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# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

## Abstract

*Conceptual framework is the foundation of scientific research, and it is formed from previous knowledge about the researched phenomenon. It is an integral part of theoretical framework, made with the aim to include key terms, presented within the bibliography, and create a suitable platform to develop the research correctly. More often with students preparing their final papers, and not so rarely with established researchers, the problem arises when it comes to conceptualizing research. A common unknown is how to divide conceptual from theoretical framework, and what conceptual framework of scientific research actually is. The aim of this paper is to clarify conceptualization of scientific research, and, by clarifying it, to point out the significance of differentiation between conceptual and theoretical framework, going on to give basic guidelines on how to form one, and therefore ease the understanding of it and application in scientific research.*

**Key words:** research, conceptualization, conceptual framework, methodology, science, theoretical framework.

*"The knowledge we have gained should not look like a big shop in a mess and no inventory. We need to know what all we have and to use them as needed."*

*Seneca*

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## INTRODUCTION

While preparing scientific research, it is not unusual, especially when it comes to PhD students, that there are methodological uncertainties and poor understanding when making a draft of scientific thought. Parallel to this, a problem for most mentors, and scientific researchers in general, is how to explain relation between theory and research, as well as how to conceptualize research for publishing in scientific literature.[1]

Having in mind the essence of scientific research, or rather the essential meaning of the research process itself, in reality this should not be a specific problem. However, while reviewing different papers, even those with better ratings, it is not rare to see that there are researchers who do not do everything according to the rules of methodological process, bringing down their paper to recomposing of already known information and contents. Understanding relation between theoretical and conceptual framework of scientific research paves the road to the final result, which should contribute to the scientific pool, within specified topic, naturally.

Conceptualization, including reconceptualization as well, presents an indispensable stage, both in inductive and deductive scientific research process. In the first case, conceptualization is part of the process of thinking out observations, while in the other one it eases generating hypotheses and variables from abstract theory.[2] It begins with definition of the research problem, and ends by coming to a conclusion, which includes its presence throughout the entire research process.

In methodology literature, one can find different approaches to technical aspects of research conceptualization[3]. The aim of this paper is not to impose or introduce a new model of scientific research conceptualization, but to encourage thinking about significance and essence of conceptual framework and give basic guidelines on what the differences are compared to theoretical framework, as well as how to form and adapt it to one's own scientific research. The first part of the paper

[1] Camp William G., "Formulating and Evaluating Theoretical Frameworks for Career and Technical Education Research", Journal of Vocational Educational Research, Volume 26 Number 1, 2001, p. 27.

[2] Engel Rafael J. and Schutt Russell K., *Fundamentals of Social Work Research*, Second Edition, SAGE Publications, 2014, p.

[3] Regarding the roles in the research process, number and names of the stages it has, how it begins and how it ends.

points out the significance of differentiation between conceptual and theoretical framework, while second part is dedicated to basic guidelines on how to create one, in order to ease the understanding of it and application in scientific research.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTUALIZATION OF RESEARCH

„*The scientist is not the man who provides the true answers; it is the one who asks the real questions*"

Claude Lévi-Strauss

There are many different definitions of science, and it is difficult to say that one of them is undisputable. Additionally, it is impossible to say that any of them are complete, because science is far more complex than any definition. It is not excluded that there could be those who "dedicate themselves to scientific research without ever wondering what science is, what its structure is, what makes it different from other cognitive and spiritual questions, what basis it is built on, what scientific revolution is, what the truth is and what criterions of truth there are in science, whether there is progress in scientific cognition, what possibilities and limits science has in explaining and understanding reality, what ultimate meaning science has…".[4] Still, it is hardly possible for someone to dispute that science is organized knowledge.[5] Being a totality of truthful and systematized knowledge, science is a product of scientific thought and creation. Scientific thought presents thinking in a specific manner that leads to its own goal. It is developed on principles of logic, which means it is based on theoretical knowledge with the inclusion of empirical verification processes.

