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Abstract

Aim To explore the concept of originality in doctoral research and outline ways in which doctoral candidates can begin to identify, formulate and articulate their individual contributions to knowledge.

Background Originality is a major feature of doctoral research but considerable confusion exists regarding what can and cannot constitute originality in the PhD and how the contribution to knowledge can be demonstrated clearly.

Data sources This is a discussion paper.

Review methods A review of relevant, published literature relating to originality in the PhD.

Discussion Many doctoral candidates merely outline why they believe their work to be original, instead of demonstrating critically how and in what way their

research makes a meaningful contribution to the body of knowledge.

Conclusion The concept of originality in the PhD is complex and multi-faceted. Identifying and conveying originality in doctoral research takes considerable time, contemplation and effort. This process is, however, integral to the PhD itself, and the skills acquired are essential for post-doctoral development.

Implications for research/practice A good doctoral thesis should clearly outline the different ways in which the work is original. A succinct, focused, critical appraisal of the specific contribution to knowledge is preferable to an exhaustive list.

Keywords Original, originality, PhD, doctoral, research, contribution to knowledge, dissemination

Introduction

WHILE THERE are disciplinary and institutional variations, the hallmarks of most doctorates are generally acknowledged to be an autonomous body of work that makes an original contribution to knowledge (Gill and Burnard 2012). Original research is important for many reasons, but primarily because it results in the production of 'new knowledge', which can inform the topic area and discipline.

However, the concept of originality is a significant concern for most doctoral candidates, and consequently is often a source of uncertainty and anxiety. So what exactly is originality and how can it be properly demonstrated? While much has been written on how to achieve a PhD, relatively little guidance (either in the literature or by most universities) is given to candidates, supervisors and examiners about how originality can be clearly

defined, demonstrated and objectively assessed. This can be problematic for all those involved in the PhD process.

The aim of this paper is to outline what originality is – and is not – and how doctoral students can begin to consider framing their work appropriately to ensure that their contribution to knowledge can be clearly demonstrated and recognised.

What constitutes originality in the PhD?

The concept of originality is commonly associated with something truly novel or unique, but how does this relate to doctoral research? Many studies have explored what doctoral examiners from various academic disciplines look for in a PhD and how they recognise originality. These studies highlight various commonalities in most disciplines regarding what constitutes originality. For example, a PhD

can be original in a number of areas, including the approach, topic area, hypotheses, methods, data, findings or theories (Phillips 1994, Winter *et al* 2000, Mullins and Kiley 2002, Delamont *et al* 2004, Cryer 2006, Phillips and Pugh 2010, Wisker 2012).

While a variety of definitions exist, Phillips and Pugh (2010) outlined 15 key areas that they believe can constitute originality in the PhD. This list (Box 1) is by no means exhaustive but covers the most salient aspects.

Problems associated with originality

While the concept of originality is undoubtedly specific to a discipline, it is arguably so nebulous that it is almost meaningless to most PhD students (Gill and Burnard 2012). This complexity is probably due to the multifaceted nature of originality in this particular context. The lack of a single, definitive definition or framework can cause considerable concern for many doctoral candidates, as they subsequently struggle to comprehend how originality can be properly established, demonstrated and evaluated. The problem is perhaps further compounded by the lack of institutional guidelines and the fact that there is often little or no discussion between students and their supervisors about what constitutes originality in the PhD (Phillips and Pugh 2010). Students' anxiety may therefore be due to uncertainty regarding how they can achieve the required standard, since they probably do not know what it is (Phillips 1994).

Another common concern is the degree of originality required. Confusion often exists in this

area because original research is often interpreted as that which has never occurred before or is truly ground-breaking (Locke *et al* 2007). Although this type of study can, of course, lay claim to originality according to the above definition, most PhDs do not achieve this standard (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Students undertaking a pre-determined PhD studentship, especially if it forms part of a programme of work related to that of the supervision team, may find it difficult to clearly demonstrate an autonomous contribution to knowledge. This aspect may be less visible in those countries where PhD students are expected to assist their supervisors in their work or be apprentices conducting research in their department on a designated topic (Dunleavy 2003). However, many examiners may well assess candidates' research in relation to that of their supervisors (Guetzkow *et al* 2004). It is therefore imperative for such students to take appropriate 'ownership' of their research.

