**Helpful Information about Theory and Theory Contribution in Dissertation Research**

Your dissertation research will be designed to address a gap in current understanding, knowledge, and theory within a topic.

A “doctoral-level” study problem is one that contributes to our understanding of theory – “our” meaning psychologists and scholars. The key to theory contribution is beginning with a specific theory. Consider what theories may be associated with research in each topic area of interest to you.

**What is a theory in social sciences?**

We use the term “theory” in everyday conversation, but when it comes to research, a theory is a very specific term. You can think of a theory as a framework of ideas that can explain certain aspects of human thinking, emotion, and behavior. Basically, a theory is a prediction about how or why something happens based on evidence from research.

In research, you can use a theoretical or conceptual framework. Ludy Mae Nalzaro (2012) describes each type of framework and how they can be used to support research in [this presentation](https://www.slideshare.net/ludymae/chapter-6theoretical-conceptual-framework).

This [recent literature review (Bernaras et al., 2019)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6435492/) discusses a variety of theories of depression found in the research literature for children and adolescents:

Note how each theory in this article includes specific aspects:

1. Constructs (phenomena of interest that relate in some way to an outcome)
2. Outcome (in this article, the theories relate to depression)
3. Tenets or propositions on how constructs predict or explain depression.

**Figure 1**

*Social Identity Theory Constructs and Proposed Relationships*



As Imenda (2014) states:

A theoretical framework refers to the theory that a researcher chooses to guide him/her in his/her research. Thus, a theoretical framework 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 shed some light on a particular phenomenon or research problem.

If the theory proposes that X and Y will influence how an individual makes decisions about mental healthcare, and I am going to study how older adults decide to participate in cognitive behavioral therapy sessions, then I can discuss my results in terms of that theory. You can also think about this as “testing” the theory. Did my results show that X and Y did influence mental healthcare decisions for my participants? If so, I have found results that are consistent with or support what the theory predicted would happen. If my results did not show this, I have found results that were not consistent with (did not support) what the theory proposed. Either way, I tested if what the theory proposed would happen occurred for my participants (older adults) for a specific mental healthcare decision. This is the contribution of my study to the theory.



**Research Problems and Theory**

Your dissertation research must contribute to knowledge in your field (e.g., Risk factor X may impact an outcome differently for adults 18-25 compared to adults 25-40) and to theory in your field (e.g., the key tenet of theory X may not apply to Latinx adolescents with immigrant parents because of Y). Researchers use theories to organize knowledge and generate new knowledge. To make a meaningful contribution to theory, your study must have a theoretical framework. This means that you must show how the problem you address makes sense and exists in relationship to a theory (or theories).

Jim Combs (2011) provides excellent information and examples about theoretical contribution in [this presentation](https://www.slideshare.net/shafiqheritage/theoretical-contribution-phd):

For example, one theory of emotion is called the facial feedback model. According to this model, your facial expressions help control the way you experience your emotions. In other words, the very nature of how you experience emotion (which takes place in your brain) is based in part on things you do physically with your face. This is a testable theory.

To test the theory, your study has to investigate some part of what it proposes. So how can we test if facial expression does impact how you feel?

Soderkvist and colleagues (2018) showed participants positive and negative emotional pictures, and asked them to either smile or frown while viewing the pictures. They found that while participants were smiling, they rated the pictures as more pleasant. However, Soderkvist et al. (2018) also found that 5 minutes after smiling, the same pictures were no longer rated as more pleasant – the smile only impacted the emotions during the actual facial action. This study provided some support for what the theory predicted or proposed about how facial expressions may explain how we experience emotions.

You can also test a theory less directly than what Soderkvist et al. (2018) investigated. The facial feedback model proposes that your facial expression impacts the emotions you feel. While not directly proposed by the theory, a logical extension might be that if your ability to make emotional expressions is decreased (e.g. through the use of botox), your emotions will be impacted.

That too can be tested! In fact, there is some research evidence to suggest that botulinum injections to the face are associated with decreases in depression, although the evidence is preliminary (Coles et al., 2019). So here the research provides some support that facial expression – and by extension, decreased ability to make facial expressions – impact how people experience emotion. The research tested some aspect of what the theory proposed and found some support (i.e. what the theory proposed would happen did happen in the study).