Theoretical framework of scientific research is in close connection with existing knowledge and serves as a system of coordinates in further research. We can use it with verification and critique and make progress by doing so.[6] The acquired theoretical knowledge is foundation for developing every new research, or rather, new knowledge (or expansion of knowledge) is based on it. In a broader sense,

[4] Šušnjić Djuro, *Metodologija [Methodology]*, Čigoja štampa, Beograd, 2007, p. 207.

[5] Nagel Ernest, *The Structure of Science: Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation*, Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2nd edition, 1979, p. 4.

[6] Popper, Karl R., *Conjectures and Refutations*, Basic Books, Publishers New York London, 1962, p. 129.

theoretical knowledge is identified with fund of total knowledge in a specific field. In a narrower sense, theories are complex creations, consisting of a certain number of opinions on facts and a certain number of interrelated scientific rules, with the aim to comprehensively explain a phenomenon, or groups of them.[7] Ancient Greek meaning of the term "theory" points toward contemplation, viewing and interpretation of a matter's essence.[8] It is not just any view, but a view from above, from a divine level (*theos* – God), "from where all phenomena can be seen as parts of a whole, not separated from each other as in ordinary experience".[9] The purpose of a theory is to explain the essence of a phenomenon by connecting scientific rules into a whole. For one to even dip into scientific research, one has to know the theory of the field they wish to research. It is a precondition for choosing research topic, as well as research problem whose solution could offer something new.[10] Knowing the theory entails mastery of terminological framework (system), without which scientific research is "blind and mostly fruitless"[11]. Every researcher's aspiration is to rely on appropriate theory with a higher capacity of explanation, and with greater ease in application, as well. Precisely because of this, it is not an easy process. One ought to go through a significant amount of bibliography relevant to research problem. However, it is also possible for researchers to find themselves in a dilemma about choosing one of the opposing theories. This is not a rare occurrence, especially if both theories (or more) are supported by relevant facts, such as was the case with Ptolemy's and Copernicus's theories of the universe, or as was the case with Newton's and Huygens's interpretations of the theory of light.[12] In that case, determination goes toward systematically related facts, because they

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[7] Vojnović Milan i Milovanović Dejan, *Uvod u naučno-istraživački rad*, skripta [*Introduction to scientific research*, scriptum], Rudarsko-geološki fakultet, Beoigrad, 2000, p. 24.

[8] Greek Dictionary Headword Search Results, Greek Dictionary Headword Search Results, http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/resolveform?type=start&lookup=qewr&lang=greek, 04/04/2019.

[9] Šušnjić Djuro, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[10] Folić Radomir, „Definisanje predmeta i problema istraživanja i uloga činjenica i hipoteza u naučnom radu" [Defining reseach subject and problem and the role of facts and hypotheses in research work], u zborniku radova sa XII skupa *Trendovi razvoja: „Evropa 2020: Društvo zasnovano na znanju"* [in Proceedings of the XII Conference *Development Trends: Europe 2020: A Knowledge-based Society*], Kopaonik 07-10.03.2011, Paper No. A2.2-1, p. 1.

[11] Vojnović Milan i Milovanović Dejan, *op.cit*, p. 68.

[12] Novaković Staniša, *Uvod u opštu metodologiju i istorija metodološke misli [Introduction to general methodology and history of methodological thought]*, Filozofski fakultet, Beograd, 1994, p. 47.

constitute science, and not separate opinions.[13] Having resources of facts at one's command confirms some previous knowledge, without which it would not even be possible to go into a research process. However, facts are only a starting point, a good-quality research process requires reaching higher than that – "in scientific work, those who refuse to go beyond fact rarely get as far as fact."[14]

