



UNDERSTANDING, SELECTING, AND INTEGRATING A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK IN DISSERTATION RESEARCH: CREATING THE BLUEPRINT FOR YOUR “HOUSE”

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The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects in the research process, yet is often misunderstood by doctoral candidates as they prepare their dissertation research study. The importance of theory-driven thinking and acting is emphasized in relation to the selection of a topic, the development of research questions, the conceptualization of the literature review, the design approach, and the analysis plan for the dissertation study. Using a metaphor of the “blueprint” of a house, this article explains the application of a theoretical framework in a dissertation. Steps for how to select and integrate a theoretical framework to structure all aspects of the research process are described, with an example of how to thread theory throughout the dissertation.

Keywords: *theoretical framework, dissertation, doctoral, academic writing, research methods*

The dissertation is a labor of love requiring much work, sweat, and tears, as well as organization skills and extensive resources from others who are involved with the process. The final product is a document that one can recognize as a once-in-a-lifetime achievement. We liken this experience to the task of building your own home. As any architect or contractor knows, prior to building a house, one must develop drawings called a blueprint for the structure. A blueprint serves as a guide for all those who are involved in the construction of the home. The drawing permits the foundation of the home to be built, and it dictates the overall floor plan of rooms, the flow of plumbing, electrical, and mechanical systems—even the direction in which the house will face. Like housing construction, much critical thinking and planning must be put into developing a blueprint for the dissertation. We believe the blueprint is an appropriate analogy of the theoretical framework of the dissertation.

The theoretical framework is one of the most important aspects in the research process, and a component that is often minimally covered in doctoral coursework. Iqubal described the struggle to identify and prepare the theoretical framework for the dissertation as “the most difficult but not impossible part of [the] proposal” (2007, p.17). As professors and dissertation committee members of doctoral students in the fields of education, policy, leadership, curriculum and instruction, and social work, we have heard students express confusion, a lack of knowledge, and frustration with the challenge of choosing a theoretical framework and understanding how to apply it throughout the dissertation. Some students briefly make mention of a theoretical framework at the start of the dissertation and never return to it throughout the rest of the document; others omit the inclusion of a theoretical framework in the proposal and are required to restructure their document after committee review.

The importance of utilizing a theoretical framework in a dissertation study cannot be stressed enough. The theoretical framework is the foundation from which all knowledge is constructed (metaphorically and literally) for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and the research questions. The theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most importantly, the methods and analysis. Lysaght (2011) highlighted the necessity of identifying one’s theoretical framework for a dissertation study:

A researcher’s choice of framework is not arbitrary but reflects important personal beliefs and understandings

about the nature of knowledge, how it exists (in the metaphysical sense) in relation to the observer, and the possible roles to be adopted, and tools to be employed consequently, by the researcher in his/her work. (p. 572)

Without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study is unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint. By contrast, a research plan that contains a theoretical framework allows the dissertation study to be strong and structured with an organized flow from one chapter to the next.

Over the past 30 years, there has been an increasing trend to include a theoretical framework in the dissertation (Melendez, 2002). There is an expectation by most chairpersons and committee members that a dissertation study will be informed by theory. Despite these realities, oftentimes students begin the dissertation process at a loss for how to accomplish working with a theoretical framework. Concurrently, incorporating a theoretical framework into research studies is a task that some may continue to struggle with post-graduation. Silver and Herbst (as cited in Lester, 2005) have acknowledged that journal submissions are often rejected for being atheoretical, or having no theory. This underscores the importance of teaching students how to implement a theoretical framework in their research, as it pertains not only to the dissertation, but also to scholarship and research activities in the professorate.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the theoretical framework and to outline a blueprint for how to understand, select, and integrate a theoretical framework into one's research when writing the dissertation. We offer the analogy of using a blueprint when building a house to provide the reader with a visual representation of the importance of this step in the development of a dissertation idea. We hope the necessity of this step in preparing the dissertation will be metaphorically obvious—a contractor could not possibly know what kind of house to build without instructions mapped out ahead of time. Similarly, one cannot guide a reader through thinking about a dissertation study without a clear explication of the study's theoretical framework. This article is intended to be a resource for faculty working with doctoral students in the classroom or in an advisory role; however, it is primarily aimed towards doctoral candidates who are seeking guidance with this foundational piece of the dissertation.

This article first covers the basics of understanding a theoretical framework, while simultaneously introducing the analogy of the blueprint for a house, which is a running theme throughout the entire article. This section also focuses on the differences between a theoretical and conceptual framework. Next, the article describes the important tenets of selecting an appropriate theoretical framework for one's research. Finally, we highlight strategies and techniques for implementing a theoretical framework in a dissertation study.

UNDERSTANDING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What is a Theoretical Framework?

