

THEORIZING CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Ewnetu H. Tamene (PhD Scholar)
Zhejiang Normal University, Institute of International
and Comparative Education, CHINA

ABSTRACT

The impetus of this paper is the irreplaceable role yet confusing use of the term ‘conceptual framework’ in research literature. Even though, there is a consensus among scholars of various field of study that conceptual framework is essential element of research endeavors, yet it is used interchangeably with theoretical framework, that create confusion. As a PhD student on the pre-proposal work, this makes me more anxious. Then my intent is to explore its conceptual meaning and purposes by bringing together similar meanings from different scholars with a view to shed some light on its understanding and its use in research. Hence, in attempting to address this, the following key terms; Concept, conceptual framework research design and theoretical framework are defined briefly as to help decipher the conceptual ties among them and illuminate the conceptual meaning and purpose of conceptual framework. The schematic representation of conceptual framework is developed based on the conceptual meaning provided by scholars. In doing this it is attempted to show conceptual meaning of conceptual framework in relation to research design, paradigms and philosophical assumptions that delineate it from theoretical framework. Conceptual framework serves essential role in inductive research design, while theoretical framework serves similar role in deductive research design.

Keywords: Conceptual Framework, Theory, Theoretical Framework, Theorizing.

INTRODUCTION

Rationale: In literature, there is common understanding among scholars of different research traditions that the conceptual framework is a critically important component of disciplined inquiry. However, the meaning of conceptual framework is not clear and often used with theoretical framework interchangeably, though their conceptual meaning is basically different (Antonenko, 2015). Yet there is a pronounced lack of shared understanding regarding the definition and functions of conceptual frameworks, which impedes the ability to design effective research (Jabareen, 2009:51). He argues that current usage of the terms conceptual framework and theoretical framework are vague and imprecise and used often interchangeably with theoretical framework that make the concept more blurred. On the other hand it is very important guide without which research seems impossible. Maxwell (2005:39) rightly puts;

The most important thing to understand about your conceptual framework is that it is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why—a tentative theory of the phenomena that you are investigating. The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design—to help you to assess and refine your goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods ...

Maxwell (2005:39)

The intent of this paper is then; to explore conceptual meaning and purposes of conceptual framework in research endeavor with a view to shed some light on its understanding and purpose in research design. In attempting to address these, the following are the key terms:

Concept, research design, conceptual framework and theoretical framework are defined as to help decipher the conceptual differences among them and illuminate the conceptual meaning of conceptual framework.

DEFINITIONS

Concept: Before embarking on the definition of conceptual framework, it's important to clarify the meaning of the term 'concept' that will lay base for understanding conceptual framework. Merriam-Webster dictionary define concept as "an idea of what something is or how it works". Jabareen (2009), in his article entitled 'Building a Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure' provides detail description of the concept, based on Deleuze and Guattari's work, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991), the idea that, "every concept has components, and is defined by them". He pointed out various aspects of the term concept, to mention some: every concept has an irregular delineation defined by its components, every concept contains components originating from other concepts, every concept is "considered as the point of coincidence, condensation, or accumulation. From this elaborated description it's possible to see that the term 'concept' is not a single entity but a system or network of concepts, and is related to other concept that makes up its meaning.

Conceptual framework: According to the above conceptual definition, the term 'concept' does not stand alone, but related to other concepts and form meaning. Hence the conceptual connection with other concept creates a 'framework' of related or interlinked concepts. Framework is the conceptual line through which concepts connect and make meaning (Maxwell, 1996, 2005, Miles & Huberman, 1994, Dobson 2002, Jabareen (2009). It is defined by scholars in many different ways with the central concept emphasizing two major points: the essential role of conceptual framework as a guide/ a plan of study in qualitative research paradigms, the interrelation interdependence of ideas; and tentative theory/understanding about phenomena under study. See the following definitions

- Conceptual framework is a network, or "a plane," of interlinked concepts that together provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon or phenomena. The concepts that constitute a conceptual framework support one another, articulate their respective phenomena, and establish a framework-specific philosophy (Jabareen, 2009:51).
- Conceptual framework of study is a system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research (Maxwell 1996; 2005:39). It is primarily a conception or model of what is out there that you plan to study, and of what is going on with these things and why; a tentative theory of the phenomena that one is interested in investigating. The function of this theory is to inform the rest of your design; to help you to assess and refine one's goals, develop realistic and relevant research questions, select appropriate methods and identify potential validity threats to your conclusions.
- For conceptual framework is the document that "explains, either graphically or in narrative form, the main things to be studied and the key factors, concepts, or variables; and the presumed relationships among them", Miles and Huberman (1994:18).
- Rivitch and Riggan (2012), view conceptual framework as an argument, why the topic one wishes to study matters, why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigor, in this sense conceptual framework is a guide for empirical research, situating specific questions in and strategies for exploring.

