



Critical Documentary Review of the Conceptual Framework, Theoretical Framework, and State of the Art in Social and Humanistic Research: A Comparative Analysis of Structures, Functions, and Applications for the Consolidation of Epistemological Frameworks in Research

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ABSTRACT: Objective: This documentary review aims to comparatively analyze the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework, and the state of the art, identifying their structures, functions, and applications in research within the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Methodology: A documentary review was conducted using specialized databases such as *Scopus* and *Web of Science*, complemented by recent literature contributed by key authors in the field. The analysis included 50 indexed academic references, selected according to criteria of relevance, currency, and methodological rigor.

Results: Convergences were identified in their role of providing methodological coherence, and divergences were found in their level of abstraction, temporality of application, and the types of sources employed. The conceptual framework organizes and delimits concepts, the theoretical framework provides scientific grounding, and the state of the art critically synthesizes and contextualizes accumulated knowledge.

Conclusions: The three categories are not interchangeable but complementary; their articulated integration strengthens the epistemological and methodological soundness of doctoral research, enabling a robust design with academic impact.

Keywords: Conceptual framework; Theoretical framework; State of the art; Research methodology; Social Sciences; Humanities; Epistemology; Documentary review.

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1. Introduction

In the field of Social Sciences and Humanities, the construction of reference frameworks for scientific

research constitutes a fundamental pillar in the structuring of rigorous projects with academic validity. Among the most debated and widely used elements are the conceptual framework, the theoretical framework, and the state of the art. Although these three categories are often used interchangeably in the literature, each possesses distinct characteristics, structures, and applications that determine its role in research.

Recent studies (Sautu, 2015; Varpio et al., 2020; Lozano Hurtado et al., 2024) have demonstrated the importance of establishing clear distinctions among these categories, since their conflation generates methodological gaps and weakens research coherence. Proper delimitation helps strengthen the validity and scientific legitimacy of a project. This article focuses on developing each category in depth, highlighting their convergences and divergences, and presenting a critical discussion that contributes to epistemological consolidation at the doctoral level.

Conceptual Framework in Scientific Research: Definition, Structure, Functionality, and Applications

The conceptual framework has been defined as an abstract reference scheme that organizes the central categories of research (Reidl-Martínez, 2012). Daros (2002) describes it as a tool to avoid ambiguities, providing the study with semantic clarity. Van der Waldt (2020) adds that it constitutes a process of selecting and articulating relevant concepts that partially explain the phenomenon under investigation.

Its structure is characterized by the identification of key concepts, their operational definitions, and the relationships among them. In some cases, it is complemented by diagrams or conceptual maps that facilitate the visual representation of these connections (Schosler, 2023). This visual dimension allows the conceptual framework to serve both as an academic tool and as a pedagogical resource.

In terms of its uses, the conceptual framework guides the definition of the research problem, clarifies categories, and prevents duplications in the analysis (Soni & Barkane, 2024). It also serves as the basis for formulating initial hypotheses and delimiting the scope of objectives. It is particularly valuable in interdisciplinary research, where establishing a common language is essential.

Its applications are manifold: in exploratory studies, it helps to outline research lines; in empirical studies, it delimits variables; and in comparative research, it establishes categories of analysis that enable the harmonization of reference frameworks across different contexts.

Furthermore, the conceptual framework is dynamic, as it can be enriched as the research progresses. This dynamism ensures its relevance throughout all stages of the project, preventing rigidities that might constrain critical analysis and allowing it to function as a flexible framework for addressing emerging problems in research (Gómez Vargas et al., 2015).

Theoretical Framework as the Epistemological and Critical Scaffolding of Research: Definition, Structure, Functionality, and Applications

The theoretical framework constitutes the epistemological scaffolding that supports a research project. Hymovich (1993) conceives it as the organized set of theories, approaches, and relevant antecedents that explain the phenomenon. For Sautu (2015), it implies a critical construction that acknowledges both the limitations and the potential of the theories employed. Varpio et al. (2020) recommend distinguishing it clearly from the conceptual framework and from theory itself.

Its structure includes a critical review of relevant theories, the presentation of models, and the identification of theoretical gaps. Kivunja (2018) argues that it should not be limited to listing approaches, but rather should integrate them coherently. Ocampo Wilches (2023) emphasizes that, in this section, the researcher must explicitly state their epistemological stance.