The theoretical framework is the "blueprint" for the entire dissertation inquiry. It serves as the guide on which to build and support your study, and also provides the structure to define how you will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach the dissertation as a whole. Eisenhart defined a theoretical framework as "a structure that guides research by relying on a formal theory...constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships" (1991, p. 205). Thus, the theoretical framework consists of the selected theory (or theories) that undergirds your thinking with regards to how you understand and plan to research your topic, as well as the concepts and definitions from that theory that are relevant to your topic. Lovitts (2005) empirically defines criteria for applying or developing theory to the dissertation that must be appropriate, logically interpreted, well understood, and align with the question at hand.

We assert that students must select and clarify a theoretical framework from the time the dissertation topic is initially conceptualized. Philosophers such as Dooyeweerd (as cited in Sire, 2004, p. 35) have even gone so far as to call for "pretheoretical commitments" by the researcher to specifically identify one's "worldview of the heart rather than the mind." We profess that the researcher's choice of theory must be clearly stated and explicitly mentioned early in the writing of the dissertation.

Mertens acknowledged that the theoretical framework "has implications for every decision made in the research process" (1998, p. 3), which supports our belief that the theoretical framework for a study must be identified at the

inception of dissertation work. We also believe that all research is theoretical. The importance of theory-driven thinking and acting should be emphasized in relation to the selection of a topic, development of research questions, focus of the literature review, the design approach, and analysis plan for the dissertation study. Anderson, Day, and McLaughlin (2006) capture the necessity of including a sound theoretical underpinning in a dissertation study with a quote from a dissertation supervisor who stated, “I don’t see how you can do a good piece of work that’s atheoretical” (p. 154). Similarly, Sarter (2005, p. 494) addressed the “limited usefulness of findings and conclusions” when a study is not justified by a theoretical framework. Evidence across disciplines is clear that the explicit identification and inclusion of a theoretical framework is a necessity of sound research.

The Blueprint

We liken the theoretical framework to the blueprint for a house—you (the student and researcher) are the architect who is charged with choosing what you are going to build and how the property will be constructed as you imagine it. Once you create the blueprint, others will have a basic idea of what concepts and principles you will use to establish the ideas and approaches to your dissertation. Only after a plan for the house has been determined can you begin to build the dissertation study.

There are two types of blueprint drawings that are used in the construction industry that correlate to the theoretical framework of the dissertation. First, an architect must create an *elevation drawing* to display the exterior of the home. This drawing offers an outside view of the style and structure, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. Traditional style elevation blueprint drawing

Types of houses vary across the country, from a ranch, bungalow, an American Four Square, adobe style, Craftsman, split-level, etc. There is no one perfect or right style of house, although certain home styles dominate certain parts of the country. All can provide shelter and residency. Similarly, there is no one perfect or right theory for a dissertation, but certain theories are popular within each discipline. As an architect or construction developer must select the type of house to build, the researcher must choose a theory to structure the dissertation.

Theories come from a multitude of sources in each discipline, and there are always more being created and applied across fields. For example, there is a plethora of options within the realm of educational leadership for selecting a theoretical framework. The researcher must select the appropriate theory of how his/her “house” will look on the exterior. The following list details a sampling of commonly used theories across disciplines.

- Transformational/relational theories
- Transactional/management theories
- Servant leadership/moral theories
- Trait theories
- Situational theories

- Behavioral theories
- Systems theory
- Developmental theory
- Cognitive theory
- Sense of community theory
- Behavioral theory
- Queer theory
- Feminist Theory
- Critical race theory
- Self-efficacy theory
- Functionalist theory
- Relational theory
- Marxist Theory
- Intersubjectivity theory
- Gender theory
- Change theory
- Identity formation
- Community of Inquiry
- Transformational theory

The researcher's choice of a theory provides structure to the entire dissertation. It provides a common world view or lens from which to support one's thinking on the problem and analysis of data.

The second type of blueprint is a *floor plan*, which details the interior details of the construction of a home. This drawing allows the viewer to see the floor plan as if you were looking down from above into the home itself. All homes contain common elements such as rooms, doors, toilets, a kitchen, ventilation, electrical outlets, and an aesthetic design. Yet how each home is organized or laid out will be in accordance with the design choice used in the elevation drawing. For example, bungalow homes have similar floor plans and exteriors, but these floor plans are very different than an adobe home, as shown below in Figure 2.

