



Em Questão
ISSN: 1807-8893
ISSN: 1808-5245
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Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul
Brasil

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Em Questão, vol. 24, no. 3, 2018

Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Brasil

Available in: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=465656255009>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19132/1808-5245243.334-341>

Linking Theory and method in higher education research: book review

Ligando teoria e método em pesquisa da educação superior: resenha do livro Theory and method in higher education research

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.19132/1808-5245243.334-341>
Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=465656255009>

Received: 16 December 2017

Accepted: 18 April 2018

ABSTRACT:

Review of Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight editors' book: Theory and method in higher education research, volume 2, 2016. The book presents 12 chapters written by 14 authors from ten countries in three continents, demonstrating a collaborative working capacity in the field of higher education research. They link theory, method and methodologies in a clear and strong way.

KEYWORDS: Higher education research, Qualitative research, Theory, Method, Participatory methods.

RESUMO:

Resenha do livro dos editores Jeroen Huisman and Malcolm Tight: Theory and method in higher education research, volume 2, de 2016. O livro é constituído por 12 capítulos, escritos por 14 autores de vários países situados em três continentes, demonstrando a capacidade de trabalho colaborativo no campo científico da pesquisa em educação superior. Estes autores fazem a ligação entre teoria, método e metodologias de um modo claro e robusto.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Educação superior, Pesquisa em educação superior, Pesquisa qualitativa, Teoria, Método, Metodologias participativas.

The chapters of the book Theory and method in higher education research contribute for building a solid Higher Education Research (HER) background by using theory in order to understand a particular social reality. Moreover, they balance theory and methods, contributing to the conceptualization of the research problem (TIGHT, 2004; ASHWIN, 2012).

For us and for the potential readers, the book is useful, because it provides a practical learning on how to align the theory, the method and the methodology in research in Higher Education. In this sense, it is relevant to understand how these authors use theory in all phases of research, from the design of the research project to the data collection and the analysis; as well as, the important use of theory in the phase of discussion of results and in the development of the theory itself. Some of the articles explain the theory in use, while others arise more implicitly.

This book can be read sequentially or chapter by chapter, according to the reader's thematic preferences (TIGHT; HUISMAN, 2016, p. i). In this case, I started with a sequential reading, without major revision concerns. Then, I reread the whole book, trying to systematize the whole book and get a global view. In Figure 1, I present an overview of the book review constituted by a matrix, in which it is easy to see, the main characteristics of each paragraph divided in three parts: (1) theory (theoretical background); (2) method; and (3) main contributions.

	Chap1 Lopes	Chap2 Tucker	Chap3 Braun	Chap4 Forsberg	Chap5 Király	Chap6 Valenzuela	Chap7 Gorup	Chap8 McCrory	Chap9 Srauw	Chap10 Kosmitzky	Chap11 Mahat	Chap12 Lepori
Theory												
Research quality	✓											
Competence-based learning			✓									
Institutional logics												✓
Strategic					✓						✓	
Threshold concept		✓										
Actor-network							✓		✓			
Epistemological foundations				✓								
Method												
Qualitative research	✓					✓						
Grounded theory		✓				✓						
Participatory research					✓							
Participant-centred interv.								✓				
Comparative review			✓									
Measure competences			✓						✓			
Networks							✓					
International comp. research										✓		
Porter's analysis											✓	
Research review				✓								
Observational method							✓					
Literature review												✓
Main contribution												
Validity in qualitative research	✓											
Curriculum design		✓										
Competences indicators			✓									
Analytical framework				✓								
Theory & practice connection						✓						
Shadowing							✓					
Practical interview techniques								✓				
Co-creation knowledge									✓			
Comparative methodology										✓		
Strategic positioning HE					✓						✓	
University as hybrids												✓

FIGURE 1
Overview review matrix

Source: The author.

This overview review matrix is a result of a third reading, based on a systematic approach. This can be a practical tool to locate and fit the chapter with the objective. To me, as a book reader, this analytical tool helped organize reading and the writing of this review.

Instead of an analysis of each chapter in the normal sequence, I choose to consider Chapter 4 as a starting point and to present groups of chapters in a logical sequence of themes. In this chapter, Eva Forsberg and Lars Geschwind provide a useful analytical framework to map HER (2016). This chapter is clearly structured and it provides accurate insights on some main issues:

- a) a) epistemological foundations of HER;
- b) analytical framework with three levels (institutional organization of researchers; object of study; and object of knowledge);
- c) the interplay among topics, theories and methodologies.

In this sense, these authors aim to develop knowledge about HER, by investigating 399 Swedish doctoral theses finished during 2000-2013. This methodology can be replicate in order to study knowledge production, in another country, to map HER.

Then, I decided to re-read some chapters that explicit discuss concepts and theories, such as Actor-Network Theory (chapter 9), Strategic Position (chapter 11) and Institutional Logics (chapter 12).

In Chapter 9, Laura Sarauw shares her own experience on studying large-scale higher education reforms, by using actor-network approach (SARAUW, 2016). She considers that, in this new “post-Bolonha” scenario, traditional power hierarchies’ theories – objects of study of HER – are not enough to understand this new social space of networks. Beyond the relations between the actors and the dynamic nature of the whole system, the idea that the research process is an agent on its own is relevant.

