



# CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS IN RESEARCH

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At the outset of planning your research, you set the study into a framework that justifies the study and explains its structure or design. This framework is like a foundation for a house. It provides the essential support for the study components and also clarifies the context of the study for the reader, much like a house blueprint. By constructing this framework, you not only justify and explain the study to others but also check your own understanding of the need for the study, how the study is conceived, what knowledge it will add regarding the topic, and how the elements of the study design align with the problem identified for the study.

This chapter builds on the philosophical foundations presented in Chapter 2 by addressing the framework for a research study. One of the difficulties for new researchers in developing a framework for a study is that conceptual and theoretical frameworks are defined and described differently by different authors, and the definition of what is considered a study framework may vary by institution. This chapter explores those various definitions to provide a spectrum of understanding of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. This chapter also provides the purpose of the conceptual framework, sources from which these frameworks are derived, and how conceptual frameworks are presented. Given the discrepancy in definitions of conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the term *conceptual framework* will serve as the overriding term for the chapter and will be differentiated from the term *theoretical framework*. Finally, some guidance in how to approach the conceptual and theoretical frameworks for your study is provided.

## LITERATURE-BASED DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

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Before exploring the various understandings of conceptual frameworks in depth, it is helpful to compare multiple definitions of the term. Some authors view conceptual and theoretical frameworks as synonymous. Interestingly, some research design authors do not provide description or definition of either conceptual or theoretical frameworks, even if they discuss theory; for example, see this omission

in Leedy and Ormrod (2016). Please note that this omission from texts does not justify excluding a conceptual framework from a study. A conceptual framework provides the orientation to the study and assists both the researcher and the reader in seeing how the study contributes to the body of knowledge on the topic, how elements of the study align, and how the study design and methodology meet rigorous research standards. In summary, a conceptual framework is incredibly important.

Table 3.1 displays various authors' definitions of conceptual framework. A conceptual framework may be defined broadly as theory or literature review, or it may be defined more narrowly as the factors and variables addressed in a study (Maxwell, 2017; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Essentially, all definitions of conceptual framework provide a context for the study, but the scope of that context varies among authors.

### Ravitch and Riggan

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) presented the most comprehensive understanding of conceptual framework. Indeed, they devoted an entire book to the topic. Their main point was that a conceptual framework is an argument for the study and that argument has two parts. First, the argument establishes the importance of and intended audience for the study. Second, the argument demonstrates alignment among research questions, data collection, and data analysis, as well as the use of rigorous procedures to conduct the study. They posited that the conceptual framework both

**TABLE 3.1** ■ DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Author(s)	Definition
Ravitch and Riggan (2017)	"An argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous." (p. 5)
Miles et al. (2014)	"[An explanation], either graphically or in narrative form, [of] the main things to be studied—the key factors, variables, or constructs—and the presumed relationships among them." (p. 20)
Maxwell (2013)	"The actual ideas and beliefs that you hold about the phenomena studied, whether these are written down or not; this may also be called the 'theoretical framework' or 'idea context' for the study." (p. 39)
Marshall and Rossman (2016)	"The first major section of the proposal—the conceptual framework—demands a solid rationale. In examining a specific setting or set of individuals, the writer should show how she is studying instances of a larger phenomenon. By linking the specific research questions to larger theoretical constructs, to existing puzzles or contested positions in a field, or to important policy issues, the writer shows that the particulars of this study serve to illuminate larger issues and therefore hold potential significance for that field." (p. 6)

informs and describes the development of research questions, design selection, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

### **Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña**

A major contribution to the idea of conceptual framework presented by Miles et al. (2014) is the graphical representation of the conceptual framework, which will be explored later in this chapter. They promoted spending significant time in developing and representing the conceptual framework. That process encourages a closer assessment of how a study's variables are related, how study participants are characterized, and how data collection instruments are selected.

### **Maxwell**

Maxwell (2013) discussed conceptual frameworks in relation to qualitative research design. For Maxwell, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks are synonymous. Maxwell presented the terms as synonymous because he viewed the conceptual framework as presenting a theory of the phenomenon under investigation (p. 39). A major point of Maxwell's contribution is that the researcher must build, or construct, the conceptual framework from personal experience, prior research, and published theory into a coherent representation of the study.