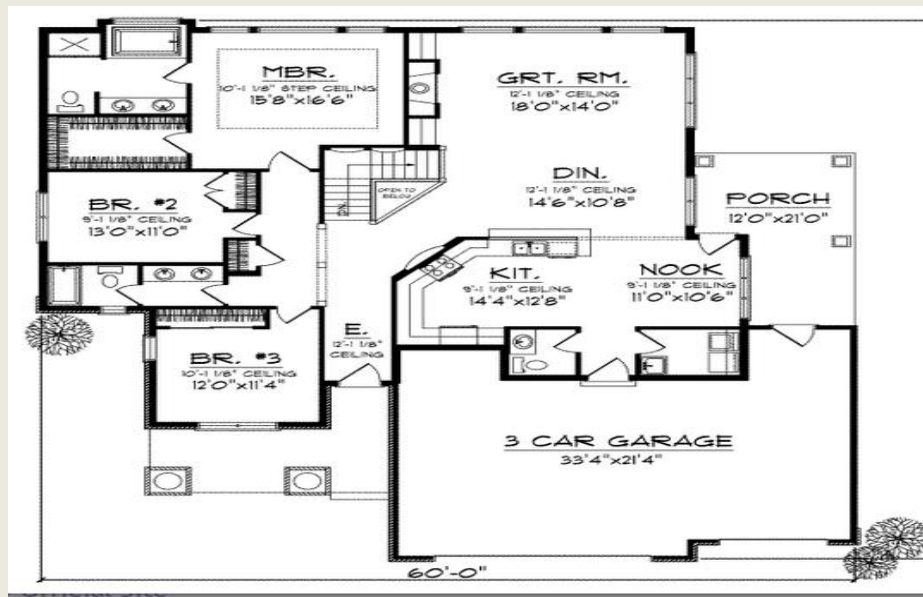


Figure 2. Craftsman style floor plan blueprint



Similarly, most professional practice dissertations and research articles follow the typical format of Statement of the Problem, Literature Review, Methods or Research Design, Presentation of the Data, and Discussion. Yet the contents of each section or chapter will vary from student to student, and must be consistent with the theoretical framework selected for the dissertation as a whole.

The floor plan of the dissertation blueprint contains the theoretical principles, constructs, concepts, and tenants of a theory. Specific conceptual elements of a theory (i.e. the interior of a home) must align with the researcher's theoretical framework. Thus, you would not expect to walk into a bungalow style home and find massive stucco walls with rounded edges, which are characteristic of an adobe style house. In reference to the dissertation blueprint, if you select transformational leadership as your theoretical framework, each chapter should connect to theorists who have written about leadership and concepts drawn from this framework. It would not be appropriate to discuss variables that do not relate to principles of transformational leadership (e.g. gender, age, or ethnicity). This would be akin to placing stucco, rounded walls in your Craftsman style home. Principles and constructs (the interior blueprint) that do not derive from your theoretical worldview of the study (the exterior blueprint) would be inconsistent and out of place.

Before committing to a research design, you must first consider the guiding principles for your inquiry so that readers will understand how you have situated the problem of study in relation to a theoretical context. The theory selected for your study offers a conceptual basis for understanding, analyzing, and designing ways to investigate a problem. Thus, you need to know how you will define and approach your research problem and provide a rationale for how and why you are conducting your study in order for the reader to get a sense for where you stand on the problem itself. This belief is supported by Maxwell, who wrote, "The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design—to help you to assess and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods, and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions. It also helps you justify your research" (2004, pp. 33-34).

Embedded within the discussion of a theoretical framework is an explanation of a conceptual framework. While these two ideas are similar in nature, they do differ in their approach, style, and utilization within a dissertation. This is an important distinction for doctoral students to understand and grasp.

The Difference Between a Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical frameworks are sometimes referred to as a conceptual framework; however, these terms are neither interchangeable nor synonymous. They can be vague and lead to confusion for students and dissertation committee members alike. As such, it is important and necessary to differentiate these terms.

We distinguish the two terms by clarifying that a theoretical framework is derived from an existing theory (or theories) in the literature that has already been tested and validated by others and is considered a generally acceptable theory in the scholarly literature. As Merriam (2001) proposed, it is the researcher's lens with which to view the world. It is the responsibility of the doctoral student to make a unique application of the selected theory (or theories) so as to apply theoretical constructs to his or her dissertation study.

Traditionally, theoretical frameworks are developed a priori, or before data collection in quantitative designs. However, a theoretical framework may also involve a theory that is developed in the course of the dissertation study. Qualitative research designs may begin with a structured, or perhaps less structured theoretical framework to keep the researcher from forcing preconceptions on the findings. In the latter case, the theoretical framework often emerges in the data analysis phase. Our dissertation committee work has focused almost exclusively on working with students who "borrow" blueprints from someone else's theory and use those plans to build their own home. For example, one of our doctoral candidates used Burns (1978) transformational leadership theory to investigate how school leaders implemented a change process in a K-12 environment. Principles and concepts of transformational leadership were threaded throughout all chapters of the dissertation.

We believe this approach towards the utilization of theoretical frameworks can be used with qualitative, quantitative, and mixed method designs. However, we recognize that doctoral candidates are capable of crafting their own blueprint for a new theory to be developed a posteriori as a result of their research endeavors.

On the other hand, a conceptual framework, in our view, is the researcher's understanding of how the research

problem will best be explored, the specific direction the research will have to take, and the relationship between the different variables in the study. This is best summarized by Miles & Huberman (1994), who categorized it as a system of concepts, assumptions, and beliefs that support and guide the research plan. Specifically, the conceptual framework “lays out the key factors, constructs, or variables, and presumes relationships among them” (1994, p. 440). Moreover, Camp (2001) aptly described a conceptual framework, asserting that a conceptual framework is a structure of what has been learned to best explain the natural progression of a phenomenon that is being studied.

