Literature Reviews, Conceptual Frameworks, and Theoretical Frameworks: Terms, Functions, and Distinctions

TONETTE S. ROCCO
MARIA S. PLAKHOTNIK
Florida International University, Miami

This essay starts with a discussion of the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as components of a manuscript. This discussion includes similarities and distinctions among these components and their relation to other sections of a manuscript such as the problem statement, discussion, and implications. The essay concludes with an overview of the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as separate types of manuscripts. Understanding similarities and differences among the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework can help novice and experienced researchers in organizing, conceptualizing, and conducting their research, whether qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods.

Key words: *Literature Review, Conceptual Framework, Theoretical Framework, Integrative Literature Review*

Sometimes novice scholars get the impression that the background to a study or problem statement is sufficient or that weak connections to the concepts supporting a study are all that are needed to connect the purpose to the literature. Unfortunately, without a literature review or a framework where the history and big ideas of an area are discussed, a paper drifts. All empirical studies—qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods—must be connected to literature or concepts that support the need for the study, be related to the study's purpose statement, and situate the study in terms of previous work.

Even qualitative empirical studies using grounded theory to nurture theory must be connected to a body of literature, conceptual framework, or theoretical framework. A misconception is that because qualitative studies are often inductive, there is no place for theory. Yet all research emanates from the researcher's implicit or explicit theory of the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2001). These theories come from the academic discipline, the professional application, and the practitioner skills and attitudes that inform service to a client (Passmore, 1997). The importance of any study is demonstrated through the linkages made between research questions and larger theoretical concepts or policy issues, demonstrating how "the particulars of the study serve to illuminate larger issues and, therefore, are of significance" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 7). Merriam (2001) cautions, "It is often the lack of a clearly articulated theoretical framework—or weak theorizing in general—that results . . . [in rejection] by publication outlets" (p. 45).

The purpose of this essay is to discuss the use of terms and functions of and distinctions among the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as components of a manuscript and as types of manuscripts. The first section will discuss literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as components of a manuscript. The second section will discuss literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as types of manuscripts.

The first area to be discussed is that these terms are used interchangeably. The second area is that the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework serve similar functions within a manuscript reporting the results of an empirical study. The third area presents the distinctions between literature review, theoretical framework, conceptual framework as a component of an empirical manuscript, and the distinctions between the three types of manuscripts.

Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework as Components of a Manuscript

The first area to be discussed is that these terms are used interchangeably. The second area is that the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework serve similar functions within a manuscript reporting the results of an empirical study. The third area presents the distinctions among literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework as a component of an empirical manuscript.

Interchangeable Use of Terms

The terms *literature review*, *conceptual framework*, and *theoretical framework* are often used interchangeably by researchers, to explain each other, and as steps

in the process. For instance, Merriam and Simpson, (2000) discuss the literature review as being done "to develop a conceptual framework or to explore a topical area for study" (p. 10). In this quote, the term *conceptual framework* is used to define literature review demonstrating one way all three terms are used interchangeably and to support or define each other. This causes confusion. In this quote, Merriam and Simpson are talking about collecting literature to develop the framework, which will connect the other parts of a paper together.

Creswell (2003) notes, "if a separate 'review of the literature' is used, consider whether the review will consists of integrative summaries, theoretical reviews, or methodological reviews" (p. 33). In this quote, the term *review of the literature* refers to a heading in a dissertation or a manuscript. Integrative summaries provide overview of "broad themes in literature" (p. 32); theoretical reviews incorporate theory relevant to the study, and methodological reviews focus on strengths and weaknesses of method sections in research relevant to the study. Therefore, for Creswell (2003), the term *review of the literature* is a shelter term that can include either review of themes in the literature, or theory, or methodological issues.

Miles and Huberman (1994) use only the term *conceptual framework* that can be "rudimentary or elaborate, theory-driven or commonsensical, descriptive or casual" (p. 18). The goal of a conceptual framework is to categorize and describe concepts relevant to the study and map relationships among them. To achieve this goal, qualitative researchers incorporate both relevant theory and empirical research that help to organize the conceptual framework and "to see where the overlaps, contradictions, refinements, or qualifications are" (p. 22).

The purpose and "the logical thinking" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 4) in research should be clearly reflected in the content, organization, and presentation of a manuscript. This clarity includes the use of correct terminology. "Authors of . . . articles contribute most to the literature when they communicate clearly and concisely" (American Psychological Association, 2001, p. 4). Although literature review and conceptual and theoretical frameworks share similar functions, each takes a manuscript in a different direction.

