my journey of becoming a researcher. While the trigger involved defense of my dignity, the real reasons that led me to doing research were for better teaching, and for query of the self. In the article, I integrate my language learning and teaching experiences with discussions of the native speaker fallacy, communicative language teaching and teacher culture in China, and the inadequacy of Canadian oriented TESL textbooks. I also discuss how doing research empowers me and helps me establish a professional identity. What's more, my research brings me back to my youthful idealism of speaking for the marginalized and creating a better society.

Research for dignity

How did I become a researcher? To answer the question, I need to begin with “Why did I want to be a researcher”? Answers to these questions are inter-related and outline my path of becoming a researcher.

Let me begin with the tender years of my career when I did not want to be a researcher. In fact, I did not want to be a university teacher at all. It was not an exciting, adventurous job. What did I aspire to be? An investigative journalist who would travel around the country and the world seeking truth and justice for the people. An idealist? Yes, indeed I was; but who wouldn't be at that age? However, at a time when university was free but going to university was highly competitive in China, we were assigned an “iron-bowl” job¹ upon graduation. Voilà, I became a university teacher of English—what people call an EFL (English as foreign language) teacher. However, it turned out a good profession for me. Teaching was not adventurous but quite exhilarating when I saw sparkles of excitement in my students' eyes. Their excitement resonated in me as I recalled my own learning experiences. I wanted to be a good teacher—caring, knowledgeable, and respectable. Research? What was that? It seemed irrelevant to my students and my teaching, and too abstract and too high for me to reach.

My contentment with being a good teacher lasted for five years until I was one year into my part-time graduate study. My thoughts and reflections on teaching accumulated, and my learning of research methodology intrigued me. I wrote a few articles based on my teaching and limited knowledge of the field, and got them published. Back in the mid 1990s, the western notion of research methodology was not common knowledge among university faculty in China. I pondered doing research was not that difficult?

My involvement in an innovative teaching project in my university during 1998 -- 2000 was the impetus for my journey to research. Through the design of the program,

¹ A colloquial term for a secure, permanent job paid by the government.

compilation of teaching materials, discussions with colleagues, intense work with students, and reflections of the issues, I felt a strong call for methodological and theoretical guidance. Knowing teaching alone was no longer enough.

Two incidents that hurt my pride but amplified my desire to become a researcher happened in 1996 and 2000. On both occasions—one was a research proposal discussion meeting and the other a large-scale teacher training session—two senior professors who had received their graduate education in the west commented on the lack of research skills of “us” EFL teachers. I was indignant as the arrogance in their tone was unmistakable. They were speaking to the general situation of the EFL teaching profession, where teachers were over-burdened with heavy teaching loads but insufficient support. However, the condescension was not acceptable to me. I was determined to become a better researcher than them.

After a one-year academic visit to the UK, seven years of Master’s and doctoral study in Canada, and three years into my “new” academic career, I am looking back at the path I trod, and realize that my research and teaching have never been irrelevant, and my query of the self was always a driving force for my research.

Research for better teaching

The native speaker fallacy

Back in the 1980s when I was learning English, native English speakers were rare in China, and so were authentic English instructional materials. I never saw a foreign face on my middle school and high school campus. In the university, we were lucky to have one or two foreign teachers every year, although they came from different parts of the world with different accents. Regardless, we treasured the opportunity of learning authentic English from native English speakers. However, after the initial excitement and curiosity, we always felt the same kind of mixed feelings about our foreign teachers.

They were all friendly and approachable, but they appeared not as knowledgeable as our Chinese professors. A few examples may be illustrative. Our 2nd year writing instructor from the United States told us not to ask him grammar questions as he did not know English grammar. It was our first writing course and he was teaching us how to write sentences and paragraphs. Another American instructor complained indignantly that some students asked her questions about *Canada*, a country she knew nothing about, during an intensive training course on IELTS (the International English Language Testing System). The test is accepted by Canadian universities for admissions purposes and by the Canadian government for immigration purposes. If the instructors had been Chinese, such questions would have been answered thoroughly and confidently.

