



# The value of the theoretical framework in health research: conceptual foundations, functions and steps for its development

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**ABSTRACT:** In health research, the theoretical framework is an essential component that provides coherence, scientific rigor, and conceptual clarity. It is not limited to presenting background information but also contextualizes the problem, justifies the study, and provides methodological guidance for the process. This article reflects on its definition, functions, and key steps in its development, highlighting its relevance in complex and multidisciplinary contexts. From a qualitative, interpretive, and hermeneutic approach, the theoretical framework emphasizes its impact on the validity of instruments, the interpretation of results, and the improvement of professional health practice, recognizing it as a structuring axis of all rigorous research.

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## 1. Introduction

In the context of health research, the formulation of the theoretical framework constitutes an indispensable structural component that upholds the logical coherence and scientific rigor of the research process. Its construction is not limited to compiling definitions or presenting background descriptively; rather, it entails analytical and argumentative work that enables the researcher to contextualize the problem, identify knowledge gaps, and justify the study's relevance from an epistemological and disciplinary perspective.

The theoretical framework performs key functions in the architecture of any investigation: it guides the formulation of objectives, delineates the most appropriate methodological approach, and provides robust criteria for interpreting collected data. In the health field, where the phenomena under study are complex, multifactorial, and frequently mediated by social, cultural, and biological factors, the theoretical framework takes on particular significance, as it allows for the integration of diverse theoretical currents and interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the object of study.

This article offers a substantive reflection on the meaning and functions of the theoretical framework, as well as on the fundamental steps for its development, with emphasis on its practical utility in health research projects. It underscores that a well-structured theoretical framework not only provides conceptual clarity but also supports coherent methodological decision-making, increases the validity of results, and contributes to the development of scientific proposals with greater impact and applicability in professional and community contexts.

From a methodological standpoint, the reflection is situated within the interpretive paradigm, employing a

qualitative approach and the hermeneutic method to critically analyze the epistemological foundations that underpin this component. It is also recognized that the quality of the theoretical framework has a direct impact on research practice, as it affects the relevance of the instruments used, the validity of the indicators constructed, and the strength of the conclusions. Consequently, this article advances a critical perspective on the value of the theoretical framework, highlighting its potential to guide rigorous studies and contribute meaningfully to improving professional practice in the health field.

## **2. Methodology**

This reflective article is situated within the interpretive paradigm, which recognizes that scientific knowledge is neither absolute nor purely objective, but is socially and culturally constructed. In this vein, understanding health-related phenomena requires a reading that integrates the meanings, experiences, and contexts in which such phenomena are produced and acquire significance (Martínez, 2010).

From this perspective, a qualitative approach is adopted, since priority is given to deep analysis of discourses, specialized texts, and theoretical developments over the quantification of variables or the application of statistical methods (Martínez, 2022). This approach enables a more complex engagement with the epistemic components of the object of study.

Likewise, the hermeneutic method is employed, understood as an interpretive tool that makes possible the critical analysis of the existing literature. Through this method, the aim is to unravel the epistemological foundations that underpin the construction of the theoretical framework in the field of health research, allowing for a deeper and more contextualized understanding of its theoretical and methodological dimensions.

As part of the methodological strategy, a systematic review of academic literature published between 2005 and 2024 was conducted. This inquiry focused on the rigorous selection of scientific articles, specialized books, and edited volume chapters that offered an in-depth treatment of the conceptualization, essential functions, and projections of the theoretical framework within the field of study. The review encompassed both classic developments and contemporary contributions in the theoretical domain, following references such as those proposed by Salcedo et al. (2022), who advocate a critical articulation between the state of the art and theoretical foundations.

To ensure the robustness of the analysis, clear and consistent inclusion criteria were defined, notably: the thematic relevance of sources to the research objectives, the methodological rigor evidenced in their construction and validation, and the contextual relevance of their contents for the design and development of projects in the health field. This strategy made it possible to build a robust conceptual foundation that supports the critical interpretation of the research problem and guides the development of the theoretical framework from an up-to-date and pertinent perspective.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Reflections on the Theoretical Framework for Health Projects: Concepts, Functions, and Steps for Development**

This article presents a reflection on the theoretical framework, addressing its definition, main functions, and the key steps for its construction. It also highlights its importance in health research projects, where it plays an essential role in guiding the study, supporting the objectives, and strengthening the analysis of results.