The conceptual framework offers a logical structure of connected concepts that help provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another within the theoretical framework. It is not simply a string of concepts, but a way to identify and construct for the reader your epistemological and ontological worldview and approach to your topic of study. The conceptual framework also gives you an opportunity to specify and define concepts within the problem (Luse, Mennecke, & Townsend, 2012). Once the conceptual framework for a dissertation has been established, you can then begin to determine how to go about writing your dissertation.

In another example from our work supervising dissertations, one candidate relied on best practices in the research literature associated with interventions with special needs children. Relying on national policies and protocols associated with Response to Intervention (RtI), core principles of the Federal policy (screening, diagnosis, and progress monitoring) were analyzed in relation to parent perceptions of service provisions for their children. Thus, RtI and best practices literature served as the conceptual framework for the study. However, the theoretical framework was that of educational equity theory, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Distinction Between a Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Theoretical Framework	Conceptual Framework
Theory: Educational Equity Theory	RtI Best Practices
Theorists: Marx (1975) Brookover & Lezotte (1981)	Core concepts: screening, diagnosis, progress monitoring (as defined by No Child Left Behind legislation) Key theoretical principles: equality, justified inequality, fair process, social justice access, participation

Returning to our analogy of how writing a dissertation is similar to building a house, we believe that the theoretical framework and its associated tenants and principles would entail the elevation blueprints for a house, whereas the conceptual framework would involve the floor plan blueprint of how information flows throughout the dissertation. Although these steps may be taken in tandem or one by one, we profess that the dissertation committee must challenge students to articulate both the conceptual and theoretical frameworks prior to beginning the dissertation.

SELECTING AN APPROPRIATE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Selecting an appropriate theoretical framework for your dissertation research is an important and necessary process with which all doctoral students should engage. The selection of a theoretical framework requires a deep and thoughtful understanding of your problem, purpose, significance, and research questions. It is imperative that all four constructs—the problem, purpose, significance, and research questions—are tightly aligned and intricately interwoven so that your theoretical framework can serve as the foundation for your work and guide your choice of research design and data analysis.

Think of the electrical system running through a house: your problem, purpose, significance, research questions, methodology, and data analysis plan must flow through all rooms in your house, connecting all the elements explicitly together to deliver power throughout the dissertation. All rooms of a house require electricity. Similarly, all aspects of the dissertation research should connect to the theoretical framework.



For the purpose of review and consistency, it is important to briefly discuss the essence of the problem, purpose, and significance of dissertation research.

Brief Discussion of Problem, Purpose, and Significance in Dissertation Research

Problem. This is one of the most critical parts of the dissertation research. The problem statement establishes an interaction by two or more factors that produce a dilemma or quandary that can cause for further examination. The problem statement defines the root problem as well as the other variables and constructs inherent to the problem. It identifies an area that needs further research or helps to resolve/address an existing problem in the field. How does the theoretical framework emerge or connect to the problem? What does the problem look like from the outside?

Purpose. This section defines the purpose, or justification, of your study. That is to say, what are the aims and/or outcomes for the problem you have generated? Think in terms of the following questions: The aim of this study is to...? The purpose of this study is to...? What do you hope to do with this study that will add to, critique, or revise current knowledge in the field? Answering these questions will allow you to describe how the chosen theoretical framework relates to the purpose of the study.

Significance. Describe the significance, the importance of, or the “so what” of this exploration. Why is this an important topic? To whom is it important? Why should readers in your particular field, and in general, care about this issue? Explain the potential value of this study and how it can add to the body of existing work and knowledge in the field. This section will help you determine the audience for your study as well. Additionally, you will need to explain why you have chosen a specific theoretical framework in relation to the importance of your study.

Aligning your theoretical framework with the problem, purpose, and significance is an important part of the dissertation process. Again, consider the analogy of the necessity of a blueprint when building a home—by creating a solid, strong blueprint you can then establish the varying parts and levels for the knowledge you want to build/know.

Understanding Your Research Questions Using the Lens of the Theoretical Framework

The development of the research questions in your dissertation has a direct impact on the other parts of your study, including but not limited to the theoretical framework. The relationship between the research questions and theoretical framework is complementary.

Both the main research question or hypotheses and any sub-questions of your study should embody recognizable aspects of the theoretical framework and articulate the theoretical framework in a manner by which it can be further explored by your dissertation research. Because the theoretical framework connects the reader to existing knowledge, the research questions of your study act as the liaison between the existing knowledge and the problem you want to resolve. For example, if the “lens with which you view the world” is critical of systems and institutions, then your research questions could be framed around the ideas of in/equality, social justice, and access/barriers. A researcher with this particular lens would investigate the issue of parental involvement in a high-needs urban setting using this type of question: “How can school administrators and teachers encourage more active engagement by parents of high-needs students as a way to promote equal access and use of school resources?” This question incorporates the theoretical framework of educational equity theory (e.g., “to promote equal access”), as shown in Table 1. In contrast, the question, “How can parents of high-needs students become more actively involved in their student’s education and school-life?” does not include a theoretical framework.

