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Discourses on Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks in Research: Meaning and Implications for Researchers

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Abstract

This article critically discusses, the relationship between conceptual framework and theoretical framework drawing on their differences and similarities. The article has made it very clear that whereas the theoretical framework is drawn from the existing theoretical literature that you review about your research topic, a conceptual framework is a much broader concept that encompasses practically all aspects of your research. The latter refers to the entire conceptualisation of your research project. It is the big picture, or vision, comprising the totality of research. Methodologically, the paper used systematic and experiential literature review to draw supporting scholarly literature by authorities in the field and made inferences, sound reasonings and logical deductions from these authorities. The primary aim of this paper is to help researchers and students to understand the convergence and the divergence of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in order to appropriately be applied in research and academic writing discourses. Understanding the conceptual framework affects research in many ways. For instance, it assists the researcher in identifying and constructing his/her worldview on the phenomenon to be investigated. Also, it is the simplest way through which a researcher presents his/her asserted remedies to the milieu he/she has created. In addition, this accentuates the reasons why a research topic is worth studying, the assumptions of a researcher, the scholars he/she agrees with and disagrees with and how he/she conceptually grounds his/her approach. Paying attention, to the theoretical framework and its impact on research, it can be mentioned that theoretical framework provides a structure for what to look for in the data, for how you think of how what you see in the data fits together, and helps you to discuss your findings more clearly, in light of what existing theories say. It helps the researcher to make connections between the abstract and concrete elements observed in the data. In conclusion, both theoretical framework and conceptual framework are good variables which are used to inform a study to arrive at logical findings and conclusions. It is therefore recommended by researchers that; a good theoretical framework should be capable of informing the concepts in a research work.

Keywords: Conceptual, theoretical, framework, research, knowledge

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Introduction

The theoretical and conceptual framework explains the path of a research and grounds it firmly in theoretical constructs (Adom, Hussein and Agyem, 2018). In the light of above, it can be deduced that the overall aim of the two frameworks is to make research findings more meaningful, acceptable to the theoretical constructs in the research field and ensures generalizability. They assist in stimulating research while ensuring the extension of knowledge by providing both direction and impetus to the research inquiry. They also enhance the empiricism and rigour of a research.

Consequently, it is not surprising for Imenda (2014) to say that both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks give life to a research. It can be inferred that just as the human being cannot survive without blood and water in the body, so is the worth of any piece of research work if both the theoretical and conceptual frameworks are absent. Unfortunately, many postgraduate students and faculty staff at universities are confused of the two terms and apply them wrongly in their research papers. As a result, their research findings become weak because of the inappropriate application of a suitable theoretical framework and conceptual framework. These shadows the comprehension of readers of the research paper who are lost, not knowing the purpose of the study, the importance of the study and the scholars the researcher is in dialogue with, whether in agreement or disagreement (Evans, 2007). A research without the theoretical or conceptual framework makes it difficult for readers in ascertaining the academic position and the underlying factors to the researcher's assertions and/or hypotheses.

This renders the research sloppy and not appreciable as contributing significantly to the advancement of the frontiers of knowledge. This article critically discusses, the relationship between conceptual and theoretical frameworks drawing on their differences and similarities. Finally, we would provide a thorough explanation on how the relationship impacts research.

Statement of the Problem

Conceptual frameworks and theoretical frameworks are inappropriately and interchangeably used wrongly in most research works. Some researchers treat these two variables differently forgetting that one can inform the other in making sound judgements and logical progression in a research work or study. Most student researchers and academic researchers have it in mind that at all cost both theoretical and conceptual frameworks must be found in a particular study. This is an error. Some social researchers in the field are of the view that we introduce theoretical framework when literature is not much readily available in a particular study. Is it really the case? There is the need for a clear distinction between what is a theoretical framework and what is a conceptual framework and how they are appropriately used in research to draw conclusions and make sound judgements. This when done right, will help bring out clear roles of both frameworks in research. It is a speculation and an undeniable fact that most graduate students in 21st century find it difficult to use theoretical and conceptual frameworks in their study either as a whole phenomenon or a single phenomenon.