The theoretical framework constitutes the section of the research work that concentrates the conceptual and analytical delimitation that supports the topic under study in a logical and articulated manner. According to Ortiz and Del Pilar (2005), its components are closely linked to the theories that guide the study, which gives it solidity and internal coherence.

The theoretical bases should be structured as a rigorous, orderly, and coherent presentation of the theoretical body that supports the research. As Salcedo et al. (2022) point out, meticulousness, transparency, and clarity in this section make it easier for the reader to build a unified set of criteria to understand and analyze the problem posed. This, in turn, allows for a more precise assessment of the innovative contributions the study may offer.

In essence, the theoretical framework is built on two fundamental pillars. The first consists of placing the object of study within the context of existing theories, with the purpose of identifying the school of thought in which it is situated and evidencing its contribution, whether innovative or complementary. The second pillar involves developing a detailed and well-argued exposition of the theoretical elements that will be

applied directly in the project's development.

In this way, the theoretical foundation becomes a key tool for the researcher by offering a comprehensive understanding of the conceptual formulations that underpin scientific knowledge related to the topic. By its nature, this framework not only orients and contextualizes the study but also plays a decisive role in building a solid basis that guarantees the validity and relevance of the research.

### **3.2. Functions of the theoretical framework**

According to methodology specialists such as Hernández, Fernández, and Baptista (2007), Martínez (2010), Gallego (2018), Rivero (2021), Salcedo et al. (2022), and Coronel (2024), the theoretical framework fulfills various essential functions in the research process. Among the most relevant are:

- Preventing the repetition of errors made in prior studies.
- Providing methodological guidance through the review of antecedents, which enables an understanding of how a specific research problem has been addressed. This review includes aspects such as the type of study, the participants, data collection techniques, geographic contexts of application, and the designs employed. Even if certain antecedents are not used directly, they can serve as a reference to define what is sought and what should be avoided.
- Expanding the scope of the research or guiding the researcher toward a more comprehensive study.
- Facilitating the formulation of sound hypotheses, avoiding claims lacking theoretical foundation.
- Stimulating new lines and areas of research.
- Providing a frame of reference for interpreting the results obtained.
- In short, its primary function is to endow the research with consistency, unity, and theoretical coherence.

Ortiz and Del Pilar (2005) define the theoretical framework as a conceptual and methodological instrument constructed from information pertinent to the research problem, based on one or several theories that have already supported previous investigations. Therefore, it is essential to carry out an exhaustive and critical search of the literature related to the object of study.

According to various authors such as Ortiz and Del Pilar (2005), Hernández, et al (2007), Méndez (2007), Martínez (2010), Tamayo (2017), and Rivero (2021), once the relevant literature and documents have been reviewed, it is possible to follow basic criteria for the development of the theoretical framework:

**Use of consolidated theories:** If there is a fully developed theory that describes, explains, and predicts the phenomenon in a logical and coherent manner, it may be employed, taking care not to investigate a problem already studied under the same parameters.

**Selection or combination of theories:** When several applicable theories exist, one may choose a single theory, integrate fragments of several, or use them in their entirety to achieve theoretical triangulation. It is essential that the selected parts remain consistent with the object of study and do not generate internal contradictions. If they are mutually exclusive, one should be chosen or a new theory should be constructed from their dialectical confrontation.

**Use of microtheories:** In disciplines with a scarcity of robust theories, it is common to have only empirical generalizations backed by evidence. These can serve as a basis for structuring a theoretical framework, provided they are integrated logically and systematically.

**Use of borrowed or indirect theories:** When there are no direct theories about the problem, literature from related areas may be used or concepts from other disciplines adapted, as occurs when ideas from the sociology of education are transferred to the field of administration.

