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Over the past few years, I have thought a lot about this particular issue. I don't think I have an answer, to be honest, because I really don't know what counts as a contribution to knowledge in doctoral work. I suspect this means different things in different areas of learning. Maybe for a scientist there is more pressure to say something original? Or are there fewer? Do your doctoral thesis have to say something no one is saying (or very few of them)? Is this what matters, in general, as a contribution to knowledge? And what knowledge do you have? For what purpose? I think some of the answers to these questions begin to form when you make a decision on a research subject and you start narrowing the theoretical basis for your research, which becomes the lens through which you see your (and many other peoples) studies. You start working, anyway, why you want or should do this research and where it fits into the area in which you work. What body of knowledge and why. And depending on the questions you want to answer and the theories and methods that you choose to use, you could potentially make a greater or lesser contribution to this body of knowledge if the contribution means something original or not-of said that sheds new light on these questions or the use of these theories or techniques in studies like this. This is something I have taken a contribution to knowledge to mean and it is a big question. There are a few things you have to do with your doctoral thesis in order to just get your thesis done, ignore impressing the hell of your experts and proving yourself a worthy degree. You should be able to read with a good amount of skepticism and be able to criticize, question, summarize and synthesize ideas and arguments; you should be able to write not only well, but also convincingly and with flair, I think; you should be able to create a research design that is guided by theory (which you had to understand and connect to a coherent structure that can carry you in data collection and analysis sequentially), and you should use this design to collect data ethically and organize it logically; and then you need to analyze this data in stages, connecting to the theoretical framework to find answers and create a language for your reader to use to interpret that data the way you are going (and the theory guides you) (see Bernstein 2000; Maton 2013); and finally you have to come to conclusions that show not only what you understand what you wrote about, but also, and here's a kicker, how what you did affects your area of research. So going pretty tough just get all the pieces in place and relate to each other before you have to tell the reader A what? And now what? Your research. I must say that I have really struggled with with two questions related to this idea of contribution to knowledge: so what? And now what? So many times, especially at the end I had to firmly shush the voice in my head saying: No point in your research. It's already done. You don't say anything new here. No one wants to read this stuff (and the like). I was very concerned that the voice was right and that I didn't really say anything that people wanted to read; that my work was not in any way, even small, challenging or advancing knowledge or understanding in my field. I'm still wondering if the voice is right sometimes. I think I'm interested because a lot of this contribution is at the PhD level. PhD work seems to be much more important than the work of MA, although many MAs are likely to do more interesting research than some PhDs. Maybe it's the skill level that they'll provide for you if you succeed, or what it says about your ability to do even more important post-doctoral research and work? I'm not sure. What I have realized, however, is that originality in social sciences is tough. I think the most that many graduate students can hope for is to pick a angle on a particular probably well-known problem that few people are really looking at in-depth, and say something that provokes thinking, and that shows that they have what it takes to do more interesting and sound research as they grow into their post-document careers. A friend told me that the PhD is an exercise, albeit quite complex, applying theory to a problem using some form of data (empirical, etc.) and achieving sound and hopefully an interesting conclusion. This simplifies the PhD process, but it has helped me keep things in perspective when the voice (above) becomes very loud. My doctorate doesn't have to be the equivalent of E=mc<sup>2</sup> to be good enough, I'm contributing to the knowledge by joining the conversation, claiming voice and position, and being brave enough to argue for it. I'm not saying something that no one has ever said or thought of, and I'm not inventing anything new. But I'm in this field now and I've shown in my thesis (I hope) that I'm capable of doing research at this level and growing further. And maybe that's good enough at the moment. This is perhaps one of the biggest questions for many PhD candidates. Candidates know that they have to make an original contribution to knowledge, but many are vague about what it means, how to explain what they have done and how significant their contribution is. Before I go any further, I'm going to direct everyone to Mullins and Keelie's absolute barnstormer article. This is a doctorate, not a Nobel Prize. Their research on what