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Research experience has shown and proven to us that many students are not able to articulate the differences between theoretical framework and conceptual framework for a proposed research work or a project. Some authors see conceptual framework argumentative for the study (Marshall and Rossman, 2016; Ravitch and Riggan, 2017) whilst others see the conceptual framework as explanatory (Anfara and Mertz, 2015, Miles et al, 2014). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) viewed the conceptual framework, which they termed as theoretical framework as generating elements of the research design and methods, whereas Robson and McCartan (2016) emphasized variable relationships and research design. In view of these controversies and vague meanings and interpretations attached to theoretical and conceptual frameworks, it has become necessary to provide a knowledge discourse on theoretical and conceptual frameworks and its associated implications for researchers. However, it will be in the right order for us to take cognizance of the meaning of conceptual and theoretical framework.

Understanding the Meaning of Conceptual Framework

According to Camp (2001), a conceptual framework is a structure which the researcher believes can best explain the natural progression of the phenomenon to be studied. It is linked with the concepts used in promoting and systemizing the knowledge espoused by the researcher (Peshkin, 2003). It is the researcher's explanation of how the research problem would be explored. Maxwell (2013) defined a conceptual framework as a tentative theory about the phenomena being studied that informs entirety of the study's design, noting that this may also be called a 'theoretical framework'. The conceptual framework presents an integrated way of looking at a problem under study (Liehr and Smith, 2009). In a statistical viewpoint, the conceptual framework pronounces the relationship between the main concepts of a study. Grant and Osanloo (2014) highlighted that it is arranged in a logical structure to aid provide a picture or visual display of how ideas in a study relate to one another.

Simply put, we can say that the conceptual framework is a diagrammatic representation of how the concepts underpinning the study relate to one another. Interestingly, it shows the series of action the researcher intends carrying out in a research study (Dixon, Gulliver, Gibbon and Hall, 2001). The framework makes it easier for the researcher to easily specify and define the concepts within the problem of the study (Luse, Mennecke and Townsend, 2012). Miles and Huberman (2014) opine that conceptual frameworks can be graphical or in a narrative form showing the key variables or constructs to be studied and the presumed relationships between them.

From our perspective, a conceptual framework is the over-all, sound positioning and associations of anything and everything that forms the underlying thinking, structures, plans and practices and implementation of an entire research project. In practice, the conceptual framework comprises your thoughts on identification of the research topic, the problem to be investigated, the questions to be asked, the literature to be reviewed that is, the concepts to be applied, the methodology you will use, the methods, procedures and instruments, the data analysis and interpretation of findings, recommendations and conclusions you will make. Accordingly, the conceptual framework is the logical conceptualization of your entire research project. This means that a conceptual framework is a metacognitive, thoughtful and operational element of the entire research process.

Gleaning from our thoughts above, it is in the right direction to emphasize categorically that, strong conceptual frameworks capture something real and do this in a way that is easy to remember and apply. For example, Berlin (1953) used the metaphor of a "Fox" and a "Hedgehog" to make conceptual distinctions on how important philosophers and authors view the world. Berlin describes hedgehogs as those who use a single idea or organizing principle to view the world

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(examples given include Dante, Pascal, Dostoevsky, Plato, Ibsen and Hegel). Foxes, on the other hand, incorporate a type of pluralism and view the world through multiple, sometimes conflicting lenses (examples include Goethe, Joyce, Shakespeare, Aristotle, Herodotus, Molière, Anderson, Balzac). Economists use the conceptual framework of “supply” and “demand” to distinguish between the behaviour and incentive systems of firms and consumers. Like many conceptual frameworks, supply and demand can be presented through visual or graphical representations. Now that, comprehensive and critical discussion of conceptual framework has been made, let us shift our attention to understanding the meaning of theoretical framework.

