A General Perspective on Role of Theory in Qualitative Research

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Abstract

There is a growing interest on qualitative methodology as evidence by an increasing number of qualitative research design employed in social science researches. In qualitative inquiry process, the role of theory in the field of social science and where it situates in the research framework has always created a challenge for the researchers. However, inconclusive and differing opinions have so far been documented about the role and position of theory in qualitative research. The purpose of this paper is to build a general perspective in terms of the position of theory in qualitative research methodology applicable to social science research. Review of literatures on these issues were presented and discussed. As a result, a deep comprehension of a phenomenon, event or experience in real-life cannot always or necessarily be based on theory, yet the significant role of theory in literature review is an undeniable fact.

Key Words: qualitative, social research, role of theory, phenomenology

Introduction

In the last decades, research designs from qualitative approach as the practical method in different fields of study such as social sciences has shown an increasing rate. As a result, special attention to its central issues such as the importance of theory has become a point of concern. A researcher uses qualitative research for his or her research work when an issue under study needs to be comprehended in a complex and detailed level. In this regards, researcher try to minimize the power relationship between the researcher and participants or co-researcher by empowering them to share their stories and to have their silent voices heard by a concerned expert. In addition, qualitative researcher attempts to understand the participants' actual contexts or settings which are directly related to the phenomenon. Likewise, qualitative design is used when subtle issues such as gender differences, race, and economic status are the matter of concern. In other instances, qualitative design was chosen when inadequate theories exist, and the possibilities that a new theory can be developed as the result of the research.

As for the research objective, McLeod (2001, p.2) iterated that the "the primary aim of qualitative research is to develop an understanding of how the world is constructed". Silverman (2001) has stated that researchers who use the qualitative method for their work commonly believe that they can provide a 'deeper' comprehension about the social phenomena. Still, qualitative social researches do not have a unique agreed doctrine underlying them (Silverman, 2001, p. 32). Thus, for accomplishing the purposes sought within this type of research, a precise survey of structural elements in qualitative research is desired. One of the issues which has persistently been raised as a question, and does not find a clear response in the process of this research is; what is the role and position of theory in the structural formation of qualitative research? The purpose of this article is to build a general perspective in terms of the position of theory in qualitative research. A survey of literatures on different qualitative research design paves the way for this purpose.

How is Qualitative Research Defined?

It is challenging to give a specific, valid, final and universal definition on the entity of qualitative research. Among the available definitions suggested, Denzin & Lincoln's definition in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* is relatively a comprehensive explanation on this key term:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform

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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 & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3).

Whereas, according to Clissett (2008, p. 100) qualitative research covers a wide range of approaches for the exploration of "human experience, perceptions, motivations and behaviors" and is concerned with the collection and analysis of words whether in the form of speech or writing. In this aspect, qualitative inquiry means to understand what others do and say or to "get grasp, hear, catch and comprehend" what something means (Grant, 2008, p. 1). In addition, Schwandt (2007) believes that understanding is itself a phenomenon which lies at the core of the qualitative research because "qualitative methodology and underlying philosophy are highly appropriate for understanding complex personal and social issues" (Creswell & Clark, 2007, p.). On the other hand, Thomson (2008) believes that a subtle difference exists between the quantitative and qualitative research methods; whereas quantitative researches often focus on measuring the parts in an issue, qualitative studies prefer to create a picture which covers the whole image in it.

As for the process in qualitative research method, the researcher inevitably dives deep into the subject or phenomenon under study. Thus, in this method, numerous forms of data or information are collected for further examination through a variety of angles or from different peoples. In the final step, this data is interpreted to establish an enriched and significantly meaningful perspective. Indeed "meaning" is of essential concern to the qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p. 32) . However, whatever the meaning derived from the data, the qualitative researcher does not make any attempt to control their subjects. In fact, he or she tries to understand the overall environment and ultimately help others gain a better understanding about how the involved participants are seeing what is really going on in that specific situation in a day to day living (Jefferies, 2005).

According to Leedy & Ormrod (2005), the qualitative research method is used in the following conditions; (a) when there is rarely any information available about the topic (b) when the researcher's variables are unclear and unknown, and (c) when a relevant theory base is missing in any sense. As such, qualitative research does not intend to "test" a hypothesis but this method has a deep tendency to "describe, analyze, and interpret the constructive aspects of the social world" (Mcleod, 2001, p.133). Since qualitative researches are inductive, they are evaluated based on the total absence of any sort of theory (Mitchell & Cody, 1993) and as a result it is method which helps a researcher construct a useful theory within a research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005 & Creswell, 2007).

