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**Summary of the Journal: “Distinguishing Between Theory, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework: A Systematic Review of Lessons from the Field” (Charles Kivunja, 2018)**

In this article, Dr. Charles Kivunja addresses a common challenge among Higher Degree Research (HDR) students and early-career researchers—understanding and differentiating between the concepts of *theory*, *theoretical framework*, and *conceptual framework* within academic research. Drawing upon experiential teaching practice and a systematic review of relevant literature, Kivunja seeks to provide a comprehensive explanation of these three interrelated but distinct constructs and their critical roles in developing a strong research foundation.

A theory is defined as a set of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that systematically explain and predict phenomena through the relationships among variables (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Theories provide the intellectual base for understanding and investigating real-world problems, enabling researchers to make sense of observed phenomena. A strong theory must be logical, coherent, empirically tested, and applicable across contexts, offering predictive and explanatory power. Theories can function on three analytical levels: micro (individual interactions), meso (institutional or group contexts), and macro (societal or cross-group relationships).

A theoretical framework, according to Kivunja, is the structural foundation that supports a study’s data analysis and interpretation. It synthesizes existing theories and scholarly perspectives, acting as a “coat hanger” or analytical lens that allows researchers to interpret data meaningfully. Theoretical frameworks enhance the rigor, validity, and credibility of a study by linking findings to established knowledge and providing a coherent structure for argumentation.

Meanwhile, a conceptual framework represents the researcher’s comprehensive plan or “logical blueprint” encompassing every stage of the research process from problem identification, literature review, and theoretical selection, to methodology, data collection, analysis, and reporting. It reflects the researcher’s cognitive and reflective understanding of the entire project. Kivunja emphasizes that while every thesis, especially at the PhD level, must include a theoretical framework, the conceptual framework does not always need to be explicitly presented, as it underpins the whole design implicitly.

In conclusion, the paper reinforces that distinguishing among these three concepts is essential for producing methodologically coherent, theoretically grounded, and academically rigorous research. Understanding how theory informs the theoretical framework, and how both operate within the broader conceptual framework, enables researchers to contribute more effectively to knowledge development and scholarly discourse.