Deriving a Theoretical Framework for Interpreting Management Research Results in South Africa

Basia Dennis Bless
Wits School of Governance, Parktown, Johannesburg
bbless97@gmail.com

Abstract: Drawing from a study investigating performance management in South African public institutions, this article highlights the significance of literature review as a technique for deriving a theoretical framework for interpreting public management research results. Specifically, the article argues that the process of developing an interpretive framework begins with understanding the difference between a conceptual frameworks and a theoretical framework. Understanding this distinction is important because students and seasoned researchers often treat these concepts as synonyms, of which they are not. As a result, most postgraduate management students in South Africa struggle to effectively use literature review as a technique for constructing a framework for interpreting their research findings. Exacerbating this struggle is that most universities do not offer structured teaching on how to do literature review and specifically use it to construct a theoretical framework. Therefore, this article provides guidance on how postgraduate management students in South Africa should effectively use literature review to develop a framework for interpreting research findings. In developing this guidance, the article drew from an ongoing research and existing literature on research conceptualisation to demonstrate the significance of literature review as a technique for interpreting research results. In other words, the article applies a combination of research theory and practice to contribute knowledge on how to construct a theoretical framework for interpreting research results.

Keywords: Literature review, Conceptual Framework, Management Research, South Africa

1. Introduction

Based on a study on performance management in South African public institutions, this article highlights the role of literature review in constructing a theoretical framework, which is the most difficult undertaking for most postgraduate students. For example, it is common for postgraduate students to refer to a description of concepts used in research as a conceptual framework (Naidoo 2011; Nelson 2016; Leburu 2018). Indeed, a conceptual framework describes concepts used in the study but Maxwell (2013) cautions that this description should be systematic. However, as Wotela (2016) points out, most postgraduate students in South Africa, and probably elsewhere, provide an incoherent discussion of concept after concept leading to an ineffective approach to research conceptualisation. This problem is a consequence of the unavailability of taught modules on literature review in most universities (Atkins & Wallace 2012; Bloomberg & Volpe 2008). As a result, literature review is the most overlooked aspect of the research process (Tight 2019). For this reason, most students struggle to effectively review literature for constructing theoretical frameworks for interpreting research findings. To address this problem, the article outlines a process towards deriving a framework for interpreting public management research results. First, it distinguishes between theoretical and conceptual frameworks to dispel the notion that these concepts are synonyms. Second, it draws from Wotela (2016) to provide guidance on how postgraduate students may effectively use literature review as a technique for constructing a theoretical framework. Last, it applies Grant and Onsaloo's (2014) approach and draws from ongoing research to demonstrate how students may link theory to key components of the research such as the research problem and the research questions.

2. Approach

This article is founded on the premise that a conceptual framework, which Camp (2001) describes as an outline showing research progression, is an outcome of a systematic literature review (Wotela 2017; Bless 2021). Therefore, the first step towards deriving a theoretical framework – an important component of a conceptual framework – involves undertaking a systematic literature review. To this end, the criteria for searching literature from a variety of academic databases such as Scopus and Google Scholar were developed. The search yielded a significant number of sources some of which were eliminated after screening abstracts. After screening, 15 peer-reviewed journal articles from the field of public administration and management were selected and subjected to thematic analysis using a grid matrix consisting of five questions. The first question interrogated the purpose of the literature review while the second focused on key products of literature review. The third addressed similarities and differences between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework while the last interrogated key functions of these frameworks. These questions were deposited in the first column of the

matrix resulting in five rows with each row representing a specific question. Specifically, each of the selected articles was analysed on how it responded to each question in the matrix. For example, each article was examined on how it had defined the purpose of literature review, and information extracted in this regard was recorded in a cell corresponding to this theme. After analysing all the selected articles against the five questions, the author expanded the matrix by three columns. In the first additional column, the author recorded similarities across articles on how they have addressed a specific question. The second column was reserved for differences while in the last column the author recorded his own reflections across a broad range of issues emerging from how all the articles had responded to the five questions mentioned earlier. As noted in Wotela (2016), understanding similarities and differences allows the researcher to establish a general pattern on how literature responds to a particular question. With this pattern established, it was easy for the author to add his own voice in the discussion of each identified theme, resulting in a comprehensive and critical understanding of a wide range of issues pertaining to the role of literature review in the research process. After undertaking this exercise, the author made the following observations.