As evidenced by the information above, the theoretical framework, your blueprint, is integral in developing the key components of your dissertation, including the problem, purpose, significance, and research questions. Keeping this idea in mind, the selection of a theoretical framework is one of the most important steps in moving from thinking about your dissertation research to actually starting your dissertation research.

Choosing the Right Theoretical Framework for You

As stated earlier, most research studies in social and behavioral sciences (regardless of disciplines) have a base for conducting research. This base is called the theoretical framework. The theoretical framework serves as a guide to your research and assists in determining what things you will measure and examine. The theoretical framework is

something solid and reliable on which to build your research and to inform the rest of your design.

As such, it is important to examine your own epistemological beliefs when selecting a theoretical framework. Our beliefs are influenced by assumptions, values, and ethics, which are all personal postulates. It is impossible to not have preconceived notions, even if they are very general in nature. Due to this, your fundamental beliefs affect how you will examine and explore research, especially your theoretical framework. In this vein, it is important to reflect on your own worldview and way of conceptualizing problems. What is the lens with which you view the world? For example, if you view the world from a pragmatic lens, choosing critical theory would not be the best way for you to proceed with a theoretical framework, whereas, if you view the world through a lens of interconnectedness of human beings, social network theory might be a good choice as your study's theoretical framework. There is no one theory that fits best with any inquiry. However, it is the researcher's responsibility to select and provide a clear rationale for the choice of theory to ensure that it aligns and supports the structure of the study's purpose, research questions, significance, and design.

In order to select the most appropriate and best-suited theoretical framework for your dissertation research, consider the following guidelines:

1. Begin by identifying your beliefs.
2. Consider several theories that intersect nicely with your epistemological values and broaden your way of thinking about the concepts in your study.
3. Develop a working knowledge of the theories and understand why each theory is important to you.
4. Conduct a brief literature review to find support for your theories.
5. Consult the ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Database to review how others have applied the specific theories you are considering.
6. Consider arguments that oppose your beliefs and theories.
7. Apply answers to "how" the theory connects to your problem, the study's purpose, significance, and design.
8. Select one theoretical framework that provides a solid, descriptive 'blueprint' for your reader.

Rich theories will offer both an elevation blueprint (i.e., provide structure for the dissertation) and a floor plan (i.e., provide concepts and purpose). This will help you focus your study's design and analysis plan to better build your research.

INTEGRATING THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A Theoretical Framework Can Enhance Your Literature Review

In general, the literature view is a discussion of your knowledge about the topic under study and how that knowledge is supported by the research literature. Often, the literature review acts as the foundation of your study.

When conceptualizing your literature review, it is important to understand the purpose of the literature review in the dissertation. The literature review is designed to demonstrate the researcher's knowledge of a particular subject area, field, and discipline. This includes key terms, ideas, theories, vocabulary, and of course, seminal researchers and research within the specific field. Hart (1998) asserted that the literature review plays a role in discovering important variables relevant to the topic; synthesizing and gaining new perspective; identifying relationship between ideas and practice; establishing the context of the topic or problem; rationalizing the significance of the problem; understanding the structure of the subject; and relating ideas and theory to applications (p. 27). Last, and certainly important for a burgeoning scholar, is the notion that the literature review can identify the gaps or paucity of information relevant to specific areas in the literature. These perceived gaps are the specific areas in which the researcher can significantly contribute to the literature and field.

The theoretical framework and the literature are intrinsically linked. Often, a theoretical framework can be used as a guide for logically developing and understanding the different, yet interconnected, parts of the literature review.

As you center on the “lens with which you view the world” you should in parallel develop the established empirical literature in the field you are studying. The theoretical framework and literature can then be developed harmoniously, and then be used to support the data, interpret the findings, and underlie the recommendations.

Using Concept Mapping to Align your Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Concept mapping is a useful tool that can be used to define your theoretical framework and to visually display how it is applied to your literature review. Concept mapping is a process for representing and organizing ideas using pictures (Novak & Cañas, 2006). Ideas are written in boxes and linked with arrows carrying explanatory legends to depict pictorial links between ideas.

The ability to construct a concept map illustrates two essential properties of understanding: the representation and the organization of ideas. Halford (1993) stated that “to understand a concept entails having an internal representation or mental model that reflects the structure of that concept” (p. 7). A concept map is an attempt to make explicit such a mental model so that it can be reviewed with others (Chang, 2007). The construction of concept maps is an excellent way to offer a preliminary organization of knowledge and to structure your understanding of how you will approach your dissertation topic.

