**Explained: Difference between Conceptual Framework and Theoretical Framework**

**What is a research framework and what is the need to have one?**

As a PhD scholar when you are planning your thesis study, there is a need to justify your research and also explain its design to the readers. This is termed as research framework. In literal terms a research framework is the foundation of a building. The stronger the foundation, better the building. For drafting a strong foundation, your research needs to have the support of the review of existing literature justifying and explaining the existing knowledge in your domain of you research being undertaken. It ascertains how your research is going to contribute or fit within the existing literature. Furthermore, your research framework informs the readers how your study aligns with your thesis questions or hypothesis.

The important components of the research framework are the literature review or the recent studies that are associated with the topic of your research and the different models or theories that are associated with your study. The literature review acts as a filter to help in choosing the most suitable research questions and also finalise the technique for data collection, analysis and further interpretation of your findings.

With a broader perspective, researchers should not limit themselves to research papers in the review process, they must explore theories, other relevant published thesis, encyclopaedia and handbooks. These will help you to create a more structured research framework.

Research frameworks are broadly classified into two types:

1. Theoretical framework
2. Conceptual framework

**1. Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework is a conceptual model that offers an organised and methodical way to think about a research problem or question. It aids in identifying the key variables and the kind of relationship that exists between them and to further pave the way for selection and interpretation of data. The data analysis finds its general structure in a theoretical framework. The concepts that are in use are defined and also the existing theories and models in the field of research are explained in the framework. It further explains any assumptions that were used to inform your approach and your choice of specific rationales. The foundation for theoretical frameworks is already pre-existing theories and research and they can be also used for developing fresh hypothesis or put to test the pre-existing ones. A good theoretical framework is the foundation for chalking out the research design, data collection and analysis. It can further help to understand the quality of the research. If the research is coherent, rigorous and relevant. The usage and application of theoretical frameworks can be found in many disciplines. Mostly we find them used in social sciences, natural sciences and humanities. They work as building blocks for developing knowledge and advancing the understanding of a concept in any field.

The purpose of a theoretical framework can be split into 4 points. A good theoretical framework designed by the researcher does justice to all the four pointers

* Challenge and out to test the existing hypothesis or theories
* Establish a methodical connection between observations and facts
* Predict as well as control the situations
* Build fresh hypothesis

**Steps for developing a Theoretical Framework**

* Identify and define the key concepts in your thesis problem statement and thesis question
* Assess the existing theories and evaluate them by writing an extensive literature review. Describe he concept, models and theories that support your studies
* Choose the most suitable theory that can be the base study for your research and describes the relationship between the key variables
* Elaborate on how your research fits into existing studies or fills the knowledge gap
* Bring forth the relevance of any of the theoretical assumptions made and also highlight the limitations

**Structure of a Theoretical Framework**

A theoretical framework has flexible structure and there are no specific rules that have to be followed. It has a fluid structure and allows room for accommodation as long as they are logically and clearly presented.

A theoretical framework can only be created after the literature review has been made. It is a natural extension of the literature review. The main purpose of the literature review us to identify the gaps in your field of research. As a researcher when you will review existing theories, you will get to know how these gaps need to be addressed. At the time of thesis writing , the theoretical framework can be added in the Literature review chapter itself. However, being fluidic in nature, it can also be accommodated as a separate chapter, depending upon the complexities of the theories in research.

**Checklist for a good Theoretical Framework**

* Is my Theoretical framework appears to be clearly emerging from the Literature Review created by me?
* The analysis of the pre-existing theories that I have created, is it advanced by leaders in the field of research undertaken by me?
* Is my Theoretical framework a representation of the contemporary and updated knowledge on the topic of my study?
* Have a elaborated on the complexities embedded in the theoretical framework, to make it easy to comprehend?
* Does my theoretical framework appear to be a coat hanger for my data analysis in terms of its structure and is it coherent and logical in its nature and flow?
* Do the different parts of the framework constitute together a correlated and comprehensive model that can help me to analyse the relationship among the variables that I plan to investigate?
* Is my theoretical framework able to answer how my hypothesis will be tested or how my research questions will be answered?
* Are all the sources that have been used to create the theoretical framework, well documented?
* What does my theoretical framework look like? A model, figure, table or description?
* Do I justify the application of this theoretical framework in being the most suitable for my data analysis?