Your research can contribute to theory by addressing the following examples:

* Identifying a new variable or new relationship among variables relevant to understanding or explaining a phenomenon
* Developing tentative propositions that can later be rigorously tested.
* Providing support for adding, modifying, or dropping claims about currently proposed relationships among variables.
* Extending a theory

Theories may need to be extended because they don't cover a certain population/group, and you need to extend it to a new population to identify the boundary conditions of the theory.

There may be a disagreement in how researchers view a theory. For example, some researchers may claim the theory can be applied all the time – that X and Y will always predict or explain how helping behavior occurs. Others may claim that Y and Y only predict or explain helping behaviors at certain times or in certain situations. An example of this is the debate over alturism or helping theory – can the theory predict helping bheavior all the time? Or only predict helping behavior when there is little “cost” to the helper (and when it “costs” a lot to help someone, the theory no longer accurately predicts who will help and when).

There may be competing theories that describe the same outcome and more research is needed to determine which one may be better about to predict what is happening or why (do opposites attract, or do similarities attract).

Below are some additional resources on theory and theory contribution that you may find helpful.

**Resources List**

Grant, C. & Osanloo, A. (2015). Understanding, selecting, and integrating a

theoretical framework in dissertation research: Creating the blueprint for

your “house”. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice,*

*and Research, 4*(2). DOI: 10.5929/2014.4.2.9

 Full text available: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1058505.pdf>

Imenda, S. (2014) Is there a conceptual difference between theoretical and

conceptual frameworks? *Journal of Social Sciences, 38*(2), 185-195. DOI:

10.1080/09718923.2014.11893249

Full text available: http://www.akuntansi.feb.mercubuana.ac.id/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Is-There-a-Conceptual-Difference-between-Theoretical-and-Conceptual-Frameworks\_.pdf

Rahali, M. (2022, Sept). How to make a theoretical contribution to the field?

*Children Online: Research and Evidence*. <https://core->

evidence.eu/posts/theory-in-practice

Rocco, T. S. & Plakhotnik, M. S. (2009). Literature reviews, conceptual

frameworks, and theoretical frameworks: Terms, functions, and

distinctions. *Human Resource Development Review, 8*(1).

<https://doi.org/10.1177/153448430933261>

Thomas, J. (2017). Scholarly views on theory: Its nature, practical application,

and relation to world view in business research (8 20, 2017). *International*

*Journal of Business Management, 12*(9). DOI:10.5539/ijbm.v12n9p231,

Available at SSRN:[https://ssrn.com/abstract=3023509](https://ssrn.com/abstract%3D3023509)

Udo-Akang, D. (2012). Theoretical constructs, concepts, and applications.

*American International Journal of Contemporary Research, 2*(9).

<https://www.aijcrnet.com/journals/Vol_2_No_9_September_2012/11.pdf>

Zou, J. Shafique, M. Adeel A. et al. (2017). What is a theoretical contribution? A

narrative review. *Sarhad Journal of Management Sciences, 3*(2), 261-271.

DOI:[10.31529/sjms.2017.3.2.6](https://dx.doi.org/10.31529/sjms.2017.3.2.6)

Full text available: [What is Theoretical Contribution?... preview & related info | Mendeley](https://www.mendeley.com/catalogue/fc3e588c-7658-38a7-a76e-e4aaad83dfd7/#:~:text=Theoretical%20contribution%20is%20a%20process,the%20narrative%20review%20of%20literature.)

**References**

Bernaras, E., Jaureguizar, J., & Garaigordobil, M. (2019). Child and adolescent

depression: A review of theories, evaluation instruments, prevention

programs, and treatments. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, 543. Doi

10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00543

Coles, N.A., Larsen, J.T., Kuribayashi, J. & Kuelz, A. (2019). Does blocking facial

feedback via botulinum toxin injections decrease depression? A critical

review and meta-analysis. *Emotion Review*.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073919868762

Imenda, S. (2014) Is there a conceptual difference between theoretical and

conceptual frameworks? *Journal of Social Sciences, 38*(2), 185-195. DOI:

10.1080/09718923.2014.11893249