Originality in doctoral research: what is it and how can it be demonstrated?

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Presentation overview

- Background and aims
- What constitutes originality in doctoral research?
- Some common definitions of originality
- Key problems associated with originality
- Is this really original?
- Some important considerations
- Conclusion
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).
What constitutes originality in doctoral research?

- The general concept of originality
- Related educational research
- Studies can be original in a number of key areas, including:
  - the approach, topic area, methods (e.g. procedures, tools or techniques), data, findings or theories (e.g. developed, refined or reinterpreted)
- Phillips and Pugh (2010) outline some key areas of potential originality in the PhD:
Some common definitions of originality

- Providing an original technique, observation or result
- Showing originality in testing someone else’s idea/theory
- Carrying out empirical work that hasn’t been done before
- Providing a new interpretation of existing evidence/theories
- Being cross disciplinary and using different methodologies
- Looking at areas not previously explored in a particular discipline
Key problems associated with originality

- The concept is multifaceted, nebulous and discipline specific (Gill and Burnard, 2012)
- No definitive definition or guidelines exist
- Students and their supervisors may have limited discussions regarding originality
- How original do you have to be?
- Pre-determined PhD studentships
Is this really original?

- Common problems relate to naive, unsubstantiated statements:
  - For example, ‘no one has ever conducted a phenomenological study, exploring men’s experiences of breast cancer’
- This usually indicates:
  - a limited understanding of the concept
  - an inability to demonstrate critically how and in what way the research meaningfully adds to the existing body of knowledge
- Failing to pinpoint the original contribution is potentially problematic
Some important considerations

- Determine what is unique and how this information can be best presented:
  1. Establish what is original
  2. Recognise that there is no absolute formula
  3. Be realistic
  4. ‘It’s a PhD, not a Nobel Prize’ (Mullins and Kiley, 2002)
Knowledge generally moves incrementally

Source: www.pinterest.com
Some important considerations

5. Frame your work within the existing, relevant evidence
6. Clearly indicate your contribution to knowledge
7. Don’t put the cart before the horse
8. Disseminate where possible
9. Don’t neglect other important elements
Conclusion

- Doctoral research must make an original contribution to knowledge.
- Identifying and articulating the contribution to knowledge is generally a progressive, incremental process and unique to each doctorate.
- The individual contribution to knowledge should be clear, logical and focused.
- Your contribution to knowledge will probably be incremental.
References


- Paper adapted from: Gill P, Dolan G. (In Press) Originality and the PhD: what is it and how can it be demonstrated? Nurse Researcher