### **Marshall and Rossman**

Marshall and Rossman (2016) described conceptual framework as providing a rationale for the study. The idea of rationale is close to Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) view of conceptual framework as an argument for the study. Marshall and Rossman also emphasized the importance of grounding a conceptual framework in the literature published on the topic under study.

All definitions demonstrate the importance of the relationship of the conceptual framework to the roots of the study purpose and the alignment of study parts. They also indicate ways that a conceptual framework makes the construction of a study clearer, cleaner, and more straightforward. However, another consideration is how researchers define the term *theoretical framework*, particularly in relation to the conceptual framework.

## LITERATURE-BASED DEFINITIONS OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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The definitions of conceptual framework are confounded by the fact that some authors do not differentiate between conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Maxwell (2013), Robson and McCartan (2016), and Merriam and Tisdell (2016) consider the terms synonymous. Anfara and Mertz (2015) do not explicitly relate conceptual and theoretical frameworks, but they imply a synonymous relationship between them. Some authors (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles et al., 2014) offer no discussion of the relationship between conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) defined theoretical framework as “the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame of your study” (p. 85), which seems close to some of the definitions of conceptual framework provided earlier. Anfara and Mertz (2015) defined theoretical frameworks as “any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels . . . that can be applied to the understandings of phenomena” (p. 15).

A clear definition of theoretical frameworks and the relationship between theoretical and conceptual frameworks comes from Ravitch and Riggan (2017). They defined theoretical frameworks as follows:

In the case of theoretical frameworks, the “parts” referred to in this definition are *theories*, and the thing that is being supported is the relationships embedded in the conceptual framework. More specifically, we argue that the parts are *formal* theories; [*sic*] those that emerge from and have been explored using empirical work. (pp. 11–12)

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) required that the theoretical framework be based on published, identifiable theories. Private conceptualizations or theoretical constructions do not qualify. In addition, they held that the theoretical framework resides within the conceptual framework and is not synonymous with it. *In other words, the conceptual framework presents the overall structure of the study, and the theoretical framework within it explains the relationships that are explored within the study.*

## RECOMMENDED DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

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I recommend that conceptual and theoretical frameworks not be considered synonymous, and I align the definitions used in this text with the guidance provided by Ravitch and Riggan (2017). I adopt Ravitch and Riggan’s definition of conceptual framework 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. 5). For example, a conceptual framework for a study on learning styles would present the reason(s) why studying the particular aspect of learning styles is important, with that reason rooted in the literature; for whom studying the particular aspect of learning styles might make a difference; and how the planned design and methods of the study are appropriate and rigorous.

Furthermore, I differentiate between conceptual and theoretical frameworks, conceiving theoretical framework as an explanation of how the study relates to the generation or testing of theory. Building on Ravitch and Riggan (2017), I define *theoretical framework* as an element of a conceptual framework that situates the relationships explored in the study into the context of developing or testing formal theories.

Consistent with Ravitch and Riggan (2017), the theoretical framework should do the following:

1. Identify the theory cluster. A theory cluster combines theories into categories, such as theories of learning style, organizational communication, and language acquisition.
2. Identify specific theories relevant to that cluster, including the originator or source and the major propositions and hypotheses of each theory.
3. Identify the theory selected for the study. This includes specifying the specific theory within the cluster that will be used, the propositions of the theory that relate to the specific study, and the review of prior studies using that theory as a focus.
4. State how the study will contribute to the body of knowledge related to the theory.