The way our foreign teachers taught seemed not to be in sync with the way we wished to be taught. For example, our lovely teacher from a small British town brought to class a bag of recyclable items, such as a screw, a yogurt cup, and a paper clip, and asked us to discuss what we could make out of these. It was funny for a roomful of university students to sit in a circle with such items in hand and talk like kids. It was not considered learning, but rather, a waste of time. At college age, we wished to be treated as adults and

do work with some challenge and depth. Our intellectual capacity was obviously misjudged by the limited expressiveness of our spoken English. Another conversation teacher thought our vocabulary was not large enough for carrying on conversations, so she taught us groups of words and tested us on these words every class. In the end, we didn't practice much speaking, but memorized some new words without knowing how to use them. Meanwhile, we were learning much more sophisticated vocabulary in our reading classes. The issue was we had trouble converting what we had learned in reading and listening, to speaking due to lack of practice and colloquial expressions. Learning to speak a language is like learning to swim. The learner has to actually "do" it for real in order to turn the book knowledge into practical skills.

Comparatively, our Chinese instructors knew much better how to teach us. They also had less trouble understanding our English, or *Chinglish*. The discussions, debates, and presentations in our conversation classes involved a lot more thinking and risk-taking. The detailed reading of the original works of western literary giants in the literature class, the sophisticated techniques of translation and interpretation taught in these respective classes—everything and anything taught by our Chinese professors could be exciting and inspiring, even those "dry" phonetics and lexicology courses. Four years' university education seemed to suggest that our Chinese instructors knew how to make learning more challenging and our western instructors knew how to do the opposite.

In my own ten years of teaching, I had many students come to me and inquire how to carry on a meaningful conversation with their foreign teachers after the initial introduction, which was always accompanied with awkward silence as nobody knew what to ask next. Some of them had contradictory feelings about the fact that their foreign teachers taught them "Happy New Year" or "Old McDonald had a farm". It was fun to learn an English song, but it was awkward to be treated like children. Uncertainty of culturally appropriate conversation topics and incompatible expectations of students' intellectual needs account for such problems. However, shouldn't teachers be aware of the cultural differences in communication and teaching pedagogy before they start their positions overseas? They speak English, yes, but should that be the only qualification for them to teach?

My initial realization of the "native speaker fallacy", the misleading tenet that the ideal English teacher is a native speaker of the English language (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1994; Phillipson, 1992), did not come from the reading of critical linguistic work, but from my own learning and teaching experiences. My practical knowledge of the issue was too shallow to explain why foreign teachers were popular but ineffective, and why it was easy for them to find jobs that they were not trained to do. I needed more profound theoretical knowledge to enlighten my querying mind.

Grammar translation method vs. communicative approach

Grammar translation method (which focuses on grammatical rules and translation between the native and target languages) was the prevailing method used in my six years of middle school and high school English learning. We started with simple vocabulary, parts of speech, verb conjugations, and tenses. By the time we graduated from high

school, we had covered most of the contents one might find in an English grammar book. Our teachers mixed English and Chinese in instruction and none of them had even near native-speaker pronunciation or fluency.

Due to my love for language and my passion for learning a *new* language, and due to the fact that we were among the first families to own a home television in our town in the early 1980s, I was able to learn from the only English instructional program on CCTV, China's national television, for five years in a row, every day after school before the CCTV news, and without a textbook. I took notes for five years and when I finally got the textbooks, I no longer needed them as I could almost memorize the lessons myself after repeated viewing of the program over the years.

The program contained many episodes of native British English speakers demonstrating language use in an entertaining way, complemented by a Chinese professor's explicit instruction. I would say it was a mix of grammar translation method and the communicative approach (which emphasizes interaction as the means and goal of learning the language). I was lucky to have found this program, which allowed me a more Standard English accent (which was considered 'strange' by my classmates because it was different from our teacher's) and an early feel of non-traditional ways of teaching (which I adapted and used liberally in my teaching later on).

At university, we had professors and instructors who were educated overseas and foreign teachers from all over. However, except for our conversation or oral English classes, most of the classrooms were filled with lectures and structured exercises. Our reading and listening vocabulary were much bigger than what we were able to use in speech and writing. The communicative approach was yet to have a decent entrance to the Chinese language classrooms. And when it was introduced to us, it did not work well. Did the teachers not do it the right way, or were we inflexible in learning?