The first is that South African public administration and management research does not offer adequate tools for using literature to derive a theoretical framework. Second, Grant and Onsaloo (2014) as well as Wotela (2016), offer useful guidance to close this gap. Last, some postgraduate management students in South Africa have applied the Wotela approach to interrogate literature for conceptualising their studies. However, no one has released a publication on the effectiveness of this approach in facilitating the development of theoretical frameworks. Therefore, in closing this gap, this article draws from ongoing research to demonstrate how postgraduate students in a South African context, can effectively use literature as a technique for deriving a framework for interpreting public management research results. In this regard, the article argues that the successful construction of interpretive framework requires students to first understand related but distinct functions of a theoretical framework and a conceptual framework.

3. Distinguishing between theoretical and conceptual frameworks

The importance of literature review as a technique for constructing theoretical and conceptual frameworks is hardly contested. However, as Evans (2007) points out, there is a debate on whether these concepts serve the same purpose. Out of a desire to contribute to this debate, this article highlights common errors that researchers commit in describing these important products of literature review. For example, Maxwell (2003) describes a conceptual framework as a presentation of a theory of the phenomenon under investigation. Similarly, Imenda (2014) defines it as a product of bringing together several related concepts to explain or predict a given event. According to Gabriel (2008), prediction is the main function of theory. Therefore, positioning a conceptual framework as a predictive concept confirms Grant and Onsaloo's (2014) observation that some scholars treat these concepts as synonyms. This obscures the distinctive features of these concepts and makes it difficult for South African postgraduate management students to appreciate their functions in the research process. Another mistake is that these concepts are described as structures that guide the research process (Liehr & Smith 1999) without explaining the type of structure they are and how each guides the research process. To provide clarity in this regard, the article treats conceptual and theoretical frameworks as complementary but distinct products of the literature review.

In terms of complementarity, both enhance research conceptualisation but theoretical frameworks specifically provide for interpretation of research findings while a conceptual framework guides the entire research process. Highlighting the complementarity between these concepts, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) define a theoretical framework as a set of theories supporting the relationship embedded in the conceptual framework. Drawing from the author's experience as a postgraduate student, this article argues that a theoretical framework infuses theory into critical components of a conceptual framework such as the research problem and the research questions. Most importantly, a theoretical framework allows researchers to justify methodological options presented in the conceptual framework. Perhaps this complementarity is the source of a misconception that the two concepts serve a similar purpose. Fuelling this misconception is limited literature offering a distinct description of the two important aspects of literature review (Maxwell 2013; Merriam 1997; Miles & Huberman 1994). Considering this, this article highlights different functions of a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework.

The main difference between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework is that the former describes a pathway along which the research process unfolds from the beginning to the end. On the other hand, the latter

constitutes theories and concepts that guide researchers in collecting, analysing, and eventually interpreting research findings. For example, a theoretical framework provides a structure for what to look for in the data (Kivunja 2018) and allows researchers to analyse variables and attributes extracted from the data in a way that links theory to research questions. Therefore, its value lies in its ability to infuse theory into key aspects of a conceptual framework, especially the research problem statement, research justification, research questions, research strategy, design, procedures, and methods. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), decisions on how to explore these research elements are dependent on the researcher's orientation and personal understanding of concepts. Therefore, as Adom and Hussein (2018) point out, a significant difference between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework is that the former is derived from personal orientations and experiences. On the other hand, the latter relies on literature to identify existing and relevant theories, frameworks, and concepts to inform the researcher's approach to answering the research questions.