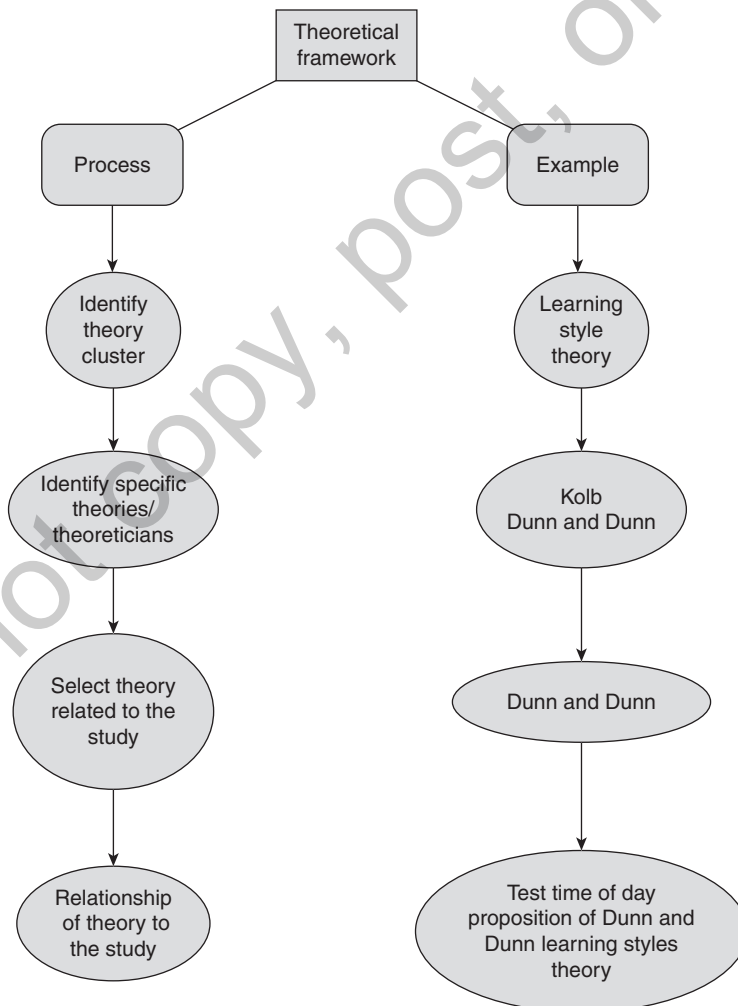
Following the earlier learning style study example, the theory cluster would be learning style theory. There are several different learning style theories, such as Kolb's experiential learning theory model (Kolb, 1984, 2015) and the Dunn and Dunn learning style model (Dunn, Dunn, & Price, 1984). Of course, there are more learning style theorists, but these two are presented for the purpose of this example. Within a theoretical framework, if you were doing this study, you would present the major theories that are relevant to the study.

Notice that a theory often has the originator's name associated with it, such as Einstein's theory of relativity, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences, and Freud's psychosexual theory of human development. Notice, too, that the publication dates for theories are often old. Theories require significant testing over time to be verified. Theories supported by research survive the test of time. Theories not supported by research lose usefulness and eventually fall away, are revised, or are replaced by new theories.

Having identified the theory cluster and the specific theories within the cluster that are related to the study problem, the theories must be explicated. In other words, their major propositions or hypotheses need to be presented. For example, Kolb's (2015) theory holds that individuals show a preference for one of four learning styles—accommodating, converging, diverging, and assimilating—and each style has a certain set of characteristics. These styles and characteristics would need to be summarized along with any other major propositions or hypotheses of the theory. As another example, Dunn and Dunn's theory (Dunn et al., 1984) offers five stimulus areas—environmental, emotional, sociological, physiological, and psychological—and each of these five areas are associated with certain elements. These areas and elements, along with any other major propositions or hypotheses, would need to be summarized. These two learning theories are very different from each other. The next task for the researcher is to select the theory most relevant to the study.

For the example of a learning style theory study, consider that the researcher is investigating whether student standardized test scores vary according to the time of day students are tested in relation to their preferred learning style. Since the researcher has explicated both Kolb’s and Dunn and Dunn’s theories, the researcher has shown that the Dunn and Dunn theory has explicit propositions with regard to time of day as a factor in learning, whereas the Kolb theory does not. Therefore, the researcher selects the Dunn and Dunn theory for inclusion in the theoretical framework, giving that rationale. A review of research on the physiological element of time of day in Dunn and Dunn’s theory situates the proposed study within the professional conversation that is related to that theory. Finally, the researcher describes how the proposed study will contribute to using the theory for explanation and prediction.

