

## **Structuring Agricultural Education Research Using Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which agricultural education research has adhered to a structured approach over the past decade. Specifically, the study sought to determine the types of research conducted in agricultural education, the extent to which researchers used conceptual and theoretical frameworks, the extent to which conclusions addressed conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks, and to assess how the formation and use of conceptual and theoretical frameworks had changed over the past decade.

The conceptual framework of this study was developed from studies by Buriak and Shinn (1989, 1993), Radhakrishna and Xu (1997), Silva-Guerrero and Sutphin (1990), and Warmbrod (1986). In those works agricultural education research was described as being soft, lacking in rigor, without focus, of limited scholarship and/or importance, and considered by some to be inferior to research conducted in other disciplines. The theoretical framework for this analysis lies in Dewey's Steps in Reflective Thinking, as adapted by Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1996) and supported by Lincoln and Guba (1995). Ary, et al. and Lincoln and Guba proposed that there is a method of inquiry to which all researchers should adhere, whether their philosophy of investigation is qualitative or quantitative by nature.

The researchers evaluated all research articles published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* from 1990 through 1999, using a researcher-developed instrument with an inter-rater reliability of  $r = .99$ . Findings revealed that the majority of the research conducted in agricultural education over the past decade has been quantitative, applied, survey research. Only 29% of the articles reviewed cited an appropriate theoretical framework. However, over 87% cited an appropriate and clear conceptual framework. It was found that researchers cited a limited number of references in establishing conceptual and theoretical frameworks, and often failed to relate their findings back to those frameworks. Selection and use of theoretical frameworks improved over the decade, although the number of studies with appropriate frameworks was still considered low. Articles accepted to the journal exhibited less well-developed conceptual frameworks as the decade progressed. It was recommended that agricultural education researchers work more rigorously to develop clear and appropriate conceptual and theoretical frameworks.

### **Introduction/Theoretical Framework**

The future of agricultural education depends upon many variables, not the least important of which is the acquisition and application of new knowledge generated from research. However, the quality of research in agricultural education has often been questioned. Throughout the past two decades it has been criticized as being without focus, of limited

scholarship and/or importance, and considered by some to be inferior to research conducted in other disciplines (Buriak & Shinn, 1993; Radhakrisna & Xu, 1997; Silva-Guerrero & Sutphin, 1990; Warmbrod, 1986). Buriak and Shinn (1989) reported agricultural education research to be perceived by external decision makers (i.e., Deans of Education, Deans of Resident Instruction in Agriculture, Experiment Station Directors) as “soft,” without clearly defined objectives, and lacking in rigor. Furthermore, Buriak and Shinn (1993) reported internal perceptions to be similar to those of the earlier study involving external decision makers.

The perceived orientation of agricultural educational professionals appears to be toward teaching and service rather than research (Buriak & Shinn, 1989). Newcomb (1990) noted that in many cases university faculty prefer to teach, advise, design curricula, and work with people – only conducting research to the extent necessary “to get by” (p. 2). Newcomb suggested that research in agricultural education become more focused, coordinated, and conducted with a “passionate vision” (p. 8). Crunkilton (1988) suggested that a framework be developed to show researchers where they have been, and where they can and should go.

The theoretical framework for this analysis of research lies in Dewey’s Steps in Reflective Thinking, better known as the scientific method (Newcomb, McCracken, & Warmbrod, 1993), as adapted by Ary, Jacobs, and Razavieh (1996). Ary, et al. proposed that there is a “method” of inquiry to which all researchers should adhere in investigating phenomena of interest. Likewise, Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that even naturalistic studies have a “pattern of flow” that “builds upon...tacit knowledge” and “propositional knowledge,” and “uses methods appropriate to humanly implemented inquiry” (p. 187).

