# Putting the philosophy into PhD

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## Introduction

Novice researchers undertaking a PhD are exposed to different research methodologies, methods, and related philosophies. The emphasis is on developing knowledge and skills as they progress through the research process. Doctoral studies are usually considered research training, or an 'apprenticeship' in research. With the emphasis on investigative processes, the place of philosophy in the Doctor of Philosophy can be overshadowed. This paper will discuss the role of philosophy in the Doctor of Philosophy, why this important consideration challenges the candidate and, through personal reflection, provides reassurance for those beginning their doctoral journey.

## What is a PhD?

In some countries, in the disciplines of medicine, veterinary science and dentistry, the title of 'doctor' is honorary and may be adopted upon completion. Formally, the title is assigned to students who complete a doctoral degree. The term 'doctoral studies' incorporates two higher degrees that result in the awarding of this title; a Doctor of Philosophy and a professional doctorate. There are traditional views about the differences between PhDs and professional doctorates but the lines are becoming increasingly blurred as the award structures change over time.

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A Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) award is generally considered to be one of the highest academic qualifications available (Johnson, 2001; Bourner et al., 2010). In academic terms, a PhD is considered to be higher degree research training and signals the beginning of a research career. The alternative professional doctorate includes a smaller research element supported by coursework components. A traditional PhD requires the candidate, under the guidance of a supervisory team, to complete a significant piece of individual research, which upon completion is approved by an expert panel including external examiners (Maxwell, 2011). Despite the differences between the professional doctorate and the PhD, some similarity exists between the two in the way that the student inevitably is required to undertake some personal philosophical searching. The degree to which this is undertaken will be influenced by the degree to which research forms the content. That is, undertaking higher degree studies with any element of research will include some philosophical searching in the building of a doctoral identity.

Several authors differentiate between the types of doctoral studies as being that the PhD prepares the future researcher, whereas the professional doctorate provides the experienced professional with research capacity (Neumann, 2005; Pearson, 2005; Pearson et al., 2008; Bourner et al., 2010; Fenge, 2010). However, Maxwell (2011), Malfroy and Yates (2013) and Edwardson (2010) go further to challenge this perception with the argument that over recent years, the differences between the two approaches to doctoral study have become more vague with a number of PhD graduates working in their chosen field of practice (Pearson, 2005), and those with professional doctorate establishing careers in academia. These authors highlight the similarities between doctoral programs and relate the phenomena to the continuing development of the professions. Ultimately, the inclusion of the word 'philosophy' in the title of PhD, implies a greater emphasis on this concept. Given the intent of the discussion that follows, this paper focuses on the relationship between philosophy and the traditional PhD.

In spite of the reference to philosophy in the title of the PhD, there is little discussion in the literature about the relationship between philosophy and the study of research at this level. It would be reasonable to assume that a considerable part of the PhD journey is dedicated to philosophy and its incorporation into this significant piece of research. Anecdotally, it is also reasonable to assume that even those embarking on a PhD struggle with truly understanding the role of philosophy in a PhD.

## Philosophy in a PhD

Birks (2014) defines philosophy as "a view of the world encompassing the questions and mechanisms for finding answers that inform that view" (p.18). This emphasis on questioning is expanded in the definition provided by Crossan (2003) as an "uncomplicated and innocent way of questioning which produces confusion and instability in assumptions" (p.47). He goes further to say that philoso-

phy is the most basic level at which research methods should be considered and that philosophy drives the interrogative processes that generate the research questions and inform the research.

Philosophy comprises both ontological and epistemological components. Ontology refers to the individual's existing assumptions about reality and how they view the world. Epistemology is how an individual believes that knowledge is gained. Together, ontology and epistemology describe what the researcher knows and how they gain knowledge (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Howell, 2013).

