Do you know the difference between a theory, a theoretical framework, and a conceptual framework?

Sessions on Medical Education
Elise Paradis, MA, PhD-- University of Toronto Faculty of Medicine
Lara Varpio, PhD-- Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences F. Edward Hebert School of Medicine
Sebastian Uijtdehaage, PhD-- Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences
Meredith Young, PhD-- McGill University

Session Plan: Scholars in the health professions often use the terms theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework interchangeably, but we should not. A theory is different than a theoretical framework, which is different again from a conceptual framework. And these differences make a difference. Confusing these terms has detrimental consequences for research in health research. Without clarity, we risk falsely assuming shared interpretations and applications of these terms. Without clarity, we risk labeling some research designs as flawed, poorly executed, or lacking in rigor, when in fact those designs are merely employing different interpretations of these terms. Without clarity, we risk impeding our collective efforts to build on the knowledge rigorously generated across paradigms. In other words, without clarity, we risk doing consequential harm to our own field.

This session grows out of current work disentangling these terms to help orient researchers towards a clear understanding of these key ideas. The article (invited by Academic Medicine) and the challenges in applying these concepts across different approaches to research will be shared with participants, and constitute the basis of our session (see session plan below).

We will describe what these three concepts mean across 2 research approaches often used in health research. We will clarify the philosophical- and research-foundations associated with each, giving participants a clearer language to describe what they do and why they do it. With this clearer language, participants will be well equipped to engage in scholarly conversations and be better prepared to craft a theoretical or conceptual framework.

To ensure this understanding, participants will engage in a small group activities and large group discussion. Participants will leave the session with a knowledge product: We will construct an infographic (and disseminate it freely on Twitter) summarizing insights coming from the session.

Session Agenda:
1) Introduction and session objectives (5 min): The journey that took us here: how writing a straightforward paper blew all of our minds. Story of our collaborative learning. Speaker: Lara Varpio. 5min
2) Small group activity (10 min). Do you know the difference between a theory, a theoretical framework, and a conceptual framework? Small group activity of collective brainstorming to construct definitions and disagreements on the key terms. Facilitator: Elise Paradis.
3) Small group activity of puzzle building (10 min) Articulating paradigmatic differences, induction and deduction. Each table will be given puzzle pieces that connect to give definitions to terms.
4) Large group discussion (10 min) about how different pieces can be connected in different ways. Facilitator: Meredith Young.10min
5) Short presentation (8 min): What is a Theory and what does this term mean in different paradigms? Speaker: Meredith Young. 8min
6) Short presentation (8 min): What is a Theoretical Framework and what does this term mean in different paradigms? Speaker: Elise Paradis
7) Short presentation: What is a Conceptual Framework and what does this term mean in different paradigms: Speaker: Sebastian Uijtdehaage.
8) Application. Facilitated small group activity where groups will be given a published articles and will be asked to identify in each article: the theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework. Lead facilitator: Bas Uijtdehaage. 12 minutes.
Critical reflection: What we have learned today and where we go next. Facilitator: Lara Varpio. Note taker: Elise Paradis. 15min.

Learning Objectives: At the end of this session, participants will be able to:

1. Describe and contrast theory, theoretical framework, and conceptual framework.
2. Explain how two key approaches inductive and deductive use theory and frameworks differently.
3. Apply the new knowledge to their own work: identify whether and how they use theory, develop frameworks, and engage in deductive research, inductive research, or both.
Critically reflect on their own and others use of language around the core concepts covered in this session