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A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE OF DELIMITATIONS IN THE DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Aim/Purpose	The purpose of the research was to examine the function and application of delimitations—what the researcher includes and excludes in a study—in the dissertation process. The aim was to map the delimitations process to improve research, rigor and relevance of findings, and doctoral completion rates using a formalized and standardized approach applied flexibly.
Background	All research is bounded whether formally defined or not. Unlike limitations, which are issues which the researcher addressed after the completion of a study and cannot control, delimitations are what a researcher includes and excludes to make a project manageable and focused on the research question. Yet, there was no research identified which specifically discussed delimitations. Researching the structure and utility of delimitations in educational administration dissertations provided a systematic analysis of the formation of the scope and boundary of research in doctoral studies.
Methodology	The structure of delimitations in dissertations were examined using descriptive quantitative statistics and a qualitative thematic analysis from 28 universities. The first stage included delimitations from 30 dissertations. Triangulation was conducted using the findings with a training set of delimitations in 15 dissertations with a rubric generated from the primary sample.
Contribution	The thematic analysis presented a description and interpretation of the nature of delimitations and a systematic framework to improve the research process in dissertations. Mapping the delimitations process gave a detailed portrait of internal and external characteristics which could aid doctoral students in completing the dissertation. Doctoral attrition rates, poorly completed dissertations, and lack of relevance or applicability of results need remedied. Furthermore, the delimitations rubric provided a systematic method to focus communities of learners around a common goal.

Findings	Findings suggested doctoral students used delimitations haphazardly and lacked a systematic application to research. Three major themes emerged from the delimitations sections: rituals, equifinality, and pragmatism. Topics within delimitations sections centered around two axes: the internal topics of sampling procedures and factors/variables and external topics of research design and conceptual/theoretical framework.
Recommendations for Practitioners	Poorly understood and developed delimitations negatively impacted findings in dissertations, completion rates, and future research skills of doctoral students. By applying delimitations to a design of research framework in a community of learners, doctoral students and dissertation chairs could improve the dissertation completion process and improve research results using a *Delimitations Evaluation Rubric.*
Recommendations for Researchers	Developing a rules-based process with a formalized and standardized process could give researchers a way to evaluate and plan the dissertation process. Developing and applying rubrics to delimitations could serve as a conduit to effective mentoring, feedback, and empowerment.
Impact on Society	Improving doctoral completion rates in a timely manner would be beneficial to students' long-term and personal interests. A well-defined delimitations process could improve the dissertation, and strengthened dissertations could add to the research base.
Future Research	Delimitations are listed in one section, but the scope and boundaries are often fragmented and disjointed throughout a dissertation. By examining complete dissertations for delimitations, there could be further insight. Expanding rubrics as a tool to build a community of learners could develop a holistic approach to doctoral education.
Keywords	delimitations, dissertation, education research, thematic analysis, doctoral education

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