Understanding the Meaning of Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is defined by Grant and Osanloo (2014) as the ‘blueprint’ or guide for a research. It is a framework based on an existing theory in a field of inquiry that is related and/or reflects the hypothesis of a study. It is a blueprint that is often ‘borrowed’ by the researcher to build his/her own research inquiry. This means that, the theoretical framework serves as the foundation upon which a research is constructed. Theoretical framework can bolster qualitative approach to research (Collins and Stockton, 2018).

Anfara and Mertz (2015) were of the view that theoretical framework is any empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and or psychological processes, at a variety of levels (example grand, mid-range, explanatory) that can be applied to the understanding of the phenomena. In this vein, it can be stated categorically that a research work without a strong theoretical framework is like a building without a strong foundation. Fulton and Krainovich-Miller (2010) compare the role of the theoretical framework to that of a map or travel plan. Thus, when travelling to a particular location, the map guides your path. In a like manner, the theoretical framework guides the researcher so that he/she would not deviate from the confines of the accepted theories to make his/her final contribution scholarly and academic. Thus, Brondizio, Leemans and Solecki (2014) concur that the theoretical framework is the specific theory or theories about aspects of human endeavor that can be useful to the study of events.

At this point of the discussion, we can observe that a theoretical framework comprises the theories expressed by experts in the field into which you plan to research, which you draw upon to provide a theoretical coat hanger for your data analysis and interpretation of results. In other words, the theoretical framework is a structure that summarizes concepts and theories, which you develop from previously tested and published knowledge which you synthesize to help you have a theoretical background, or basis for your data analysis and interpretation of the meaning contained in your research data.

Collins and Stockton (2018) have argued that a strong theoretical framework allows the researcher to reveal existing predispositions about a study and assist in data coding and interpretation. Swanson (2013, p. 122) explicitly asserts that, “The theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study”. With regards to the assertion above, it can be revealed that theoretical framework for your research dissertation or thesis is not a summary of your own thoughts about your research. Rather, it is an amalgamation of the thoughts of giants in your field of research, as they relate to your proposed research or thesis, as you understand those theories, and how you will use those theories to understand your data.

We can reason that, the theoretical framework comprises what leaders in your field of research say about your research question, about the problem you plan to investigate, and might even include suggestions on how to solve that problem, including how to interpret the findings in your data. What those leaders say, helps you to develop an informed, and specialized lens, through which you examine your data, conduct the data analysis, interpret the findings, discuss them, and

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even make conclusions and recommendations. Data analysis and interpretation in a higher degree research is an academic piece of writing and cannot be written as conversational dialogue. It must reflect academic rigor and skills. Situating your research findings within your theoretical framework helps you to provide that rigor and skills. You can look at the theoretical framework as a structure or a data mining lens that uses knowledge from research currently done in your field, to make sense of the data in your own research study.

For example, Mensah (2019) situated the theoretical framework of AGIL taxonomy of Adaptation (A), Goal attainment (G), Integration (I), and Latent Pattern maintenance (L) by Talcott Parsons (1951) in the write-up he put together entitled “Sociological Analysis of Police Training Practices in Ghana: Theoretical and Conceptual Schools of Thought. In the writing of this article, he was able to successfully link police training practices to AGIL taxonomy. He presented it well to fit the theoretical context of his work as following;

First of all is Adaptation. According to Parsons (1951 as cited in Schwartz, 2012) adaptation involves securing sufficient resources from the environment and then distributing these throughout the system. Relating this to police training, adaptation refers to the need to get adequate knowledge (resources) in informing police training practices. The knowledge mobilized through the adaptive use of the resources is then utilized in ensuring specific goals attainment within the police service.