A Review of the Literature on Theoretical Frameworks

Despite the fact that there is hardly any disagreement on the role and position of *theory* in quantitative research (Creswell, 2002 & 2007), there is no clear agreement made in qualitative research regarding the role and significance of theory. In overall, based on Anfara & Mertz (2006) there are three distinct understandings about the role of theory in qualitative researches: (a) Theory relates to the researcher's chosen methodology and the epistemologies underlying it (Best & Kahn, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003 cited by Anfara & Mertz, 2006); (b) Qualitative research theory, compared to methodology, has a relatively more broad and extensive role (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003b), and (c) Theory does not typically have a solid relationship with qualitative research (Merriam, 1997; Schwandt, 2007). As it appears, the understandings are not finalized in this field of social science, and what is more, some experts have declared that there is no clear boundaries among such opinions. For instance, Merriam (2002) discussed her perception on the deep and broad influence of theory on the research process; yet she also acknowledged methodology's part as the "theoretical stances" taken by a researcher. As mentioned, some researchers have pointed to theory's role in methodological paradigms which simultaneously hint the wide role of theory (Merriam, 2002). Thus, new researchers are facing ambiguities on two aspects; the true entity of theory, and their rate of reliability on theory as a major reference in their work. The point which should be understood is the different roles played by theory in the quantitative research and the qualitative research. In quantitative research, the researcher seeks to prove and confirm his/her hypothesis through a deductive method intermingled with a number of

theories. However, a researcher chooses the qualitative method for his/her work when there is little information about the topic and a relevant theory base is missing (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Therefore the qualitative researcher intends to create an appropriate theory which suits his topic by using the inductive method.
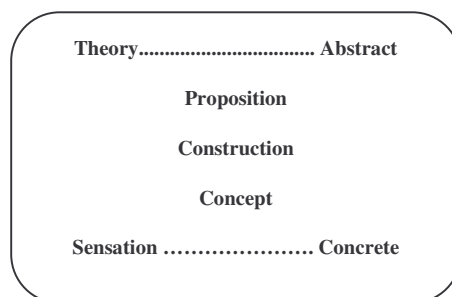
How is a Theory Defined?

The term theory has been defined in a variety of manners depending on the field of study, ground of science and even the era it was recognized to be a vital device in the process of knowledge throughout history. One of the oldest definitions on scientific theory was given by Hempel (1952, p. 36) who compared theory with "a complex spatial network" whereby "system" and "observation" are the floating device, while "rules of interpretation" control and guide them. Homans (1952, p. 812) believes that essentially no theory exists unless there is a clear "explanation" on the "properties" and "propositions" which clarify their relations and finally forming a "deductive system. In addition, Burr (1973) was concerned with deductive theory and assumes that propositions "explain why certain things occur"; afterwards deducing them. He then concludes that these propositions are examined and tested as science has a purpose; elimination of "invalid propositions" and increasing the number of "useful and valid" propositions (Burr, 1973, p. 3). In contrast, Silver claims that once a formal definition is offered for theory, its true beauty, emotional significance and importance in everyday life will be lost. She herself defines theory a unique way for 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 (Silver, 1983).

The word theory merely refers to a particular kind of explanation. Leedy and Ormrod (2005, p.4) point out: "A theory is an organized body of concepts and principles intended to explain a particular phenomenon". Thus, theories explain "How" and "Why" something operates as it does (Johnson & Christensen, 2007, p. 7). As stated by Boss, Doherty, LaRossa, Schumm, & Steinmetz (1993, p.20) "Theorizing is the process of systematically formulating and organizing ideas to understand a particular phenomenon. Thus, a theory is the set of interconnected ideas that emerge from this process." McMillan and Schumacher (2000) declared that a theory can develop scientific knowledge by these criteria; first, provide simple explanation about the observed relations regarding their relation to a phenomenon, second, be consistent with an already founded body of knowledge and the observed relations, third, provide a device for verification and revision, and fourth, stimulate further research in areas needing investigation.

