

Who Are They? Redefining Demarcation of Research Participant Characteristics and Related Conceptualizations

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ABSTRACT

In any research that involves people, whether as respondents or participants, demarcation of their characteristics is crucial for necessary context. These can include their roles (e.g., patient, caregiver), relationships (e.g., partner), and demographics such as age range, [dis]ability, ethnicity, gender, language, race, socio-economic group or geographic region. Yet, despite this need for precision, terminology used for demarcation is often treated as intuitive (“y’know”). For example, age demarcations seem to be obvious but are often laden with vagueness, lack of standardization, and/or acknowledgement of differences in age ranges. Some demarcations might also be influenced by country norms or by disciplinary interpretations (e.g., legal vs medical). Considering the emphasis on respect for diversity and the need for rigor in research it seems timely to open a discussion of the many questions to be answered when demarcating characteristics of research participants. Using examples, this panel will explore some applications and definitions of demarcations.

KEYWORDS

Age; Ethnicity; Gender; Research participants; Terminological clarity

INTRODUCTION

When planning a research project or instructional event and subsequently reporting of findings and outcomes, it is conventional practice to specify the people who participated in surveys as research respondents or as collaborators in co-design projects in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, language, geographic location, role, relationship or other distinguishing factors (Pickard, 2017). Although some ethical advisory boards/committees may object against requesting such personal detail, there are journals e.g., in the health sciences, whose author instructions stipulate that they will not publish articles without clear detail on the research participants. Using cancer as example, it is fairly common to see titles stating ‘elderly cancer patients’, ‘men/women/children/youth with cancer’ without clear distinctions of how gender and age is interpreted. Sometimes age categories are given, but often without consideration of the complexities covered by a term such as ‘elderly’ or even ‘youth’ or ‘emerging’ or ‘young adults’ or ‘children’ (Young, et al., 2019). There are many other examples that can be given e.g., when reporting studies on visual disability, blindness (Kleynhans and Fourie, 2014), hearing impairment or people living in rural or urban areas. Providing statistics e.g., for age ranges for children might add some clarity, but such detail is not reflected in titles, abstracts and keywords that influence on whether a paper is studied in further detail and used in related research.

PANEL GOALS

This panel intends to increase awareness of the vagueness and ambiguities in demarcation in research when stating the characteristics of the actors and how that guides research (data collection, analysis and interpretation). Although focusing strongly on age, other examples will also be noted and more are to be solicited from the audience’s input.

PANEL FORMAT

This panel brings together academics from four countries who recognize the need to address the plight of vague and ambiguous demarcations of participants and their distinguishing characteristics. The moderator (Ina Fourie) will present background for the panel and why it is timely to ask questions about how we define people. She will also introduce the panel members and explain the format of the panel (**8 minutes**). This will be followed by four 8-minute presentations (**32 minutes**) and a conclusion (**5 minutes**). A further **45 minutes** will be used for audience engagement. **Total: 90 minutes**

PANEL CONTENT

Background of the Panel Topic, Rationale, and Panel Introduction. Ina Fourie

The moderator will explain the need to ask questions about terminological clarity or lack thereof in the demarcation of people participating in research, how we describe their characteristics in contexts, challenges with differences in interpretations, insufficient awareness of gaps in demarcation terminology and categories. She will explain the goal

of the panel and mention some examples other than those that will be discussed in more detail by the panelists e.g., in studies with people with special needs or disadvantages (Kleynhans and Fourie, 2014). She will also introduce the panel members before they proceed to share their perspectives on contexts, and challenges in different demarcations.

Elements of Context – the Actor and Their Identity, Ethnicity, Race. Naresh Agarwal

Naresh Agarwal will introduce the ‘elements of context’ framework (Agarwal, 2018), which demarcates the context variables studied in information behavior research into seven elements. He will discuss how aspects of the actor can be more stable or changing with time. How does this relative stability or change affect our understanding of research participants’ ethnicity, race, and identity (Agarwal, 2009)? Does ethnicity mean genetics, geography, nationality, or language? Drawing from the Contextual Identity Framework in Agarwal (2018), he will discuss how identity can be viewed differently by oneself individually, as part of a group, and by those looking from the outside, including researchers. Using an example from Sikkim, India (Agarwal, 2023; Paljor and Agarwal, 2024), he will highlight how othering and exclusiveness continue to challenge diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) efforts (Griffen, 2021) in parts of the world, and what it might mean for researchers.

Preciseness in Demarcation: Why Should We Do It and How? Val Nasset

Searching the literature within library and information science (LIS) for a specific demographic can be challenging due to the often broad and general nature of the designations of groups. Certainly, this is indicative of the complexities inherent in the categorization of humans, however, over-generalization can result in ambiguity, creating difficulties for retrieval of documents specific to certain groups, and even misinterpretation of findings (for example, applying the results of a study on copyright law conducted in the US to another country). The latter example highlights the need for more precise demarcation of such things as location within titles so that users are aware of the context of such studies. Yet even as one calls for more specificity in denotation, compounding the problem is the fact that even within broad categories, there often appears to be disagreement regarding the terminology to be used, often resulting in multiple terms for the same group (e.g., older adults, seniors, elderly). This presentation will discuss the importance of, and difficulties in being more precise in terminology when constructing research titles and abstracts to allow for better clarity and findability by users, while at the same time making sure to consider important concepts such as inclusivity and decolonization of language.

Contextualizing Age Appropriate Research with Children in Terms of Level of Development and Socioeconomic Environment. Theo Bothma

Information literacy is a common topic for research, covering the full range from theory, to curricula, training, needs of a variety of professions and age groups, including young children (Grgić and Martinović, 2024; Kerslake and Hannam, 2022). Data are usually gathered through questionnaires and/or interviews, which are often re-used by numerous researchers. Curricula and training for school children are adapted for the specific age group. However, there is not necessarily any homogeneity within a specific age group, and the cultural and socioeconomic environment and level of development should be considered when researchers develop a research or training program. This will be illustrated by referring to young children from a Canadian perspective and a perspective from deep rural South Africa.