Functions

The literature review and conceptual and theoretical frameworks share five functions: (a) to build a foundation, (b) to demonstrate how a study advances knowledge, (c) to conceptualize the study, (d) to assess research design and instrumentation, and (e) to provide a reference point for interpretation of findings (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). All five functions are not necessarily fulfilled by the review or framework in each manuscript, but often they are, and the functions would be the same whether the form used is a literature review, theoretical framework, or conceptual framework.

Building a foundation requires using previous work in such a way as to demonstrate linkages, illustrate trends, and provide an overview of a concept,

theory, or literature base. Demonstrating how any study advances knowledge uses the literature to present existing knowledge building a case that clearly shows the gap in what is known that a study will address. The common function of conceptualizing a study occurs by describing hypothesis and propositions of previous studies, defining terms, and clarifying assumptions and limitations citing relevant work to build a rationale for a study (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Another function of this section of a manuscript is to provide support for the research design, method, and instruments to be used in a study. This is done by making a case for the method the researcher believes appropriate and by illustrating why other methods are not appropriate, citing related work. The last function is to provide a reference point the findings can be compared with and the implications connected to this previously presented work.

Relationships to Other Sections of the Manuscript

The introduction section of a manuscript traditionally includes the problem statement, purpose, and a discussion of the relevant literature, theories, or concepts that build the foundation for the importance of the study. The rationale for a framework or review is to ground the study in an appropriate literature, or theoretical or conceptual framework, demonstrating the importance of the topic and the need for the study. This literature used to build the foundation is then used to connect the findings and the implications sections to the introduction section of the manuscript.

Relationship of framework to the problem statement. The problem statement can precede or follow the literature review, theoretical framework, or conceptual framework. However, most readers prefer to know the purpose of a paper early so as not to waste time on something that is not germane to the readers' needs. When the problem statement and purpose are presented within the first three paragraphs of an article, the literature review or the theoretical or conceptual framework that supports the problem follows. This is true for empirical studies and papers that are critiques of the literature or theoretical or conceptual pieces.

Theory development and conceptual papers are organized around concepts presented in the purpose statement. For example,

> The purpose of this article will be to advance transfer theory development by demonstrating how the three theoretical frames—cultural orientation, gender schema theory, and social role theory—fit together to explain the origin of sex-typed thinking and its effect on the transfer of training in interpersonal communication skills. (O'Neill, Hansen, & May, 2002, p. 168)

The authors present the concepts in this order: "training transfer theory development," "individual differences of the trainee" moving into "effect of sex-typed thinking as an individual difference in the transfer of interpersonal

communication skills training", which is followed by discussions of each of the theoretical frames mentioned in the purpose.

In other articles, the problem statement flows from the literature review or the theoretical or conceptual framework. The framework used gradually refines and narrows the topic to an identifiable gap in what is known about the topic. The gap is then articulated into a problem statement of a few paragraphs in length that clearly delineates what the field needs to investigate (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). This process takes the reader "along to the point where it is obvious what needs to be done. What needs to be done is stated as the *purpose* of your study" (Merriam & Simpson, 2000, p. 19), which ends with a statement, "The purpose of this study is . . . ". The conceptual or theoretical framework builds the case for the research problem in the beginning of the paper, gradually narrowing the focus of the paper to end with a problem statement, which concludes with the purpose of the paper. This can be followed by research questions or propositions and then the research design.

Relationship of framework to the discussion and implications. Later in the manuscript, the literature should be integrated into the discussion and implication sections of an empirical study to make meaningful connections between the data presentation, the findings, and the framework used to support the problem and purpose of the study. In a theoretical or conceptual article, the concepts presented may be explored in terms of "opportunities for research" and "implications of theory and practice" (O'Neill et al., 2002, pp. 178-179). Alfred (2007) researched factors that hindered transition to work and economic development of African American women who were former welfare recipients. The conceptual framework was divided into two sections: "race and the politics of welfare reform" (p. 295) and "traditional views of women's economic dependency" (p. 230). The first part of the discussion section connects the findings with the traditional views of women's economic dependency (personal and structural) reviewed in the conceptual framework. Alfred (2007) argues that women's economic development should not be viewed as depending on either personal or structural constraints. Rather, both views should be considered to understand women's economic dependency. To discuss how personal or structural constraints should be integrated, Alfred focuses on the issues of discrimination and labor market conditions, which were included in the first part of the conceptual framework. In the implications section, Alfred again returns to the conceptual framework to suggest that the intersection of race, class, and gender in terms of the politics of welfare reform and women's development have been ignored in the adult education literature.