Ary, et al. (1996) further proposed that in addition to the accepted steps of the scientific method, research should also be evaluated based upon the assumptions made by scientists, attitudes of scientists in controlling for bias, and formulation of scientific theory. Adapted to this study, this framework suggests that there are models to which all agricultural education research can and should adhere. Specifically, the models encompass a structure by which all research should be based upon philosophy, purpose, and method, and grounded in both a conceptual and theoretical framework – either in its inception or conclusion.

Miller (1998) cautioned that researchers need to be “green and growing” (p. 1) and therefore continue to refine their research skills, much as a mechanic would hone his or her skills. To do so means that researchers should devote time to maintaining and/or improving skills – to re-focus their attention to minor details that often are overlooked as research techniques approach automatic skill transfer status. This study seeks to determine the extent to which researchers in agricultural education are using those skills to conduct scholarly research.

### **Purpose/Research Questions**

Buriak and Shinn (1993) noted that human beings are set apart by their ability to solve problems – to conduct research. Ary, et al. (1996) emphasized the need to follow a systematic procedure in conducting this research. How well does agricultural education research follow a specified procedure? The purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which agricultural education research has adhered to a structured approach over the past decade. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What types of research have been conducted in agricultural education?
2. To what extent did researchers use conceptual and theoretical frameworks?
3. To what extent did the conclusions address the conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks used?
4. How has the formation and usage of conceptual and theoretical frameworks in agricultural education research changed over the past decade?

### **Methods/Procedures**

Research conducted and reported in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* over the past decade was reviewed by the researchers and classified as to philosophy (quantitative or qualitative), purpose (basic, applied, or action), and the methods employed to conduct the research. Articles were also evaluated for their effective use of conceptual and theoretical frameworks. The *Journal of Agricultural Education* was selected because it is the premier refereed outlet for current published research in agricultural education.

The researchers evaluated all research articles published in the 40 volumes of the *Journal of Agricultural Education* during the 10-year period from 1990 through 1999. Articles were evaluated using an instrument developed by the researchers. Content validity of the instrument was established by a panel of six land grant university faculty in agricultural education. Inter-rater reliability on the instrument was established at  $r = .99$ .

Journal articles were coded and reviewed for the following components:

- Extent to which the researcher(s) developed a conceptual framework
- Extent to which the researcher(s) developed a theoretical framework
- Extent to which theory was generated (if research was basic by purpose)
- Number of citations used to establish the conceptual framework
- Number of references cited
- Number of research references cited
- Extent to which the researcher(s) used citations to tie conclusions to the literature base
- Classification of research by philosophy, purpose, and method

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including measures of central tendency and dispersion.

### Philosophy of Research

According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), researchers have different epistemological assumptions about the nature of scientific knowledge and how to acquire it. As a result of these differences, research is categorized into two groupings based upon the philosophy of the researcher. Those two categories are positivistic (*quantitative* research) and post-positivistic (*qualitative* research). Quantitative researchers collect numerical data on observable behavior and analyze that data using numerical analysis. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, believe that research is best constructed as interpretations by individuals and that these interpretations are transitory, situational, and analytically inductive (Gall, et al.).

Wardlow (1989) classified research based upon philosophy into three categories: positivistic mode, interpretive mode, and critical science mode. The positivistic mode in Wardlow's classification corresponds to the quantitative grouping, whereas the interpretive and critical science modes correspond to the qualitative classification used by Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996).

### Purpose of Research

In addition to distinction based upon the philosophy of the researcher, studies can also be classified by type based upon the purpose for which the research was done. Whereas different names are used to describe these groupings, the operational terms used in this study are "basic," "applied," and "action" research (Ary, et al., 1996).

*Basic* research is that research conducted in an original area of inquiry, to generate new knowledge, or for the formulation of theory. The primary concern of this type of research is the discovery of knowledge for the sake of knowledge (Ary, et al., 1996). Ary, et al. defined basic research as having the aim of expanding "the frontiers of knowledge without regard to practical application" (p. 26). For example, Piaget's initial work and genesis of his theory of intellectual development was basic research (Kolb, 1984). Rosenshine and Furst offered another often-cited example of basic research in their *Principles of Learning* (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971).