Concordant with our analogy of a floor plan blueprint, a concept map offers you a tool to draw a plan for how you will approach your investigation within a specific theoretical framework. First, review literature and organize key issues of interest related to your topic using headers with key authors noted below each issue or theme. These are the foundational concepts that support your chosen theory. Next, arrange your ideas in a hierarchical, logical structure to create a floor plan for your house. Start with general ideas and funnel your thinking down to more specific, related topics. Each idea should have a clear purpose and significance in relation to the topic as a whole. The reader should be able to begin to see a clear picture of your ideas by previewing the organization and identification of your headings. Then, imagine you are an engineer who must add an electrical system to the floor plan blueprint of the house: use conduit and electricity to connect your research problem, research question, and significance. Where do ideas flow? What are the linkages from each concept to the next? Which concepts are most closely aligned (or derived) from the literature on your chosen theory? Draw visual arrows, connectors, and boxes among concepts. Finally, frame out the entire map with your theoretical framework and your research question.

The concept map will better help you write the literature review in an organized manner that is aligned with the theoretical framework. The following items will be included in a strong dissertation literature review rooted in theory:

1. A brief statement of your topic
2. An introduction to the organization of the literature review
3. Identification of your chosen theoretical framework (defines the theory, identifies key theorists, history of theory)
4. Specification of key theoretical principles to be applied to your topic, organized around conceptual subheadings
5. Identification of conflicts and controversies in the literature
6. Identification of gaps in the existing literature
7. In the last paragraph only, an explanation of how your proposed study connects to existing literature

A holistic view of your developing concept map will allow you to view concepts that may or may not fit with your theoretical framework. What aspects of your research question have not yet been addressed on your map? What connections are weak or need additional detail? Does the theoretical model, the exterior elevation blueprint, “fit” with the drawing’s interior blueprint as you imagined it? Does each space of the proverbial house to be built have an intended purpose and rationale for being there? Your dissertation committee can help you evaluate the feasibility of the plan and approach for your dissertation.

Applying the Theoretical Framework to Your Research Methods

One of the many values of having a clearly identified theoretical framework for a dissertation study is the ability to use this material to support and build the methodological plan. The use of a theoretical framework is not limited to problem formulation and the literature review—it should guide your study throughout the dissertation (Torraco, 1997).

Theory provides clear directions for how the researcher has moved beyond intuition and “pretheoretical commitments” to a solid basis for understanding and conceptualizing a topic within the context of the study. A theoretical framework permits the researcher to identify the design and the evaluation of a problem in a way that will allow the theory to be measured, tested, and extended to serve as a guide for the design of a study. A good blueprint paints a very clear picture as to the subject matter. Similarly, a good theoretical framework will offer the reader all the pieces needed to understand how the researcher has assembled the study.

Trifiletti et al. (2005) rated the use of theoretical application in research studies from “low” to “high” levels of how explicitly theory is applied and threaded through all aspects of a study. In our experience, a more explicitly identified and integrated theory used throughout the dissertation (e.g. Trifiletti’s “high” level of theoretical application), the stronger and more descriptive the framework (or blueprint) will be for the house being built.

Whether you are constructing a quantitative, qualitative, or mixed method study, the theoretical framework will often dictate the data collection plan that you develop and will illuminate information within the data. This can be a fairly straightforward process when constructing a quantitative research study based on a theory that has associated concepts, constructs, or ideas. Each of those constructs or theoretical notions can be used to structure the data collection and data analysis plan. Lester reported, “There is no data without a framework to make sense of those data” (2005, p. 458). Research findings can “be used to support, extend, or modify” (ibid, p. 459) a borrowed theory presented and applied in the dissertation. Consequently, approaching one’s data with a theory that was determined a priori offers a way to follow the blueprint for constructing the entire house.

For example, if your theoretical framework relates to Greenleaf’s servant leadership theory (1977), quantitative measures such as a survey instrument or an observational protocol would be constructed, applied, and/or organized around the 10 principles of servant leadership. Data analysis and testing of relationships among variables can follow the tenants of Greenleaf’s theoretical principles. Fortunately, many existing quantitative instruments used in dissertations are rooted in a theory, allowing for novice researchers to borrow theoretical frameworks to structure the methodological plan in a study.

Qualitative research methods may or may not involve a theory that is explicitly determined a priori. In some instances, the pre-determination of a theoretical framework would be the antithesis of the very nature of the method itself. However, this does not mean that theoretical frameworks are abandoned in qualitative inquiry. In these cases, qualitative research methods have theoretical underpinnings that guide the study with emphasis on the development of a theory a posteriori during the data analysis phase (Munhall & Chenail, 2008). The theoretical structure would be described after taking an inventory of available resources (e.g. data) prior to deciding on a blueprint from which to build.

If you are seeking to understand workplace bullying, you may discover themes in interview data that establish an emerging framework for understanding the phenomenon. Allowing theory to arise from qualitative methods may lead to a new conceptualization of the topic, or to the alignment of findings with an existing theory that can be compared and contrasted in the analysis. Thus, a revised supposition of workplace bullying rooted in employee emotional intelligence may emerge from the data, which would allow you as the researcher to identify, expand, or critique a new theoretical approach to the topic of inquiry.