Distinctions

In this section, distinctions are made among the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework. As each is presented, the role of the

review or framework within an empirical study presenting data collected and analyzed using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods research designs is discussed.

Literature review. Many research texts refer to doing a review of the literature in order to demonstrate a need for the research study. This need is articulated in the problem statement that uses the literature to support assertions and make the case that the purpose of the paper is important. The literature following the purpose is used to build a foundation for the important ideas in the problem statement and purpose.

As part of the introduction section, the purpose of the literature review is to determine if a topic is researchable, to report the results of closely related studies, and to establish the importance of the current study in relationship to previous studies (Creswell, 2003). The literature review might be seen as casting a broad net around an area to explore the topic. The net should include presentation of the history or chronology of the manuscript's main idea. In a history, the author should acquaint the reader with the major authors writing in favor of or in opposition to the main idea and the state of the current empirical research (A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes, personal communication, May 24, 2002).

Using literature reviews to connect the problem, purpose, and discussion sections "is a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research" (Boote & Beile, 2005). An example can be found in the work of Kuchinke (2003) on graduate education. In this article, Kuchinke uses a literature review to build the foundation for an empirical study that compares postbaccalaureate HRD courses in two countries. The "Review of literature" is divided into: "History: US," "History: UK," "Definitions of HRD in the UK and the US," "The HRD industry," "Professional associations," "National level recognition schemes," and "HRD academic programs." The headings clearly lead the reader through the important literature to frame the comparison of postbaccalaureate work in both countries. Evident also is that this is a review of literature that provides a foundation and history for this empirical study where no theory or concepts exist to guide the work.

Theoretical framework. Creswell (2003) makes distinctions between literature used for qualitative studies and quantitative studies. In quantitative methods, presentation of a theoretical framework is crucial to the study, which will have been designed to test the theory. However, qualitative studies can also use a theoretical framework. In simple terms, a theoretical framework involves the presentation of a specific theory, such as systems theory or self-efficacy, and empirical and conceptual work about that theory. Merriam (2001) describes the theoretical framework as "the structure, the scaffolding, the frame of your study" (p. 45). The structure comes from the author's disciplinary orientation and the literature related to the topic and theory under investigation. From these sources, a case is built for the importance of the study through a presentation and critique

of the concepts, terms, definitions, models, and theories found in a literature base and seen through a particular disciplinary orientation.

Archie-Booker, Cervero, and Langone (1999) used a qualitative case study research design to investigate cultural relevance in program planning of an AIDS community service organization. Their article provides an example of using literature to situate the problem and present their research questions, which are followed by a separate section where the theoretical framework of the study is provided. The theoretical framework used was grounded in Cervero and Wilson's (1994, 1996) work "that program planning is a social activity in which adult educators negotiate interests in social and organizational contexts structured by power relationships" (Archie-Booker et al., 1999, p. 165). From this theoretical orientation, they set out to examine power relationships within cultural and organizational contexts.

Conceptual framework. Testing theory does not have to be the beginning point of a qualitative empirical study; instead qualitative research often explores areas that are understudied and searches for emergent theory (Creswell, 2003). When searching for emergent theory, however, a conceptual framework is important for situating the study. The author must demonstrate the importance of the study by defining the main ideas and the network of relationships between them (Becker, 1998). A conceptual framework grounds the study in the relevant knowledge bases that lay the foundation for the importance of the problem statement and research questions. Whereas a theoretical framework is used when investigating a specific theory, a conceptual framework is made up of theoretical and empirical work relevant to the manuscript's purpose, where the purpose is not to further investigate a specific theory.

Theory may not be guiding the study but concepts are. Two examples of qualitative studies using a conceptual framework are Ellinger, Watkins, and Bostrom (1999) and Wilensky and Hansen (2001). For instance, Ellinger et al. (1999) use the person–process–product model (Campell, Dunnette, Lawler, & Weick, 1970) and the person–role model (Clawson, 1992) as concepts to guide their study integrating them into an adapted model. In the first study, on managers as facilitators of learning, Ellinger et al. (1999) begin their article by situating it in the relevant literature and ending this section with the research questions. This is followed by a separate section called "Conceptual Framework" where they not only discuss the concepts that situate the study but even illustrate them with a figure. Wilensky and Hansen (2001) take a slightly different tactic. They situate their study in the relevant literature but do not end this section with their research questions; instead the next section integrates the conceptual framework with the research questions making explicit the connections between the two. This section titled, "Conceptual Framework and Research Questions," has two sections. The first section called occupational culture, discusses this concept and related concepts organized to support each research question. The second section, organizational stories, is used to provide the conceptual rationale

for using this data collection technique. This is also an example of using a conceptual framework to support a research design decision, which was the fourth function of literature reviews and frameworks discussed earlier.

Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework as Types of Manuscripts

In this section, the distinctions between manuscripts that are literature reviews or introducing a theoretical or conceptual framework to a field will be presented. This is a brief discussion of each as a distinct type of manuscript.

Literature Review

The literature review and conceptual and theoretical frameworks each can be a type of manuscript. An integrative literature review is "a form of research that reviews, critiques, and synthesizes representative literature on a topic in an integrated way such that new frameworks and perspectives on the topic are generated" (Torraco, 2005, p. 356). An integrative literature review on a new phenomenon in the field would lead to an initial holistic conceptualization of the phenomenon; a review of an existing topic would lead to new understandings and reconceptualizations. Whether researching a new or existing topic, this type of literature review requires conceptual and methodological rigor. Integrative literature reviews require a description of the research design where search terms used to collect the literature as data, criteria for a piece's inclusion or exclusion, and data analysis techniques are described (see Rocco, Stein, & Lee, 2003).

Theoretical Framework

As a type of a manuscript, a theoretical framework synthesizes existing theories and related concepts and empirical research, to develop a foundation for new theory development. For example, Ng (2008), first, briefly discussed research on diversity practices and concluded that this research lacks a framework that can systematize and link factors promoting diversity in organizations and, particularly, CEOs' commitment to diversity. Next, Ng (2008) proposes "a leadership-based theoretical framework for linking CEOs' commitment to diversity practices in organizations" (p. 59). Then, Ng discusses and integrates literature on diversity into theories of leadership and organizational behavior. As the discussion progresses, five propositions are suggested and later incorporated into a figure that illustrates the proposed framework. The figure demonstrates how CEOs' demographic characteristics (Proposition 1) and CEOs' personal attributes (Propositions 2 to 4) relate to CEOs' commitment to diversity, which in turn affects firm diversity practices (Proposition 5). The framework is further discussed in terms of its theoretical contributions and practical implications.

Conceptual Framework

As a type of manuscript, a conceptual framework relates concepts, empirical research, and relevant theories to advance and systematize knowledge about related concepts or issues. Some concepts gain popularity among practitioners; however, research around a concept may be limited and sporadic. For example, Watson (2007) suggests a conceptual framework for social creativity. She observes that social creativity has been studied by many disciplines and at both individual and group levels. However, "the research community does not have a conceptual framework to integrate who the agents are when creativity occurs and what the context is for their creative processes" (p. 421). Such a framework would help researchers define the concept, map the research terrain or conceptual scope, systematize relations among concepts, and identify gaps in literature.

Concluding Thoughts

Viewing the literature as honoring the past to inform the present gives us the opportunity for it to affect the future. In summary, a clear understanding of the differences among the literature review, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework provides better guidance for organizing, conceptualizing, and conducting research. This clarity, ultimately, adds rigor to the research and increases chances of publishing the manuscript. Authors do not have control over some aspects of the manuscript publication process (Hatcher & Winn, 2008); however, authors can learn about other aspects of research and writing, such as when to use a literature review, theoretical framework, or conceptual framework. Using the appropriate framework will improve the quality of manuscripts and increase the likelihood of favorable critiques by reviewers and editors.

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Tonette S. Rocco *is associate professor of adult education and human resource development at Florida International University, USA. She serves as coeditor of New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development. Her recent publications include "Sexual Minority Issues in HRD: Raising Awareness" (a special journal issue with Julie Gedro and Martin Kormanik,* Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 2009); Challenging the Professionalization of Adult Education: John Ohliger and Contradictions in Modern Practice (with Andre Grace, Jossey-Bass, forthcoming May 2009). and* Demystifying the Writing and Publishing Process: A Guide for Emerging Scholars *(with Tim Hatcher, Jossey-Bass, forthcoming).*

Maria S. Plakhotnik *is a doctoral candidate in Adult Education and Human Resource Development program at Florida International University, USA. She works as a managing editor of* New Horizons in Adult Education and Human Resource Development *and serves as a co-editor of the* Proceedings of the Annual FIU College of Education Research Conference. *Maria has presented at several international, national, and local conferences and authored and co-authored publications that have appeared in the* Human Resource Development Quarterly, Adult Education Quarterly, New Horizons in Adult Education *and* Human Resource Development*, and* Race, Gender, & Class, and New Directions in Adult and Continuing Education *(forthcoming in 2009).*