

The Dynamic Connections between Theory and Qualitative Approach

Aisha Ibrahim Ningi

Department of History, Yobe State University Damaturu

Abstract- This paper takes stock of the role of theory in the humanities away from the usual notion that it has no place in qualitative inquiry. The paper then maps the broader view of qualitative approach in an academic writing, it goes further to diffuse some misunderstandings, analyses the specifics of qualitative research, and outlines some practical significances of theory in the humanities as a paradigm, or that which may inform our understanding of the phenomenon under exploration. The use of theory in an academic writing is seen as that which underpins research design, as a lens which may emerge from studies usually viewed as new knowledge. Some recommendations were made on how best to use a theory when reporting qualitative inquiry.

Index Terms- Qualitative Approach, Method, Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper is a portion of a study I conducted for my doctoral research in which qualitative approach was adopted. Here, I intend to focus on the importance and appropriateness of theory in qualitative inquiry. This is because; researchers using such approach do not consistently articulate how theory should be applied (Yin, 2012). This is unlike the fact that there is hardly any discrepancy or heated debate on the role and position of theory in quantitative research. In my initial research, an exploration was undertaken on the influence of socio-cultural values on girl-child education in Yobe State, and the broad objective was not to make a generalization, but to explore the research problem with a view to establishing a detailed meaning of the central phenomenon from the informants' viewpoints. The fact is that most scholars seeking to answer questions about culture and meaning in a detailed manner have found quantitative and experimental methods to be inadequate on their own in explaining the phenomenon they wish to study (Cibangu, 2012). However, the most contentious issue, researchers are often beset with have to do with the role of theory in a qualitative inquiry.

II. QUALITATIVE APPROACH AND METHOD IN AN ACADEMIC WRITING

Generally, humanities research has been likened with the endeavour to interpret the meaning and/or study subjective and none measurable phenomenon. As such, a clear definition of the qualitative approach is necessary so as to justify its usage in an academic writing. Ordinarily, it has been challenging to give an exact and acceptable definition when discussing qualitative

inquiry. However, among the available definitions accessible in many books, Merriam (2014); Creswell (2013); Yin (2009 & 2011) Krauss (2005); Shank (2002); Bogdan & Biklen, (1992) offered a relatively comprehensive explanation on some terms. For instance, Shank (2002) outlines qualitative research as a form of systematic and empirical inquiry into meaning. In this regard, he viewed the word "systematic" as something "planned, ordered and public", which follows agreed rules. By empirical, he means that this type of inquiry is grounded in the world of experience. While the inquiry into meaning speaks volume of how researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience(s). Also, Krauss (2005) defined qualitative inquiry as one of the ranges of approaches through the exploration of both behaviour and human experience. So, the submissions made by Krauss (2005) show how a researcher using a qualitative approach seeks to inquire and explore what others do and say. It is an inquiry which seeks to understand social phenomena through in-depth exploration and interpretation of the meanings people attach to, and make sense of their experiences of the social world. For instance, in my earlier research which specifically focused on inquiry about the socio-cultural context of a particular social group, an ethnographic method was thus adopted which sought and understood the research problem from the viewpoints of the native people involved (Merriam, 2014). It was a kind of narrative procedures and descriptions of the cultural behaviour of the group or an individual by describing and interpreting their roles. Under such a scenario, a researcher grasps, catches, hears, and at the same time comprehends the informants' viewpoints regarding their socio-cultural values. Accordingly, the meaning would always be the essential concern of the researcher which is an integral part of a qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, whatsoever the meanings and importance resulting from the information received during data collection, there should never be an attempt from the researcher to influence the informants if not for domineering ones. For instance, during the heydays of my research, some informants during the focus group discussion appeared to dominate the discussions. In this case, one has to assume the role of a "moderator" in which I tried to moderate the process which is a commendable role expected of a qualitative researcher (Creswell, 2013).

