
Pp. xi + 174 ISBN 1412981255

Reviewed by Mary E. Gardiner & Michael Kroth
University of Idaho, Boise

*Reason & Rigor* is a research guide focused on assisting novice and seasoned researchers to reflect on, critique, and create their study’s conceptual framework. Students in particular, the authors claim, frequently confuse conceptual frameworks (CF) with theoretical frameworks (TF), literature reviews, and reflexivity or positionality of the researcher. Sharon Ravitch and Matthew Riggan, both faculty at the University of Pennsylvania

Graduate School of Education (GSE), collaborated on this book which offers a substantive contribution toward improvement of quality in research, particularly for doctoral dissertations.

The purpose of the book was to clarify what a conceptual framework is and how it is used in research. The rationale was that researchers often fail to adequately conceptualize their research prior to embarking on studies and fail to reflect on and use the conceptual framework to generate a meaningful research study. We were drawn to write this review because so many of our own students struggle with questions about conceptual frameworks, what they are and their purpose, and how they are similar to or different from other terms like those mentioned above.

“Conceptual framework” is defined by the authors as an “argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 7). The conceptual framework of the book Reason and Rigor (2012) is comprised of ideas from constructivist theory, the authors’ own research experiences, and published studies on research methods, in particular Marshall and Rossman (2006), Maxwell (2005), and Miles and Huberman (1994). Constructivist theory explains that experience is constructed by the individual researcher using past knowledge as a lens to build new knowledge and experience. Prior experience allows the person to interpret and view the current experience by constructing new meanings. To illustrate the use of conceptual frameworks in education research, the authors use exemplars in the work of four distinguished researchers.

Some researchers may conflate conceptual framework and theoretical framework. However, Ravitch and Riggan insist the theoretical framework is a sub-component of a larger conceptual framework (p. 8). The three primary components of the conceptual framework, according to the authors, are: (1) Personal interests meaning the researcher’s vested interests, epistemological or philosophical commitments or biases leading to the inquiry; (2) Topical research including prior empirical and other published scholarly literature on the topic which the researcher is investigating, and also broader research including policy, government, foundation, not-for-profit or
advocacy organization publications; and (3) the *Theoretical framework* which can be found in the formal theories of scholarly literature selected for the research or created by the researcher to illuminate some aspects of the conceptual framework (pp. 10-13).

Ravitch and Riggan suggest the CF is present in the seven stages of the research process that they identify. The authors particularly emphasize the importance of the literature review to help define and justify and research and guide the entire research process. Stage one is identifying a research problem which may arise in the real world or by reading existing literature which suggests a problem for investigation. Stage two, conducting the literature review, should be thorough and extensive. Stage three involves the researcher writing research question(s), stating the problem and purpose of the study, which may change as the researcher learns more about the research topic. Stage four indicates the selection of an appropriate research method, given the problem and purpose of the study. Stage five includes the design of the study as a whole including sampling, methodology, timeline, and budget. Stage six represents conducting the study itself, including institutional review board approval, data collection, analysis, and writing. Stage seven, the final stage, refers to the presentation, publication, dissemination of new knowledge, and in some cases actions or interventions indicated by the research.

The book itself is organized by seven chapters, with each chapter explaining what a conceptual framework is, how it is constructed, and then used throughout all stages of the research process from initial design through presenting and publishing findings and conclusions. In other words, the conceptual framework is a necessary “guide and ballast” for scientific and rigorous research (p. 135). Chapter 1 "Introduction" outlines the thesis of the book that empirical research needs a conceptual framework (CF) and is frequently under-conceptualized or missing. Researchers misuse, use interchangeably, or conflate terms which have distinct definitions, including conceptual framework, theoretical framework, literature review, conceptual model, and theory. Chapter 2 "Why Conceptual Frameworks" provides a convincing rationale for why research requires more systematic attention to conceptual frameworks. The authors explain the conceptual
framework is a necessary tool guiding all aspects of empirical research throughout the research process. The conceptual framework guides the research problem, purpose, research questions(s), literature review, methods, positionality of the researcher(s), analysis, interpretation, significance, and recommendations.

The next four chapters illustrate Ravitch and Riggan’s thesis through previously published studies. Chapter 3, "Excavating questions: Conceptual Frameworks and Research Design", presents the research of James Spillane, a well-known policy analyst. The article focuses on how school administrators view teacher learning as part of standards implementation reform. The iterative nature of developing a conceptual framework and utilizing it in research design and implementation is illustrated. Spillane's CF arose from his prior research, demonstrating the connections between the researcher's knowledge and literature. Chapter 4, "The role of the conceptual framework in data collection and fieldwork", illustrates sociologist and participatory action researcher Michelle Fine's research on Muslim American youth identity. Three main components of a conceptual framework are reinforced in the Fine exemplar: (1) personal interest (researcher identity); (2) topical research (what was studied) and (3) theoretical framework (how the research is studied; which lens is used to examine the topic). The interplay between these three elements of personal interest, theoretical framework, and topical research is discussed. Finally, the research context of sociopolitical influences on the research in micro and macro contexts are considered. Chapter 5 "Conceptual frameworks and the analysis of data" features the work of Frederick Erickson, a recognized educational anthropologist. Erickson's work is revealed as an iterative, reflexive, recursive process guiding all aspects of research.