Conceptualization of research leads further towards that point. It is a process of specifying what we consider is the meaning of a term, which is necessary in creating connected observations in inductive research, while in deductive research it eases generating hypotheses and variables from abstract theory. In the first case, terms are formed by contemplating the thing that is observed, while in the other one concepts are developed based on the theory and then it is decided what is to be observed.[15] Besides the theories, which researchers rely upon in their research, theoretical framework also includes concepts, together with their definitions. Concept is a mental picture that unites a set of various observations, feelings, or ideas.[16] Choosing a certain concept means the researcher is choosing a direction of consideration – whether the paradigm can be upgraded or if it can be replaced with another. In both cases, the researcher poses the question of what the consequences are. It could be that the outcome of the research nullifies or replaces the already existing result, but it is only possible if it is in accordance with previously determined scientific elements. It is important to understand that not all problems are posed with an unambiguous goal of solving them but can be with a different purpose. Sometimes it is sufficient to bring scientific attention to them.[17] Or, as the famous French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss said: "The scientist is not the man who provides the true answers; it is the one who asks the real questions" (fr. "Le savant n'est pas l'homme qui fournit les vraies réponses; c'est celui qui pose les vraies questions").[18] Conceptual framework of scientific research implies understanding

[13] Vojnović i Milovanović, *op. cit*., p. 23.

[14] Huxley Henry Thomas in: Jeffrey Schloss, "'Faith vs. Fact:' why religion and science are mutually incompatible", *The Washington Post*, August 3, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/science-and-theology/2015/08/ 03/77136504-19ca-11e5-bd7f-4611a60dd8e5_story.html, 04/04/2019.

[15] Engel Rafael J. and Schutt Russell K., *op.cit.*, p. 68.

[16] *Ibid*.

[17] Jonker Jan and Pennink Bartjan W., The Essence of Research Methodology, Springer Link, e-book, p. 45, https://link.springer.com/book/ 10.1007/978-3-540-71659-4, 10/04/2019.

[18] Lévi-Strauss Claude, *Mythologiques – Le cru et le cuit*, Plon, Paris, 1978, p. 15.

the research problem, recognizing the manners to research it in the most efficient way, and establishing relations between different variables of scientific project. It further gives us a picture of actions that need to be taken during the research process, based on the previously acquired knowledge from other researches and other researchers' opinions. In that sense, it is part of the theoretical framework, but it is a part whose aim is to step forward and upgrade the theory with new knowledge.

## METHODOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS OF CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

*„A goal without a plan is just a wish."*
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

The type of research in which the researcher associates with an abstract idea or theory and which is used to develop new concepts or reinterpret already existing ones is called conceptual research.[19] The already mentioned Copernicus's theory of the universe was established with this type of research, when Copernicus created concepts about constellations of celestial objects based on his own observations of the universe. Galileo went even further by setting up his own concept, which enabled confirmation of Copernicus's ideas about heliocentric system through experimental researches. Apropos, conceptualization is applicable even in other types research. The essence is in observation and analysis of existing information about the research object and therefore, conceptual framework as an analytical tool is used to make conceptual differences and organize ideas necessary for research.[20]

In order to formulate the problem and, therefore, begin research, it is important to unequivocally understand words and terms that will be used in research. This way, any doubts during their interpretation and measurement are avoided, which stresses the significance of understanding research conceptualization.[21] Formulating the

[19] Kumar Rajendra C., *Research Methodology*, S.B. Nangia for APH Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2008, p. 8.

[20] Bhat Ady, "Conceptual Research: Definition, Framework, Example and Advantages", QuestionPro Blog, https://www.questionpro.com/blog/ conceptual-research/.

