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Summary of Charles Kivunja's (2018) article "*Distinguishing between Theory, Theoretical Framework, and Conceptual Framework: A Systematic Review of Lessons from the Field.*"

In his 2018 paper, Dr. Charles Kivunja clarifies three key but commonly misunderstood research concepts: *theory*, *theoretical framework*, and *conceptual framework*. Drawing from his experience teaching research methods and reviewing higher-degree theses, Kivunja identifies that many postgraduate students confuse these terms or use them interchangeably. To address this, he employs both experiential and systematic literature review methodologies to define, distinguish, and explain how each concept functions within academic research.

A **theory** is described as a set of interrelated concepts, definitions, and propositions that explain or predict phenomena by identifying relationships among variables. Theories provide a systematic understanding of how and why events occur, grounded in empirical evidence and logical reasoning. Good theories are coherent, testable, and contribute to knowledge development.

A **theoretical framework** refers to the structure that supports a research study by integrating relevant theories from existing literature. It acts as a foundation for analyzing and interpreting data, guiding the researcher in connecting findings to established knowledge. Kivunja likens the theoretical framework to a "coat hanger" a structure that organizes data and gives it meaning. It ensures scholarly rigor, enhances credibility, and deepens analytical discussions in research.

In contrast, a **conceptual framework** represents the researcher's overall design and thought process for the entire study. It includes the identification of the research problem, objectives, theoretical basis, methodology, data analysis, and reporting. Kivunja compares it to a "house," where the theoretical framework is just one "room" serving a specific function.

Kivunja concludes that every sound thesis must have a well-developed theoretical framework to ensure coherence and analytical depth, while an explicit discussion of the conceptual

framework is optional. Understanding the distinctions among these three elements is essential for producing rigorous, valid, and well-grounded academic research.