Chapter 6, "Expanding the conversation, extending the argument", featuring the research of Margaret Beale Spencer and colleagues shows the interrelationship between a theoretical framework within participatory action research of Phenomenological Variant on Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) and the broader conceptual framework in which this research was situated. The researchers encountered surprises during the research process, confirming the importance of staying open to new
discoveries and the iterative, reflexive, recursive nature of research. It would have been helpful for the authors to be more explicit here regarding the difference between the conceptual framework and the theoretical framework and the surprises evident in research that transformed the outcomes.

Chapter 7, "The conceptual framework as a guide and ballast", synthesizes the arguments from across the four research article exemplars provided. Conceptual frameworks are explained as the overarching master architect of a research design, similar to the foundation and framework of a house. Based on the ideas and concepts embedded in the conceptual framework the research can be conducted with reason and rigor. The conceptual framework informs the research problem, purpose, methodology, findings, and conclusions. Even the significance of the study and its limitations are informed by the conceptual framework, the authors argue. The CF shows why the research matters, how it matters, and the limitations of the research. Moreover, the conceptual framework can be seen in the analytic concepts used in the findings and threaded throughout the entire manuscript. If the conceptual framework were removed, the research house may crumble as it would no longer have a solid base or frame on which to stand.

One way to envisage the conceptual framework is to consider it a thesis or argument, perspective, or point of view. However, it is more than a perspective, as it is grounded in research experience, not merely one’s opinion or consideration. The book reminds the reader of the critical role of literature and prior research on a topic. As the authors point out a frequent complaint of doctoral committee members and manuscript reviewers is the lack of a substantive literature review and a conceptual framework for the study. The definition of CF is reinforced, and the authors provide guided exercises to assist researchers to develop their own conceptual framework.

The implications of Ravitch and Riggan’s research for fellow researchers are that all research must be rigorous, intentional, sustained, and iterative, with an eye on the conceptual framework as part of the overall design, implementation and dissemination of the research. The CF
of *Reason and Rigor* itself is comprised of ideas from constructivist theory, which posits experience is constructed by the individual based on prior knowledge and experience. Thus, researchers do not begin their work with a blank slate, but instead build on and understand and appreciate present experience while drawing from prior knowledge and experience. Prior experience allows the individual to interpret the current experience and construct new meanings.

We appreciated the book’s attention to critical and sustained engagement with theory and positionality of the researcher(s), however this also leads to a criticism. In Chapter 3, James Spillane’s research is included as an example of how to develop a conceptual framework, but Spillane is a seasoned veteran of research. Spillane’s work indicates the embedded nature of his own ideological and vast experiential base in research and how they informed the project. This raises the question: How then do novice researchers build on what they have learned in prior research when the topic may be new to them? They may not have prior analyses to draw on, but are still required to create and articulate a conceptual framework. This question is left largely unanswered in the book, and novice researchers may continue to search for guidance in this area and may learn from experience.

The book is written for novice and seasoned researchers, yet in the exemplars the reader is not provided with any example of a published research study with a theoretical framework within a conceptual framework. The authors explain the research should not include these headings, yet such an argument relies on a researcher with a sophisticated understanding of the body of research connected to each of the research studies presented in order to understand the implicit conceptual frameworks presented. For beginning researchers an illustration of the interplay of CF and TF may have been helpful.

A second criticism is that approaches to research are vast, with new methodologies emerging. All research approaches may not be encompassed by the view of research espoused by Ravitch and Riggan. For example, researchers in the grounded theory approach of qualitative research conceptualize their research as less theoretically driven by prior research. They posit the value of empirical
field study and data generated as the source of findings uncontaminated by prior hypothesizing. The criticism could be made that Ravitch and Riggins have placed an over-emphasis on the scaffolding of research, and not enough attention to engaging in rigorous scientific inquiry in an empirical setting.

We argue any qualitative research approach must have elements of spontaneity, play, and in-depth exploration in a particular setting, but also provide an examined and emergent framework for the research. While supporting Ravitch and Riggins's conceptualization of qualitative research needing to be supported by explicit attention to the foundational conceptual framework, we also caution researchers against over-reliance on a CF. A rigid CF could blind the researcher to new possibilities embedded in a unique setting. Being in the moment as a qualitative researcher requires creativity, strong powers of presence, observation and openness to emotion to sense and feel the phenomenon under investigation. A process of to-and-fro interplay between data and theory during data collection and analysis is the *sine qua non* of qualitative research. No one side can be out of balance or the synergistic process of analysis can break down. If the CF is too strongly established it can restrict inquiry. The CF can close the possibility for the data to be informed anew with original insight or perspective.

