Chapter 1
Applying Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks to Doctoral Research in Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the role of theoretical and conceptual frameworks in designing the research methodology for your doctoral thesis. We show how these frameworks serve as overarching structures that shape the entire study, influencing the formulation of research questions, the literature review, methodological choices, as well as data presentation and analysis. In inductive studies, such as grounded theory, theoretical insights emerge from the data itself, whereas in deductive studies, the relevant theory is identified at the outset. The chapter also outlines practical strategies to help doctoral candidates develop a suitable theoretical or conceptual framework as they begin their research journey. Emphasis is placed on the importance of engaging with recent theses and other scholarly articles within the chosen field, as a means of identifying and refining appropriate frameworks for their research.

INTRODUCTION

Starting to work on a doctoral study can be an overwhelming experience. For many, the tyranny of the blank page is real – the blinking cursor on an empty screen is a silent reminder of just how difficult to know where to begin. One of the most daunting hurdles in the early stages of doctoral research is grappling with the concept of the theoretical framework. Many candidates struggle to appreciate why a theory is necessary at all and then have to select a theory that aligns with their research paradigm. This chapter seeks to demystify the role of the theoretical framework, clarifying its purpose and guiding readers on how to select and integrate their chosen theory into the study. We argue in this chapter that a sound theoretical framework is not an academic add-on, but rather the bedrock upon which the entire research rests. It provides coherence, direction, and intellectual rigour from the research question to the final conclusion.

The chapter highlights how a theoretical framework can be developed for diverse research paradigms. The chapter will focus on the role of theory in different paradigms and demonstrate how it can be employed to enhance the quality of doctoral research. The chapter will examine the role of the theoretical framework in postpositivism, interpretivism, and pragmatic research philosophy and offer guidance on how theory can guide and inform scholarly inquiry across various methodological approaches.

The chapter will also distinguish between the theoretical framework and the conceptual framework, clarifying their respective roles in scholarly research. This will guide postgraduate students in understanding how theory can be applied within different research paradigms and explore ways in which researchers can identify or generate an appropriate theoretical foundation to support their study. Elements of a good theoretical framework will also be explored in relation to the following:

- How theory guides data collection
- How theory informs one's research questions, the literature review, data gathering and analysis
- The relationship between theory and research variables
- Unpacking concepts and terms within the theoretical framework

The chapter proposes to foreground how theory assists in structuring the entire dissertation. It will demonstrate how the appropriate use of theories creates a coherent framework, forming a nexus of relevant ideas that not only guide the research process but also contribute to the contemporary body of knowledge.

This chapter also highlights the role of the conceptual framework, with particular emphasis on distinguishing it from the theoretical framework. It is intended to support students in identifying the underlying assumptions associated with various

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