From Australia, Marian and Leo Goedegebuure defend a controversial perspective to study Higher Education. They have a larger project, which investigates the strategic position as a way to improve University performance, inside a competitive context (MAHAT; GOEDEGEBUURE, 2016). They look at Medical Education through the lens of Porter’ Framework, considering Higher Education as an industry, in which marketization and competition are the main topics. Porter’s model comes from strategic management field and can be useful for helping Universities to understand global and local context. With this systematic information, they can choose their own strategy to concentrate in what they want to do.

Benedetto Lepori, from Switzerland, defends that we must go beyond than looking Universities through the lenses of isomorphism. Considering Universities as hybrid institutions this is a challenge to develop a study in HER (LEPORI, 2016). This author proposes the use of institutional logics to analyze how managerial and professional logics interact in institutional, organizational, individual and practice levels. In Chapter 12, the reader will find a brief literature review based on a search term – “institutional logics” – in higher education papers and book chapters. The recognition that it is structured in the coexistence of different logics and the complexity of these institutions demands a clear and explicit methodology when carrying out these studies.

Furthermore, I select two chapters focused on qualitative research (2-6). In Chapter 2, Virginia Tucker (USA), Christine Bruce and Sylvia Edwards, from Australia, focus on the use of grounded theory research to identify concepts and themes. They consider the research design very important and they summarize five factors that impact the rigor of research: approaching constructivist grounded theory; collecting data directly from learners; selecting participants who represent edges of the liminal learning spaces; engaging participants in relevant tasks related to study scope and interviewing participants pre and post task. In addition, they discuss when to conduct the review of literature in a grounded theory study (TUCKER; BRUCE; EDWARDS, 2016).

From Chile, Carolina Guzman-Valenzuela investigate two different research approaches in education, namely “academic research” (rooted in theory) and “practitioner research” (rooted in practices). It is a relevant contribution to validate both theory and methods (GUZMÁN-VALENZUELA, 2016).

Next, I grouped some chapters that focus on method and methodologies. From Portugal and UK, Betina Lopes, Helena Pedrosa-de-Jesus, and Mike Watts discuss the validity in qualitative research. They developed a validation framework that integrates five processes of validation: (1) context validation; (2) theory-based validation; (3) response validation; (4) criterion-related validation; and (5) consequential validation. Those processes are inter-connected and they must be aligned on the timeline of the research project. Using this framework can help to design and manage the research project and certify the quality of qualitative research. A useful application of this validation framework is provided through a longitudinal study, which investigates the relationship between classroom questioning practices and teachers’ preferential teaching approaches (LOPES; PEDROSA-DE-JESUS; WATTS, 2016).

In chapter 3, Edith Braun and Shweta Mishra, from Germany, compare five approaches of assessing competences of higher education graduates: (1) self-report of competences; (2) job requirements; (3) student engagement; (4) achievement tests and (5) role plays. Their starting point is based on the idea that

[...] that the goal of higher education is to not only support and expand discipline-specific and cognitive competences of graduates, but to also foster skills that enable graduates to become effective citizens who can contribute equally towards their personal, professional and social lives. (BRAUN; MISHRA, 2016, p. 50).

In Chapter 7, Meta Gorup, from Belgium, discuss the use of Shadowing-an observational method or a form of non-participant observation in higher education environments. She said: “while document, policy, survey, and interview analyses offer insights into how things should be done or are said to be done, few studies offer an understanding of how things are actually done” (GORUP, 2016, p. 135).

Anna Kosmützky, from Germany, makes an evaluation of 202 studies, published in six leading journals, about higher education and comparative education. She chooses these two fields, because she wants to know how international comparative studies in higher education are performed in this intersection area. Those comparative studies, in both contexts, differ regarding their justification strategies, their use of methods of data analysis and their size of comparison (KOSMÜTZKY, 2016). Comparative methodologies within higher education research should be intensified, with special attention to the rigor and explicit justification of all decisions made during the research process.

From Scotland, UK Marjorie McCrory and Victoria O'Donnell discuss the participant-centered approach to qualitative research interviewing. They share practical techniques to develop interviewing skills, in order to increase the quality of data and its discussion (MCCRORY; O'DONNELL, 2016).

A reflection on the future of higher education comes from a group of researchers from Hungary: Gábor Király, Zsuzsanna Géring, Alexandra Köves, Sára Csillag, Gergely Kováts. This reflection is based on a research project that involves teachers, students and key stakeholders, in order to develop a future vision of higher education. This chapter describes the participatory research process, the methodological combination of participatory techniques and it is a relevant example of an application of HER. The result is a strategic vision of HER, with explicit outputs (system map and vision) and positive impact on the creation of a sense of ownership and participants engagement (KIRÁLY et al., 2016).

After reading this book, I feel more confident in conceptualizing the connection between theory and methods that allows me to carry out research work on HER with internal consistency. I hope this review can be a motivation to read the entire book, as it is a contribution to the mapping of Higher Education Research.

I recommend this book to experienced researchers, both in the field and in other areas, who find it useful to use qualitative assessment techniques. Several researches included in this book are illustrative examples that help to continuously improve the quality of research. New researchers can also use this book to increase their expertise and confidence in the practice of research work.

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