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Using Lenses to Make Sense of Research: A Review of Sharon M. Ravitch and Matthew Riggan's Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research

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Using Lenses to Make Sense of Research: A Review of Sharon M. Ravitch and Matthew Riggan's *Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*

Abstract

Have you or your students ever had questions about conceptual frameworks or found that you used different verbiage when discussing conceptual frameworks? This book succinctly explains conceptual frameworks and how they inform all parts of the research process. Ravitch and Riggan include exemplar empirical studies as models to help readers see the new knowledge in action. They also challenge your thinking and verbiage with conceptual frameworks. If you are a current doctoral student or if you are a researcher about to begin an empirical study, this book will help you create a more rigorous study that links all parts of the study with the conceptual framework.

Keywords

Conceptual Framework, Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, Qualitative Research, Dissertation

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**Using Lenses to Make Sense of Research:
A Review of Sharon M. Ravitch and Matthew Riggan's
*Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research***

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Have you or your students ever had questions about conceptual frameworks or found that you used different verbiage when discussing conceptual frameworks? This book succinctly explains conceptual frameworks and how they inform all parts of the research process. Ravitch and Riggan include exemplar empirical studies as models to help readers see the new knowledge in action. They also challenge your thinking and verbiage with conceptual frameworks. If you are a current doctoral student or if you are a researcher about to begin an empirical study, this book will help you create a more rigorous study that links all parts of the study with the conceptual framework. Keywords: Conceptual Framework, Literature Review, Theoretical Framework, Qualitative Research, Dissertation

Reviewer's Statement

As a former doctoral student and a current professor of doctoral students, I realize the difficulties that many students have conceptualizing the purpose of their chapter two literature review. I personally found chapter two the most difficult chapter as I was working through the dissertation process because I lacked knowledge of the different sections and did not have a grasp of the big idea. I searched for books and articles that I could read to help me understand theoretical frameworks and how to synthesize prior research on my topic. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) have written the perfect book that all doctoral students should read, reflect, and discuss during their program in preparation for the dissertation process. This book is worth having students read from cover to cover as they prepare to write their conceptual framework. I have already added this book on my short list for doctoral students and will continue to use it in the future. The authors recognize the different verbiage that professors and authors use to describe chapter two and conceptual frameworks. Ravitch and Riggan believe that the entire chapter is a conceptual framework that argues why the topic matters and that the proposed study is appropriate to address the topic. In dissertation verbiage, the conceptual framework is all of chapter two, which includes the theoretical framework(s) and literature review. The authors spend the necessary time on the basics before moving the reader to the higher-level skill of linking a conceptual framework to each phase of the research process. This is a five-star book that challenges all readers to reflect on their prior knowledge of conceptual frameworks and to consider a new way of thinking and developing future research studies.

What do the Authors Mean by Reason and Rigor in the Context of Conceptual Frameworks?

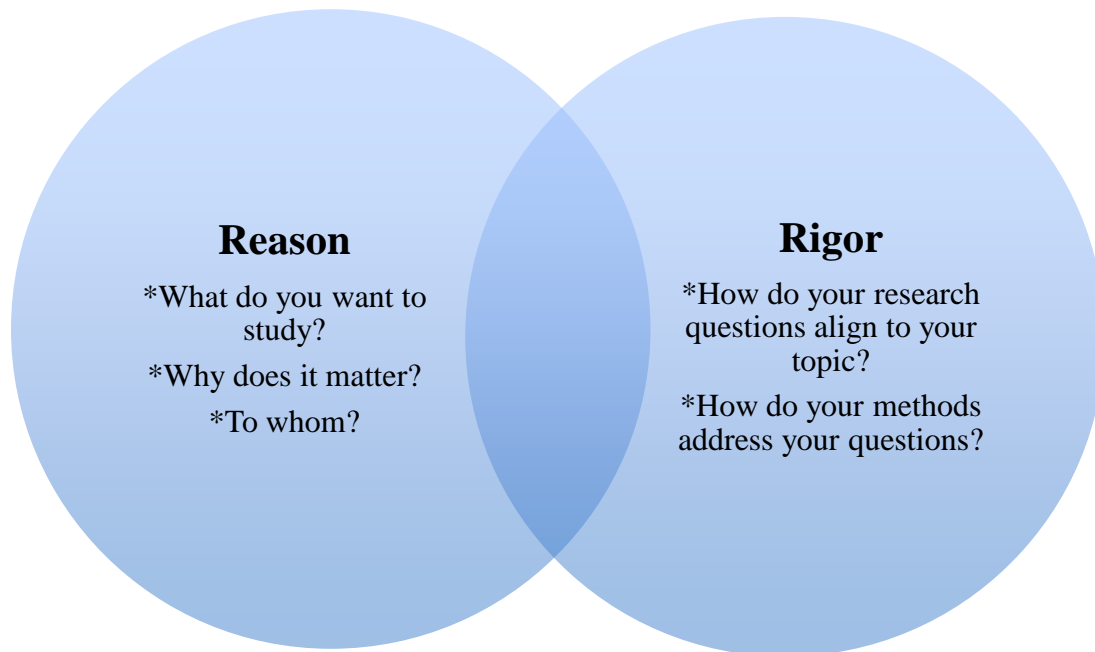


Figure 1: Reason and Rigor: An Argument for Topic and Methods

What Are Conceptual Frameworks?

