

Theoretical Framework

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Description

A theoretical framework provides a lens to explore or understand a phenomenon. It is constructed by selecting and defining concepts from an existing theory or theories in order to discuss ideas and to understand and analyze data (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). Text explaining a theoretical framework typically summarizes only the relevant aspects of the theories it draws on, rather than describing the entirety of each theory or giving the history of these concepts. In addition, a theoretical framework often includes reasons or justifications for bringing particular concepts together to understand a phenomenon being investigated.

As an example, Fox et al.'s (2016) study of victims of stalking in the field of criminal justice uses ideas from three theories: "self-control," "social learning," and "control balance." In the section, "The Tale of Three Theories and Stalking Victimization" (p. 322), the authors explain each theory separately, defining its claims and connecting it to their topic. Here they discuss self-control theory:

Based on Gottfredson and Hirschi's (1990) general theory of crime, Schreck (1999) hypothesized that people with low self-control ... are more likely than those with high self-control to be victimized by crime. ... In line with Schreck's (1999) extension of self-control theory, we contend that people with low self-control may be more vulnerable to stalking victimization because they are likely to place themselves in situations with an increased risk. (p. 322)

Later Fox et al. explain why they draw together the theories used in their theoretical framework: "While these theories are often contextualized as disparate or incompatible perspectives, we contend that they also likely operate collectively to explain victimization" (p. 328).

24 The theoretical framework can play a role at different stages of research, from
25 constructing questions and/or hypotheses to designing a study and interpreting data (Grant &
26 Osanloo, 2014). In Fox et al. (2016), the theoretical framework informed the three hypotheses
27 that guide the study.

28 The theoretical framework may also change during the research process. In a
29 **dissertation**, it may be revised to reflect what was actually useful during data analysis.

30 **Variations and Tensions**

31 While some scholars see the terms “conceptual” and “theoretical” framework as
32 interchangeable (e.g., Casanave & Li, 2015), others view a conceptual framework as being more
33 concrete and narrower in scope and applied to a specific study (Imenda, 2014). In contrast, they
34 see a theoretical framework as more abstract and broader in scope, and applicable to similar
35 research. The terms “theoretical background” and “theoretical foundations” are also used to refer
36 to the theoretical framework (Tseng, 2018).

37 **Graduate Student Voice**

38 Earlier in my program, I thought I should choose a theoretical framework before I had a
39 research question. Consequently, I struggled with aligning the sections of a paper. Now, I read
40 the literature to decide which theory might work best for my question. – Jihan Ayesh

41 **Reflection Questions**

- 42 1. Looking at texts in your discipline, what role does the theoretical framework play, if
43 any?
- 44 2. If you are writing a theoretical framework, how and where do you explain your reasons
45 for selecting a theory or theories?

46 **For Further Reading**

47 Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical
48 framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for your “house.”
49 *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice and Research*, 4(2), 12-
50 26. <https://doi.org/10.5929/2014.4.2.9>. This article discusses the importance of having a
51 theoretical framework and how to develop it in a dissertation.

52 Nygaard, L. P. (2017). *Writing your master’s thesis: From A to Zen*. Sage. The chapter, “Your
53 theoretical and conceptual framework: What ideas are you using?” (pp. 123-136),
54 explains the main constructs of theoretical and conceptual frameworks and how to
55 present them.

56 **References**

57 Casanave, C., & Li, Y. (2015). Novices’ struggles with conceptual and theoretical framing in
58 writing dissertations and papers for publication. *Publications*, 3(2), 104–119.
59 <https://doi.org/10.3390/publications3020104>

60 Fox, K. A., Nobles, M. R., & Fisher, B. S. (2016). A multi-theoretical framework to assess
61 gendered stalking victimization: The utility of self-control, social learning, and control
62 balance theories. *Justice Quarterly*, 33(2), 319–347.
63 <https://doi.org/10.1080/07418825.2014.902985>

64 Grant, C., & Osanloo, A. (2014). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a theoretical
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66 *Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice and Research*, 4(2), 12–26.
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68 Imenda, S. (2014). Is there a conceptual difference between theoretical and conceptual
69 frameworks? *Journal of Social Sciences*, 38(2), 185–195. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471->
70 [0528.2006.00853.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-0528.2006.00853.x)

71 Tseng, M. Y. (2018). Creating a theoretical framework: On the move structure of theoretical
72 framework sections in research articles related to language and linguistics. *Journal of*
73 *English for Academic Purposes*, 33, 82–99. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2018.01.002>

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