Understanding theory demands traveling into someone else's mind for comprehending reality like that person. When an individual experiences a shift in one's mental structure; therefore discovering a new and different way of thinking, it means that he has understood that particular theory. It is like a new discovery; observing things in a totally different manner.

Theory and Its Structural Elements

The relationship among concepts, constructs, and propositions as component parts of theory is significant. When a researcher moves from concepts to the theory level, there is also a parallel movement from experiences to the level of abstract descriptions. According to Anfara & Mertz (2006) "concepts" are words assigned to events, distinguishing one event from another and in return allow us to relate the past events to the present or even future events. When these concepts cluster, they finally form a higher-order unit of thought, which is known as "construct". The next level of abstraction includes moving towards "propositions"; which express the relation among a number of constructs. Since propositions count as new inventions, their definition and explanation demands close attention. Usually one proposition alone is not sufficient for explaining new insights on aspects of reality. Therefore, researchers consciously use a set of logically related propositions together and finally the relationship among propositions forms a *"Theory"* (White & Klein, 2008). Thus, a theory is developed when a highly abstract thought process is completed by setting aside the ideas from the world of immediate experience and sensation in successive stages. Although theories are abstract, they significantly help us understand the experienced world. The following figure suggested by Anfara & Mertz (2006) is helpful in comprehending the relationship among building blocks of theory; showing how the movement from concrete experience to abstract explanation takes place.

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Theory.................................. Abstract

            Proposition

            Construction

              Concept

Sensation ………………… Concrete
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Source: Anfara & Mertz, 2006, p. XV

A Definition of Theoretical Frameworks

Anfara & Mertz (2006, p. xxvii) define theoretical frameworks as "empirical or quasi-empirical theories of social or psychological processes which exist at a variety of different levels and apply to the understanding of phenomena". This definition excludes what Guba and Lincoln (1994) stated about theoretical frameworks which refers to the "paradigms" of social science research such as post-positivist, constructivist, critical, and feminist. As a contrary, the definition offered by Anfara & Mertz (2006) does not assume methodological approaches to be the same as theoretical frameworks; e.g., narrative analysis, systems analysis, and symbolic interactionism. Qualitative researchers can consider a high variety of theoretical frameworks which stem from the vast domain of disciplines in both the social and natural sciences. Therefore, researchers of different fields of study, such as economics, sociology, political science, psychology, physics, and anthropology for instance, investigate a method for applying any of the available frameworks to their research problem. Indeed, the high diversity and richness of theoretical frameworks give researcher a valuable opportunity to see what could seem familiar through a new and distinct perspective.

Silverman argued that "Theory without some observation to work upon is like a tractor without a field" (Silverman, 2001, p. 294). Therefore, a theoretical framework gives the researcher a chance to "observe" and "perceive" just certain aspects of the phenomenon under study while some are concealed. Thus, theory or theoretical framework alone cannot provide a comprehensive explanation on the issue being studied.

Theories in Social and Natural Sciences

Once social sciences are compared to natural sciences in terms of their theories, it becomes evident that social sciences have more competing theories available. Anfara and Mertz (2006) declare that the major characteristic of social sciences in contrast to natural sciences is its multiple theoretical orientations which never reaches a fixed consensus like the empirical referents or explanatory schemes which characterize natural sciences. The competing theories available in social sciences are commonly popular because the nature of the phenomenon under study allows its consideration through multiple perspectives. Each of such perspectives suggests a reasonable explanation about the phenomenon.

In social sciences, theories exist at different and variable levels including individual theories, organizational, group, and social theories (Yin, 2008). While individual theories focus on the individual's development such as cognition and behavior, learning, personality, and interpersonal interactions, organizational theories focus on institutions, bureaucracies, organizational functions and structures, effectiveness or excellence of organizational performance. Group theories are concerned about family issues, work teams, employer-employee relations, and interpersonal networks. The social theories discuss group behavior, cultural institutions, urban development, and market-place functions. These different and variable levels are found in all social science disciplines and as a result provide a myriad of theories at each level.

Situating Theory in Qualitative Research's Design

In qualitative researches several experts equate theory with the methodologies used in conduction of a research and the epistemologies underlying them. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p.30-32), paradigms equate with theory and bear the researcher's "epistemological, ontological and methodological

premises" which direct the conducts of a researcher. Actually the researcher "approaches the world with a set of ideas, a framework (theory, ontology) that specifies a set of questions (epistemology) that he/she examines in specific ways (methodology, analysis)". This discussion reveals a clear link between theories and methodologies.

