

## Theses and Dissertations – similarities and essential differences

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The PhD is a research degree. Unlike a Masters or professional degree, it signals to the world that you have accomplished something significant in the domain of research and the creation of new knowledge. That's not necessarily a better thing to have done than treat a patient or represent a client or even repair a car – but it is a different kind of thing, and needs to be respected as such.

The PhD dissertation is unique in its emphasis on establishing its continuity with the whole body of research in the subject area, not only past and present research but research yet to come. In practice, this means that the major aspect that distinguishes a PhD dissertation from a Masters' or DBA-type thesis is the degree to which it succeeds in opening up more interesting researchable questions than it resolves.

Both projects may begin with similar kinds of research questions; but the difference revolves around this distinction:

- the thesis goes on to answer these questions and present the answers
- the dissertation may answer the questions, or it may fail to find conclusive evidence one way or another; in either case, it presents and uses the answers as the basis for formulating further questions, rather than as statements having value in and of themselves.

The source of this divergence between the thesis model and the dissertation model lies in the degree to which the research question is based in a body of theory about similar kinds of questions, and the degree to which the results are subsequently interpreted in terms of that theory and generalized to a population across which the theory is supposed to apply.

To illustrate: both kinds of studies might start with a similar sort of question, something like "what factors account for cooperating but different organizations deciding to share applications software?", and both could address this question with a similar study of several cases in which such cooperating organizations did or did not come to the decision to share. For the thesis, it would be sufficient to say that the question is interesting because particular organizations are losing money because their partners won't share, and it is sufficient to answer the question by studying how some specific decisions were made in particular cases. Results might consist of formulating several recommendations to both parties as to how to improve their communication and understanding of the situation.

For the dissertation, however, it is critical to describe the question as a specific instance of a more general set or sets of questions, perhaps relating to the nature of collaborative

decision making among populations of organizations, or the processes by which organizations chose mission-critical technologies, or maybe both. The question is then reinterpreted in terms of the categories employed in the theory. The assessment of the actual relationship between measurements is interesting more for what it would allow us to say about the relationships between the theoretical concepts than for its applicability to the specific situations studied.

Say that a theoretical proposition of interest is that decisions are more collaborative when the different parties share common criteria of effective performance than when they use different criteria. The dissertation study would then be interested in finding measures for "criteria of performance" that had enough in common with such measures that had been used in other studies in the same area – perhaps defined in terms of a similar set of dimensions or characteristics — that one could reasonably argue that they were studying a shared phenomenon. We would then want to find comparable ways of measuring "degree of collaboration" and "degree of shared criteria" in each of several instances of possible collaborative decision making. Whatever relationship we can detect between these two measures (perhaps tested statistically, perhaps not – it really doesn't matter) is then inferred to apply to the more general class of collaborative decisions.

The findings and discussion sections of each document also reflect their different emphases. A thesis would appropriately conclude with a finding such as "it's important to share your information about what matters to you, and here are some recommendations as to how these two companies could do it better." A dissertation, however, would phrase the finding more in terms such as "collaboration in decision making involving multiple organizations is positively related to similarity in performance criteria employed by the different decision makers;" it would then go on to use this finding as a basis for formulating more questions such as "what is the critical degree of similarity required?" or "are there kinds of organizational structures that facilitate or impede this relationship?" or "do resource constraints affect the relationship?"

The keys to formulating a good dissertation are thus to see:

- your findings most importantly as instances of more general phenomena,
- your detected relationships as evidence of the probable existence of relationships that you haven't directly measured,
- and your study as primarily a trigger for new questions rather than a vehicle for resolving existing questions.

Think along these lines and your dissertation should fall into place, if not easily, then at least with a comforting thud when it does.