Role of Theory in Qualitative Research

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Abstract: *Qualitative approach is a predominant research method in social science researches. Role and position of the theory have always been a challenge for the researchers, though it constitutes a substantial place in the qualitative approach. This study comprises multiple but different opinions and positions on the role and position of theory in qualitative research design. The purpose of this paper is to build a perspective on the position of theory in qualitative method of social science research. It argues that comprehension of every phenomenon, event or experience cannot always be built on theory; still the significance in qualitative research designs is undeniable.*

Key Words: *qualitative method, social sciences research, theory, philosophy*

Introduction

As far as the social sciences is concerned, qualitative approach is a predominant research method. And theory constitutes a substantial place in the qualitative approach. Although both qualitative and quantitative methods are scientific methods until scientific rules are followed, the former becomes more relevant when a complex societal or political issue under study is to be comprehended in a detailed manner. In this regard, the qualitative researcher endeavours to understand the context of the study that is directly related to the phenomenon under research. Generally, qualitative approach in research is used when issues under study are either philosophical in nature or related to complex phenomena such as racial issues, gender difference and economic status etc. (King, Keohane and Verba 1994, 3-6)

Silverman argues that researchers who use qualitative method believe that they can give a deeper conception of a social phenomenon that is otherwise difficult to be studied with the quantitative method. While formatting the qualitative method, one of the most important steps is to understand the role and importance of theory within the method. (Silverman 2001, 32) This article is intended to explain the role of theory in research, particularly qualitative research. However, it appears necessary to first explain qualitative research before explaining role of theory in the former.

Qualitative Research

Regardless of the fact that scientists, especially social scientists, have tried to explain qualitative research in the simplest way, there is not any universally accepted definition of qualitative research. In Handbook of Qualitative Research, Denzin and Lincoln have provided a comprehensive explanation of qualitative research. According to them:

> Qualitative research is a situated activity that searches for the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them. (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, 88)

As mentioned above that both qualitative and quantitative methods are scientific methods, research cannot necessarily overemphasize one method. One fundamental difference between the two is that quantitative research focuses on measurement of part in a problem while qualitative research covers the whole image in a picture. Leedy and Ormrod argue that qualitative research does not intend to test a hypothesis, but this method has a deep tendency to describe, analyse and interpret the constructive aspects of the social world. Since qualitative research is inductive and often evaluated in the absence of theory, its method helps the researcher to construct a theory after finding pattern in diverse phenomena. (Leedy and Ormrod 2005, 168)

Theory and Its Structural Elements

Like qualitative research, theory has also no universal definition. In fact, numerous people have defined theory in a variety of manners depending on the field. Hempel has defined theory in a different manner in which he has compared the theory with a complex spatial network, while system and observation are the 'floating device' and 'rules of interpretation' control and guide them. (Tavallaei and Talib 2010, 572)

Homans argues that "no theory exists unless there is a clear explanation on the properties and propositions", which make clear their relations and form a deductive system. In addition to this, Burr assumes that proposition explains that why a certain thing happens. Later on, these propositions are verified that invalidate invalid propositions and validate useful and valid propositions. On the other hand, Silver defines theory "a unique way for the perception of reality, expressing someone's prominent insight about a nature's aspect in addition to a fresh and new understanding about a world aspect." (Silverman 2001)

The word theory refers to a peculiar type of explanation. "A theory is an organized body of concepts and principles intended to explain a particular phenomenon", Leedy and Ormrod argue. In this way, one can argue that the theory explains that how and why something operates as it does. Theorizing, therefore, is a process of systematic formulation and organization of ideas to understand a particular phenomenon. Theory can play an important role in development of scientific knowledge by four criteria. First, it should provide simple explanation about the observed phenomenon; second, it should be in accordance with the existing body of knowledge; third, it should provide mechanism for verification and revision; and fourth, it should highlight the areas which need further investigation. However, understanding structural elements of a theory constitute high level of significance before analysing its role and importance in research. (Leedy and Ormrod 2005)

Analysing the relationship among concepts, constructs and propositions as part of the theory is essential. Amid the movement of researcher from concept to theory level, there remains a parallel movement from experience to level of abstract description. When the researcher clusters the concepts, words assigned to events that distinguish one event from the other, they form a high-order unit of thought that is called 'construct'. The third stage of theory constitutes expressing relation among multiple constructs, which is, in simple words, a move towards making proposition. Proposition is usually a new invention and therefore needs close attention of the researcher, though one proposition alone cannot represent the reality. Therefore, the researcher put a set of logically related propositions together to form a theory. In this way, one may argue that the theory is developed through a highly abstract thought process. And, despite being abstract, it plays a substantial role in making us understand the real world.