Whereas basic research generates new knowledge, most educational research is conducted to test or expand that knowledge. This type of research, *applied*, expands upon existing theory and aims to solve specific problems. Whenever theories are generated, research either confirms or rejects the accuracy of those theories as they relate to particular variables under study. As may be surmised from Rosenshine and Furst's *Principles of Learning* (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971), there is not always a distinguishing line between basic and applied research. While there is currently an effort by some authors to merge the two categories, that union has not yet occurred. Therefore, for this study the two are treated as separate entities.

*Action* research is defined by Leedy (1997) as "a type of applied research that focuses on finding a solution to a local problem in a local setting" (p. 111), has specific application, and involves the decision-maker in conducting the research. For example, testing the effectiveness of a recruitment activity for the purpose of improving student recruitment in a particular college of agriculture is action research.

### Research Method

Research is further categorized based upon the method employed to conduct the study. Whereas several classification systems are in place (Ary, et al., 1996; Gall, et al., 1996; Isaac & Michael, 1990; Leedy, 1997; Van Dalen & Meyer, 1979), for the purpose of this analysis methods have been categorized into eight groups: Holistic (also referred to as qualitative), Historical, Survey, Correlational, Ex post facto (Causal-comparative), Experimental (includes Pre-experimental, Quasi-experimental, True Experimental), Delphi, Evaluation.

## Conceptual versus Theoretical Frameworks

Several researchers have advocated the use of strong conceptual and/or theoretical bases in agricultural education research (Buriak & Shinn, 1989; Lee, 1985; Silva-Guerrero & Sutphin, 1990; Wardlow, 1989; Williams, 1997). However, the two terms – “conceptual framework” and “theoretical framework” – are likely the two most misunderstood and misused terms in agricultural education research today. As such, the two terms are often erroneously interchanged.

A *conceptual framework* builds a structure or “concept” of what has been learned in a particular area of study. Conceptual frameworks are similar to standard literature reviews in that the conceptual framework lists the important research that has been conducted in a particular area. It goes beyond a simple literature review, however, in that it truly builds a “framework” of research. That is, it structures the literature in such a manner as dictated by the researcher to best explain the natural progression of research for the phenomenon under study (Ary, et al., 1996).

By contrast, a *theoretical framework* is a framework for explanations about the phenomenon being investigated (Gall, et al., 1996). The theory itself is defined by Gall, et al. as “an explanation of a certain set of observed phenomena in terms of a system of constructs and laws that relate these constructs to each other” (p. 8). Piaget’s theory of intellectual development is an example of a theoretical framework. It has shaped educational curricula and formed a basis for multitudes of studies to better understand and utilize the theory. Other examples include Fishbein and Azjen’s theory of attitudinal influence (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), Vroom’s expectancy theory of human motivation (Vroom, 1964), Rosenshine’s explicit teaching model (Rosenhine, 1986), Mitzel’s model for the study of classroom teaching (Duncan & Biddle, 1974), and Witkin’s theory of cognitive styles (Witkin, 1973).

## **Results/Findings**

Question 1: *What types of research have been conducted in agricultural education?*

Most of the research conducted in agricultural education over the past decade has been quantitative, applied, survey research. As noted in Table 1, of the 348 articles evaluated, 290 (83.3%) were classified as quantitative research. Only 12.1% of the research conducted and published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* over the past decade was determined to be qualitative. The remaining 4.6% of the studies used a combination of quantitative and qualitative designs.

When categorized by the purpose of the research, 315 articles (90.5%) were determined to be applied research, 23 (6.6%) were action research, and the remaining 10 articles (2.9%) were basic research. When classified as to the method employed to conduct the research, 189 studies (54.3%) used a survey method. Correlational studies accounted for 58 articles (16.7%), followed by Experimental ( $\underline{n} = 35$ , 10.1%), Holistic ( $\underline{n} = 19$ , 5.5%), Ex post facto ( $\underline{n} = 15$ , 4.3%), Historical ( $\underline{n} = 14$ , 4.0%), Delphi ( $\underline{n} = 13$ , 3.7%), and Evaluation ( $\underline{n} = 5$ , 1.4%).