The main uses of the theoretical framework relate to the formulation of hypotheses, the methodological foundation of the study, and the articulation of variables. It also enables the interpretation of results within specific scientific paradigms. Likewise, the theoretical framework provides a bridge between abstract theory and research practice, fostering the construction of solid interpretations (Reidl-Martínez, 2012).

In terms of applications, this framework is employed in quantitative projects to construct statistical models; in qualitative research, to guide discourse analysis; and in mixed-methods studies, to balance divergent approaches. Its flexible nature allows it to be updated as the research progresses. Thus, the theoretical framework is not static but a resource in constant evolution that ensures the robustness of scientific inferences in high-level projects (Hymovich, 2022).

State of the Art as a Device for Critical Synthesis and Academic Contextualization: Definition, Structure, Functionality, and Applications

The state of the art is conceived as a form of critical review aimed at integrating and synthesizing the existing knowledge on a specific topic. According to Gómez Vargas et al. (2015), it represents a useful methodology for organizing and systematizing the available information. For her part, Reina Vanegas (2014) emphasizes that this practice makes it possible to identify both research trends and knowledge gaps. Likewise, Morel and Buitrago (2018), together with Martínez et al. (2024), regard it as an evaluative tool that enables the assessment of academic production within a given field.

Its structure involves the search, selection, classification, and critical analysis of specialized literature. It does not merely list references but comparatively articulates results, debates, and contradictions (Reale et al., 2018). This critical nature allows the state of the art not only to describe but also to problematize the contributions identified, projecting new research lines (Liberatore et al., 2023).

In terms of its uses, the state of the art contextualizes the project, legitimizes its relevance, and enables the identification of theoretical and empirical gaps (Avendaño Angarita et al., 2015). It is also crucial for demonstrating the novelty and pertinence of the proposal. Moreover, it helps to avoid duplication of efforts, ensuring that research contributes authentically to scientific progress (Reina Vanegas, 2014).

Its applications include systematic reviews, trend studies, and bibliometric diagnostics. Liberatore et al. (2023) emphasize that its inclusion is essential in doctoral projects to demonstrate original contributions. In addition, the state of the art plays a strategic role in identifying ongoing debates, positioning the researcher within the current discussions of the discipline.

Comparative Tables: Analysis of Epistemological and Methodological Similarities and Differences

Table 1. Epistemological and Functional Convergences in the Methodological Architecture of Research

Element	Conceptual Framework	Theoretical Framework	State of the Art
Orientation	Organization of categories	Scientific foundation	Critical literature review
Relation to research	Clarifies terms	Supports hypotheses	Identifies gaps
Common function	Provide methodological coherence	Provide methodological coherence	Provide methodological coherence
Level of abstraction	Medium	High	Variable
Temporality	Beginning of the study	Early and intermediate phases	Throughout the process
Practical	Problem delimitation	Support for hypotheses and	Diagnosis and justification

Element	Conceptual Framework	Theoretical Framework	State of the Art
purpose		variables	

Source: Authors' elaboration (2025).

Analysis of Category Similarities

The table shows that the three frameworks share the mission of providing methodological coherence. While the conceptual framework organizes categories, the theoretical framework grounds them in solid theories, and the state of the art situates the research within the current academic context. The analysis also reveals that all three contribute transversally to the delimitation and strengthening of the object of study.

It can also be observed that the convergence of these frameworks provides the researcher with an integrative structure that enables the planning, support, and justification of the project at every stage. This implies that, although their specific functions differ, they operate as interrelated components of the same methodological device, ensuring consistency and validity in research.

Table 2. Epistemological and Operational Divergences in the Methodological Configuration of Research.

Aspect	Conceptual Framework	Theoretical Framework	State of the Art
Basis	Concepts and categories	Theories and approaches	Existing literature
Main use	Definition of notions	Epistemological foundation	Synthesis and critique
Application	Exploration and delimitation	Explanation and analysis	Review and diagnosis
Type of sources	Conceptual definitions	Theoretical texts and prior studies	Academic publications
Expected product	Conceptual model	Explanatory framework	Critical synthesis
Flexibility	High	Medium	Low

Source: Authors' elaboration (2025).