Older Adults, the Elderly, or the Silver Generation: Ambiguity Across Cultures and Disciplines. Anna Mierzecka

A wide array of terms closely related to the concept of ‘older adults’ exist, such as ‘senior citizen’ or ‘retirees’. Some labels, like ‘elderly’, are often viewed as pejorative, reductionist, or even ageist (Falconer and O’Neill, 2007), yet they continue to be widely used in scholarly research, as evidenced by 2,837 results in the Web of Science Core Collection index by this term. Additionally, these descriptors lack precision; ages for ‘elderly’ range from 60+ (Mansour, 2021) to 75+ (Orimo, et al., 2006). ‘Retired’ can signify individuals aged 65 for women and 68 for men in New Zealand, in Saudi Arabia, 47 and 59 respectively. Aging can be viewed through various dimensions: physical and psychological (often medical), as well as economic or social. Consequently, there is a pressing need for more accurate and value-neutral terminology.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE AUDIENCE

After the presentations, the moderator and panelists will engage with the face-to-face audience, inviting them to share their ideas, experiences with the demarcation of participant characteristics. If the audience group size allows, small break-away groups will be formed to discuss the questions for 30 minutes. Each group will nominate a person to give feedback (15 minutes). Audience input will be summarized by the moderator and shared via email with the audience. Initial questions to stimulate the discussion include:

1. How do we prevent arbitrary, subjective demarcations that complicate the use of research findings?
2. How do we define age groups (e.g., differences between younger and older adults) and other demarcations such as race, gender, disability?
3. How do we reflect and tighten demarcations in titles, abstracts and keywords of research output?

4. Which criteria/guidelines/definitions do we use for demarcations e.g., of age groups?
5. How do we acknowledge finer nuances in differentiation e.g., between older adults, the elderly and retired people?
6. Which disciplines can enrich our understanding of differentiation and demarcation e.g., age groups, health care, law e.g., disabilities?
7. Which other examples of demarcations lacking terminological clarity can you think of?

At the conclusion of the session, the moderator will summarize the outcomes of the panel discussions. A more detailed summary will be shared via email.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

By the end of the panel discussion, the audience will have increased their understanding of the need to consider the demarcation of target groups with greater care and to address concerns for terminological clarity and to acknowledge the diversity in interpretations. The audience would be aware of the need to consider examples other than those mentioned in the discussion.

PANEL MEMBER BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Moderator: Dr Ina Fourie is a Full Professor, former Head of the Department of Information Science and Chairperson of the School of Information Technology (iSchool), University of Pretoria, South Africa. Ina held positions in the leadership of the ASIS&T Executive Board (2019-2023) and Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) Standing Committee (2016-2022). She is currently Chair Elect of the iSchool Organization Board and a Co-Chair of the Research and Supervision Section of the European iSchool Region. Her research focuses on information behavior, especially health information behavior in cancer, palliative care, grief and bereavement.

Dr Naresh Agarwal is a Professor and Director of the Information Science & Technology Concentration at the School of Library and Information Science at Simmons University, USA. He is a Past President of the Association of Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T). Naresh's research area is information behavior and knowledge management. His first book 'Exploring Context in Information Behavior' was published in 2018. His second book was published in 2021 as 'You know the glory, not the story' internationally and 'Engineering to Ikigai' in South Asia. He has been a keynote/invited speaker at workshops and conferences in several countries, including the US, UK, China, France, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Japan, and South Africa. You can learn more at nareshagarwal.com and projectonenessworld.com.

Dr Theo JD Bothma is Professor Emeritus and contract professor in the Department of Information Science at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He is the former Head of Department and Chairperson of the School of Information Technology (iSchool) (until his retirement at the end of June 2016). His current research focuses primarily on aspects of information literacy, e-lexicography and digital humanities.

Dr Anna Mierzecka serves as an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Journalism, Information, and Book Studies at the University of Warsaw and is a member of the Laboratory of Media Studies. Her areas of expertise include academic and health information behavior, social and digital inclusion, public and academic librarianship. She has spearheaded various research initiatives, partnering with organizations such as Google Poland, the Polish Ministry of Economic Development, and Orange Poland S.A., and academic institutions including Vilnius University, Saxon University of Applied Sciences, and Oslo Metropolitan University.

Dr Val Nasset recently retired from the University at Buffalo's Department of Information Science as an Associate Professor. Now living in Ontario, Canada, she is still active with her research in User Experience and UX design where she has developed a new participatory design methodology, Action Partnership Research Design (APRD). She also continues her work with the Beginning, Acting, Telling (BAT) model which focuses on the intersection of information behavior and information literacy instruction for elementary school students. Val is a past editor of the *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Science*, is on the editorial boards of *Library & Information Science Research* and *The Indexer*, and reviews for several journals in the LIS field.

CONCLUSION

Clear, mindful demarcation of the characteristics of people participating in research, whether as respondents or participants (also referred to as actors in contexts) is essential to improve research rigor. More attention should be paid to the complexity of characteristics in any project and the need to acknowledge diversity in interpretations. Age, identity, ethnicity and race are important. There are, however, many other demarcations to consider.

GENERATIVE AI USE

We confirm that we did not use generative AI tools/services to author this submission.

AUTHOR ATTRIBUTION

First author: conceptualization, invitation of other panelists, formulation of background, purpose, alignment and audience interaction, editing of final submission. All other authors wrote the sections where their name appears; they will present this. They all reviewed and gave editing feedback on the final version.

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