As a lens through which we view the world, philosophy allows researchers to identify knowledge gaps upon which to base research and the method with which the gaps are filled (Mills and Birks, 2014). Thus philosophy and research are inextricably linked in knowledge generation. A PhD is basic research training and acknowledgement of an individual philosophy is fundamental to each person's PhD journey. A researcher's philosophy or the way they view the world will undoubtedly influence the way in which a study proceeds. Philosophical questioning informs identification of the research problem and selection of research method and thus is an essential part of ensuring that the researcher stays true to their chosen method (Evans, 2013). This covert element of research permeates all aspects of the project and may in fact be more readily identifiable in its absence/lack of acknowledgement than in its presence. Identifying one's philosophical position is therefore one of the first and most important tasks for the researcher. But, how do you know what you don't know?

## The student experience

We have established that undertaking qualitative research at a doctoral level requires the candidate to adopt research methods that align with their philosophical position. The philosophy underpinning the research design and the philosophical positioning of the researcher receives limited attention in the literature with few authors addressing it on a level easily understood by novice research students (Crossan, 2003; Mills and Birks, 2014). To prepare a research proposal, the candidate must reflect on who they are in the world and what their world-view is. Embarking on qualitative research can, however, often raise more questions than answers. What is my philosophy? Where did it go? How do I find it? How do I know what it looks like? Oh, what have I got myself into?!

Furthermore, in some cases the alignment of philosophy to a specific research design is almost a sacred bond and students who inadvertently disrespect the bond may potentially become alienated and disillusioned. Conversely, students who feel that they are not following their own path can foster feelings of not owning their PhD which can ultimately lead to non-completion (Johnson, 2001). Therefore in the interest of self-preservation, students tread very carefully to avoid invoking the ire of experienced researchers. A negative experience at this early stage may reinforce the 'imposter syndrome' that many students feel, turning an exciting learning opportunity into an arduous task from start to finish (Maxwell, 2011).

The identification of an individual philosophy has the potential to be lost in the process of developing a strong research design and result in confusion for the student. Knowledge acquisition in the early stages of a PhD includes developing a clear understanding of research methods applicable to the chosen methodology. Reading a multitude of texts and journals opens a whole new world of knowledge and ways of thinking. Traditional texts about research processes align specific methods with underpinning philosophies. More recently, however, some researchers have challenged the need to adopt a specific philosophy when using a particular research methodology, instead encouraging new links and the opportunity to interpret research through different lenses (Holloway and Todres, 2003; Burbank and Martins, 2009; McCreaddie and Payne, 2010; Dowling and Cooney, 2012; Hall et al., 2013; Mesel, 2013; Mills and Birks, 2014).

Learning about and discerning between research designs creates one of the first major learning curves for the candidate: choosing a study design that is suitable to address the research question and that is consistent with the researcher's philosophy. Ultimately, the philosophy should come first (Crossan, 2003). In reality, the areas of interest for most researchers generally reflect their personal philosophy (regardless of whether this is articulated) and thus such alignment occurs as a natural progression. Those whose personal philosophy leads them to see the world as comprised of singular truths for example, will seek to prove such truths through the use of the scientific method. Others whose philosophical values and beliefs has them see the world as constructed through interaction are more likely to lean towards qualitative approaches that permit investigation from this perspective. The lead author's philosophy, research methodology and process is outlined in Box 1.

**Box 1 Adele's PhD**

Adele is a nursing and midwifery academic with over 25 years experience in the profession. Her PhD is: Role modeling by nurse academics: a grounded theory study. This reflects her interest in holistic learning experiences and the development of nursing students' professional identity.

Grounded theory is based on the belief that knowledge is generated. Therefore the answer to this research question could be best investigated using this methodology.

During the early stages of methodological and philosophical discovery, Adele found that symbolic interactionism aligned with both her personal philosophy and with grounded theory.