Table 1

Classification of Research by Philosophy, Purpose, and Method

| Type of Research | f   | %     | No. of Citations                             |                         | No. of References                      |                            |
|------------------|-----|-------|--|-------------------------|--|----------------------------|
|                  |     |       | Conceptual-Theoretical Framework<br><u>M</u> | Conclusions<br><u>M</u> | Cited in Reference Section<br><u>M</u> | Research Based<br><u>M</u> |
| Philosophy       |     |       |  |                         |  |                            |
| Quantitative     | 290 | 83.3  | 14.38 (7.90)                                 | 2.53 (3.48)             | 14.81 (6.13)                           | 6.69 (4.55)                |
| Qualitative      | 42  | 12.1  | 8.45 (7.27)                                  | .76 (1.38)              | 18.88 (11.32)                          | 9.36 (13.17)               |
| Both Types       | 16  | 4.6   | 10.06 (5.48)                                 | 1.13 (1.89)             | 11.88 (4.21)                           | 4.06 (3.07)                |
| Purpose          |     |       |  |                         |  |                            |
| Basic            | 10  | 2.9   | 7.10 (6.71)                                  | .30 (.67)               | 15.20 (6.88)                           | 4.10 (3.21)                |
| Applied          | 315 | 90.5  | 13.51 (7.98)                                 | 2.22 (3.25)             | 15.13 (7.11)                           | 6.94 (6.40)                |
| Action           | 23  | 6.6   | 15.70 (7.41)                                 | 3.48 (4.07)             | 15.65 (6.29)                           | 7.43 (5.20)                |
| Method           |     |       |  |                         |  |                            |
| Survey           | 189 | 54.3  | 13.58 (8.03)                                 | 2.06 (2.94)             | 13.64 (5.89)                           | 6.07 (4.08)                |
| Correlational    | 58  | 16.7  | 16.14 (8.06)                                 | 3.84 (3.77)             | 16.52 (5.68)                           | 7.41 (4.62)                |
| Experimental     | 35  | 10.1  | 14.69 (6.52)                                 | 2.09 (3.34)             | 17.29 (6.14)                           | 7.40 (4.63)                |
| Holistic         | 19  | 5.5   | 9.42 (7.46)                                  | 1.00 (1.41)             | 16.84 (10.08)                          | 7.16 (9.86)                |
| Ex Post Facto    | 15  | 4.3   | 16.53 (8.89)                                 | 2.73 (4.67)             | 17.40 (5.57)                           | 9.33 (6.25)                |
| Historical       | 14  | 4.0   | 5.36 (4.27)                                  | .36 (.84)               | 23.57 (14.01)                          | 14.00 (18.61)              |
| Delphi           | 13  | 3.7   | 9.15 (3.63)                                  | .62 (1.66)              | 12.69 (3.40)                           | 12.69 (3.40)               |
| Evaluation       | 5   | 1.4   | 10.00 (7.87)                                 | 5.00 (7.91)             | 12.00 (12.27)                          | 7.60 (12.03)               |
| Totals           | 348 | 100.0 | 13.47 (7.99)                                 | 2.25 (3.29)             | 15.16 (7.03)                           | 6.89 (6.27)                |

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

Question 2: *To what extent did researchers use conceptual and theoretical frameworks?*

As indicated in Table 2, a vast majority of the articles reviewed (87.1%) cited an appropriate and clear conceptual framework. Only nine of the accepted articles (2.6%) had no conceptual framework. The remaining 36 articles (10.3%) displayed an attempt at creating a conceptual framework, but the review of literature was deemed so weak that a clear conceptual framework could not be discerned.