Both an elevation blueprint and a floor plan blueprint must be supplied in order for a contractor to build a house. Similarly, a theoretical framework and its associated concepts is needed to structure the methodology and analysis of a dissertation. The use of qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, or action research approaches in a study may relate to the sequence of events taking place to understand, select, and apply the theoretical framework. However, the end product (i.e. the dissertation blueprint) will provide the researcher’s audience with a clear picture to explain



how the house was constructed based on an identified theory and conceptual framework.

APPLYING THE HOUSE ANALOGY - AN EXAMPLE

In order to assist in driving home the points we are making in the article, we will provide you with an in-depth example of applying the house analogy to your dissertation study. Let us use the example of gender gaps in school finance to underscore the ideas mentioned in this article. First, we describe the epistemological beliefs of the student who is conducting this research. Second, we provide you with an example of a problem, purpose, significance, and research questions associated with this topic. Third, we highlight some of the key components of the literature review that should be discussed when examining school finance. Fourth, we offer an example of a theoretical framework that is aligned with the aforementioned components of the study. And lastly, we give an example of a methodological plan for the proposed study. The examples of sections provided below are greatly abbreviated. They do not exemplify the actual length of these different sections. We did this for purposes of content and clarity.

An Example

Student "Alicia" is a bi-racial female who is in a doctoral program in educational leadership and who was formerly a journalist for a national newspaper. She spent much of her early career interviewing people for newspaper articles. As such, she has a keen knack for listening to people, taking notes while others speak, and summarizing long interviews. In addition, because of her vast experiences as a bi-racial female she has learned to be self-reflective, become concerned with issues of justice, and offer critiques of institutions, policies, society, and culture. She would position herself academically as a critical theorist.

Problem. At Sunshine Desert College (a pseudonym), Alicia reviews preliminary author first name and abstract data that reveals of 25 doctoral dissertations completed in the past five years in the entire Department of Educational Leadership, only one dissertation completed by a female student included school finance in the abstract, whereas eight males in the same program addressed this topic within their dissertations.

Purpose. The purpose of this study is two-fold. The first aim of the study is to understand what leads to the large gender gap in the topic selection of the doctoral student population in the Department of Educational Leadership. The second aim of the study is to provide educational administrators with strategies for encouraging more female students to participate in finance reform and fiscal issues in school administration as a topic for their doctoral dissertation.

Significance. This research is significant because it will potentially help increase the representation of a minority population, women, to the field of education finance. Moreover, by increasing the number of female doctoral students interested in school finance there could potentially be a greater number of educational leadership female administrators and school board members, which in turn could provide more role models for women looking to go into the field to better prepare female leaders in the fiscal needs of schools so as to reduce inequitable funding practices.

Research Questions. Main research question: What is the reason for the gender gap in dissertation topics at the Department of Educational Leadership at Sunshine Desert College? Two sub research questions: How do female doctoral students in the Department of Educational Leadership at Sunshine Desert College perceive this gender gap? What are the reasons why female doctoral students do not pursue topics related to school finance? How can educational leaders work to improve this gender gap?

Literature Review. Key topics will include the history of school finance practices, school finance reform, fiscal responsibility, inequality in funding practices, and the roles of women in school administration. Figure 3 displays an example of a concept map for Alicia's topic.

Theoretical Framework. Feminist Theory. Key theoretical principles include gender discrimination; social, institutional, and political factors influencing women's position in society; oppression and inequality of women; hegemony; and patriarchy.

Conceptual Framework. Gender socialization in the field of education, women's professional experiences