Mitchell and Cody (1993) have explained that, philosophers and scholars have all emphasized on one point; that all knowledge is theory-laden and all methods are theory-driven. On the other hand they also assume that the development of knowledge through qualitative research should actually start in the absence of theory; an issue which has also been somehow approved by other researchers. Therefore the question constantly raised is; how is this contrast surveyed? Another issue that arises is; what is the role and position of theory in different designs of qualitative research?

Creswell (2007) stated that depending on the type of research design, role of theory varies. For instance, the case study research method intends to survey how an issue is discovered through one or more cases within a bound. The case study researches focus on an issue which is to be explored in the domain of a limited system by the means of the case of interest. In other words, in case study, a particular individual, program or event for instance is deeply and thoroughly studied in a specific time period. This method which was later on developed by other researchers (Denzin & Lincoln 2005, Merriam 1998, Stake 1995, 2006, Yin 2003) became a common method in social sciences originating from anthropology and sociology (Creswell, 2007). Unlike other qualitative research designs, Yin (2008) argues that the case study research needs identification of the theoretical perspective at the beginning of the investigation because it affects the research questions, analysis, and interpretation of findings. In other words, Yen (2008) declares that "the complete (case study) research design embodies a theory of what is being studied (Yin, 2008, p. 28) drawn from the existing knowledge base. In this respect, Creswell has paid attention to the role that theory plays in a research design falls into the domain of methodologies or theoretical perspectives (Creswell, 2007).

Grounded theory is a method in which the researcher uses the data obtained for developing and finding a theory in the process of his/her studies (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Grounded theory has a particular purpose; which is to "move beyond description" (Creswell, 2007, p.62), so that the researcher can "generate" and "discover" a theory. The design of this research has been developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967 (Mitchell & Cody, 1993; Creswell 2007) in the field of sociology. Some researchers and experts believe that theory has an obscure role in grounded theory (Mitchell & Cody, 1993), yet others believe that theory is the "outcome of the research" (Creswell, 2007; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). As a result it seems that within this research category, theory plainly becomes functional for the background of research and is a strategy for literature review research. Understandably, no one can deny the role of accomplished studies but at the same time it does not mean that the theories under study can directly affect the subject of interest in grounded theory. Mitchell and Cody (1993) noted that Glaser and Strauss have clearly stated that preconceived theoretical assumption or speculations should be avoided in grounded theory. Still they advise researchers to possess a sociological "perspective" and "theoretical sensitivity" which leads to the generation of a theory related to sociological principles (p.171).

Ethnography is known as the primary method of field research in cultural anthropology and concentrates on a group with common cultural features. In ethnographic researches, the researcher is interested in the meaning of elements such as behavior, language and the interaction of the members of the selected group (Mitchell & Cody 1993; Leedy & Omrod, 2005; Creswell, 2007). Mitchell and Cody (1993, p.173) have elaborated that although ethnography is initially a descriptive method, the guiding factor for a researcher is the available knowledge both related to the research question and the cultural phenomenon of interest. Therefore, interpretive analysis in ethnography is generally directed by theories driven from cultural anthropology. It could be concluded that in ethnography, theory is a tool for selecting the observed items, and guiding the researcher in interpreting and limiting the role of cultural biases in the research. As a consequence, the data obtained through research will be interpreted according to theory rather than using the researcher's own experiences and insights as a means for interpretation (Spradley & McCurdy, 1972 as cited in Mitchell & Cody, 1993).

