A theoretical framework, or theoretical construct, terms used interchangeably, works as the support, foundation, and structure of your dissertation study. The purpose behind a dissertation at the Ph.D. level is to accomplish one of these goals:

a. Test an existing theory in a new environment or population
b. Extend a theory or theoretical framework in a novel way
c. Create new theory (least likely of these three goals)

A theory is something that already exists in the literature that has been documented and empirically tested. It is an orientation or broad way of looking at relationships among elements in a given phenomenon. Examples of theories in public administration include Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith's advocacy coalition framework, Baumgartner & Jones’ punctuated equilibrium, rational choice theory, Peter Singer's conceptualization of utilitarianism, and John Rawls’ version of social contract theory.

Within the specializations of public administration, such as criminal justice, there are additional theories specifically related to those disciplines. For example, a good amount of criminal justice research looks at classical sociological and criminological theories, or more recent conceptualizations of these theories, such as Felson & Cohen’s routine activity theory.

Your goal, in crafting a dissertation study, is to identify a problem that needs to be addressed in public administration, determine whether any or what theoretical frameworks have been used to address this problem or similar problems, and then propose a study that tests or extends a particular theoretical framework as a potential explanation to the problem you identified.
In very rare cases, you may find that the existing theories and literature do not adequately address your particular research problem, in which case, you turn to constructing a new theory. Even in these rare cases, the new theories—developed through methodological designs such as grounded theory—are related to an existing theoretical base.

Once you identify a theory you’d like to use as the structure and support for your dissertation, you must identify the components or elements of the theory—the assumptions, concepts, and systematic explanations. These elements eventually become variables (quantitative designs) or factors (qualitative designs) that you will use to test your hypotheses in your dissertation study. It is through this process that you extend or test in a new environment a theoretical construct, which ultimately and ideally makes a significant contribution to the body of literature in our discipline.

This—an original and significant contribution to knowledge—is what makes a Ph.D. the degree it is, and at the top of the hierarchy of earned doctorates. Other doctoral degrees, such as professional doctorates, do not have the charge and responsibility of creating new knowledge. Your goal, as a Ph.D. student, is to make a contribution to literature and theory that others can use to understand and solve problems. It is through the application of theory that we bridge the gap between theory and practice.

**Theoretical vs. Conceptual Frameworks**

Some of the Walden University rubrics and other documents we use to evaluate student work note the use of *either* a theoretical or conceptual framework. Here is a quick “go to” guide to help you differentiate between the two:

- **Theoretical Frameworks:**
  - Rooted in theory, for example, a criminal justice study may use routine activity theory, a policy implementation study may use punctuated equilibrium, or other studies may use some version of social capital theory.
  - The theoretical framework provides the structure, foundation, and focus for a study.
  - Work at the Ph.D. level should be rooted in theory in the sense that it tests, extends, or in some rare cases, creates new theory.
• **Conceptual Frameworks (two types):**
  
  o Applied and professional doctorates. For these programs, because of the practical and applied nature of the work, doctoral studies may not need to be as deeply rooted in theory. In these types of programs (examples include the DBA and EdD), the focus is on studying and solving practical problems, not testing or creating new theory. As our PPA program is a Ph.D. curriculum, and not an applied doctorate, you will need to use a theoretical—and not a conceptual—framework.
  
  o Ph.D. level dissertations may use a conceptual framework in those cases where a single unifying theory does not provide sufficient structure. In these cases, a conceptual framework may appear alongside the theoretical framework if:
    
    ▪ You need to use multiple theories
    ▪ The theory needs to be narrowed and clarified. For example, using the above noted example of social capital theory, you may choose to limit your exploration to Putnam’s conceptualization of social capital as opposed to others.
    ▪ You wish to develop new theory, but even in these cases, the underlying core is still rooted in theory.

Where differentiation between the use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks becomes challenging is in the colloquial use of the two; often the terms “theoretical” and “conceptual” are used interchangeably, typically to refer to broad, overarching explanations of phenomena or in cases where there is a single theory, but factors, variables, and concepts relate back to that theory.

In Ph.D. studies, conceptual frameworks are often compilations of multiple theoretical frameworks. Another way of thinking about this is that the theoretical framework is the theory upon which the study is based; the conceptual framework is the operationalization of that theory for purposes of conducting the study. You may use both theoretical and conceptual frameworks, if appropriate, but you must at least use a theoretical framework.