[21] Sequeira Aloysius Henry, „Conceptualization in Research", a paper presented on August 30 2014, at the National Institute of Technology Karnataka (NITK), Surathkal, India, p. 1, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/ papers.cfm?abstract_id=2489284.

problem is important because research process begins by noticing it and scientists' task is "always the solution of a problem through the construction of a theory which solves the problem; for example, by explaining unexpected and unexplained observations".[22] Conceptualization of research is focused on choosing the topic and formulating the research problem,[23] while conceptual framework presents the next step – creating a strong help tool for scientists, which facilitates and makes their research more efficient in all stages. It is interesting that there is not an agreed opinion on how to create it and which elements conceptual framework is comprised of. It seems that there are as much models of conceptual framework as there are authors. Among many different approaches, an interesting opinion is that conceptual frameworks consist of ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions, and that every concept within conceptual framework plays an ontological or epistemological role.[24] This thought was explained over more than two decades ago by Guba Egon G. and Lincoln Yvonna S.: ontological assumptions refer to reality as it is, they refer to its nature, real existence and action; epistemological assumptions refer to things in the assumed reality, the way they are and how they work; methodological assumptions refer to the very process of creating conceptual framework and what it can tell about the real world.[25] Methodological assumptions are precisely the side of conceptual framework we will be talking about in the following part of this paper.

Setting conceptual framework begins by choosing the research topic, before any collection of working materials for research. This entails previous command of theoretical knowledge in the field one plans to research. It would be crazy, and practically impossible to go into research of unknown territories, which becomes clear from the steps that follow up. The very choice of topic does not necessarily have to represent its immediate precise formulation, because in the next steps of creating conceptual framework it is possible to notice flaws in the initial topic title which leads to its reformulation, even after the research has already started.

[22] Popper, Karl R., *op. cit.*, p. 222.

[23] Aurini Janice et al., *The How To of Qualitative Research*, SAGE Publications, 2016, p. 9.

[24] Jabareen Yosef, "Building a Conceptual Framework: Philosophy, Definitions, and Procedure", *The International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, November 2008, p. 51.

[25] Guba Egon G. & Lincoln Yvonna S., "Competing paradigms in qualitative research", in N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994, p. 108.

After choosing the topic, the next step is gathering relevant bibliography. Collecting information from previous researches is a very important step in conceptual research. Relevance of information means that their scientific validity was previously verified. It is necessary to make difference between questions of origin and questions of validity, whereby correctness of a claim or information is tested with critical examination of the fact that is claimed.[26] Scientists should always have a critical attitude toward facts coming from looking into different sources of information – scientists ought to think about the fact that they can be interpreted in more ways than one. Their questions relating to the facts ought to interest them more than the fact itself.[27]

Outlines of the research problem appear while choosing the paper (project) topic. While studying relevant bibliography, scientists perceive what they do not know. This nescience manifests as cognition of knowledge incompleteness, which directs them toward evaluating criteria of the problem.[28] The problem arises when there is a fact that is impossible to explain based on the information available within the existing fund of knowledge, or blanks in that fund, as well as when there are contradictions within one theory, or rather logical inconsistencies between theories in the same field. This problem cannot be resolved with simple studying, but scientific research has to be conducted. With formulation of the research problem, research object will be crystalized, shown in several dimensions – through preliminary, theoretical, operational, spatial, time and discipline determination. Theoretical determination of the research object entails indicating the existing scientific knowledge and defining basic terms. Operational determination pertains to the very structure of the paper. Names of the spatial, time and discipline determinations speak for themselves, and therefore do not require special explanation besides the remark that in some research papers (mostly in doctoral dissertations) they can be found within operational determination. After defining all dimensions of the research subject, scientific and pragmatic aims of research are determined.

When posed research problem is well examined and a possible solution can be seen on the horizon, hypothetical framework about research subject is set up. Hypothesis is thought-provoking, possible and verifiable solution to a particular

[26] Popper, Karl R., *op. cit.*, p. 24.