experienced experts are looking for in PhD is excellent. Since this post meta-knowledge post on how to think, I go through my whole thought process too. What I'm going to say is came up in a coaching session with a late-stage candidate in my current day job at La Trobe, but it merged some of the things I've been telling people for years. In the session, I drew this on a white board: A lot of things added as we talked, and as I more fully explained what I was trying to say, and in the end, the advice was a bit of a mess. So I made a quick version of it in PowerPoint (which is great for creating flow charts). It's a heuristic rather than a complete system, that is, it's a quick way to start thinking about a massive and messy problem, not something that's designed to address all possible aspects of it. This means that your own research may not quite fit this model, but I firmly believe that it is easier to change the model than to start from scratch! (And if some of the terms sound like they came out of Bloom's taxonoom educational goals, it's because they did! It's also unpacking what the IMRAD structure is trying to do for STEM minuses in a way that's deeper and more widely useful.) With all this aside, let's get the answer. These are different things that can be learned in scientific research, and what you should do with them, and how they can be an original contribution to knowledge. Knowledge: The bottom line is that knowledge is all that scientists know in their field. You can make an original contribution to knowledge by helping nurses understand what sociologists have known for 20 years (or vice versa). Or you can bring what practitioners have known for years to the academy. You may only bring information to people who speak German or Vietnamese in English. Interpretation, analysis, evaluation: For almost everyone, their interpretation of what they found (your argument) would be unlike other people's arguments. Even if you're one of hundreds of people looking at penicillin or Romeo and Juliet, your reading will be subtly different from other people, you'll put it all together in a slightly different way. In some cases, this section is the most original; you may be the first person to use a certain theoretical lens or methodology for researching this information. You can also be the first researcher to take a dataset or archival document and analyze it for thesis or publication. (When we talk about discoveries in archives, that's usually what we mean.) Info: Information will put the data in order. In your dissertation, you turn a lot of data into meaningful knowledge. Cataloging, coding, reviewing or organizing facts will be a significant portion of your research and thesis time. It can also be a significant contribution to knowledge if the information is not organized earlier. It may also be a reshuffle of facts in order to tell a new story or to include new interpretations. Facts, data, experience, imagination, wisdom, opinion: These are all things that you can know, they can be discovered, recorded, found. There is value in all of them, although some have more value in some disciplines than others. (Imagination is an integral part of the production of creative research-led practices; opinion is essential in marketing analysis; data are relevant to quantitative research). You can be the first explorer to count the number of Aedeomyia venustipes mosquitoes in this swamp in south NSW, or part of a team that uncovers the archaeological remains of a Victorian factory outside Bendigo. You may be the first researcher to ask this social group about their reasons for participating in the Marshal of the Arts; or you may have written a novel as part of your doctorate. Any of these knowledgeable can be your significant contribution to knowledge. And all these kinds of banner should be in your research. You will need to go and find your evidence, your facts or data or case studies or creative work. You will need to publish your basic evidence, through quotes, tables, graphs or transcripts, or where you collect secondary evidence on your topic in an understandable manner. You will need to interpret, analyze and evaluate the evidence you have gathered and organized. What does that mean? How reliable is it? Is that better than the other evidence? What can we do with it? And you will need to have your work within what is already known in your field and explain how much it is. In some of them these steps are clearly divided, your methods, results and discussion are different chapters. In others, you will move from presenting basic evidence, to analyzing and evaluating within a single sentence. In most myoks, for sections such as Introduction, Literature Review and Conclusion, you do all these things at once. In the Lit Review, for example, you organized what you read in an understandable manner, explained and evaluated how it fits into your particular research project, and used it to put your project in the context of your discipline. I hope this will help you think about your initial contribution to knowledge and be clearer about what knowledge you use in your thesis at different points. Articulating this can also help you determine what's going wrong if, for example, your supervisor gives you feedback that you're "not analytical enough", or "the data section is a bit thin". If you want slides to use in your own classroom/learning, here are related. 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