Consequently, the theoretical framework is not only a conceptual support, but a strategic tool that guides, sustains, and strengthens the validity of the research, increasing its academic relevance and its potential contribution to scientific knowledge.

### **3.3. Key Steps for Developing the Theoretical Framework**

This section details the essential stages for constructing the theoretical framework: bibliographic review, theoretical analysis, and writing the text.

#### **3.3.1. Bibliographic Review**

The process of constructing the theoretical framework begins with an exhaustive bibliographic review

aimed at identifying, compiling, and analyzing the existing literature on the research topic. To this end, multiple sources are used, such as specialized academic databases, university library catalogs, institutional repositories, and websites of research centers linked to the field of study. Rigor in the selection of reliable sources is an essential criterion at this stage.

According to Salcedo et al. (2022), this step comprises two interrelated sub-stages:

- **Identification of studies related to the research problem:** this action makes it possible to recognize the theoretical and methodological approaches applied by other researchers, examine their findings, record relevant bibliographic information, and assess their relationship to the study in progress.
- **Familiarization with the theoretical bases of the study:** after identifying the authors and reference theories present in prior conceptual frameworks, as well as those fundamental to the current research, the next step is to consult and document their contributions. This exercise fosters an understanding of the most influential and authoritative perspectives in the disciplinary field.

### 3.3.2. Theoretical Analysis

With the information gathered, a critical analysis is conducted to refine, organize, and prioritize the theoretical content. This examination involves reflecting on:

- The key concepts developed by the authors reviewed and their degree of relevance to the object of study.
- The categories of analysis used in previous research that may be adapted to the present work, with justification for their inclusion.
- The possible ways in which the selected theoretical perspectives will influence the development and results of the research.

This analysis not only helps structure the theoretical framework but also allows a more precise delineation of the researcher's epistemological stance toward the phenomenon under study.

### 3.3.3. Writing the Text

Once the information has been systematized, the theoretical framework is drafted. In this phase, it is advisable to organize the data in advance using comparative tables, hierarchical schemes, or concept maps that facilitate the text's internal coherence.

During writing, a constant relationship with the research problem must be maintained, ensuring that the exposition is clear, precise, and supported by verifiable references. Typically, the theoretical framework is structured in two main components:

- **Background:** presents the relevant results and contributions identified in the initial review, explains their relevance, and highlights how the current research contributes to advancing knowledge in the area.
- **Theory:** sets out the principal theoretical currents and approaches developed by key authors that provide the conceptual foundation for the research, establishing the interpretive framework that will guide the analysis.

## 3.4. Importance of the Theoretical Framework in Health Projects

In the field of health research, the theoretical framework is a fundamental pillar that orients, supports, and provides coherence to the entire project. First, it offers a scientific foundation by bringing together the conceptual bases and available evidence that enable an understanding of the nature of the health problem addressed, ensuring that methodological decisions and proposed interventions are grounded in prior studies and validated knowledge.

It also plays a key role in epidemiological contextualization, as it situates the phenomenon of interest within the local, national, or even global reality, incorporating data on prevalence, risk factors, and social determinants of health. This makes it possible to identify more precisely the magnitude and particularities of the problem in the target population.

The theoretical framework likewise facilitates clinical and preventive orientation, as it provides criteria for selecting evidence-based approaches, protocols, and clinical practice guidelines, ensuring that the proposed actions are pertinent and effective for diagnosis, treatment, and prevention (Pedreira, 2019).

Another essential aspect is the integration of policies and regulations, enabling the project to be aligned with public health policy guidelines, the recommendations of international organizations such as the WHO and PAHO, and current health legislation, thereby increasing its feasibility and institutional relevance. Moreover, it fosters innovation and relevance by supporting the design of creative interventions that are closely tailored to the real and contextual needs of the beneficiary community or population group.

Finally, the theoretical framework contributes to the validity of results, as it serves as a reference for interpreting findings in coherence with prior theories and studies in the health sciences, facilitating academic discussion and comparison with other works.

In short, in health projects, the theoretical framework not only organizes and supports the research work but also ensures its relevance, scientific soundness, and practical applicability for the benefit of public health and collective well-being.