Moreover, the authors argue the critical role a conceptual framework plays in qualitative research methodologies. However, only two of the four exemplars included in the book are "qualitative" studies, and none of the studies are recent research studies. The four exemplars are the published studies of (1) James Spillane (2002); (2) Michelle Fine (2007); (3) Frederick Erickson (1996); and (4) Margaret Beale Spencer (1997). Frederick Erickson is a widely recognized educational anthropologist and sociolinguist who engages in a fine-grained music inspired analysis of an interaction between a teacher, Miss Wright, and a student, Angie. The study reveals Angie’s participation in class and how her learning opportunities were overshadowed by competitive dominant students, referred to as “turn sharks”. We learn in this study that Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) means teachers need to do much more than present material; they also must extend the actions and insights of their students,
and provide a safe space for less competitive students to learn.

James Spillane's study of standards implementation in nine school districts is also included, as a policy study which includes large scale state-level data collection with 165 interviewees. The focus was how teachers learn to implement standards with the situative-sociohistoric view of learning postulated by Greeno, Collins and Resnick (1996), an essential part of the CF. Spillane analyzed policy as a type of instruction, with learning required of the implementers who are teachers and administrators. The thesis is in order to understand how or why standards are effective or not, we need to examine local officials' theories of learning (p. 45). The research was published in 2002 in *Teachers College Record*, yet none of the studies cited were post-1996. Other more recent exemplary studies could have been featured.

Nevertheless, as qualitative researchers who have recommended *Reason and Rigor* to students, we applaud the work of these scholars. The book was nominated for the prestigious AERA QR-SIG’ Book Award, 2013, indicating its important contribution. The book makes alignment of research design elements understandable as pieces of a structure held together by the conceptual framework. Both qualitative and quantitative research designs rely on a conceptual framework to provide guidance in the many decisions made in the process of research. Depending on where the researcher is coming from in terms of the conceptual framework constructed for the study, the research questions and methods differ.

After all the discussions, in this book or elsewhere, of what a conceptual framework is as compared to other formats such as a theoretical framework, the reality is that many of the differences are definitional. One author explains it one way, another tries to make the case for a different perspective. What is important is that the researcher: (1) Define how the terms will be used in the particular study at hand; (2) ground the definition and associated approach in the discussions of respected qualitative research authors like Miles and Huberman or Maxwell, or in this case with the added perspective of Ravitch and Riggan; and (3) explain the reasoning why this particular terminology and approach, with its
associated processes and concepts, is being used to bring depth to the discussion of this specific work.

Ravitch and Riggen contribute significantly to the research methodology literature by explaining in detail and modeling the argument for conceptual framework grounding all aspects of research. Rigor refers to intellectual, scientific inquiry guiding research. Reason refers to connections, relevancy and reflective intentionality. Particularly in qualitative research, a recursive, meaning-making process defines the methodology, so attention to the conceptual framework is a valued contribution. Sustained critical self-reflection and revision in light of data generated and growth as a researcher underpins rigorous research. The concluding chapter includes exercises to assist novice and seasoned researchers in creating and articulating their own CF which is a particularly useful element of the book. The book should be used in research methods courses and discussed by faculty in research forums to enhance academic community building and scholarly inquiry.

References


About the Reviewers

Mary Gardiner / Henry, Ph.D., is a Professor in Educational Leadership at the University of Idaho, Boise. Research interests include emotion in leadership, authentic leadership, democratic leadership praxis, and socio-cultural dimensions of leadership. She has authored and co-authored several books including *Latino Dropouts in Rural America: Realities and Possibilities*; chapters in *Breaking into the All-Male Club: Female Professors of Educational Administration*, and *Social Justice Leadership for a Global World*, and numerous articles.

Michael Kroth, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor at the University of Idaho in Adult/Organizational Learning and Leadership. He has written or co-authored four books including *Transforming Work: The Five Keys to Achieving Trust, Commitment, and Passion in the Workplace* (2001); *The Manager as Motivator* (2006); and, *Career Development Basics* (2009). *Managing the Mobile Workforce: Leading, Building, and Sustaining Virtual Teams* (2010), co-authored with David Clemons, is his latest book.

Copyright is retained by the authors, who grants first publication to the *Education Review*. *Education Review/Reseñas Educativas* is a project of the College of Education and Human Services of the University of Delaware, The National Education Policy Center http://nepc.colorado.edu, and the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

Editors
David J. Blacker
Gustavo Fischman
Melissa Cast-Brede
Gene V Glass

Follow *Education Review* on Facebook and on Twitter: #EducReview