Having noted similarities and differences between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework, the article moves on to answer the most pertinent question of how to construct a theoretical framework. To answer this question, the article concurs with Wotela (2016) that deriving a theoretical framework begins with interrogating literature to understand the field of study in which research is embedded. Based on this explanation, management was interrogated as an academic home for this article and this interrogation enabled the author to identify theoretical views of leaders in the field of management. According to Grant and Osanloo (2014), these theoretical views should be tightly aligned to the research problem, the research justification, and the research questions. To facilitate this process, Wotela (2016) suggests five questions with the first question aimed at understanding events leading to the development of a theory of interest. The second question examines how the theory of interest was developed and for what purpose while the third examines what the theory explains. The fourth question provides information on the advantages of identified theory while the fifth addresses its disadvantages. These questions, together with Grant and Onsaloo's (2014) approach to integrating theory into key components of the research process, inform the process towards deriving a framework for interpreting public management research results as outlined in the next section.

4. Dering a theoretical framework: Lessons from performance management research in South Africa

As mentioned earlier, this article is a product of an ongoing study on performance management in South African public institutions. Therefore, in line with Wotela's (2016) suggestion that deriving an interpretive framework begins with understanding the field of study, the author interrogated management as a field of study in which the main research that informs this paper is located. To this end, management is defined as a branch of public administration divided into two components of business management and public management. Given its title, this paper is located within the realm of public management. This means that public management provides potential theories, concepts, and frameworks for interpreting public management research results. In this regard, new public management stands out for its ability to explain a transition from public administration to public management. Therefore, constructing a theoretical framework for interpreting public management research findings requires a detailed analysis of key dimensions of public management. In this regard, the author began by tracing the origins of new public management back to institutional economics and managerialism (Hood 1991). With this in mind, the article argues that an effective interpretive framework for public management studies should draw from the two fields. For example, theories such as public choice, property rights, and transactional costs are commonly used for interpreting different aspects of institutional economics. However, these are not appropriate for this study which is rooted in the field of public administration. For example, Sidzumo and Wotela (2016) applied the theory of bureaucracy which originates from public administration, to explain constraints towards the use of performance monitoring and evaluation in South African public institutions. Adding to this, this article identifies management by objectives, implementation theory, and organisational culture as potential theories for explaining challenges facing South African public institutions. Identification of several theories in this regard confirms Ravitch and Riggan's (2017) notion that understanding the field of study, in this case, public management provides a cluster of potential theories for interpreting research results. For this article, there are three clusters of potential theories for interpreting public management research results. The first cluster consists of theories drawn from the field of public administration while the second and third are drawn from the field of management and the field of organisational behaviour respectively.

Now that clusters of potential theories for interpreting public management research results have been identified, the next step is to use these theories to interpret research findings. To facilitate this process, the article draws from Crawford (2014) and Wotela (2016) who suggest that before applying potential theories, researchers should first understand their origin, as well as assumptions, propositions, and explanations associated with them. Therefore, the article traces the origin of bureaucracy within the South African public service to apartheid, which according to Gumede (2015), was fragmented along ethnic, regional, and political lines and characterised by centralised control, top-down management, lack of transparency, and accountability. Given the oppressive policy of apartheid, bureaucracy was mainly used as a tool for compliance and control. Notwithstanding inefficiencies of bureaucracy, as noted in several proponents of new public management, Cameron (2009) states that principles of bureaucracy are entrenched within the South African public service. For example, the current bureaucracy, established on democratic principles of accountability, is also characterised by nepotism, lack of accountability, and professionalism when it comes to the appointment of senior public servants (Ndevu, 2019). As Kgatle (2017) points out, political interference, lack of accountability, and nepotism are root causes of poor performance in South African public entities. For this reason, Weber's (1947) theory of bureaucracy is suitable for interpreting factors that hinder performance across South African public institutions. In addition, Wilson's (1887) theory of politics-administration dichotomy, which originates from the failure of the spoils system, is relevant for interpreting the same issue. Specifically, Weber's rational bureaucracy allowed the author to understand that bureaucratic institutions are slow to adapt and innovate leading to poor performance. Most importantly, Wilson's ideas allowed the author to understand how failure to adhere to the principle of politics-administration dichotomy has eroded accountability and professionalism leading to the collapse of key institutions in South Africa.

