

FRAGILE DOCTORAL COLLEGIALITY UNDER PUBLICATION INVOLUTION: CHINESE SOCIOLOGY PHD STUDENTS' COLLEGIAL PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do sociology PhD students in China enact and experience collegiality with their doctoral peers?
- How does publication involution shape these practices and experiences?

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INTRODUCTION

Doctoral Publication in China:

- Four-year doctoral programme
- Nearly all research universities require ≥ 1 high-quality paper beyond the thesis (as first author or co-authored with a supervisor)
- Many require 2, some even 3

“Involution”:

- Originating in anthropology: increased labour input without corresponding growth in output, leading to stagnation
- A recent buzzword in China: a social dilemma where people compete for limited resources with increasing effort yet fail to achieve meaningful outcomes

Publication Involution:

- Researchers boost publication metrics (primarily quantity) to compete for limited resources without yielding substantive research innovation

Peers in Collegial Interactions

- Other PhD students expected to engage in daily interactions and communication with the participants, including: fellow cohort members; members of **Shimen** (the supervision group); PhD students in the same institution; acquaintances pursuing a PhD at other institutions

RESULTS

Collegial supports (+)
Strains on collegiality(-)

Social Collegiality

Social Interaction

- (+) More social activities within Shimen
- (-) Limited interaction with cohort peers (primarily due to research differences)
- (-) Interaction can be hindered by publication record differences, peer comparisons and publication anxiety

Friendship

- (-) Peer relationships can be harmed by competition for resources (primarily within Shimen) and publication record differences
- (+) Some report no peer competition and maintain friendly relationships

Emotional Collegiality

Sense of Solidarity

- (+) Peers provide encouragement, trust and a sense of belonging
- (-) Many experience peer jealousy
- (-) Some experience awkwardness (when talking with less productive peers), feelings of surprise or unfairness, or a lack of solidarity caused by publication record differences and competition

Social Well-being

- (-) Almost all feel peer pressure and anxiety (sometimes motivating), with some also feeling shame or devalued
- (+) Alleviating stress through peer sharing

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK & METHODOLOGY

Doctoral Collegiality (Brown, 2021)

- Professional collegiality: Mutual academic assistance and interdependence
- Intellectual collegiality: Recognition of peers' contributions through shared knowledge
- Social collegiality: Developing friendships beyond professional relationships
- Emotional collegiality: Sharing emotional experiences and building social solidarity

Research Design

- 56 in-depth interviews with 14 PhD students from seven top Chinese research universities
- Focused on daily communication, peer relationships, academic practices, and emotional experiences related to peers and publications
- Part of a narrative study on Chinese sociology PhD students' publication journeys under a 'publish or perish' culture
- Thematic analysis with MAXQDA

Professional Collegiality

Collaborative Practices

- (+) Many engage in peer collaboration
- (-) Collaboration can be impeded by competition and first-author requirements

Mutual Professional Support

- (+) Peer support in writing and publishing; reciprocal learning; some initiate peer-support activities
- (-) Some peers hide research progress due to competition

Intellectual Collegiality

Research Communication

- (+) Ideas exchange and give/receive feedback on papers (primarily in Shimen)
- (-) Limited research exchange beyond publication progress, partly due to competition and fears of idea appropriation (mainly among cohort)

Sharing Publications

- (-) Most are reluctant to share their publications due to modesty or fear of peer jealousy

Recognition for Publications

- (-) Few receive recognition for their contributions

CONCLUSION

- For sociology PhD students in China, collegiality manifests more within their Shimen (supervision group) than across cohorts, with individual differences.
- Under publication involution, all four dimensions of doctoral collegiality can become fragile, as **publication pressure, peer comparison, competition and jealousy** can erode relationships

“I feel that differences in publication performance are also a big obstacle to building a truly equal, friendly and harmonious environment for communication. Say you’ve published one article and someone else has published five — it’s really hard to find common ground because your situations are just so different. ...And of course, there’s definitely a competitive aspect to it. I do want to have interactions and communication with others, but I can clearly see the barriers... In the end, we’re still a group of people competing with each other, because we all have to submit and publish, and the opportunities are limited.”(L)

• Reference: Brown, K. (2021). Cultivating a ‘collegial turn’ in doctoral education. Teaching in Higher Education, 26(6), 759–775. Scopus.