## EXAMPLE OF HOW A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK RELATES TO A STUDY



## PURPOSE OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

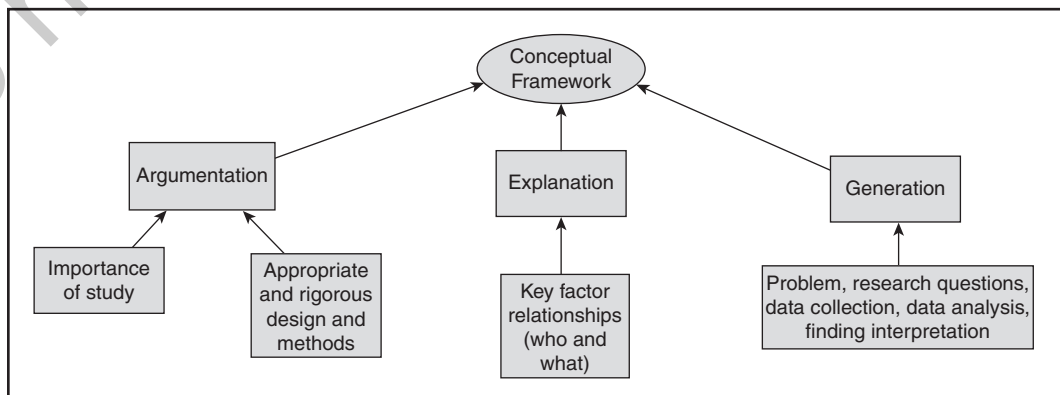
To construct an informative conceptual framework, the researcher must understand the purpose of a conceptual framework. Different authors present the purpose of conceptual frameworks in different ways (Table 3.2). Some authors focus on the conceptual framework as argumentation for the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). Other authors see the conceptual framework as explanatory (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Miles et al., 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) viewed the conceptual framework, which they termed theoretical framework, as generating elements of the research design and methods, whereas Robson and McCartan (2016) emphasized variable relationships and research design. Maxwell (2013) combined purposes of the conceptual framework into clarification, explanation, and justification.

**TABLE 3.2** ■ PURPOSE OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

Author(s)	Purpose
Ravitch and Riggan (2017)	Argue for why the topic matters and why the proposed design and methodology are appropriate and rigorous (p. 5)
Miles et al. (2014)	Explain relationships among key factors/variables/constructs of the study (who and what will be studied) (p. 20)
Maxwell (2013)	Clarify, explain, and justify methods (pp. 39–40)
Robson and McCartan (2016)	Specify variable relationships and research design (p. 68)
Marshall and Rossman (2016)	Argue for study in terms of meaning and contribution to improving the human condition (p. 67)
Merriam and Tisdell (2016)	Generate study problem, research questions, data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of findings (p. 86)
Anfara and Mertz (2015)	Explain variable relationships (p. 15)

Figure 3.1 displays the various purposes of conceptual frameworks: (a) argumentation, (b) explanation, and (c) generation. Argumentation focuses on the importance of studying the topic, the appropriateness of the design, and the rigor of the methods. Explanation stresses the relationships among who and what will be studied. Generation gives rise to the problem, research questions, and methods of a study.

**FIGURE 3.1** ■ PURPOSES OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS



I recommend that you incorporate the three purposes—argumentation, explanation, and generation—when constructing your conceptual framework. By doing so, you will build a comprehensive model that will aid in justifying your study, clarifying the relationships explored in the study, and aligning design elements. As you build the conceptual framework toward these purposes, you must root the framework in verifiable sources.

## SOURCES OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

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A source for a conceptual framework is the principal element forming the basis for the development of the framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). You may think of it as the impetus for the conceptual framework. There are three sources for a conceptual framework: (1) experience, (2) literature, and (3) theory.