When I integrated the communicative approach in teaching, without knowing the term itself, I realized that it was very challenging to implement under the pressure of meeting the national curriculum requirements and preparing students for the standardized examinations². In addition, students were trained well to learn in the "Chinese way"—taking notes of lectures and answering questions only when called upon. They felt uneasy in a less structured classroom as spontaneous engagement was not the "norm". Moreover, speaking was not a focus in college English teaching. It was integrated in the teaching of listening and reading. Opportunities to practice oral English were limited and at the discretion of the individual teacher, who might not be fluent in speaking themselves. Furthermore, student-oriented learning might lead off the required curriculum. When given the opportunity to direct classroom learning, my students showed more interest in political and cultural issues beyond the curriculum. Addressing such issues would take a lot of instructional time. It was a delicate balance to keep.

² All non-English major Chinese university students are required to pass the national College English Test (CET) Band-4 for their bachelor's degree and CET-6 for their graduate degree. English majors have to pass their respective national exams too.

By the time I read about the communicative approach, I had already come to the conclusion that the communicative approach would not work well as long as the pressure of the standardized exams persisted. Basically, a thorough reform was needed in China's secondary and tertiary education systems. Would that happen? When? To what extent? And most importantly, should we expect the communicative approach, which was developed and advocated by native English speakers (cf. Littlewood, 1974, 1981; Savignon, 1972, 1991; Widdowson, 1978) in teaching English, to work in the Chinese EFL context, with students having very limited off-campus, authentic exposure to the language, with domestic teachers having trouble adapting themselves to the approach, and with foreign teachers barely knowing anything about Chinese learners and learning styles?

Teacher culture and innovation

The mention of teachers leads us to the next point—the teacher culture. Hargreaves (1994) defines the cultures of teaching as comprising of “beliefs, values, habits and assumed ways of doing things among communities of teachers who have had to deal with similar demands and constraints over many years” (p. 165). In other words, “it is ‘the way we do things around here’” (p. 166). According to him, teachers often work in isolated classrooms, which offer them “a welcome measure of privacy, a protection from outside interference” (p. 167) while at the same time, they also need to maintain relations with colleagues for their socialization and development.

The traditional culture of teaching was undergoing tremendous challenges in China during the mid to late 1990s, when the college English textbooks were systematically changed, the communicative approach introduced, and various innovative English teaching programs implemented. In my university, it used to be that a teacher was assigned to teach two classes of over a hundred students for two years in a row until the students finished all required contents for the CET Band-4 exam. Listening, intensive reading, and extensive reading were taught in separate classes but by the same instructor. For students, it was pure luck if they were placed with a “good” teacher for the two years.

The innovation program turned things upside down. Now each class of students had three teachers for the three courses (listening, intensive reading, and extensive reading), and each teacher had triple the number of students to teach. Students were able to compare their teachers' abilities and sneak into the classes taught by a better teacher not assigned to them. The face-level harmony among the teachers was broken. Competition caused tension. Teachers' in-service education became an issue, and so did the age-old routine of promotion by seniority. Numerous complicated issues forced the university to abort the innovation program two years later (cf. Li, 2002). Some teachers were happy to get back to their secure, “insulated and isolated” egg-crates of classrooms (Hargreaves, 1994, p. 167), at the cost of students' learning. Others were disillusioned by the reality. Was it a problem with communicative teaching? Was it a problem with the culture of teaching? Was it a problem with the existing higher education system? Or, was it a problem with innovative program design? My heavy involvement in the innovation program urged me to seek answers, solutions, theoretical guidance, and feasible practices.

Gap in Canadian oriented textbook

My teaching (not mentoring or tutoring) in Canada started in the third year of my doctoral study. This experience prompted me to write a TESL textbook geared to the Canadian context. At that time, many peers were teaching in our Bachelor of Education program. Due to the focus on Canadian K-12 teaching, an elementary and secondary classroom teaching background was a strong asset in hiring instructors. I was, to my knowledge, the only international, non-white, non-native-English-speaking instructor at the time hired to teach in the B.Ed program. Disregarding my feelings of unfairness in selecting instructors, I took the job seriously. The course was Teaching English as a Second Language.