Hence, conceptual framework is a network/interlinked system, or relationship of assumptions, expectations, beliefs. It is a tentative theory that guides the research. In this

sense it is the essential and central element of the research design that guides not only researcher to what is going on, but also guides a reader to what has been done and how. The term theory, is defined different to the traditional theory test sort of study as “...theory is one that tell an enlightening story about a phenomenon one that gives you new insights broadens your understandings about phenomenon”(Maxwell,1996:33). As illustrated above theory is a framework of ideas about how a particular phenomenon is related to its parts. It means conceptual framework in this sense. Maxwell explains that the concepts of framework as a theory, that framework serves as the basis for understanding the causal or correlational patterns of interconnections across events, ideas, observations, concepts, knowledge, interpretations and other components of experience. Emphasizing the importance of theory, Given contends that “without at least some rudimentary theoretical framework there would be no way to make reasoned decisions about what data to gather or to determine what is important from among the wealth of data and possibilities of approaches to analysis that exist”(Given, 2008:870).

Searching and building the interconnectedness among concepts in the research design is exclusively the task of researcher. Conceptual framework in research is, something that the researcher constructs, is not something that s/he find. Conceptual framework incorporates pieces that are borrowed from elsewhere, but the structure, the overall coherence, is something that the researcher builds, not something that exists ready-made (Maxwell, 2005). Based on the above conceptual definitions and explanations, I schematically represent the ideas of conceptual framework at the start of exploratory study. Thinking the understanding of the research problem, objectives and methods of data collection are concrete at the start of the study.

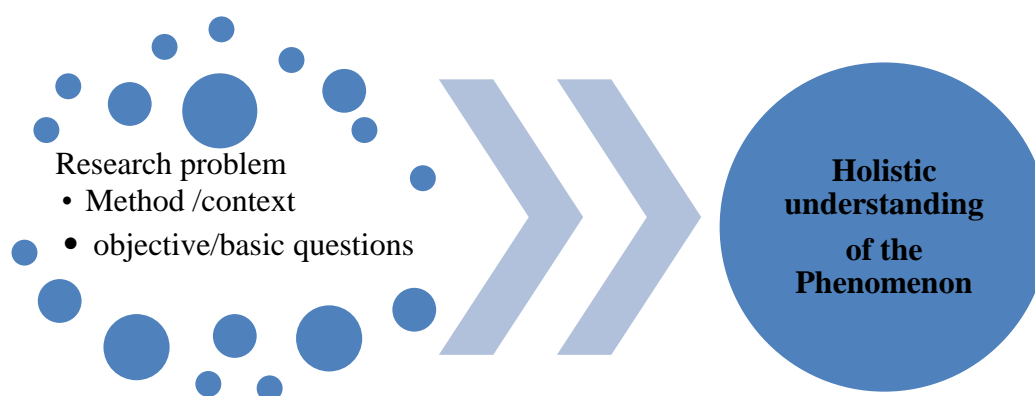


Figure 1: Schematic representation of conceptual framework

Figure 1, shows the tentative concepts and several ideas that can result in a unified conceptual framework then leads to unified holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study. It moves from general research problem to basic idea of data collection techniques; from some understanding of research context and participants and thinking of their relationship to forming a conceptual framework, then to theory development. With the understanding of the two strands of qualitative research design: fixed and emergent, () my understanding in this paper comply with emerging design that there cannot be precise and complete design on

which everything is judged at the start, as in quantitative research approach, exploratory research is conceptualized in this model. Exploratory study refers to broad-ranging, intentional, systematic data collection designed to maximize discovery of generalizations based on description and direct understanding of phenomenon of interest. *“To explore a given phenomenon effectively, they must approach it with two special orientations: flexibility in looking for data and open-mindedness about where to find them”*,...they know what to do (Given,2008:327). The above figurative concept assumes that though exploratory study design follows emerging type of design; researchers are not empty mind to the phenomenon, research problem, method of data collection, the context and objectives should be clear to certain level at the start. I would like to conclude the concept of conceptual framework with the following arguments on which the central idea of this paper rests. Conceptual framework is the framework of related concepts that link the core components of the research design that responds to the questions in qualitative research paradigms and are products of qualitative processes of theorization, (Jabareen, 2009). A conceptual framework can be taken as an end result of bringing together a number of related concepts to explain or predict a given event, or give a broader understanding of the phenomenon of interest. The process of arriving at a conceptual framework is akin to an inductive process whereby small individual pieces (in this case, concepts) are joined together to tell a bigger map of possible relationships.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