Theoretical frameworks were less well developed. Only 29% of the articles reviewed cited an appropriate theoretical framework. The remaining articles either failed to develop a framework (50%), or attempted to establish a framework, but the result was unclear (21%).

As noted in Table 3, larger percentage of quantitative studies than qualitative studies (89%, 76.2%, respectively) cited and developed an appropriate conceptual framework organized around the existing research base. Nine studies were published with no conceptual framework.

Interestingly, four of the nine studies were classified as applied research – the type of research that necessitates building upon an existing research base.

Table 2

Extent to Which Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks Were Established

| Degree to Which Established                    | Conceptual Framework |      | Theoretical Framework |      |
|--|----------------------|------|-----------------------|------|
|  | f                    | %    | f                     | %    |
| None   | 9                    | 2.6  | 174                   | 50.0 |
| Attempted to establish, but result was unclear | 36                   | 10.3 | 73                    | 21.0 |
| Cited and developed appropriate framework      | 303                  | 87.1 | 101                   | 29.0 |
| Totals   | 348                  | 100  | 348                   | 100  |

Table 3

Extent of Use of Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks in Qualitative and Quantitative Studies

| Degree to Which Established                    | Quantitative         |      |                       |      | Qualitative          |      |                       |      |
|--|----------------------|------|-----------------------|------|----------------------|------|-----------------------|------|
|  | Conceptual Framework |      | Theoretical Framework |      | Conceptual Framework |      | Theoretical Framework |      |
|  | f                    | %    | f                     | %    | f                    | %    | f                     | %    |
| None   | 4                    | 1.4  | 143                   | 49.3 | 5                    | 11.9 | 25                    | 59.5 |
| Attempted to establish, but result was unclear | 28                   | 9.6  | 55                    | 19.0 | 5                    | 11.9 | 9                     | 21.4 |
| Cited and developed appropriate framework      | 258                  | 89.0 | 92                    | 31.7 | 32                   | 76.2 | 8                     | 19.1 |
| Totals <sup>a</sup>                            | 290                  | 100  | 290                   | 100  | 42                   | 100  | 42                    | 100  |

<sup>a</sup> Does not include studies that used both quantitative and qualitative philosophies.

Both qualitative and quantitative studies failed to develop adequate theoretical frameworks. Only 19.1% of the qualitative studies, and 31.7% of the quantitative studies cited and developed adequate theoretical frameworks. It should be noted that according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), post-positivistic research often generates theory rather than requiring that a study be built around existing theory. However, only eight of the 42 qualitative articles either cited an adequate theoretical framework or generated appropriate theory as stated by Lincoln and Guba. Likewise, only 92 of the 290 quantitative articles either cited an adequate theoretical framework, or properly developed the study around existing theory.

Basic research articles were more frequently missing a theoretical framework than were either applied or action research. Of the ten basic research articles reviewed, nine had unclear or non-existent theoretical frameworks. This is to be expected since a function of basic research is to generate theory rather than build upon existing models. However, 78.3% ( $n = 18$ ) of the action research articles and 68.2% ( $n = 218$ ) of the applied research articles possessed unclear theoretical frameworks – or indicated no framework at all. The mean number of citations used to establish the conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks was 13.47 ( $SD = 7.99$ ,  $Md = 12$ ). (See Table 1.)

Researchers cited a limited number of references in establishing conceptual and theoretical frameworks (Table 4). While the number of references cited is not as important as the quality of the cited research base, it is near impossible to develop a quality conceptual framework without an extensive review of literature.

Whereas some articles cited a plethora of references, others were published with very limited numbers of citations. As indicated in Table 4, a combined total of 25.6% of articles had from 0 – 10 citations. Likewise, the type of references cited contained fewer research-based references than is typical for applied research. Nearly half (49.4%) of the articles contained five or less *research* citations.