The first problem was the textbook. I searched online and in the library, and from all major publishers to find an appropriate TESL textbook with a Canadian focus. To my disappointment, all the ones available or popular were too general to address the Canadian ESL teaching and learning concerns. Most of the books used examples from the US or the UK to illustrate points or present scenarios. I was dumbfounded by the finding. As a major immigrant country³ and with a bilingual policy, Canada has among the highest ratio of ESL population. All ESL teachers in the K-12 system and in the nationwide government sponsored LINC programs need proper TESL methodology training and a practicum prior to hiring: a Master's degree in TESL or a recognized TESL certificate is required. However, most of the TESL programs were using general textbooks that hardly mention Canada.

I managed to teach using a one-size-fits-all textbook and complemented it with the provincial ESL documents and some handouts. The students' feedback on the textbook was not positive. Something had to be done. But what could I do, as an ESL speaker myself and on a student visa in Canada? What's more, I was moving away from language teaching and my research at the time was identity issues in cross-cultural contexts. However, I could not help but ponder the possibility of working on such a book and the potential workload. I spoke with two colleagues who had been ESL teachers in Canada for many years—one even had some overseas EFL teaching experience. We decided to give it a try.

When I finished my doctoral research and graduated two years later, my ideas for this book were getting more specific and mature. At an academic conference, I caught the attention of a publisher who followed up with me and requested a proposal and sample chapter. There began our work on the book. After two years' of research, discussions, meetings, writing, and revising, and then repeated revising after numerous peer reviews, the book (Li, Myles, & Robinson, 2012) was finally published. The book addressed many of the concerns I had in teaching. There could be no closer connection between teaching and writing than this one. Again, teaching was the driving force for my research, and research was for the benefit of teaching, mine and others'.

³ Immigrants accounted for 17% of Canada's population in the 2001 Census, only next to Australia's immigrant percentage, which was 21.1% (Chua, 2002). In the 2006 Census, almost 20% of the Canadian population were foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2009). It is estimated that by 2031, between 25% and 28% of the population could be foreign-born (Statistics Canada, 2011).

Research for identity and idealism

For empowered self

Being a researcher allowed me to understand many issues that confused me when I was a teacher. As I mentioned, the communicative approach was strongly advocated in the few years before I left China. Through my teaching practice, I learned when it would work and when it would not, and why it worked sometimes and why not other times. However, it was difficult for me to articulate the ideas explicitly and convincingly. I felt like I was scratching the surface but not reaching any depth. It was not until much later in my graduate study, when I examined various approaches and methods with critical eyes, that I began to see where the proponents of the approach (Clark, 1987; Johnson, 1982; Nunan, 1989; Savignon, 1991; Widdowson, 1978) came from and why the opponents (Bax, 2003; Swan, 1985a, 1985b) disagreed. While China needs to shift from teacher-centered, test-oriented teaching method?, issues such as lack of understanding of the learning context (Bax, 2003), the need for teaching both use and meaning, the effect of mother tongue in foreign language learning (Swan, 1985a, 1985b), let alone the complicated local teaching cultures and learner needs, among many others, have to be considered. Popular methods or approaches emerge in response to the needs of certain times and contexts, but none of them are one-size-fits-all. The frenzy of pushing communicative approaches into Chinese EFL classrooms lacked rational thought and theoretical altitude. Maybe more efforts could be made to change “the system”: the unreasonable demands for English competencies in fields and professions irrelevant to language (e.g., in archeology, physical education, and chemistry), the absurd requirement of passing English tests as a pre-requisite for entering any university and for obtaining any university degree, the deficiency in EFL teachers’ on-going in-service education and support, and the ambiguous criteria for hiring foreign teachers.

A Chinese saying goes “Bystanders see more than gamesters” or “spectators see clearly while the participants are dazed”. When I was overwhelmed with teaching, supporting students, doing research, and publishing, I was a busy player of the EFL teaching game. It was only when I stepped outside of the game and had the opportunity to catch the ideas that used to race through my mind that I began to see the whole picture and to reflect thoroughly. I felt elevated to a higher platform in terms of professional and theoretical knowledge. The insights I gained through reading literature, doing research, and contemplating ideas empowered me. It was a good feeling.