Moving on to theories clustered under management, the article argues that the principle of task monitoring espoused in the original work of Taylor's (1911) scientific management, is the basis for the introduction of performance standards in public institutions. Subsequently, this principle became a cornerstone of Drucker's (1954) idea of management by objectives that appeared in the wake of the new public management movement. Specifically, key principles of management by objectives permeate all facets of new public management making this theory appropriate for interpreting performance issues in South African public institutions. Therefore, the successful development of a theoretical framework for interpreting management research results requires theories drawn from multiple fields of study. For example, Taylorism, which is a management theory, provides the basis for use of performance standards in public institutions. In other words, Taylorism provides a theoretical foundation for new public management, which in turn, draws inspiration from Drucker's management by objectives. In sum, new public management draws its theoretical foundations from several fields including public administration. This means that the popularity of new public management does not mean that it is a new phenomenon. What is new is that old ideas expressed by classical public administration and management scholars were repackaged and widely promoted by international organisations as a panacea for administrative problems facing public institutions in general. Riding over the bandwagon of this international movement, a democratic South Africa adopted different aspects of performance management especially monitoring and evaluation, as a solution to service delivery challenges it inherited from apartheid administration.

Adoption of performance monitoring and evaluation assumes that the effectiveness of public institutions rests on the use of private sector management techniques and values. However, as Meek (1988) points out, this assumption is not accurate because private and public institutions do not share a homogeneous culture. For this reason, Gumede (2015) concludes that new public management reforms have not yielded convincing results in South Africa. To address this problem, this article points to the third cluster of theories drawn from a domain of organisational behaviour. Specifically, it draws from theories of culture to demonstrate the significance of organisational culture as a performance-enhancing attribute. To this end, the author applies Wotela's (2016) thematic analysis to interrogate literature for understanding different aspects of organisational culture. As noted in table 1, this interrogation is guided by key issues reflected in the first column. Based on personal experience, effective analysis of potential theories for interpreting research findings requires students to source a minimum of three articles on each theory to be considered for inclusion in the theoretical framework. One article should be written by the pioneer of the theory, the other by its supporter while the last should be written by its antagonist.

Table 1: A framework for interrogating literature to derive a theoretical framework for interpreting public management research results (Adapted from Wotela 2016)

	Pioneer	Supporter	Antagonist
Author and year	**Durkheim (1960)**	**Radcliffe Brown (1965)**	**Van der Berghe (1963)**
Events leading to development of organisational culture	Comte gave the subject its name and an ambitious prospectus; Durkheim gave it academic credibility and influence.		
Purpose of organisational culture	ritual and ceremony serve to build cohesion and facilitate collective cognition	Social institutions are necessary for inculcating the values and strengthening solidarity among the masses.	
What does organisational culture explain	To make sense of culture, then, one must first attend to the social structural configurations that beget and sustain it	The social structure of society consists of various components such as social institutions, social norms, and values, that are interconnected and dependent	Culture is the product of negotiated and shared symbols and meanings; it emerges from social interaction.
Advantages	The two Frenchmen who did most to create the discipline were Auguste Comte (1798–1857) in the aftermath of the Revolution, and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) after the Franco-Prussian War.	Each component of the structure has a specified role and altogether these social patterns contribute to the balanced and stable functioning of society.	
Disadvantages			"criticised structural functional theory for its assumption that the parts of a society exist in a natural state of equilibrium, functioning efficiently so as to maintain the effectiveness of the total social structure"

After sourcing three articles (see table 1), the analysis should begin by interrogating culture as a concept. In this regard, culture is understood as a configuration of social structure and how it functions (Durkheim 1960). In support of this view, Brown (1965) identifies different components of culture which include social institutions, social norms, and social values. Based on Durkheim's understanding of culture, norms and values give meaning and identity to a social structure. Even Van der Berghe (1963), who criticises Durkheim's idea, recognises this fundamental aspect. For this reason, in the original study that informs this paper, the author collected empirical data on norms and values that shape individual and institutional behaviour that determine the administrative culture of public institutions in South Africa. To understand how these values and norms are translated into strategic objectives, the author reviewed organisational reports and strategic documents. Therefore, this article underscores the relevance of structural functionalism for interpreting the administrative culture of social institutions. Building on key elements of structural functionalism, Schein (1985) developed a framework for analysing organisational culture. This framework consists of three dimensions of organisational culture which are, artefacts, beliefs, and values as well as assumptions underlying these beliefs and values. Artefacts describe physical spaces and objects important to the organisation while beliefs and values shape individual identity and are driven by underlying assumptions. These dimensions are consistent with components of culture outlined in Durkheim's (1960) notion of structural functionalism. This means that Schein's (1985) understanding of organisational culture is informed by social norms and values that make institutions, as part of social structures, functional. Therefore, the original study on which this article is based applied Schein's framework to understand social norms and values that shape individual attitudes and perceptions that determine the administrative culture of the South African public service.