[27] Šušnjić Djuro, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

[28] Folić Radomir, op. cit., p. 1.

problem.[29] Hypotheses are formed as opinions or judgements that are assumptions about research subject. They are in the form of opinions when they consist only of a cognitive value assumption. If the grounded assumptions are of particular cognitive value, then hypotheses are expressed as judgements. There are different classifications of hypotheses, but most of them are based on the criteria of subject and research (theoretical, empirical, illusory); type of scientific goals (descriptive, connection hypotheses, causal hypotheses); degree of generality (general, special, individual). Classification according to the degree of generality is a mandatory component of project of research. Hypotheses have to be grounded on previous knowledge, they have to be empirically verifiable and cannot contain value judgements.[30] Hypotheses of a lower degree of generality are derived from hypotheses of a higher degree of generality. The one with the highest level of generality, a general hypothesis, is derived from the formulation of the research problem and subject, taking into consideration the aims of research (they determine hypothesis's character). It is established first, it refers to the entirety of the research subject and presents a general stance about its unknown elements. Special hypothesis is derived from the general hypothesis and segments of operational determination of the research subject, and it refers to the content of special segment. Individual hypotheses are derived from elemental factors of operational determination of the subject and parts of special hypotheses that refer to elemental factors. They have the highest level of specificity, so indicators are linked to them.

With classification of variables and indicators we can practically complete the map of methodological assumptions of conceptual framework. A variable is "an image, perception or concept that is capable of measurement – hence capable of taking on different values"[31]. This trait of the research subject can be measured, and it makes it different from another subject. In order to avoid confusion, a variable is not the same as concept, and what makes them different is precisely the measurability of variables. For a concept to be measurable, it has to be turned into a variable directly or with the help of indicators.[32] There are different criteria for

[29] Novaković Staniša, *Filozofija, metod i razvoj naučnog saznanja – Izabrani radovi II* [*Philosophy, Method and Development of Scientific Knowledge - Selected Papers II*], Institut Filozofskog fakulteta u Beogradu, Beograd, 2001, p. 24.

[30] Šušnjić Djuro, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-63.

[31] Kumar Ranjit, *Research Methodology – a step-by-step guide for beginners*, 3rd eition, SAGE Publications, 2011, p. 71.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

division of variables, but for us right now, it is important to know the division according to their role in research – they can be independent, dependent and control variables. Independent variables are the ones that affect a particular quality that is observed and measured. Those are phenomena and qualities used to better understand changes in dependent variables. Independent variable precedes dependent variable, and in accordance with that we look at it as a cause or condition. The measured quality presents dependent variable.[33] These are phenomena and characteristics we would like to understand and explain, so during the research process we aim to determine their dependence on independent variables. This is why independent variable is also called prediction variable – based on it one can predict the effects of one variable on another. Apropos, dependent variable is also called criteria variable because its values are being predicted.[34] As with hypotheses, research goals influence the role of variable in a particular research, considering that the research goal can give different attributes (independent or dependent) to the same variable in different situations. Choosing variables is extremely important for proving or refuting hypothesis. During that process, opinions/judgements of hypothesis, which are actually relation between its variables, are either confirmed or refuted. Complexity of opinions/judgements is conditioned with the number of variables, and the simplest ones are expressed with relation between only one independent and one dependent variable. However, such opinions/judgements can have a debatable value because, no matter the fact that there is a relation between them, it cannot be claimed with certainty that there is a causal connection. This is why one ought to introduce the third, control variable, with the task of clarifying the mentioned connection.

Indicators are visible manifestations of a variable's inner essence – they are symbols or signs through which phenomenon presented in the variable can be noticed, recognized, explained and learned.[35] The point is to see the great picture by looking at a small part of it. Sometimes only one indicator is enough to verify a hypothesis, depending on the type and content of the hypothesis itself. However, it is far better to branch out general hypothesis into a larger number of less general

[33] Knežević Florić Olivera, Ninković Stefan, *Horizonti istraživanja u obrazovanju* [*Research Horizons in Education*], Filozofski fakultet, Novi Sad, 2012, p. 46.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 48.

[35] Gaćinović Radoslav, "Indikatori u naučnom istraživanju" ["On Scientific Research Indicators"], Politička revija [Political Review], Year (XXI) VIII, vol=21, No. 3 / 2009, pp. 230-231.

hypotheses, where indicators relying on special hypotheses practically lead into formulation of individual hypotheses.