### Experience

Ravitch and Riggan (2017), Maxwell (2013), Robson and McCartan (2016), Marshall and Rossman (2016), and Booth, Colomb, Williams, Bizup, and Fitzgerald (2016) all allowed for personal interests, experiences, intuitions, and hunches as stimuli for a conceptual framework, although none of them believed that personal experience alone is sufficient. For example, your personal experience observing leadership styles in an organization may stimulate in you a desire to conduct a study on a certain aspect of leadership, but a literature review might reveal that that aspect has already been deeply studied or that there is scant support in the profession for investigating that aspect. Personal issues may point you in the direction of a study topic, but the topic must have meaning for others in the field. In other words, there must be evidence that others in the field share your concern and that addressing the concern will advance knowledge. Such evidence rests in literature and a theoretical base to support a conceptual framework for a study.

### Literature

An essential source for your conceptual framework is the published research literature related to your topic. Ravitch and Riggan (2017), Maxwell (2013), Robson and McCartan (2016), Merriam and Tisdell (2016), and Marshall and Rossman (2016) advocated for rooting the conceptual framework in the literature associated with the topic of study. Of singular importance is that your study is based on a need documented from the literature. For example, following the idea in the prior paragraph, your personal experience may point to a desire to study a certain aspect of leadership. Of importance, though, is that you find out from the literature the extent to which that aspect has already been studied, what is still not understood about it, and whether or not the discipline needs to remedy the lack of knowledge (Booth et al.,



2016). The literature review provides the evidence for the argumentation contained in a conceptual framework.

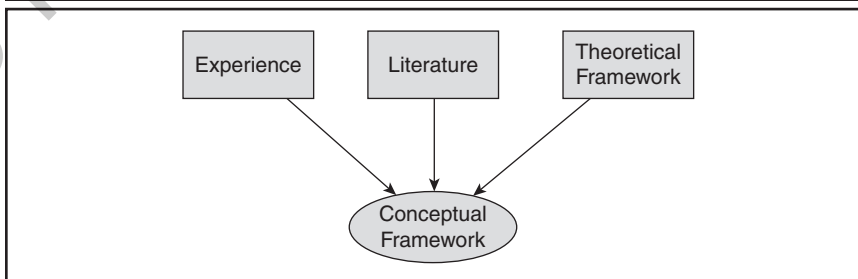
### Theoretical Framework

An additional source for your conceptual framework is theory (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017; Robson & McCartan, 2016), and this source is expressed in the theoretical framework. The study may be focused on generating new theory or on testing theory that has already been constructed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For example, your study may focus on describing how leaders distribute power in an organization. In other words, the focus is on developing an explanation, or theory, of how power distribution functions in a certain kind of organization. Or your study may focus on testing some theory of power distribution that has already been developed to determine if it accurately explains how power is distributed within a certain group. Whether generating or testing theory, the conceptual framework contains the theoretical framework, or theoretical context, for the study.

### Summary of Sources of Conceptual Frameworks

As shown in Figure 3.2, there are three sources, or stimuli, for creating a conceptual framework: (1) experience, (2) literature, and (3) theory. Although personal experience may instigate a research idea, personal experience is not sufficient to support a conceptual framework for a research study. The conceptual framework must be rooted in the professional literature. The literature provides the rationale for the study by exposing what is not yet known or understood about a phenomenon. The third source for a conceptual framework is theory, integrated as the theoretical framework. Is there already a theory that needs to be tested? Is there no existing viable theory of the phenomenon and does one need to be developed? Thus, experience may prompt a conceptual framework, the literature must provide the argumentation for pursuing the research idea, and the study must be situated in relation to generating or testing theory.