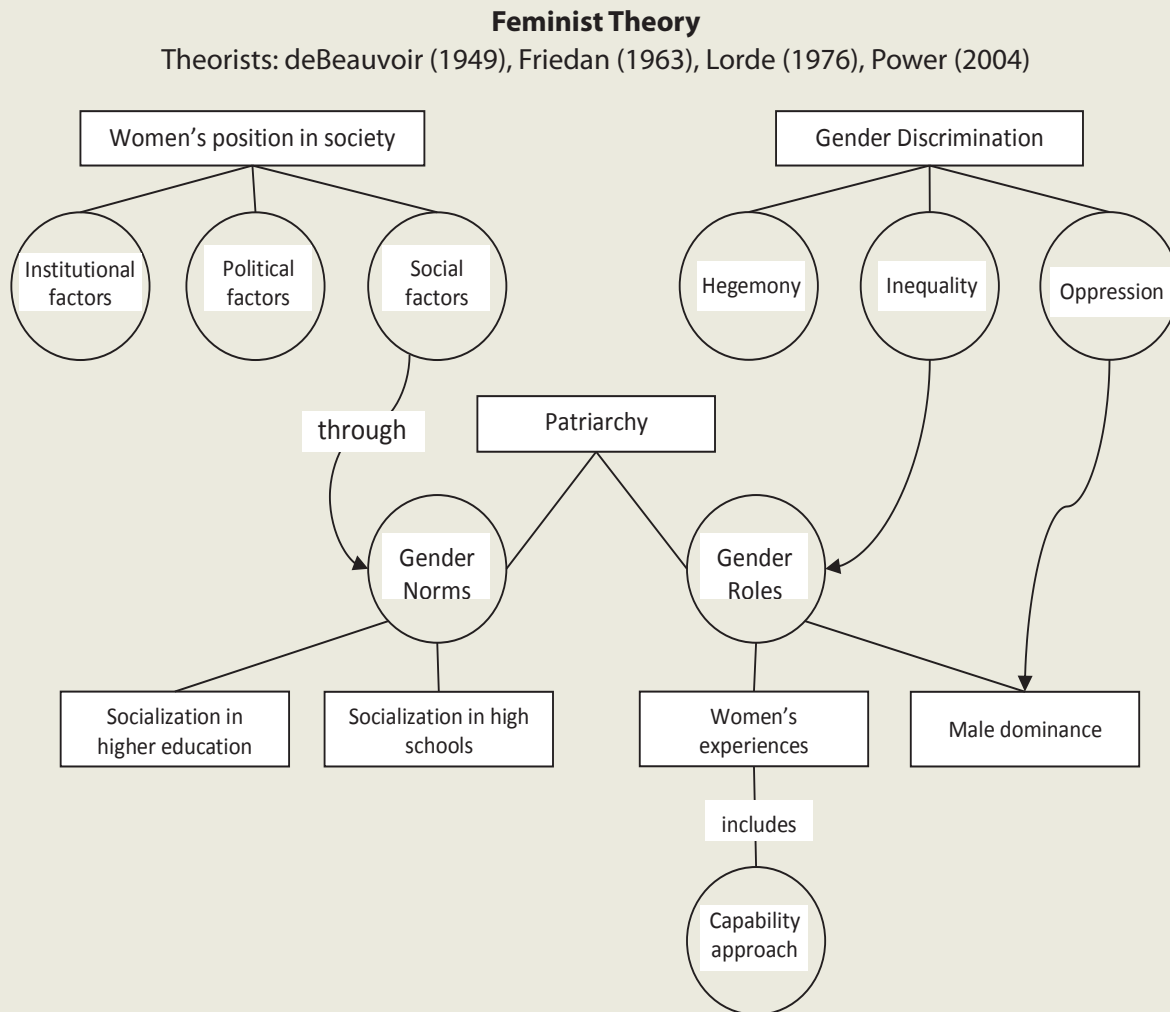


Figure 3. Concept Map

in the field of education, male dominance of math, accounting, and finance disciplines within educational structures.

Methods. Qualitative case study of Sunshine Desert College—four data sources are interviews with Sunshine Desert College doctoral graduates, focus groups with local area K-12 school administrators, reflective journaling by current Sunshine Desert College educational leadership students (all fit with feminist theory), and dissertations completed by Sunshine Desert College Department of Educational Leadership doctoral candidates over the past 10 years.

Data analysis plan. Thematic analysis of interviews, focus groups, and reflective journal data using a priori categories from feminist theory including gender socialization, gender inequality, patriarchy, and gender expectations. Content analysis of dissertations categorized by pre-determined gender role ideology of topics associated with gender ascription and norms.

Checklist for Integrating a Theoretical Framework

Doctoral students can use the following checklist as a member-check for before, during, and after you write your dissertation. Keep these questions in mind as you write.

1. Which discipline will the theory be applied to?



2. Is the theory an appropriate fit with the methodological plan?
3. Does the study's methodology draw from the principles, concepts, and tenants of the theoretical framework?
4. How big is the theory? Is it well developed, with many theoretical constructs that require investigation or too small in scope to fit with the topic? Have specific concepts and theoretical principles been selected to meet the objectives of the study?
5. Do the problem, purpose, and significance of your study align well with the theoretical framework?
6. Can the theory be used in conjunction with the research questions being developed? Or do research questions need to be modified to incorporate and reflect theory defined a priori?
7. How does the theoretical framework inform your literature review?
8. Does the data analysis plan utilize codes determined a priori based on the selected theoretical framework? Or does the data analysis plan allow for the development of grounded, a posteriori codes that can be connected to a new, evolving theoretical framework?
9. Does your theoretical framework undergird your conclusions, implications, and recommendations based on the data analysis?

SUMMARY

Multiple theories give varying perspectives on the same issue. Thus, each researcher must decide which lens to use, or which blueprint to follow to build an argument, establish the context of the problem, and explain findings. The researcher must keep the theoretical framework front and center in justifying the research questions, the problem, the significance of the study, and as a way to help determine the research design and the analysis plan. Information that is gathered for a dissertation needs to always be interpreted through a theoretical framework in order to offer a clear explanation of what has been found or the researcher risks being saddled with the previously mentioned "limited uselessness of findings and conclusions" (Sarter, 2006, p. 494).

The nature of the dissertation is such that it will begin with the blueprint, but over time will focus on the house itself instead of a representative sketch or plan. You will not "see" the blueprint anymore, and its intended purpose will be clear to all who read your work. The theoretical framework weaves its required elements into the building process so that it becomes indistinguishable from the house itself. What you are left with is a home to call your own.

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