In recent years, scholars have shifted from an anthropological perspective and adopted a management approach to understanding the culture of institutions. For example, Harrison and Stokes (1992) provide a framework outlining four dimensions of organisational culture (power-oriented culture, role-oriented culture, achievement-oriented culture, support-oriented culture). According to Hampden-Turner (1990), the power dimension thrives on respect for authority, rationality in processes, and division of work. This means that power-oriented culture

is associated with bureaucracy thereby confirming the author's argument that bureaucracy remains relevant for interpreting performance in South African public institutions. Harrison and Stokes (1992) describe role-oriented culture as substituting the power of the leader with a mechanistic system of rules and processes. These types of organisations are governed by position and contract procedures (Hampden-Turner 1990) meaning that they are as bureaucratic as power-oriented organisations. The achievement-oriented culture is described as a culture that lines people up behind a shared vision or purpose (Harrison & Stokes 1992). This culture is consistent with key principles of new public management espoused in Hood (1991) and organisations that embrace this culture are more likely to perform better than those that are power-oriented and role-oriented. Last, support-oriented culture promotes strong interpersonal relationships (Harrison & Stokes 1992). For this reason, it is consistent with Schein's (1985) description of norms and values as determinants of interpersonal relations.

In sum, the article has outlined a cluster of potential theories for interpreting public management research results. Specifically, it underscores the relevance of traditional public administration theories and contemporary public management theories for interpreting performance issues in South African public institutions. However, new public management is inadequate because it does not recognise organisational culture as a performance-enhancing attribute. To this end, the article argues that Harrison and Stokes (1992), as well as Schein (1985), offer ideas that enhance limitations of new public management as an interpretive framework. So far, the article has described how specific theories drawn from different fields of study can be used to establish a theoretical framework for interpreting public management research results in a South African context. Therefore, the next step is to explain how theory can be infused into specific aspects of research.

Once a theoretical framework has been constructed, it should be linked to all components of the research. However, due to limitations of time and space, this article focuses on how to link theory to the research problem statement and the research questions. Drawing from the original study that informed this article, the author structured the problem statement around an argument that traces the failure of new public management reforms in South Africa to inadequate recognition of organisational culture as a performance-enhancing attribute. For this reason, organisational culture and new public management emerged early on as potential theories for interpreting performance issues. After conceptualising the research problem statement, the author derived the research questions, one of which was to determine constraints to effective implementation of monitoring and evaluation. Therefore, implementation theory was used to collect and interpret data on how monitoring and evaluation were implemented in South African institutions. Last, another question focused on the role of organisational culture as a performance-enhancing attribute. In this regard, Schein's (2010) framework of analysing culture was found useful for collecting and analysing data to understand norms and values that shape the administrative culture of public entities in South Africa. In a nutshell, this is how theory is linked to the research problem statement and the research questions and the same approach should be applied to other components of research.

5. Conclusion

This article has outlined a process towards deriving a theoretical framework for interpreting public management research results in South Africa. Specifically, this article distinguished between a conceptual framework and a theoretical framework before demonstrating how postgraduate management students should interrogate literature to establish an academic home for research. In this regard, the article has argued that distinguishing between these important aspects of research allows students to appreciate related but distinct functions of theoretical frameworks and conceptual frameworks. Most importantly, understanding the field of study, especially public management, allows students to identify clusters of potential theories for interpreting public management research results. Therefore, this article has demonstrated how specific theories drawn from public administration, management, and organisational behaviour, can be used to construct a framework for interpreting public management research in a South African context. By so doing, the article contributes much-needed knowledge on how postgraduate students across a variety of disciplines may effectively use literature review as a technique for interpreting research findings.

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