Is this really original?

A common problem associated with claims of originality relates to naive, unsubstantiated statements in the thesis, with doctoral candidates merely outlining why they believe their work to be original. This is often best exemplified by process type statements, such as 'no one has ever done this before'. For example, 'no one has ever conducted a phenomenological study that explores men's experiences of breast cancer before'.

Even if correct, such standalone statements usually indicate a limited understanding of the concept of originality and fail to critically demonstrate how, and in what way, the study meaningfully adds to the existing body of knowledge. For example, without further information, the above statement does not demonstrate how men's experiences of breast cancer compare and contrast to women's experiences and/or other relevant, analogous research. The reader of such work will therefore not get any real sense of what is now known, as a result of the research, which was not known before.

Failing to clarify such issues is potentially problematic; if students cannot concisely compress their arguments regarding originality, this can signify 'flabbiness' in their methods, theories or structures, and if examiners cannot pinpoint the original contribution, they may not award a PhD (Brabazon 2010). This is a relatively common problem in many theses initially presented for examination, but is rarely the result of students conducting research that is not, in some way, original; instead,

Box 1 Key definitions of originality in the PhD

- Setting down a major piece of new information in writing for the first time.
- Continuing a previously original piece of work.
- Carrying out original work designed by the supervisor.
- Providing a single original technique, observation or result in an otherwise unoriginal but competent piece of research.
- Having many original ideas, methods and interpretations all performed by others under direction of the postgraduate.
- Showing originality in testing somebody else's idea/theory.
- Carrying out empirical work that hasn't been done before.
- Making a synthesis of things that haven't been put together before.
- Using already known material but with a new interpretation.
- Trying out something in this country that has previously been done only elsewhere.
- Taking a particular technique and applying it in a new area.
- Bringing new evidence to bear on an old issue.
- Being cross-disciplinary and using different methodologies.
- Looking at areas not previously explored in a particular discipline.
- Adding to knowledge in a way that has not been done before.

(Phillips and Pugh 2010)

it is usually because the original contribution to knowledge has not been conveyed adequately.

Some important considerations for doctoral students

To address the issue of originality effectively, doctoral candidates first need to establish what is unique about their research and then determine how this can be clearly explicated. However, while important, simply doing something original is not in itself necessarily enough to obtain a PhD: students also have to demonstrate, in a scholarly manner, how their research adds to the extant body of knowledge and what the potential wider implications of this new knowledge are for the subject, discipline and related research.

There are, therefore, several important factors to consider during this critical process, and these are outlined below.

Establish what is original Working critically and creatively to determine what is unique about one's research takes considerable time and effort. Regular, constructive supervision during this process is essential, as supervisors can help to formulate and refine the original contribution and subsequent development of the theses. It is, however, important to keep an open mind during this iterative process and candidates should therefore critically explore several potential areas of originality, some of which will invariably be discarded along the way (Dunleavy 2003, Murray 2006). This stage is vital and should not be rushed, yet these areas are sometimes overlooked, particularly towards the end when candidates are eager to submit for examination.

When considering how best to identify and frame the individual contribution to knowledge, it is prudent to explore some relevant, good-quality doctoral theses (supervisors should be able to advise accordingly) to establish how other PhD candidates have addressed this issue. By thinking critically and pragmatically about the research of others, it is often possible to locate one's work and realistically place its contribution to the discipline, without handicapping oneself by harbouring over-ambitious plans, thinking that there is a need to satisfy evaluative criteria that are unrealistically demanding (Delamont *et al* 2004).

It is also wise to commit ideas to writing as soon as practically possible. The very act of writing can make an important contribution to the development of ideas and is often integral to the critical, thinking process (Dunleavy 2003). Developing a coherent, scholarly contribution to knowledge usually requires significant contemplation, reflection and refinement. Originality should therefore be seen

mostly as a cumulative achievement – it rarely arises from a single insight or the Archimedean 'stroke of genius' (Dunleavy 2003). Taking some 'time out' from crafting this particular discussion, as and when appropriate, can also be helpful, as it often assists in the further development of erudite theories.