In any event, embarking on a PhD requires the candidate to take a leap of faith: faith in his or her own ability, and in the wisdom of the supervisory team. Regardless of the candidate's academic background, the prospect is daunting and results in confronting beliefs and values in a process of self-assessment. As described by Maxwell (2011), most students experience some "sense of being an imposter" (p.25) and have an "ongoing struggle to balance feelings of despair and inadequacy with a dogged determination to succeed" (p.28). Maxwell also likens this to Goleman's 1996 work on Emotional Intelligence to "keep the distress from swamping the ability to think" (p.34). The "dogged determination to succeed" must prevail to allow a sense of belonging and ultimately a sense of significant achievement.

## Pulling it all together

In most cases, the candidate, through immersion in the literature and subsequent reflection, is able to articulate a philosophy that resonates with their personal values and beliefs. Publications about philosophy range from the simplistic to the extremely complex. If the wrong philosophy is grappled with at the wrong time during the candidature, there is a danger of the "feelings of despair and inadequacy" (Maxwell, 2011, p. 28) that may become overwhelming. An example of the lead author's experience of finding her philosophy is presented in Box 2.

The example in Box 2 outlines the experience of many higher degree research students, who suffer from 'impostor' or 'fraud syndrome' (Jones, 2009; Peternelj-Taylor, 2011), as alluded to by Maxwell (2011). First described by Clance and Imes in 1978, impostor syndrome has been linked in the health professional literature to nurses, novice writers and students (Legassie et al., 2008; Jones, 2009; Peternelj-Taylor, 2011). When beginning a PhD within the nursing discipline, many such students are novice writers and students. Authors who have written about impostor syndrome in these contexts offer suggestions to overcome the potentially disabling effects of the syndrome. The first step is to recognize what it is and acknowledge it – a process that is aided by reflective writing. Seek supportive and constructive feedback – the supervisory team provides that. Take risks and forge ahead – that is the PhD journey: keep moving forward, put ink to paper and write. And ultimately - think positively.

Indeed searching for a philosophy upon which to base a research study opens the door to a new ways of thinking and understanding. The necessary reflection that this process engenders fosters a growing confidence in academic ability, a belief in the ability to conduct a research project of relevance, and commitment to providing new knowledge in an area of interest. Putting the philosophy into PhD is almost a misnomer. Finding your philosophy in your own PhD is a more accurate title. It will align with a formal philosophy described in the literature, but your philosophy is the key. The challenge is to find it then see what door it opens.

## Conclusion

Philosophy is undeniably a central pillar underpinning research design. However, prior to developing research projects, many novice researchers have not previously had reason to identify their own personal world-view and individual philosophy. Embarking on a significant piece of independent research can be overwhelming in itself, let alone the journey of self-analysis, self-awareness and situating oneself in the world. Despite the potentially confronting process of identifying an individual philosophy, it is an essential first step in the research process and demands appropriate attention at the very beginning of any research project, particularly one with such significant professional ramifications as the PhD. The light-bulb moment when you find the philosophical view that resonates with you is truly spectacular. At that time you start to believe you actually belong here and that you are not a fraud after all.

**Box 2 Adele's Story**

In my experience of searching for a philosophy I found that I related to the philosophical perspective of symbolic interactionism. The supervisory team guided me to Charon's (2010) work, which I read again and again, delighting in the new knowledge. Through my reading I was lead to the work of Blumer (1969) with whom others felt an affinity. I tried (I really did!) early in the philosophy reading, to read Blumer but I just did not get it. This brought about another challenge to feeling unworthy of joining such esteemed ranks of higher degree research scholars.

As the PhD progressed, I kept reading as much about symbolic interactionism as I could by a range of authors. Again, I thought about Blumer. Every author referred to his work as seminal and profound so eventually I found the courage to tackle it again. So I did. I went in prepared for hard labour and to my great surprise; I understood it, setting off a light-bulb moment of nuclear proportions. It made sense, a lot of sense. Charon (2010), and I thank him for it, gave me the basis to understand and the confidence to step off. The works of Charon do not dumb down the concept of SI, merely his writing style and explanations worked for me at the level I was at that time. Incidentally, his work continues to be the backbone of my thinking as I move slowly through the learning journey.

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