Ultimately, yet not less significantly, research methods are chosen, and adjusted to research subject's characteristics.[36] Their task is to help the researcher reach new knowledge, both specific and as an insight into a particular whole. Therefore, for methodological map of conceptual framework it is important to build in those methods which would most efficiently adapt to preceding settings and lead to a new truth.[37]

## CONCLUSION

In modern scientific practice it is not uncommon for authors of scientific papers, which are not doctoral theses, to not adhere to the rules of methodological procedure.[38] This is especially noticeable with regards to the conceptualization of scientific work. A large number of papers with completely different approaches to the question of conceptual framework of scientific research indicate a lack of agreement on the question of what conceptual framework is, what its purpose is and how it is formed. The paper indicates that a considerable number of authors views conceptual framework as a preparatory part of the research process, which involves only reviewing the literature and, possibly, mastering an apparatus of terms. However, creating conceptual framework gives the researcher the comfort to sort through relevant information from the existing literature with conceptual research. The fact is that conceptual research relies upon the results of previous researches. Built on the foundations of the existing fund of scientific knowledge, conceptual framework of scientific research is actually a part of the theoretical framework, and it is the one that strives to go beyond its boundaries in order to upgrade it with new knowledge. This means that owing to conceptual framework the researcher contributes to theoretical framework. Conceptualization is a multi-stage process that does not exclude the possibility of completing or changing the initial conceptual framework during research. On the contrary, speaking from experience, after the initial phase of conceptualization, it undergoes reconceptualization,

[36] Šušnjić Djuro, *op. cit.*, p. 126.

[37] Novaković Staniša, 2001, *op. cit*., p. 35.

[38] The author is a reviewer in several scientific journals and other scientific publications.

that is, there is reorganization, and even complete changes, of certain opinions and judgments.

Conceptual framework should not be considered only as a sum of concepts. It is a construction in which concepts play their part, but also a construction that is fragile without incorporating methodological assumptions. Developing initial idea about research topic after formulating the research problem and subject requires an idea about the basic research concept. We can look at a phenomenon from different angles, and the goal of the research will largely determine which concept is appropriate. On such concept we build the research map – a map of conceptual framework, like foundation of a building, to which we will later easily add blocks and fill it with functional equipment, in this case knowledge. Methodological assumptions are embedded in the foundations of that knowledge building, walls are the theoretical framework, and the roof is that part of the conceptual framework that goes outside of the theoretical, enriching it with new knowledge.

It is important to understand that, although it involves methodological assumptions, conceptual framework is not a defined scheme with no deviation, but it is rather a construction of the researcher's scientific thought in each particular research, in accordance with theoretical framework that research goals and objectives are built on. This gives sufficient freedom to each researcher to express his or her scientific creativity, and on the other hand, the conceptual framework will help them maintain and improve the direction in the research process towards their desired goal.

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# КОНЦЕПТУАЛНИ ОКВИР НАУЧНОГ ИСТРАЖИВАЊА

**Апстракт**

*Концептуални оквир је темељ научног истраживања, а гради се из комплекса претходних сазнања о феномену који се истражује. Он је саставни део теоријског оквира, а сачињава се са циљем увртавања кључних појмова, представљених у литератури, те креирања погодне платформе за правилан развој истраживања. Много чешће код студената који припремају свој завршни рад, али не ретко и код већ формираних истраживача, јавља се проблем концептуализације истраживања. Честа непознаница је како раздвојити концептуални од теоријског оквира, и уопште шта је то концептуални оквир научног истраживања. Циљ рада је да се разјашњавањем концептуализације научног истраживања, најпре укаже на значај разликовања концептуалног од теоријског оквира, а затим дају основне смернице за његово формирање, те на тај начин олакша његово разумевање и примена у научном истраживању.*

***Кључне речи:*** *истраживање, концептуални оквир, методологија, наука, теоријски оквир.*