Recognise that there is no absolute formula Given the complexity of the concept, when formulating the proposed contribution to knowledge it is important to recognise that there are no absolute criteria, prescriptive principles or definitive solutions to follow. While this can be challenging and frustrating for many doctoral students, particularly those who wonder, 'Is this really a PhD?', determining the ways in which work is original is precisely what a PhD is about. The emphasis therefore should not be on the 'right answer' but on realising that there are many relevant possibilities for originality in doctoral research (Cryer 2006). When candidates understand this, they are usually in a better position to develop the kind of feel for their own and others' work that comes with growing experience and confidence (Delamont *et al* 2004).

The main challenges for research students are therefore to consider critically how their research makes a meaningful contribution to knowledge and how this information can be best conveyed. Taking a 'scatter gun approach' is unwise, as the original aspects of most PhDs are likely to be relatively narrow, focused and precise, and usually depend on the research and the candidate.

Be realistic There are many common problems associated with originality in the PhD, such as making overly ambitious, poorly supported claims to originality. It is imperative that any potential assertions of uniqueness are logical, realistic, rigorous, properly substantiated and, where appropriate, supported by relevant evidence.

However, while most doctorates' contribution to knowledge is likely to be cumulative, it is possible that aspects of some may be so unique or potentially controversial that students might need to consider carefully how best to present such information in the thesis. There are inherent risks associated with pursuing a highly original theme, not because it is bad but because it is potentially unsafe and some supervisors may advise their students to proceed cautiously with work that might be regarded as 'extremely original' (Holloway and Walker 2000, Cryer 2006). This does not mean that students should be untruthful, but some caution may occasionally be required when presenting particular aspects of the research.

'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize' A common concern of many doctoral candidates is how much of a contribution to knowledge they have to make. Recognising how high the bar is set is a useful starting point and can often allay fears associated with trying to achieve an unrealistically high standard. As Mullins and Kiley (2002) rightly pointed out: 'It's a PhD, not a Nobel Prize.'

A good PhD should be theoretically exciting and original, without necessarily being earth-shattering (Delamont *et al* 2004). It is important for candidates to acknowledge that while the PhD is expected to make a contribution to knowledge, most doctorates will not be so innovative that they will redefine the subject area or discipline (and nor should they). For most students, the actual contribution to knowledge will probably be incremental and this is usually sufficient.

Frame work within the existing relevant evidence

New and existing knowledge are inextricably related, so demonstrating what is new requires an indication of what was previously known. Situating and integrating one's work critically in the existing, relevant literature can help to ensure that any novel contribution to knowledge is both apparent and clear (Dunleavy 2003, Snowden 2006, Phillips and Pugh 2010). Even if nothing comparable exists, which is unlikely, there will undoubtedly be a similar 'nearest neighbour' paper or papers that will help to put the research into a more meaningful context.

A common problem with some nursing PhDs is that the reviewed literature is so narrow, focused and discipline-specific, it often lacks sufficient context to make a meaningful contribution to the evidence base. Candidates should not assume that what they are doing is new, simply because they have not read the wider literature (Brabazon 2010). 'Under-readers' are often emboldened by their own brilliance, simply because they do not know how little they know (Brabazon 2010). PhD students should be fully aware of the existing state of knowledge in the area (Holloway and Walker 2000).

Indicate clearly the contribution to knowledge

On reading the thesis, examiners should not have to guess what the contribution to knowledge is: they should be told clearly, concisely and convincingly, as and where appropriate. Any such claims should be properly introduced, well written, logically presented (Dunleavy 2003, Murray 2006), understandable and properly substantiated. It is also important to make it easy for the examiners, so the original contribution should be referred to

in the abstract and where appropriate thereafter (Brabazon 2010).