Second is Goal attainment. This refers to establishing priorities among system goals and mobilizing system resources for their attainment or the need for all societies to set goals towards which activity is directed (Parsons, 1951 as cited in Schwartz, 2012). At the level of the social system, the requirement of goal attainment is typically met by the polity, as it is the realm in which goals are prioritized, and discrepancies are resolved between “the inertial tendencies of the system and its ‘needs’ resulting from interchange with the situation” (Parsons 1961) as cited in (Schwartz, 2012). The polity and the government establish status and reward systems so that social goals can be attained. Therefore, in the context of this study, goal attainment relates to how police officers can achieve their set goals appropriately without any challenge or disruption. Goals must be set and those goals must be prioritized and achieved through effective police training. In applying this to the study or police training, Act 350 of the Ghana Police Service instructions defines clearly some core mandates or functions of the service which are; the protection of life and property, prevention and detection of crime, apprehension and prosecution of offenders, preservation of peace and good order and enforcement of all laws, Acts, decrees with which it is directly charged. When all these are achieved effectively and applied well, then we can say police training practices has been efficient.

The third paradigm is Integration. Integration refers to the coordination of a system’s or subsystem’s constituents’ parts, since “all social systems are differentiated and segmented into relatively independent units” (Parsons 1961) as cited in (Garriga and Melé, 2004) or a system whereby all the adaptive efforts of social institutions within a society needs to be integrated into a cohesive system (Parsons, 1951). Within the four systems of action (behavioural organism, personality, system and cultural system), the function of integration is met primarily by the social system. With regard to this study, integration sees to how trainees incorporate whatever they have learnt into practice. That is, the various divisions and departments within the Ghana Police Service need to be regulated so that a harmonious society can emerge from their interaction. In applying this to police training, the various divisions in the police service like the Criminal Investigation

Department (CID), Highway Patrol Unit (HPU), the Motor Traffic and Transport Department (MTTD), Domestic Violence and Victim Support Unit (DOVVSU) and many other departments within the service should come together and work unanimously by putting whatever

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has been taught by their instructors into good and effective use and in the end expected results from police training practices would be achieved.

The last is Latency or Latent pattern maintenance (L). This refers to the “imperative of maintaining the stability of the patterns of institutionalized culture”. This function is carried out primarily by the cultural system, as it is through culture (made up of shared meanings and values) that specific patterns of behaviour are maintained (Parsons, 1961). This, therefore, pertains to the risks, challenges and stresses police officers pass through when delivering their duties.

From the above, we can see that the scholar has successfully situated the theoretical framework of AGIL taxonomy of Adaptation, Goal attainment, Integration, and Latent Pattern maintenance to police training practices which is one of the social issues in Ghana. By way of successfully accomplishing the task of critically discussing the meaning of theoretical framework, let us turn our attention to discussing the point where conceptual and theoretical framework diverge and converge. In other words, the next section of the discussion would pay attention to the differences and the similarities between conceptual and theoretical frameworks. But before that the diagram in figure 1 below clearly gives us a comprehensive picture of how Mensah (2019) situated the theoretical framework of AGIL Taxonomy into his work sociological analysis of police training practices in the Ghana Police Service, theoretical and conceptual schools of thought.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR POLICE TRAINING PRACTICES