Table 4

Number and Type of References Cited in *Journal of Agricultural Education* Articles

| Number of Citations | All Cited References |      | Cited <i>Research</i> References |      |
|---------------------|----------------------|------|----------------------------------|------|
|                     | f                    | %    | f                                | %    |
| 0 – 5               | 21                   | 5.9  | 176                              | 49.4 |
| 6 – 10              | 70                   | 19.7 | 112                              | 31.5 |
| 11 – 15             | 113                  | 31.7 | 48                               | 13.5 |
| 16 – 20             | 85                   | 23.9 | 10                               | 2.8  |
| 21 – 25             | 42                   | 11.8 | 4                                | 1.1  |
| More than 25        | 25                   | 7.0  | 6                                | 1.7  |

Figure 1 displays graphically the number of citations, listed in the reference section of each article. The mean number of references cited per article was 15.2 ( $SD = 7.03$ ). The number of citations varied from 3 – 51, with a positively skewed distribution. The median number of references listed was 14.

Since over 90% of the articles accepted for publication were applied research, logic would dictate that a vast majority of references listed would be research-based. However, the mean number of *research* studies that authors cited was 6.9, with a positively skewed distribution. The median number of listed research references was 6.0.

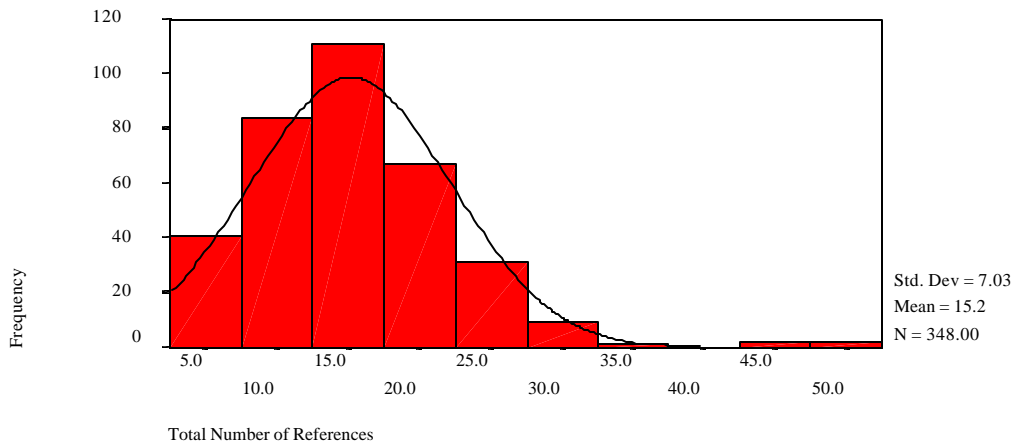


Figure 1. Number of references cited.

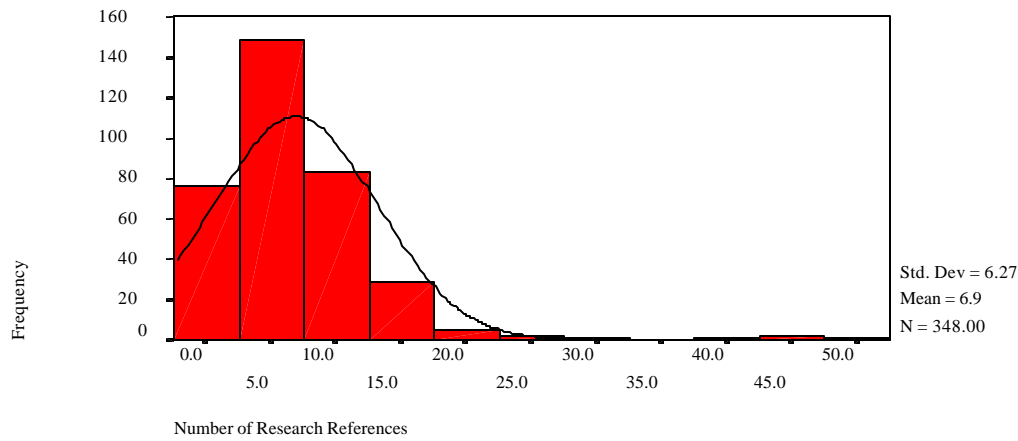


Figure 2. Number of *research* references cited.