For professional identity

Once I started to write again academically in Canada, and go to conferences and publish, the confidence of being an EFL/ESL professional slowly came back. First of all, the deficit in theoretical knowledge and research skills that I felt when I entered my graduate program was shrinking. The more I read, the better I knew how to do good research. My first empirical studies with ESL students became my first two term papers, which were well-received by my professors. It was encouraging. Moreover, the embarrassment of not speaking English proficiently was easing off when I was able to present myself clearly in the classroom and at conferences. I had thought my oral English was excellent while I was in China and I actually published a textbook on communication skills for college

students with a colleague (Li & Li, 1997). However, the troubles I had communicating with people in the UK almost crushed my confidence. Although I was aware of the fact that people spoke in very different accents and dialects, I could not help feeling my English skills were inadequate. Now in Canada, while I was picking up the colloquial English through daily conversations, extensive use of Standard English on formal or semi-formal occasions assured me of my language competence. While I was not a fluent English speaker yet, I felt I was on my way to becoming a researcher. And certainly I wanted to be a good one.

The path was not as smooth as I had thought. It was not an issue of personal endeavor and determination. What caused the twists and turns were other issues, such as figuring out my identity puzzles in an English speaking country, being a former English teacher, a current student, a non-native-English-speaker, an instructor of teaching-English-as-a-second-language to native-speakers of English, a visible minority, and whatever labels other people put on me (Li, 2006). There were also issues of dealing with the hidden curriculum in a western academic context (Li, 2003; Margolis, 2001), where subtle implications normally escaped me when I was busy dealing with the obvious demands of academic work. Snyder analogized the hidden curriculum as a “semiprivate matter” (1971, p. 7), and it was true. There were so many things I didn’t know or didn’t know how to ask, or knew I would not get an answer if I asked. An invisible screen separated me from the people who grew up in this culture. The *spiritual loneliness* was also caused by lack of shared cultural experiences with peers and colleagues (Li, 2006; Mukherjee, 1994) and maybe some unspoken racism and hints of linguistic imperialism that one could only “feel” but could not “tell”. The stress wore me down but also toughened me up. What were unambiguous were my growing interests and knowledge in doing research. I stayed focused.

Research is a yardstick of success in the academy. By the time I graduated from my doctoral program, I felt I was somewhere on the yardstick. My research skills improved significantly. I also noticed my *westernized*, or *Canadianized*, critical thinking skills demonstrated in the articles I wrote, which were different from the modest and implicit critical thinking skills I internalized in my own culture. Such skills gave a more powerful voice of the researcher that I was becoming than ever before. The process of research-writing-publishing was always challenging but never insurmountable. The prospect of being a qualified, professional researcher outweighed the tediousness of rewriting, revising, and re-submitting and the scrutiny of reviewers and editors.

My own struggles and puzzles along this path make me empathetic to my students who are beginning their journey. I see the importance of guiding them through the process of conceptualizing, designing, and undertaking a research project. I also see the importance of pointing out the differences in second language teaching across cultures, not simply at face level, but from historical, philosophical, and sociopolitical perspectives. For international students, awareness of the hidden curriculum and acquisition of different ways of thinking are equally imperative. It takes a lot of practice to turn the eastern inductive, dialectical ways of thinking and writing to the western deductive, logical ways (Ballard, 1991; Cortazzi, 1996; González, 2001; Nisbett, 2003; Nisbett, Peng, Choi, &

Norenzanyan, 2001). Working with students, our future researchers, makes my professional life more fulfilling.

For idealistic self

While my research interest in China was mostly for the purpose of better teaching, my interests in Canada mostly reflect my search for the self. Initially, when I wrote about the innovative project in China, I was trying, subconsciously, to position myself in the context—what role I had really played in this top-down teaching innovation, and why I felt powerless in spite of my passion and hard work. Then, I was troubled but also intrigued by the change of my identities and self-confidence in Canada. I recruited participants who were in more or less similar situations to mine. I observed myself closely while undertaking my research and analysing the data. It was difficult sometimes to strip my personal biases from what the data revealed. The findings answered my research questions, and importantly, they helped with my query of the self and the world in general. I thought people like me were in a vulnerable position in the western academy, but my involvement with immigrant-related work changed my view and the direction of my upcoming research.