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) define conceptual frameworks 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. xv). As stated in the title of the book, reason and rigor are important elements of conceptual frameworks, and the authors thoroughly explain how reason and rigor build a researcher’s argument for the topic and methods chosen in the study. Ravitch and Riggan argue that a conceptual framework “both shapes the design and direction of your study and guides its development” (p. 4). In addition, they view conceptual frameworks as “a way of linking all of the elements of the research process” (p. 5). One of my favorite parts of the book is where the authors explain the different elements of a conceptual framework: personal interests and goals, identity and positionality, literature review, topical research, and theoretical frameworks. Under the literature review section, Ravitch and Riggan ask researchers to survey what is known and has been investigated about the chosen topic. They state, “...you must critically read and make connections between, or integrate and synthesize, existing work related to your emerging research topic and its multiple theoretical and practical contexts” (p. 10). Researchers are reminded that a conceptual framework will and should change during the course of the study.

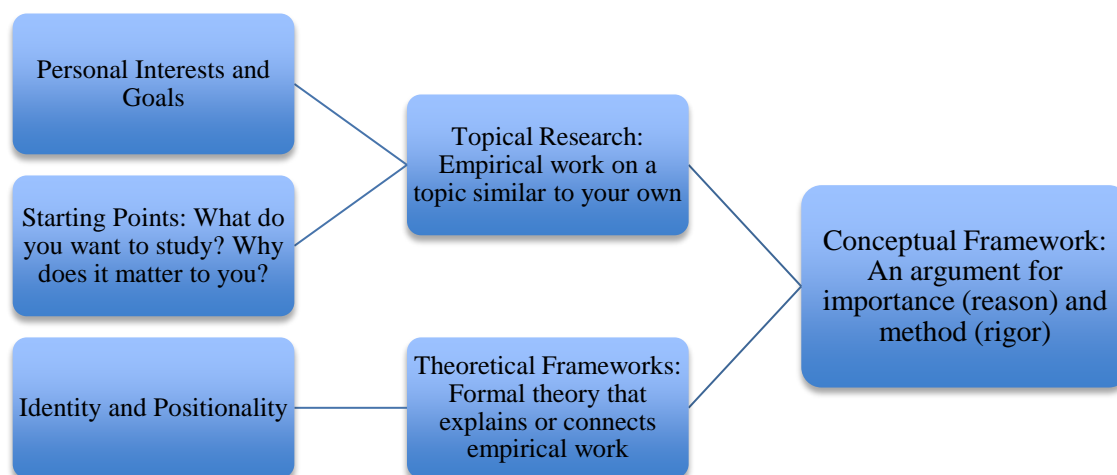


Figure 2: Elements of a Conceptual Framework

How Do Conceptual Frameworks Inform Other Areas of Research?

One strength of Ravitch and Riggan’s (2017) book is their use of a variety of actual studies to share and teach the relationship of conceptual frameworks to research questions, research design, data collection, analysis of data, and the explanation of findings. For this review, let’s dig deeper into conceptual frameworks and the analysis of data. The authors chose a qualitative study titled “Going for the Zone: The Social and Cognitive Ecology of Teacher-Student Interaction in Classroom Conversations” conducted and written by Frederick Erickson, a Professor of Anthropology of Education. The argument for this study centers on understanding interactions in the school environment. Erickson establishes the rationale for a close analysis of interaction through theoretical concepts such as ecosystem perspectives, neo-Vygotskian perspectives, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and the ebbs and flows of mutual influence in conversations. This study is important because, “speakers are governed by unwritten rules about interruption and turn-taking, which can be bent or broken with the assistance of verbal and nonverbal cues...what happens when certain ways of interacting are considered ‘normal’ or acceptable while others are not” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 114). Erickson’s analysis of data was inductive, yet he used tools that were provided by previous theory. By reading Erickson’s transcript of his collected data, “one can identify where words were emphasized, which words were stressed, and where speakers overlapped” (p. 129). Erickson’s conceptual framework helps readers make meaning of the complexity of classroom interactions and communication within the setting. In addition, the conceptual framework informs the categories and themes, which result from the data collected in the classroom. It is very helpful that Ravitch and Riggan’s (2017) book not only explains the relationship between conceptual frameworks and the research process, but also provides exemplar studies to model the process.

Are There Other Terms for a Conceptual Framework?

According to Ravitch and Riggan’s (2017) and my own personal experiences, researchers and professors use a multitude of terminologies to describe the contents of a traditional chapter two in a dissertation or a review of topical research in a study. The array of

terms include, “theoretical framework, conceptual framework, conceptual model, and literature review,” (p. 193) which easily confuses new researchers. The authors use the language *conceptual framework* to describe all of the contents of a chapter two. A theoretical framework and literature review are elements of the conceptual framework. Ravitch and Riggan explain their thinking behind this and have convinced me to use the same verbiage. I find that many doctoral students and even some professors interchangeably use the terms *theoretical framework* and *conceptual frameworks*. “We have argued throughout this book that a theoretical framework---the way in which a researcher engages with, integrates, and argues from existing, ‘formal’ theories within and across relevant fields---is one piece of a broader conceptual framework... (p. 194). This book teaches the idea of conceptual frameworks, supports this learning with model studies, clears the confusion of verbiage, and allows researchers to focus on their study, which is where the time should be spent. I commend the authors for the clarity of their writing.

Final Thoughts

Between the costs of textbooks and the wide selection of books written to help doctoral students/researchers be successful with an empirical study, I find it difficult to select a book and require students to purchase it unless I truly feel the book will make a positive difference in their learning. *Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research* by Sharon Ravitch and Matthew Riggan is the perfect book for students to grasp the purpose of writing a traditional chapter two or a new researcher to understand conceptual frameworks. Students/researchers will benefit from the thorough discussion of conceptual frameworks and will be able to connect their conceptual framework with all parts of the dissertation/research process. The exemplar studies in the book will provide a model for each phase of the research process and challenge students to make sure their own conceptual framework has informed and been informed by the study, which will result in a dynamic, ever-changing conceptual framework. It is with no hesitation that I highly recommend this book to all involved in research!

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Author Note

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