A theoretical framework is defined as empirical or quasi-empirical theory of social and/or psychological processes, at a variety of levels that can be applied to the understanding of phenomena. Within the context of research, Liehr and Smith (1999) assert that a theoretical framework provides researcher guidance for the study questions, methods for measuring variables are selected and analyses are planned. Therefore it refers to the theory that a researcher chooses to guide him/her in his/her research, thus it is the application of a theory, or a set of concepts drawn from one and the same theory, to offer an explanation of an event, or research problem. A theoretical framework guide research, determining what things to measure, and what statistical relationships to look for. In this sense, it is critical in deductive, theory-testing sorts of studies, as conceptual framework is critical inductive theory building exploratory studies. Thus, a conceptual framework is derived from concepts, as a theoretical framework is derived from a theory (Meirovitch 1997, as in Imenda, 2014). The summary of this paragraph is depicted in the figure 2.

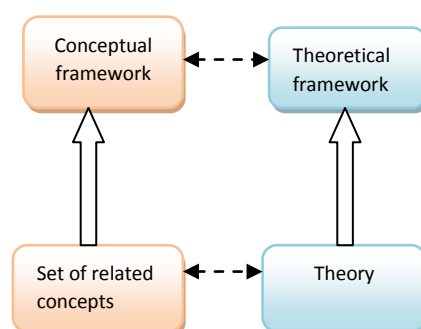


Figure 2: Derivation of conceptual and theoretical framework adapted from, (Imenda, 2014)

To situate the discussion of conceptual and theoretical framework in practice, I will proceed to briefly conceptualize research design to delineate their differences in the study design.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research is an organized and systematic way of finding answers to questions. Research design refers to a plan of which this systematic ways of finding answers to a question is transformed into a study that can then be carried out by a researcher (Given, 2008). According to this source, research design encompasses decisions about how the research itself is conceptualized, the subsequent conduct of a specific research questions, and ultimately the type of contribution the research is intended to make to the development of knowledge in a particular area. In the research design the major concern lies in responding to the issues of approach; constructionist or positivist to take; and the theoretical lens through which the study is being conceived and theoretical base for data analysis and interpretation. The right response of these concerns leads one to think of research paradigms, of own philosophical thinking about the basic question at hand. Patton, (2002), explained research design as a test and guide how the question we are supposed to answer is going to be approached and provide options. Therefore, thinking about design alternatives and methods choices again leads researcher directly to considerations of the relative strength and weaknesses of qualitative and quantitative data. Pragmatically, some questions lend themselves to numerical answers, some to words explanations of meanings. As the eminent scientist, Albert Einstein puts, *“Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts cannot be counted”*.

For instance, if you want to know the lowest temperature of the winter of 2016 in Jinhua, China; and predict what would be the next winter like, in see daily temperature records, and look at the theory and trend of climate change. If you want to know the experience of first year international students in Zhejiang Normal University, particularly those who are from Africa, who experienced snow for the first time; how did they manage, their meaning of ‘winter’ and staying in on campus during the spring holidays, probably what would be their plan for the next winter, ask them. Hence, in the first case the responses are numeric and registered data which is fixed and can be proved with certain scientific theory. While in the second case, the responses are words, descriptions in narratives forms, which are individual experiences, concepts and meanings which cannot be generalized, but thick and detail valuable data that gives holistic understanding of the question. Such conception of the researcher to great extent defines the research paradigm that the researchers opt to follow for the sake of obtaining right response. The right response needs right questions that emanates from the researchers philosophical assumption of the reality at hand.