There should be a succinct, dedicated section towards the end of the thesis where candidates can set out in an unambiguous, scholarly manner what was known about the topic before submission of the thesis and what relevant, new information has been discovered as a result of the research (Gill and Burnard 2012). This could help to demonstrate critically how the research makes an original contribution to knowledge and, where appropriate, how the work could inform the subject area, professional practice and/or further related research (Lee 2010, Gill and Burnard 2012).

Do not put the cart before the horse Establishing how and in what way one's doctorate makes a meaningful contribution to knowledge and the associated, potential wider implications of the research usually occurs at the end, not the beginning, of the PhD. Doctoral research often evolves significantly over time. As a result, the final thesis may bear little resemblance to the initial research proposal. Attempting to define the original aspect of one's research at the outset is therefore unwise, even if there are early indicators about what possibly makes the work unique, as it inevitably limits the subsequent critical, iterative process associated with identifying and demonstrating the 'so what?' aspect of the research.

Supervisors should also discuss these complex issues with their students at the outset, to help moderate expectations. For example, it can be useful to outline to new doctoral students that while originality is its crux, a PhD develops progressively and is often associated with interpretation of the research and identification of its proposed contribution to knowledge, rather than conducting 'ground-breaking research'.

Disseminate where possible While perhaps not essential, disseminating relevant work in good quality, peer-reviewed journals is advisable during the PhD. Examiners often view publication favourably, since the work will already have been peer reviewed and found to be acceptable (Mullins and Kiley 2002). Dissemination at conferences or in journals can also help to further refine ideas and theories, and writing for publication can improve one's scholarly skills.

Any relevant publications should, where appropriate, be cited in the thesis and the full paper included in the appendix (Gill and Burnard 2012). It is essential to ensure that any relevant publications that arise as a direct result of the PhD

can legitimately be claimed as the candidate's own. For example, a referenced paper in which the candidate is listed as the fourth author, when the work has clearly originated from his or her PhD, often raises concern about intellectual property and may well lead to a difficult discussion at viva.

Do not neglect other important elements While important, originality is not the only quality indicator on which the PhD is judged. Consequently, when making an overall assessment, most examiners will consider the whole thesis rather than just the sum of the component parts (Phillips 1994). Common problems associated with questionable doctoral theses include claims of originality in a methodologically flawed study, a rigorous study with no clear indication of originality, and a poorly written or constructed thesis. Even if the work is potentially original, aspects of the research may be so fatally flawed that they compromise the entire study.

The final thesis should be logically coherent, with a pertinent, critical literature review, clear study aims, a relevant and rigorous methodology, appropriate critical analysis (of the research and that of others), and a logical, well-structured argument with justifiable conclusions (Johnson and Burnard 2002, Mullins and Kiley 2002). Attention to detail is also important, so it is essential to address any typos, erroneous references, and spelling and grammatical issues, and to ensure the style and format are consistent (Brabazon 2010). A poorly presented thesis often indicates more

fundamental problems and may subsequently result in the examiners questioning the overall quality of the research.

Conclusion

There is consensus among doctoral examiners that the PhD must make a contribution to the body of knowledge in the relevant discipline (Denicolo 2003). However, conveying originality in doctoral research poses challenges, as the concept is complex, multifaceted and open to interpretation. Therefore, in the doctoral assessment, quality may be more easily recognised than defined (Morley *et al* 2002).

Nonetheless, we hope that this paper helps to demystify the concept of originality in this context. To this end, it is important for doctoral candidates to recognise that identifying and articulating a cogent contribution to knowledge is a progressive, incremental process and is individual to each PhD. While it is likely that superficial, unsubstantiated claims to originality will be explored further at viva, a good doctoral thesis should clearly outline the different ways in which the work is original. A succinct, focused, critical appraisal of the specific contribution to knowledge is preferable to an exhaustive list that lacks sufficient rigour. There can be little doubt that this particular aspect of the PhD cannot be 'taught' or easily explained, but has to be learned. While it may often seem arduous to many students, this critical process is integral to the PhD 'apprenticeship' and the acquisition of skills essential for further post-doctoral development.

Online archive

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Conflict of interest

None declared

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