Analysis of Category Divergences

The table shows how each framework responds to different demands: the conceptual framework organizes, the theoretical framework provides grounding, and the state of the art diagnoses. Their complementarity ensures robustness in research. Furthermore, the differences reveal that each plays a strategic role depending on the phase and objectives of the study.

A closer look shows that the conceptual framework offers the categorical basis that enables the construction of hypotheses; the theoretical framework provides the epistemological scaffolding that sustains explanations; and the state of the art situates the entire process within the current academic context, highlighting trends, gaps, and areas of innovation.

This comparative analysis makes it clear that divergences are not a problem but an added value that strengthens the methodological soundness of research.

Argumentative Synthesis

The three frameworks are not interchangeable but complementary. When articulated together, they contribute clarity, rigor, and relevance to the research project. This synergistic integration enhances the methodological and epistemic quality of any advanced research. Furthermore, the joint reading of the

tables shows that while similarities ensure coherence and stability in the process, differences provide richness and flexibility, allowing the research to adapt to diverse contexts and objectives.

At an epistemological level, the convergence among the three frameworks guarantees conceptual unity, while their divergences enable a plural and dynamic approach. Thus, they are configured as instruments that, when strategically employed, elevate the depth, rigor, and originality of doctoral-level academic projects.

Critical Discussion and Epistemological Deepening in Methodological Architecture

The three frameworks share the function of providing methodological coherence, although they differ in nature, temporality, and level of abstraction. The conceptual framework contributes initial flexibility, the theoretical framework constitutes the epistemological axis, and the state of the art contextualizes the research within the academic landscape. Their integration is essential to avoid improvisation and to guarantee scientific legitimacy.

The discussion reveals that the conceptual differentiation among the three frameworks is not merely a theoretical exercise but a research practice that allows for a more effective articulation of objectives, methodological design, and expected results. Such epistemological clarity is crucial in doctoral projects, where originality, rigor, and significant contributions to the field of knowledge are required.

Final Conclusions and Epistemological Implications for Advanced Research

Conclusions on the Conceptual Framework

- The conceptual framework clarifies notions and establishes a common language that serves as the basis for the semantic coherence of any research. Its doctoral value lies in providing the categorical compass essential for the initial delimitation of the object of study, avoiding ambiguities and strengthening analytical precision.
- It functions as a dynamic methodological device that adapts as the research progresses. This flexible nature ensures that the researcher can integrate new categories without losing consistency, reinforcing the capacity of the conceptual framework to sustain long-term, high-complexity projects.

Conclusions on the Theoretical Framework

- The theoretical framework supports hypotheses and operationalizes variables from a higher epistemological level, ensuring that analysis does not remain at mere description but advances toward critical and explanatory interpretation. Its doctoral strength lies in its capacity to provide solid scaffolding that articulates theories and methods in a coherent manner.
- Its application is not limited to compiling theories but requires a critical analysis of their scope and limitations. In this sense, it becomes the space where the doctoral researcher makes their epistemological positioning explicit, engaging in dialogue with existing currents and contributing a renewed approach that legitimizes their original contribution.

Conclusions on the State of the Art

- The state of the art diagnoses trends, gaps, and debates, consolidating itself as a strategic instrument for research justification. At the doctoral level, it guarantees the relevance and

originality of the work by demonstrating that the proposal is grounded in updated and critical knowledge.

- Beyond synthesis, the state of the art situates the research within a specific academic field, showing how the doctoral project engages in dialogue with current scholarly production. In this way, it legitimizes the scientific and social relevance of the research, enhancing its impact within the academic community.

General Comparison

The comparative analysis reveals that, although the three frameworks fulfill the function of providing coherence, they differ in scope, temporality, and level of abstraction. The conceptual framework provides initial clarity, the theoretical framework offers explanatory depth, and the state of the art supplies contextual perspective. This complementarity ensures that the doctoral research process is not linear but a complex and articulated structure.

Unifying Synthesis

The conceptual framework organizes, the theoretical framework grounds, and the state of the art contextualizes; together they form a methodological and epistemological triad that strengthens the robustness of doctoral research. Their integration allows for a fluid transition from categorical delimitation to the validation of scientific relevance, making these frameworks key components for producing innovative, rigorous, and high-impact knowledge in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

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