**FIGURE 3.2** ■ SOURCES OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS



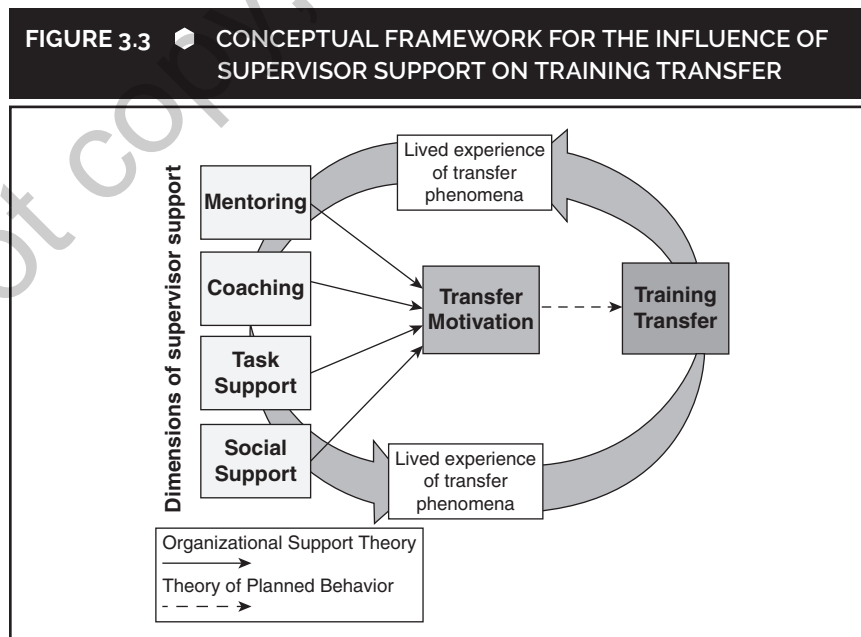
## PRESENTATION OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS

There are two ways to present a conceptual framework—graphically and narratively. If you are crafting a research study for a thesis or dissertation, your institution will probably expect that, at a minimum, you describe the conceptual framework narratively, with optional figures to support clarity of presentation. This section will examine means of exhibiting a conceptual framework.

### Graphic Presentation

Some authors favor a diagrammatic portrayal of a conceptual framework using a concept map, with or without an accompanying narrative (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Miles et al., 2014; Robson & McCartan, 2016). A concept map is a pictorial portrayal of relationships. It shows how one idea or concept connects to other ideas or concepts.

Miles et al. (2014) provided several fine examples of graphic presentations and concept maps describing conceptual frameworks. As an additional example, Figure 3.3 shows a graphical conceptual framework for a mixed methods study that examined the influence of specific dimensions of supervisor support (mentoring, coaching, task support, and social support) on transfer motivation and training transfer to determine whether transfer motivation mediates the relationships between dimensions of supervisor support and training transfer (Schindler, 2012).



Source: L. A. Schindler (personal communication, July 15, 2015).

Figure 3.3 reflects the purpose of the mixed methods study, which was to understand the influence of specific dimensions of support (mentoring, coaching, task support, and social support) on transfer motivation and training transfer. In the quantitative portion of this study, the author examined the relationships between dimensions of supervisor support and training transfer and the degree to which transfer motivation mediates those relationships. In the qualitative portion of the study, the author explored participants' lived experiences of transfer phenomena (i.e., supervisor support, transfer motivation, and training transfer). Both organizational support theory and the theory of planned behavior provided support for this study (Schindler, 2012).

Miles et al. (2014) noted that forcing the graphic onto one page rather than multiple text pages allows you to see and adjust all the parts of the study as a unit as well as to see inconsistencies and contradictions. Going through this process lends cohesiveness to the study design. You should expect development of the graphic to be an iterative process with several versions until it finally accurately represents the study. During this iterative process, how you are writing about the study in text and how you are graphically representing the study become mutually informative and mutually formative. Miles et al. further suggested that you should challenge yourself to avoid overly global graphics with ubiquitous two-way arrows that do not clearly demonstrate the flow of the study.

Like Miles et al. (2014), Robson and McCartan (2016) advocated presenting the conceptual framework in graphic format. Robson and McCartan provided six specifications for developing that graphic:

1. Contain the graphic on one page.
2. Include multiple inputs, such as prior research, including pilot studies; relevant theories; hunches with regard to the phenomenon or variable relationships; and thoughts of other professionals in the field.
3. Attain internal consistency within the graphical map.
4. Expect to produce multiple iterations of the framework graphic.
5. Include an item, rather than exclude it, if unsure.
6. Simplify the graphic as you learn from experience.

If you attend to each of the six specifications listed, you will develop a solid graphical presentation of your conceptual framework.