**Benefits of Theoretical Framework**

There are multiple benefits of the theoretical framework in your research

* It increases the credibility in case the data is qualitative in nature and internal validity in case of quantitative data
* With the help of theoretical analysis, you can enhance the possibility of transferability of the findings from the qualitative data or external validity and generalizability of quantitative data analysis.
* It further adds on to the confirmability of your findings when it comes to qualitative data and the objectivity of your findings when it comes to quantitative data
* It increases the dependability of your findings in qualitative data reliability when we talk of quantitative data

**Conclusion**

A robust and well-made theoretical framework is crucial when writing a dissertation. It not just defines your research gap but it also identifies your approach and paves the path for the interpretation of your results.

**Conceptual Framework**

A conceptual framework is a written or visual representation that explains your study variables and also their relationship with each other. The ground work for conceptual framework is also the literature review of existing studies and theories about your topic.

**Step for Developing a Conceptual Framework**

* One of the key preliminary requirement of a research is that it has to address a knowledge gap. In the stage of designing a conceptual framework, you must define the key concepts in your problem statement as well as the thesis question.
* Take up a literature review in such a way that that the study findings and literature review is explained well. You can even further draw on the empirical knowledge you have gained from your personal experience, on the. given topic.
* After a through literature review and jotting down pointers from your empirical knowledge, you must identify the crucial variables relevant to your study. Further classify them as a dependent or independent variables and define them explicitly.
* Thing through and brainstorm all the factors that could affect each dependant variable
* Propose the type of relationship among the variables and lay down the possible associations that could exist between the variables
* The best representation of a conceptual framework is a flow chart or a tree diagram. Use the most applicable one to represent your conceptual framework.

**Categories of variables**

At the time of developing a conceptual framework, you will need to identify the following variables

* Independent Variable
* Dependent Variable
* Moderating Variable
* Mediating Variable
* Control Variable

How are these variables different from each other and what are the ways in which they impact each other. To begin with, first you must identify the dependent and independent variable in your study. The independent variable is the cause variable and the dependent variable is the effect variable. The next stage is to identify variables that influence the relationship between the dependent and independent variable. These could be the moderating, mediating and the control variables. If the value of the moderating variable increases or decreases, the relationship between the independent and dependent variable changes accordingly. A mediating variable is the one that links the independent variable to better explain the relationship between them. A control variable, as the name suggests, can potentially impact the cause and effect relationship but it is kept constant throughout the study so that its impact on the findings or outcomes can be ruled out.

**The Benefits of a Conceptual Framework**

There are many benefits on working with a conceptual framework in your research

Some of the key benefits are:

* When the researcher is creating a conceptual model, he will give very detailed thought on the variables and hence give very precise descriptions of the same
* The guidelines when created meticulously, help in creating a better final result
* The high standards of quality and preciseness that are created in the beginning, while making the conceptual framework are maintained throughout the execution as well

**Look of a Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework a simpler representation of the problem statement of research question. It looks structured and easy to comprehend. The researcher can start making the conceptual framework, as soon as the dependant and independent variable have been determined. A conceptual framework comprises the following elements

* Frames: The dependent and independent variable are drawn up in frames
* Arrows: An arrow between two concepts indicates a casual link. The starting point of the arrow influences the point towards which the arrow is heading
* Lines: When it is expected that there will be a correlation between two variables, btu no connection, a line is used to depict the same.

**Purpose of a Conceptual Framework**

In a conceptual model the cause and effect relationship between the variables is demonstrated. In testing research, one works with specific expectations about the cause and effect relationship and they are depicted in a schematic relationship

The conceptual model is suitable for exploratory research. The framework comprises broadly defined concepts rather than specifically defined variables. In this kind of research, the specific relationships are determined at a later stage and the variables. Are so created that they are directly measurable and are concrete in themselves.

A conceptual framework finds its greatest applicability in practical problems that have to be tested objectively. It originated in the financial reporting of accountancy and finds a lot of use there in the present time also. It can help issues such as :

* What are the useful features that the accounting needs?
* Which are the fundamental elements we are dealing with in the accounting?
* Which are the variables that are required for the preparation of the financial statements?

**Distinction between Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

A whole lot of students and researchers have difficulty in discriminating between theoretical and conceptual framework. The theoretical framework rests on a broader scale of resolution and a conceptual framework is the concept of the researcher on how the research problem will be explored in the process. On one side, the theoretical framework offers a general representation of the relationships between things given in a phenomenon. It rests on time tested theories that embody the findings of numerous investigations on the way the phenomena can occur. While, the conceptual framework gives a specific direction in which the research will have to be undertaken. It can also be called as the research paradigm as it specifically describes the relationship between specific variables that have been identified in the study and also the input, process and output of the entire research journey.