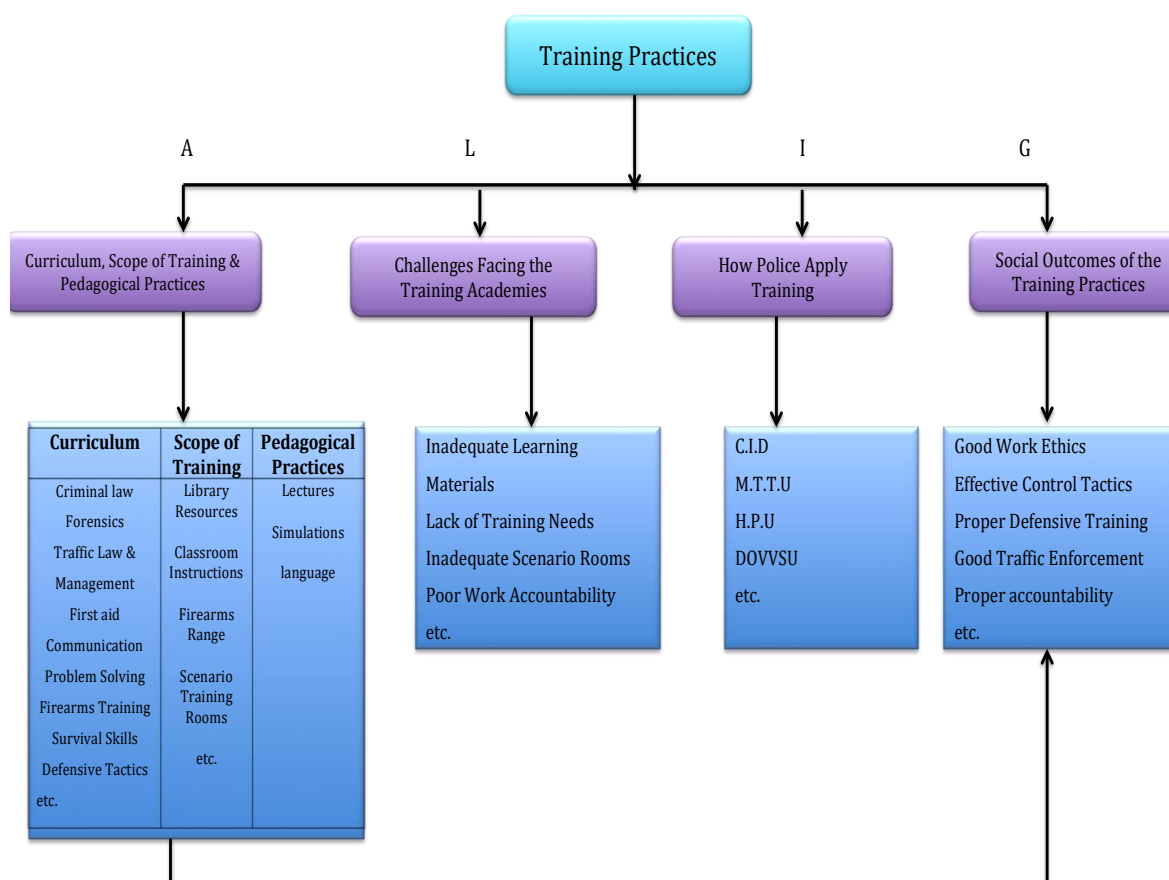


Figure 1: Conceptual framework demonstrating Talcott Parsons AGIL Taxonomy
Source: Adapted from Parson’s AGIL Taxonomy as cited in Mensah (2019).

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Differences and Similarities: Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks

This section of the article would be dedicated to discussing the differences and similarities between conceptual and theoretical frameworks. A conceptual framework is the logical master plan for your entire research project. It is noteworthy, as it can be seen from the above, that a theoretical framework is only a sub-set of the conceptual framework. We would like to create a helpful analogy here, by saying that while the conceptual framework is the house, the theoretical framework is a room that serves a particular purpose in that house. The purpose of the room could, for example, be the kitchen, or living room, or bathroom or bedroom, or garage. While each room has a unique purpose, no single room can serve all the functions that a house serves. This analogy should help you to appreciate better, why these two terms should never be used interchangeably. Only in a one-room ‘house’, would the house and room be one and the same thing. Most houses are not built like that.