**Question 3:** *To what extent did conclusions address the conceptual and/or theoretical model used?*

As presented in Table 1, the mean number of citations found in the conclusions, recommendations, and implications sections of articles was 2.25 (SD = 3.29, Md = 1). Table 5 contains data showing the distribution of citations as they were applied to the existing literature base.

Although over 90% of the articles reviewed were applied research, which should have required that researchers compare their results with those of others. Nearly one-half (47.4%) failed to compare results with at least one piece of research cited in the conceptual framework, or to the theoretical framework that supposedly guided the study. An additional 12.4% compared findings to only one piece of research.

Table 5

Number of Citations in the Conclusions, Recommendations, and/or Implications Sections of *Journal of Agricultural Education* Articles (N = 348)

| Number of Citations | All Cited References |      |
|---------------------|----------------------|------|
|                     | f                    | %    |
| 0                   | 165                  | 47.4 |
| 1                   | 43                   | 12.4 |
| 2                   | 33                   | 9.5  |
| 3                   | 23                   | 6.6  |
| 4                   | 18                   | 5.2  |
| 5                   | 11                   | 3.2  |
| 6                   | 14                   | 4.0  |
| 7                   | 10                   | 2.9  |
| 8                   | 9                    | 2.6  |
| 9                   | 4                    | 1.1  |
| 10 or more          | 18                   | 4.0  |

*Question 4: How has the formation and usage of conceptual and theoretical frameworks in agricultural education research changed over the past decade?*

The *Journal of Agricultural Education* published 40 volumes during the ten years that comprised this analysis. To better gauge the changes taking place in the reporting of research in the publication, the decade was divided into four equal time periods consisting of 10 volumes each. As indicated in Table 6, the first quarter of the decade produced publications in which the highest percentage of articles (94.5%) cited appropriate conceptual frameworks. That percentage had dropped to 78.7% by the end of the decade. Likewise, the percentage of articles in which the researcher cited *some* research, but failed to develop a clear conceptual framework increased from 4.4% in the first quarter of the decade to 20% by the end.

Selection and use of theoretical frameworks improved from the first part of the decade, although the percentage of studies with appropriate frameworks was still low (33.3%). In the first ten issues of the journal, only 7.7% of all published articles cited appropriate theoretical frameworks. That percentage dramatically increased to 33.3% in the second quarter and to 43.8% in the third quarter of the decade. By the final quarter of the decade, however, only one-third of the articles published had appropriate theoretical frameworks.

### **Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations**

Most of the research reported in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* over the past decade can best be classified as quantitative, applied, and survey research. Of the 348 articles evaluated, over 83% were classified as quantitative research. Based upon purpose, over 90% of

the articles were determined to be applied research. When classified by method, over 54% of the articles reviewed used a survey design.

Table 6

Degree to Which Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks Have Been Used and Reported Over Time

| Degree to Which Established                    | Date of Publication <sup>a</sup> |               |               |               |
|--|----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
|  | 1990-1993                        | 1993-1995     | 1995-1997     | 1997-1999     |
| <u>Conceptual Framework</u>                    |                                  |               |               |               |
| None   | 1<br>(1.1%)                      | 3<br>(2.9%)   | 4<br>(5.0%)   | 1<br>(1.3%)   |
| Attempted to establish, but result was unclear | 4<br>(4.4%)                      | 11<br>(10.8%) | 6<br>(7.5%)   | 15<br>(20.0%) |
| Cited and developed appropriate framework      | 86<br>(94.5%)                    | 88<br>(86.3%) | 70<br>(87.5%) | 59<br>(78.7%) |
| <u>Theoretical Framework</u>                   |                                  |               |               |               |
| None   | 67<br>(73.6%)                    | 42<br>(41.2%) | 29<br>(36.2%) | 36<br>(48.0%) |
| Attempted to establish, but result was unclear | 17<br>(18.7%)                    | 26<br>(25.5%) | 16<br>(20.0%) | 14<br>(18.7%) |
| Cited and developed appropriate framework      | 7<br>(7.7%)                      | 34<br>(33.3%) | 35<br>(43.8%) | 25<br>(33.3%) |
| Totals   | 91                               | 102           | 80            | 75            |

