

Commentary - Originality in doctoral research

Originality is a key ingredient of doctoral research in every discipline. Doctoral students are required to demonstrate how they have contributed new knowledge to their discipline and will use their doctoral theses and, in some countries, oral examinations to demonstrate originality to their examiners. If originality is not present the doctorate cannot be awarded. In this themed edition of 'Nurse Researcher' two authors consider originality in doctoral research from two very different perspectives.

In the first themed paper Mandy Edwards (2014) examines originality in doctoral research from the student's perspective, highlighting the considerable complexities that exist for students to demonstrate originality and for examiners to assess when originality is present. The challenge for doctoral students is to ensure that examiners are left in no doubt that a thesis exhibits the necessary level of originality, which requires a shared understanding of what constitutes originality. This is a complicated process because, as Edwards (2014) argues, originality in doctoral research can be demonstrated in up to nine different ways (Phillips and Pugh 2010), creating the possibility that students, supervisors and examiners might focus on different issues when judging the presence of originality. Doctoral students must, therefore, write their theses in such a way that examiners are convinced that sufficient originality is present.

Some students have the additional advantage of having an opportunity to further convince examiners of their originality through an oral examination. It is interesting to note that doctoral students in some countries don't have an oral examination and, therefore, it is even more important that their theses are able to convince their examiners.

It is clearly important that doctoral students understand the need for originality but Edwards' (2014) suggestion that students might be uncertain or anxious about this aspect of their doctorate is less than convincing and might reflect the quality of supervisory support rather than the process itself. There is much in the conduct and reporting of a student's research, and in the presentation of that research in the thesis and oral examination, that should be considerably more challenging to students than highlighting the existence of originality. From day one doctoral students know that

demonstration of originality is a requirement of their research and, throughout their studies, their supervisors will challenge them to plan and conduct research with a clear focus on this requirement. Towards the end of their doctoral studies originality should no longer be in doubt and the student has ample opportunity to share this with their examiners through their thesis and oral examination. It might be more challenging to demonstrate other criteria of doctorateness, including demonstration of intellectual quality, confidence, independence of thinking, enthusiasm, commitment and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances and opportunities (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2010). These all need to be considered and it is this that makes undertaking doctoral research such a challenge and why a doctorate is considered the pinnacle of academic study.

In the second themed paper Austyn Snowden (2014) suggests that the process of seeking the necessary research ethics approvals can have a negative impact on doctoral research and the potential to demonstrate originality. Snowden (2014) argues that this is largely the result of the 'gatekeeping function of risk-averse (research) ethics committees', which can prevent students from undertaking ethically complex research projects. Snowden (2014) highlights the important role that research ethics committees play in helping students to clarify the details of how they will conduct their research but, interestingly, Snowden (2014) then suggests that the research ethics committee's primary objective, of protecting research participants from harm, creates three further problems for researchers.

It is suggested that the first problem is that research ethics committees might not be best positioned to comment on the most appropriate way to answer a research question. This relates to an age-old debate about whether research ethics committees should consider the ethics of an application alone or whether they should also consider the science of a proposed research project. Whilst Snowden (2014) is right to suggest that research ethics committee might not always be familiar with the proposed research design (the 'science'), this does not mean that the committee should not want to know that the science is right. There is a growing understanding, amongst research ethics committees and researchers, that allowing bad science to be conducted is unethical because it wastes valuable

resources and people's time. Most research ethics committees, however, would not wish to be in a position where they are required to judge the science of a project but what they do need is to be convinced that the science is right. The easiest way to do this is to provide an external and independent review of the project from an expert in the field. If a positive review of this kind were provided then it would be uncommon for a research committee to further challenge the scientific merit of a proposed research project.

Also implied in this first problem is the idea that research ethics committees can lead student researchers to undertake research projects that might be less ethically challenging. For example, by avoiding the recruitment of vulnerable populations. Whilst there may be occasions where the ethical review process might result in changes to the study population, it would be unusual for a research ethics committee to insist that such changes are made. Like researchers, research ethics committees are bound by a number of ethical principles and the principle of justice dictates that research should be undertaken with due regard for fairness (Gelling 1999). In the above example, it would be unfair and unjust if vulnerable groups were excluded from research from which they might benefit. It is inevitable, however, that there will be additional challenges when recruiting particularly vulnerable groups to research but it is not the research ethics committees or the ethical review process that should be held responsible for this.

The second problem highlighted by Snowden (2014) is that the ethical review process might 'minimise the originality of research over time' by seeking to protect vulnerable populations. This appears to be based on the argument that both researchers and research ethics committees are seeking to support research that does good (beneficence) but also does no harm (non-maleficence). Snowden (2014) suggests that research ethics committees make their judgments focusing on the latter principle. There are two main problems with this argument. First, it is not possible to separate beneficence and non-maleficence when conducting research involving human participants. There will inevitably be a balance and it would usually be wholly appropriate for research ethics committees to look unfavorably on research projects where the balance is tipped in favour of an increased risk of harm. The second problem with this argument, and linked to the first, is the suggestion that the risk of harm can ever be eliminated in any research.

No research involving human participants is without risk but researchers too often will attempt to argue that their research is without risk.

The third problem highlighted by Snowden (2014) is that making an ethical judgment can be difficult and, as a result, there can be inconsistency in the outcomes of ethical reviews. Rather than treating this as a criticism of ethical review, this should be accepted as an inevitable part of the ethical review process. Attempts to standardise ethical review have repeatedly failed and it is now generally accepted that some variance in ethical decision-making is inevitable (National Research Ethics Service 2014). What doesn't appear to be appreciated is that members of research ethics committees, especially those representing the National Research Ethics Service (NRES) in the UK, are now better trained and more experienced, in ethical review and the conduct of research, than ever before.

There are clear challenges for doctoral students and these two themed papers have highlighted just some of them. What isn't made clear in these two papers is the vital role that experienced doctoral supervisors can have in supporting students to recognise and overcome these challenges. For example, a supervisor who is an experienced researcher and a current member of a research ethics committee should help to ensure that a doctoral student would understand what is expected of them at all stages in their research. What these papers don't highlight is the need to provide greater training and support for doctoral supervisors, which will contribute to enhancing the doctoral student experience.

Leslie Gelling, Reader in Nursing, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, UK.

Maria Aurora Rodríguez Borrego, Department of Nursing, Faculty of Medicine and Nursing, University of Córdoba, Spain.

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