Drilling (2018) has written an article that looks at the major differences and links between the conceptual and theoretical framework in relation to psychology and other fields. According to the writings, the theoretical framework of an experiment or paper refers to the larger assumptions in which the researcher is working. For example, a psychologist writing a paper may be working in a Freudian, Jungian or behaviourist theoretical framework. A theoretical framework provides a large, overarching structure of ideas that the researcher can then draw from the beginning to analyze a phenomenon or a text. This differs with the conceptual framework. The conceptual framework refers to the specific ideas a researcher uses in the study. Examples of conceptual frameworks include the definitions a sociologist uses to describe a culture and the types of data an economist considers when evaluating a country’s industry. The conceptual framework thus consists of the ideas that are used to define research and evaluate data. Conceptual frameworks are often laid out at the beginning of a paper or an experiment description for a reader to understand the methods used.

Drilling further goes ahead to show that, the difference between theoretical and conceptual frameworks is a scale referring to the big ideas and the smaller ones. The conceptual framework is a set of specific ideas that can be used within the larger theoretical framework. A theoretical framework may contain many ideas that are not explored within the paper or experiment it structures. However, by definition, all aspects of the conceptual framework are used in the process of research. Also, the theoretical framework may also determine what ideas are not considered by a conceptual framework and later on interlink the two by adding the ideas for the betterment of the whole research.

Justification of the divergence between theoretical and conceptual frameworks

Akintoye (2015) has focused on the differences and later on the similarities of the theoretical framework and conceptual framework by focusing on their activities in relation to social studies. The purpose of the theoretical framework from conceptual framework are as follows: the purpose of a theoretical framework is to provide the organization for the study, to test theories, to make research findings meaningful and generalizable, to establish orderly connections between observations and facts, to guide the researcher in the interpretations of the results, to predict and control situations and to stimulate research. She added that, the purposes of conceptual framework include: To clarify concepts and propose relationships among the concepts in a study, to provide a context for interpreting the study findings, to explain observations and to encourage theory development that is useful to practice.

Secondly, conceptual framework is thus the umbrella term relating to all the concepts and ideas that occupy your mind as you contemplate, plan, implement and conclude your research project. Thus, whereas the conceptual framework could be the product of your own thinking about

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your research study, the theoretical framework comprises other people's theoretical perspectives that you interpret as relevant to your research, and in particular, helpful in your data analysis and interpretation.

Thirdly, conceptual framework differs from theoretical framework in that it provides the direction that is missing in theoretical framework. Also called research paradigm, conceptual framework makes things easier by delineating the input as well as output of the research project. One gets to know the variables that need to be tested in a conceptual framework. Theoretical framework is based upon theories that have already been tested. These are theories that are the result of painstaking research conducted earlier by other investigators.

Fourthly, a conceptual framework is a researcher's own constructed model that he/she uses to explain the relationship that exists between the main variables in his/her study. It can also be an adaptation of a model in an existing theory which a researcher adapts to suit his/her research purpose and theoretical framework is in the form of a model that pivots a study, with its exponents and the results of their studies.

In addition, the design of the conceptual framework is not accepted, but it is a proposal of the researcher's answer to the research problem s/he has defined whereas the theoretical framework is well developed, designed and accepted. The theoretical framework provides a general representation of relationships between things in a given phenomenon. The conceptual framework, on the other hand, embodies the specific direction by which the research will have to be undertaken in relation to the direction given by the theoretical framework. Specifically, speaking, the conceptual framework describes the relationship between specific variables identified in the study as guided by the conceptual framework. It also outlines the input, process and output of the whole investigation. The conceptual framework is also called the research paradigm.

Furthermore, conceptual framework is the one that shows logically how the research inquiry is to be undertaken and the theoretical framework offers a focal point for approaching the unknown research in a specific field of inquiry. Moreover, conceptual framework consists of concepts interconnected to explain the relationships between them and how the researcher asserts to answer the research problem defined and the theoretical framework consists of theories that seem interrelated with their propositions deduced. Finally, the conceptual framework is aimed at encouraging the development of a theory that would be useful to practitioners in the field whereas the theoretical framework is used to test theories, to predict and control the situations within the context of a research inquiry.