When I was hosting a local spoken-word radio program, I had the opportunity to interview a refugee woman from an African country. She escaped her horribly abusive family with the help of many people. The agonizing story shocked me. I also interviewed a former ESL teacher who recounted an incident in her class back in the 1980s. A young boy with a refugee background screamed and ducked under the desk at the sight of a camera man holding an old-styled camcorder on his shoulder. The boy thought it was a machine gun. The boy's frightened eyes had imprinted on her memory for decades and the story has imprinted on my memory ever since. Later, I served on the advisory committee of the local immigrant and refugee service. I was able to meet some of the refugees in person. The service was helpful, but it could not solve all their practical problems, not to say dealing with their mental and spiritual issues. They were the most vulnerable people I ever met.

Here in St. John's, my first research projects began with ESL learners from immigrant and refugee families. Words of the children were most heart-rending when they talked about missing family members, the confusing transition to Canada, the lack of resources for living, racism and discrimination, difficulties with study, and struggles of parents. I felt the urge to do something more. If I can't solve the problems, can I at least uncover them to raise awareness? If I can't impact policy making, can I at least make some noise to draw attention? I have obtained funding for a few more research projects, all related to this population: some with children, others with adults; some looking at learning and family support, others looking at social integration and career options.

After two and a half decades, I have come back to my original ideal of speaking for the marginalized and the vulnerable, only that I work as a researcher not a journalist. I have settled down on the other side of the earth; the people I wish to help are from all over the world; and the community I'm serving is not my hometown. Do these make a difference?

No. I would rather consider myself a “global soul” (Iyer, 2000), who would call home anywhere I live in spite of the ambiguity of identity.

Research training

My narrative above has answered why I wanted to become a researcher and the internal drive of how I have reached where I am now. However, I haven’t given enough credit for the research training I obtained in my graduate programs in Canada. I published in China, yet I felt I was more a classroom teacher with some insights and ambition. I learned research methodology and ethical concerns in my Master’s program at Carleton University. The patient explanation of the ethical review process (which was unheard of to me), the invitation to publish my first term paper in our internal journal, and the encouragement of conducting a classroom action research from my professors were not only instrumental but also inspiring. There were times when I was puzzled with the “unnecessary” details required for the ethical proposal, the tedious description of the research process, and the boring particulars of the referencing style. And the writing of research papers was so rigid. My intention of being creative and metaphorical in language was not appreciated. I learned to “hedge” every claim I made and be accurate in wording. After two years’ training, I began to deem myself a researcher on occasions, although only in private. In public, I was still a graduate student, a researcher in training.

The training in my doctoral program broadened my knowledge in related fields and further honed my research skills. I almost had my own spot in the library and spent the bulk of my day there. My supportive supervisor never attempted to bind my hands and feet. I was free to go where I wanted to with my research. This sense of autonomy was also a source of motivation. I conceptualized my own theoretical framework, designed my own study, and drew my own conclusions. Such a self-driven process with gentle reminders every now and then could not be more nourishing for an independent researcher. I also worked well with “tough” professors. One “picky” professor spent an hour reviewing APA formatting style with me while offering feedback on a draft of my term paper. Another “peculiar” professor drilled me in methodology issues so I would not trip over any unforeseen questions from potential examiners. All the bits and details contributed to my overall skills in research and writing. I tried different genres of research writing using different data collection methods. I had six peer-reviewed and two non-peer-reviewed publications added to my CV during my doctoral study. By the time I graduated, I was confident that I was a researcher with insights and depth.

Beyond the university, going to academic conferences is another way of expanding my research repertoire. Learning from other graduate students, junior and senior researchers was always eye-opening. I observed effective presentation skills and tried to improve mine. I heard interesting quotes and tried to memorize them. I learned of pioneer studies and tried to read them. I found unique research methods and tried to figure out how they would work for my projects. In addition, socializing with colleagues was exciting and reassuring. Although many times those friendly faces faded away in memory as the conferences and our conversation became more distant, some of them indeed left an evident mark in my mind. It was always pleasant to meet “an old friend” at a conference, and it was always comforting to feel connected with people in the same line of research.

Research is the connection between the past, the present, and the future. Research is also a bridge between reality and the ideal. While each project of mine is about reflections of the past, or examinations of the present, it has implications for the future. While each project is grounded in reality, it is oriented to make the future more ideal. I may be “brainwashed” by “communism” or by the Chinese collective culture, but I do believe that everything we do today is to make for a better tomorrow, and everything we do for ourselves should be beneficial to others. Being a researcher gives me the power to do so.

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