### **Narrative Presentation**

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) were less supportive of a graphical presentation. Although they saw that graphical and narrative presentations of the conceptual framework can work well, they preferred a text-based presentation of conceptual framework when there is a question about presentation. Ravitch and Riggan provided strong examples of narratively presented conceptual frameworks in relation to design, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

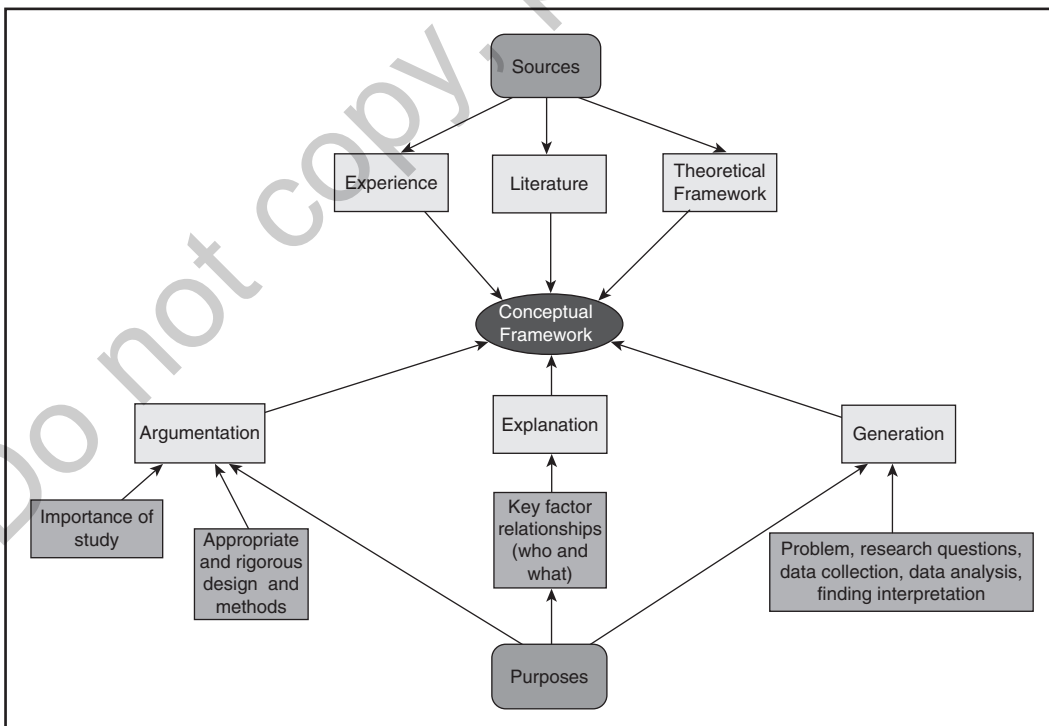
### Recommendation

I advocate narrative presentation of the conceptual framework accompanied by a graphic. The effort to create a one-page graphical model of a study will assist you in coherently conceptualizing the study, determining appropriate alignment of research design elements, and communicating the essential elements to others. Another benefit of a graphical conceptual framework is that it lifts you from the burden of words, in which some researchers can become mired, and allows you to see the study and interrelationships as a picture. In that way, a graphic provides you with an organizing tool that conveys meaning to readers more simply than written text. I maintain, though, that you must also present the conceptual framework in clearly written text. Narrative presentation of the conceptual framework clarifies key aspects of the study foundation and conveys an understanding of the overall study in the context of knowledge in the discipline.

### SUMMARY

In this chapter, I explored definitions of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. I advocated that conceptual and theoretical frameworks should not be considered synonymous but should be understood as different concepts, congruent with the assertions of Ravitch and Riggan (2017). As shown in Figure 3.4, three

**FIGURE 3.4** ■ PURPOSES AND SOURCES OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS



purposes identified for conceptual frameworks—argumentation, explanation, and generation—are rooted in the three sources of experience, literature, and theory. As part of the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework shows how the study relates to generating or testing theory and explains the relationships that are explored within the study. Finally, I recommended graphical presentation of a conceptual framework accompanied by narrative explication.

### Questions for Reflection

1. How do you distinguish between conceptual and theoretical frameworks?
2. Why is personal experience a valid but insufficient stimulus for a study's conceptual framework?
3. How might the presentation of a conceptual framework in both narrative and graphical formats help both the conceptualization and communication of a study?

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