Theory in Qualitative Research Design

Numerous experts have associated theory with the methodology used amid conduction of research. Researchers approach the world with a [theory] framework, which specifies questions and ways to analyse. Thus, there is still a close link between theory and methodology. Mitchell and Cody argue that philosophers and scholars have emphasized that "all knowledge is theory-laden and all methods are theory-driven." In contrast, some of them also presume that the absence of theory should exist during qualitative research led development of knowledge. Therefore, role and position of theory in qualitative research designs remain fundamental questions while studying the research methodology. (Tavallaei and Talib 2010)

Creswell argues that the role of the theory depends on the type of research. For example, a case study research method intends to analyse how an issue is found. This type of research focuses on an issue (that is to be explored) in the domain of a limited system. In plain words, a particular individual, group or event is deeply studied in a specific period in case study research. With the passage of time, it has become a commonly used research method in social sciences research. Contrary to other research designs, the case study research design needs clarity and

implementation of theory in the first stage, because theory impacts on the formulation of research question, explanation and interpretation of the findings. (Creswell 2007)

On the other hand, researchers use data for developing and finding theories. This method is called 'grounded theory'. Like case study research design, grounded theory has also a particular purpose that is to generate a theory. Though there remain lots of concerns on role of grounded theory, yet it becomes clear that the theory becomes functional in the background of research. Glaser and Strauss argue that preconceived theoretical assumptions and speculations should be avoided in grounded theory. However, they advise researchers to possess a theoretical sensitivity and perspective which lead to the generation of a theory. (Tavallaei and Talib 2010)

One may argue that one does always start with theory to verify as far as qualitative research is concerned. However, theory may emerge during the data analysis process particularly if the researcher finds patterns amid his analysis.

Theory in Social and Natural Sciences

Anfara and Martz argue that a comparative study of social sciences and natural sciences in terms of theories shows that the former has more competing theories. They argue the fundamental characteristic of social sciences is its multiple theoretical orientations that never reach consensus like empirical studies which constitute an important role in natural sciences. Competing theories in the social sciences provide multiple perspectives on the phenomenon under study, and each of those perspectives suggests a sensible explanation about that phenomenon. (Anfara and Mertz 2006, xxii)

Theories exist at a different level in the social sciences. For instance, individual, group, organizational and social theories are diverse in their orientation. Individual theories focus on development of individual's behaviour, cognition and personality. Group theories focus on family issues, work teams and interpersonal networks. Organizational theories are concerned about organizations, institutions and bureaucracies. Social theories explain group behaviour, urban development and cultural institutions. The difference in level of theories exists in almost all social sciences disciplines and, thus, offers a huge amount of theories at every level.

Unlike natural sciences, there remains disagreement on role and position of theory in qualitative research. Anfara and Mertz argue that there are three different understandings about the role of theory in qualitative researches. First, theory relates to the researcher's chosen methodology and the epistemologies originating it. Second, qualitative research theory has a relatively more broad role. Third, theory does not typically have a solid relationship with qualitative research. (Anfara and Mertz 2006)

Importance of Theory

Theories provide complex and comprehensive conceptual understanding of things that cannot be pinned down in a fixed manner. Use of theory criticises traditional qualitative data analysis such as mechanistic coding, reducing data to themes and writing up transparent narratives. It problematizes the phenomenon which is complex i.e. that how societies work? How think tanks operate? Why realists behave in certain ways? Theories provide researchers different lenses to examine complicated predicaments, social problems, focus their concentration on multiple aspects of data and provide a framework to conduct analysis.

All types of research contain theory in one or another way, so qualitative research is not any exception to this reality. There is a strong tradition to use theories, which manifest themselves to some degree in:

- Theoretical approach itself (the methodology)
- Arguments about what may happen
- Approach to the fieldwork or data-collection process
- Analysis and synthesis of the findings

While thinking on these steps, it challenges qualitative researchers to utilize theory to accomplish a rigorous, analytic reading of qualitative data. The use of theory produces a variety of readings of a single text or phenomenon. (Jackson and L Mazzei 2012, 12)

Distinction between Theory and Philosophy

The word theory and philosophy are compatible in the conventional sense ranging from Plato's theory of forms down to John Rawls's theory of Justice. Theory, in other words, is an offshoot of philosophy which is reshaped by the suspicion of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and then human's rational aspiration to structuralism and post-structuralism. Philosophy acts upon limits and barriers while theory often refuses those philosophical limits and aim to believe that the human existence and, in fact, the unconscious structures of one's beliefs can be altered if the right material and method of application are found. (Erickson 2001, 143)

Conclusion

Although theory plays an important role in research, there remains a possibility that every type of research, particularity qualitative research, does not encompass theory as an integral part such as grounded theory and case study research. However, theory role in qualitative research cannot be denied. After all, it provides multiple perspectives on an event and therefore can prove helpful in indicating the most relevant explanation of a real life event.

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