<sup>a</sup> Journal articles were equally divided into four groups of ten volumes each, published in the years indicated.

When classified by purpose, research published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* was almost entirely applied research. Why? Are reviewers for the journal more likely to only accept research that builds upon existing theory, or do agricultural education researchers conduct little basic or action research? Is action research deemed to be more biased because it is designed to address a problem in which the researcher is intimately involved? Do agricultural educators fail to use research-based solutions when solving their immediate problems, and therefore render those studies unpublishable? Further research directed at determining the attitudes of *Journal of Agricultural Education* reviewers toward submission criteria and/or research philosophy may be helpful in answering some of these questions. In addition, journal editors may wish to implement training seminars to assist reviewers in improving skills in critiquing submitted articles.

Researchers may have a limited understanding of the functions of, and differences between, conceptual and theoretical frameworks. Authors in over 87% of the studies analyzed had developed a clear conceptual framework. However, only approximately 20% of the

published articles cited an appropriate theoretical framework. Likewise, when theoretical frameworks were cited, often they were not well connected to the research being conducted. Interestingly, both quantitative and qualitative studies often failed at either building upon, or developing, sound theoretical frameworks. Approximately 81% of the published qualitative studies and over 68% of the quantitative studies failed to focus the inquiry around theory explanation or development, or the study exhibited a theoretical framework that was poorly developed. Has the profession heeded the warnings of Buriak and Shinn (1989; 1993), Silva-Guerrero and Sutphin (1990), and Warmbrod (1986)?

Researchers cited a limited number of references in establishing conceptual and theoretical frameworks – both in explanatory citations and in citations of related research. Whereas some articles cited a plethora of references, others were published with a very limited number of citations. Nearly half (49.4%) of the articles contained five or less research citations. Of those that contained more than 25 research citations, all were syntheses of research. Whereas the number and type of references cited do not ensure that a conceptual base has been established, it is difficult to develop a sound conceptual framework without an extensive review of the research base. Not only should a greater number of references be utilized, researchers should also focus on developing a *quality* review of literature. These findings further emphasize the need to improve the rigor of research in agricultural education, as called for earlier by Warmbrod (1986).

Most articles published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* failed to tie conclusions to the conceptual and/or theoretical frameworks around which the research was conducted. Nearly 47% of the articles reviewed failed to compare research findings with even one piece of research cited in the conceptual framework, or to the theoretical framework that supposedly guided the study. Perhaps this criterion should be included as item of review when articles are critiqued.

Selection and use of theoretical frameworks improved between the first and last portions of the decade, although the number of studies with appropriate frameworks was still low (33.3%). By contrast, as the decade progressed, articles accepted to the journal tended to have less well-developed conceptual frameworks. For example, in the first quarter of the decade, 94.5% of the published articles cited appropriate conceptual frameworks. By the end of the decade that percentage had dropped to 78.7%. To predict a trend of deteriorating quality in this component of research goes beyond the scope of this investigation, but the situation warrants future attention.

Overall, research published in the *Journal of Agricultural Education* only moderately adheres to the theoretical models of Ary, et al. (1996) or Lincoln and Guba (1985) in structuring research around a model that is grounded in both a conceptual and theoretical framework. As noted by Buriak and Shinn (1989), in order to gain the respect of external decision makers, agricultural education researchers should adopt and use more rigorous research techniques. A decade later this call for rigor is still pertinent.

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