Importance of Philosophical Understanding: It is obvious that an understanding of the philosophic assumptions is important as one begins a research project because questions will come up that were not, anticipated but seeks immediate answer (Maykut and Morehouse (1994). Without the philosophic background and without the conceptual tools to think through problems and issues as they arise would be challenging. As qualitative research, generally examines people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by the participants, it is based on a phenomenological position and questions tend to signal initial methodological orientations toward the study of a target phenomenon even when they are not explicitly stated (Maxwell, 2005). On the other hand quantitative research is based on observations that are converted into discrete units that can be compared to other units by using statistical analysis. While there may be modifications and variations on this general picture of quantitative research, statistical analysis is an essential part of quantitative research. In this sense understanding philosophical assumptions of research methods is essential.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) point emphasize this point; they explained how one's assumptions are related to certain paradigm in the research without understanding philosophical assumptions, research study cannot get ground. That refers to a set of general philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world (ontology); and how one can understand it (epistemology), assumptions that tend to be shared by researchers working in a specific field or tradition. They add, at the most abstract and general level, examples of such paradigms are philosophical positions such as positivism, constructivism, realism, and pragmatism, each embodying very different ideas about reality and how we can gain knowledge of it. A paradigm includes, specific methodological strategies linked to these assumptions, and identify particular studies. As paradigms are sets of basic beliefs, they are not open to proof in any conventional sense; there is no way to elevate one over another on the basis of ultimate, foundational criteria (Guba and Lincoln, (1994). Hence it is possible to put that conceptual framework and theoretical framework articulate the conceptual and logical tie between basic elements of the design, within the selected theoretical lenses constructivists or positivists respectively.

Therefore, the understandings and assumptions about research held by a researcher provide an overarching frame that shapes and influences the research design at every point. For example, if a design is qualitative in nature, then one can assume that the researcher has a commitment to, and has identified the need for, some form of naturalistic interpretive approach to inquiry so as to explore or address the particular substantive focus or question. Such a commitment will influence all parts of the research design, from the way in which the aims and objectives of the research are thought about and articulated, to the methods employed in collecting data, to the analytic processes undertaken with respect to the types of theoretical lenses that are applied to the data collected. This is what makes this a 'conceptual' framework and what differentiates it from a theoretical framework (Imenda 2014).

CONCLUSION

In this article I tried to conceptualize conceptual framework from various scholars and put together defining with similar meaning. The model representing conceptual framework is presented assuming emergent qualitative research design. Both conceptual and theoretical frameworks refer to the epistemological paradigm a researcher adopts in looking at a given research problem and refer to a structure which guides the researcher. A conceptual framework of a research help readers to understand the reasons why a given researcher decides to study a particular topic, the assumptions s/he makes, how s/he conceptually grounds his/her approach, the scholars s/he is in dialogue with, who s/he agrees and disagrees with. Though both conceptual framework and theoretical framework serve similar purpose in their own right, it is extremely important for beginning researcher to identify as well as describe an appropriate conceptual or theoretical framework based on the question at hand. Without which not only a study lacks proper direction and basis but also add to the confusion in the literature as well as improper interpretation and explanation of the findings.

REFERENCES

- Antoneko, P. (2015). The Instrumental Value of Conceptual Framework in Educational Technology Research. Retrieved February 12, 2016, from Educational Technology Research and Development 63(1): <http://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-014-9363-4>.

- Imenda, S. (2014). Is There a Conceptual Difference between Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks. *J Soc Sci* 38(2), 185-195.
- Dobson, P. (2002). Critical Realism and Information System Research: Why Bother with Philosophy? Retrieved February 28, 2016, from *Information Science-An International Electronic Journal* 7(2): <http://informationr.net/ir/7-2/paper1124.html>
- Given, L. (2008). *The Sage Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods*. Vol. 1 & 2. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications Inc.
- Guba, E. and Lincoln, Y.S. (1994). Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In N. a. Denzin, *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park: Sage.
- Jabareen, Y. (2009). Building Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8(4).
- Liehr, P. & Smith M.J. (1999). Middle Range Theory: Spinning Research and Practice to Create Knowledge for the new Millennium. *Advancing in Nursing Science* 21(4), 81-91.
- Matthew, J. and Riggan, M. (2012). *Reason and Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*. London: Sage.
- Maxwell, J. (1996). *Qualitative Research Design: An Integrative Approach*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE publications Ltd.
- Maxwell, J. (2004). *Qualitative Research Design*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M.B., & Huberman, A.M. (1994). *Qualitative Data Analysis: An Expanded Sources book* 2nd ed. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Mykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Pamela Mykut & Richard Morehouse. (1994). *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*. London: The Falmer Press.
- Patton, M. (2002). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks CA: Sage.
- Ravitch, S.M. and Riggan, M. (2012). *Reason & rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research*. London: Sage.