Phenomenology on the other hand refers to the meaning of the 'lived experience' of several individuals on a particular concept or in other words a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Through

phenomenology, the researcher can deeply understand the experience that several individuals have had on a certain phenomenon. The major aim of phenomenology is to "reduce" the experience individuals have about a certain phenomenon so that finally the description of the universal essence is created which means "to grasp the very nature of the thing" (VanMane**n**, 1990, p. 177). Originally, phenomenology has philosophical roots; which was first founded by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Theorists, researchers and experts have divided the phenomenological approach into different categories. For example, Moustakas (1994) has divided phenomenology into two major approaches; the *Hermeneutics* phenomenology which was introduced by Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and was developed by VanManen (1990), who also describes this type of research method straightforwardly directed towards the lived experience, in order to interpret the "texts" of life (VanMenan, 1990, p. 4). The second major category is the *Empirical Transcendental* or *Psychological Phenomenology* which was developed by Moustakas (Creswell, 2007). Husserl's phenomenology, which is known as the Transcendental Phenomenology, intends to generate the "essence" of pure consciousness. Husserl declared that any sort of presupposition needs to be bracketed out or in other words held in abeyance (Mitchell & Cody, 1993, p.174). Unlike Husserl, who strongly believed that an individual can practically bracket his beliefs about reality, Heidegger (1962) assumed that human beings cannot at any cost deny the basic actuality that has always existed in the world. In Kockelman's (1996) words: "while Husserl tries to free the Transcendental ego from the world by means of reduction (bracketing), Heidegger sees Daesin as the being that discloses the world…as Being-in-the-world" (Kockelman, 1996, p.227 as cited by Mitchell & Cody, 1993, p.175).

The role of theory in phenomenology, considering the explanations associated with its origin and definition is complicated and yet interesting. It is explicit that applying formal theory contrasts with Husserlian Phenomenology, or Transcendental but one important point should be remembered; the assumptions and principles of Husserl's phenomenology actually from a kind of theory in themselves (Mitchell & Cody, 1993). In Transcendental Phenomenology, theory is invisibly linked with methodology, and as a result the researcher consciously tries to avoid any sort of influence that theories could possibly have on his/her mind which inevitably leads to a predetermined path, while the invisibility of theory demands him/her to be objective through the research process. On the other hand, Heidegger's Phenomenology (Hermeneutics) possesses an interpretive attitude which allows phenomenon to "show themselves" in an intelligible manner to mankind. One of the major differences existing between Hermeneutics Phenomenology (Heidegger) and Transcendental Phenomenology (Husserl) lies in the function of bracketing (Epoche) in the former one. As a result, some of the phenomenological scholars, including Georgie (1985) for instance, propose that a theoretical approach is "essential" for sciences which are based on disciplines. Yet the same set of reasoning expressed for not using theory in Husserlian phenomenology (Transcendental) can be applicable for this major category as well. Some pioneers in qualitative researchers explicitly insist that theory should not be applied in phenomenology. For example, McLeod (2001) points out "Phenomenology requires a kind of withdrawal from the world and a willingness to lay aside existing theories and beliefs" (p.37). In addition, Creswell (2007) has stated that "no preconceived notions, frameworks or expectations guide researchers" (p. 94). However, Creswell has not neglected the role of theory related to methodology and noted that;

> "In a qualitative research, one does not begin with a theory to test or verify. Instead, consistent with the inductive model of thinking, a theory may emerge during the data collection and analysis phase or be used relatively late in the research process as a basis for comparison with other theories" (Creswell, 1994, pp. 94-95).

Conclusion

Considering the ever increasing development of qualitative research method in scientific studies especially in social science, we made an attempt to answer one question; what is the position and status of theory in qualitative research; regarding its inductive entity? Through a survey of various perspectives offered on this topic within the variety of designs attributed to this method, this article actually clarifies the role of theory in qualitative research. One cannot deny the role of theory in the structure of literature review in every individual topic; because it might have been carried out through quantitative research method, a point that apparently becomes clear once a researcher concentrates on the literature review. Since the ultimate purpose

of qualitative research method is earning a deeper understanding about a phenomenon or event in the real-life, therefore the basic structure of this research method cannot be based on theory. Even though this opinion does not have an absolute reliability, and is less applied in some types of qualitative research such as case study and grounded theory, it nevertheless plays a prominent and outstanding role in phenomenology especially in Husserlian phenomenology. This article has presented a brief historical glance at what theorists have stated about this key term; making an attempt to draw out the common points which are somehow relevant to this field of study and can act together as pieces of a patchwork; completed in the process of time; yet controversial. Another aim followed out through this article is; paving the way for stepping into a path which has so far been relatively dominant as a topic for debate and discussion in researches. One of the other aims pursued throughout this article is to share the available and coherent knowledge in a smooth and clear manner; finally making qualitative research method a tangible device in the hands of social science researchers.

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