A closer look at the paper reveals that some points of convergence exist between the two. For example; a conceptual framework is the researcher's idea on how the research problem will have to be explored. This is founded on the theoretical framework, which lies on a much broader scale of resolution. The theoretical framework dwells on time tested theories that embody the findings of numerous investigations on how phenomena occur. However, there exists a similarity between the two in that, a theoretical framework often informs the conceptual framework. For instance, a Freudian psychologist is likely to place a great deal of importance on early childhood data from their subjects.

Some other similarities include: the conceptual and the theoretical frameworks together, help the researcher see clearly the main variables and concepts in a given study; provides the researcher with a general methodological approach, that is research design, target population and research sample, data collection and analysis); guides the researcher in the collection, interpretation and explanation of the data; guides future research specifically where the conceptual framework integrates literature review and field data. At this point of the discussion, we would provide a

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thorough explanation on how the relationship between the conceptual and the theoretical frameworks impacts research.

Understanding the Relationship between Conceptual and Theoretical Frameworks in Research

Understanding the conceptual framework affects research in many ways. For instance, it assists the researcher in identifying and constructing his/her worldview on the phenomenon to be investigated. Also, it is the simplest way through which a researcher presents his/her asserted remedies to the milieu he/she has created. In addition, this accentuates the reasons why a research topic is worth studying, the assumptions of a researcher, the scholars he/she agrees with and disagrees with and how he/she conceptually grounds his/her approach.

Paying attention, to the theoretical framework and its impact on research, it can be mentioned that it provides a structure for what to look for in the data, how you think of what you see and how the data fits together, and helps you to discuss your findings more clearly in the light of what existing theories say. It helps the researcher to make connections between the abstract and concrete elements observed in the data.

To make it more practical, the theoretical framework aids the researcher to raise questions relating to what leaders in this field theorise about the research questions formulated and questions relating to what existing theoretical ideas can be used to investigate and to understand the research problem in a research. Another related question becomes what should I be looking for in the data to answer my research question? Thus, the theoretical framework helps the researcher to substantiate his/her argumentation. It helps the researcher to justify what he/she says about the findings and recommendations.

As we said earlier, the theoretical framework serves as a coat hanger for all data analysis, interpretation of results and discussion of findings. We use the symbol of the coat hanger to suggest that it is the structure that you use to make the bits and pieces of the data hang together as one body of knowledge. Finally, the theoretical framework enables the researcher to add depth to the data analysis by supporting what he/she says with reference to the theories advanced by people whose knowledge on the topic is much deeper than that of the investigator, and in many cases proven or unquestionable. In other words, it enables you to report your findings in an analytical, evaluative and creative way which adds to the depth of the analysis and discussion of findings. To summarise, understanding the relationship between the conceptual and the theoretical frameworks demonstrates a deep rather than surface understanding of the meaning contained in the data of the researcher.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This article has discussed thoroughly and comprehensively the relationship between theoretical and conceptual frameworks in a research. We have also taken time to present the lines of divergences and convergences of the two frameworks. The article has made it very clear that whereas the theoretical framework is drawn from the existing theoretical literature that you review about your research topic, a conceptual framework is a much broader concept that encompasses practically all aspects of your research. The latter refers to the entire conceptualisation of your research project. It is the big picture, or vision, comprising the totality of research. So, it represents all the thinking that goes into the cognitive processing about your research topic, developing interest in it and defining it accurately; finding who will be your supervisors, followed by every step of the entire research process, all the way to completing and submitting the work. Theoretical framework in a study is based on an existing theory and a conceptual framework can be developed from this theory.

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We therefore recommended that to get a good theoretical framework for your study or research work, you need to choose a very good research topic with advanced theoretical literature which will help you theorize and arrive at a concrete logical conclusion for your research work. Researchers are therefore encouraged to make good use of conceptual and theoretical frameworks in informing their research works which will help them arrive at good understanding and to the benefit of their readers as well. Generally, good a theoretical framework can be used to inform a conceptual framework which embodies specific direction by which the research has to be undertaken.

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