#### **4. Discussion**

The reviewed literature confirms that the theoretical framework constitutes a structuring axis that runs through all phases of health research, rather than an auxiliary section. Its construction entails a critical and strategic selection of approaches and explanatory categories that enable a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study, rather than the mere accumulation of descriptive background (Ortiz and Del Pilar, 2005; Hernández et al., 2018; Méndez, 2007; Martínez, 2010). In this vein, conceptual delimitation and articulation with objectives and methods strengthen the study's directionality (Tamayo, 2017).

From an epistemological perspective, the absence of a clear or up-to-date theoretical framework is associated with recurrent risks: disarticulation of the problem, inappropriate use of methodological strategies, and conclusions with low transferability. In contrast, a solid foundation promotes the internal coherence of the design and bolsters the interpretive validity of the findings (Martínez, 2010; Méndez, 2007; Hernández et al., 2018). This scaffolding guides congruence among questions, variables or categories, and analytical procedures (Tamayo, 2017).

On the applied plane, health research demands the translation of scientific knowledge into decisions and actions. The theoretical framework functions as a bridge for transferring results into clinical guidelines, community interventions, and public policy formulation by providing criteria for evidence-based decision-making and for professional training in real-world contexts (Hernández et al., 2018; Rivero, 2021; Ortiz and Del Pilar, 2005). Likewise, its orienting role supports the design of programs and the evaluation of their impact on specific populations (Salcedo et al., 2022).

A cross-cutting aspect is the need for continual updating. The dynamics of public health marked by new epidemiological challenges and transformations in health systems demand flexible theoretical frameworks capable of incorporating scientific and technological innovations without losing explanatory rigor (Rivero, 2021; Coronel, 2024). Such flexibility allows for adjusting assumptions, categories, and relationships as evidence emerges and contexts change (Coronel, 2024).

In sum, the theoretical framework should be understood as a living, strategic component that articulates accumulated knowledge and contemporary challenges, with an impact on both methodological robustness and the practical relevance of results. This comprehensive understanding extends its influence beyond the academic sphere and contributes to improving health practice and informed decision-making (Martínez, 2010; Tamayo, 2017; Coronel, 2024).

#### **5. Conclusions**

In conclusion, the analysis confirms that the theoretical framework is a backbone component of health projects: it delineates the problem, guides the study's logic, and ensures coherence among objectives, methods, and analysis. Its development is not limited to compiling background information; rather, it requires a critical curation of approaches, concepts, and relationships that explain the phenomenon with rigor and relevance (Méndez, 2007; Tamayo, 2017). When solidly constructed, it prevents methodological errors, strengthens interpretive validity, and contributes theoretical unity to the body of work (Gallego, 2018; Rivero, 2021).

Likewise, the review shows that its functions transcend the purely conceptual: it guides the formulation of hypotheses, steers methodological choices, and offers a framework for interpreting results in dialogue with the available evidence (Hernández et al., 2007; Martínez, 2010). In the health field, its practical utility is expressed in the translation of knowledge into clinical guidelines, preventive interventions, and informed decisions in services and policies, promoting effective and safe actions (Pedreira, 2019; Rivero, 2021). This

applied orientation is enhanced when the framework articulates epidemiological and social determinants with disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches (Salcedo et al., 2022).

With respect to the steps, the importance is reaffirmed of an exhaustive bibliographic review, a critical analysis that prioritizes categories, and writing that makes explicit the chain of theoretical reasoning (Salcedo et al., 2022; Méndez, 2007). In addition, it is concluded that its value depends on continuous updating and on the flexibility to integrate innovations or to combine theories, microtheories, and “borrowed” approaches without incurring inconsistencies (Tamayo, 2017; Ortiz and Del Pilar, 2005; Coronel, 2024). In sum, a well-constructed and dynamic theoretical framework increases the scientific quality, social relevance, and innovation potential of health projects by aligning foundation, method, and application for the benefit of collective well-being (Rivero, 2021; Salcedo et al., 2022).

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