Furthermore, the choice of qualitative approach is essential when every aspect of the research typically consisted of a set of visible narrations, descriptions, and interpretations practices based on the viewpoints of the informants. The whole process would pave the way for the researcher to involve in interpretive, descriptive, and naturalistic undertakings of the world of the targeted informants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This means that the informants were being studied within their natural settings while struggling to make sense of the phenomenon and the

meaning they attached to their values (Lillis, 2008). Likewise, Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba (2007) have confidence in this kind of approach as understanding in itself is a much better impression that is core in qualitative inquiry. Therefore, researchers from the humanities unnoticeably argued that the selection of qualitative approach and ethnography method are highly appropriate for understanding such social issues. It is worth mentioning here that, such researcher only tried to understand the overall setting and ultimately or at least in part helped others gain a better understanding of how the informants involved were seen in that specific situation. Besides, complex reality can only be understood as amalgam and not as simply a sum of its parts (Cibangu, 2012). On the other side of the spectrum, qualitative researcher(s) further contended that the approach preferred to create more pictures which covered the whole image with it, while quantitative approach normally deals with survey and measurement which does not represent the fieldwork scenario (Creswell, 2013). Thus, the process will enable a researcher to generate reliable and sufficient data over time based on underpinning theory(s).

However, the question arises here as to how can one collect data to describe social phenomena? What are data collection techniques appropriate to the methodology? It is important to point out that the means by which one explore the context (methodology) and the means by which researchers gather evidence (methods) were instrumental when writing a qualitative research. So, in qualitative inquiry data is primarily collected either through participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions, or through available data to describe social phenomena not to test the theories. The strategies of inquiry are appropriate to ontological/epistemological position, whether descriptive, confirmatory, explanatory, or exploration of other cultures (Creswell, 2013).

III. SOME DEFINITIONS OF A THEORY

But before dwelling into the details, it is imperative to throw more light on what a theory is all about when undertaking a qualitative inquiry. A theory is a generalized explanatory statement that asserts a connection between two or more types of phenomena (Tavallaei&Talib, 2010). It is an assembly of interconnected ideas or concepts that guide and organizes knowledge about the world. In this case, the theory becomes stronger as more supporting evidence is gathered; and it provides a context or framework for the capacity to generate new research. It is a framework or model for observing and understanding, which shapes both how we think, what we see and how we see it. This has shown that the theory is not fixed; it is provisional, open to revision and grows into more accurate and comprehensive explanations about the makeup and operation of the social world. As Ospina (2004) pointed out, theory enables us to connect a single study to the immense base of knowledge to which other researchers contribute. In other words, the aforementioned literature has shown that theory has the capacity to generate new ideas and research.

IV. THE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEORY AND QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Over the years, few books have addressed the theoretical status of the Arts and humanities as a whole. Of specific, one reason is that the field of humanities and the choice of qualitative research has been considered inferior in academic writing or scientific research. Another reason is that theory is simply understood as a purely intellectual exercise withdrawn from human progress and reality. As a result, misunderstandings concerning humanities research have increased (Malterud, 2001).

In this regard, some scholars Bogdan & Biklen, (1992) contended that qualitative inquiry is purely inductive and that its credibility could, therefore, be judged by the extent to which preconceived theory is absent from it. Specifically, Stake (1995) has stated that there should not be preconceived notions; frameworks or expectations guide the researchers when using a qualitative approach. Such authors explicitly insisted that the development of any kind of knowledge through qualitative approach should actually start in the absence of any theory. In addition, such a research requires a kind of withdrawal from the world and a willingness to lay aside existing theories is what is required from a qualitative researcher. Hence, a theory should not be applied.

Conversely, Mitchell & Cody, (1993) have not neglected the role of theory related to methodology and thus noted that most often with a qualitative research, one does not begin with a theory to test or to verify. Instead, they further acknowledged that consistent with the inductive model of thinking, a theory may, therefore, emerge either during the data collection and analysis phase or to be used relatively late in the research process as a basis for comparison with other theories. Thus, a researcher chooses the qualitative method for his or her work when there is little information about the topic and a relevant theory base is missing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This has proved that the use of theory(s) in qualitative approach is important as it allows the researcher to make links between the theoretical and the empirical; thought statements and observational statements, etc. This informs our understanding of issues, which in turn, assists in making research decisions and making sense of the world (Mitchell & Cody, 1993). In the same regard, the theories and the approach are significant as they influenced the design, including decisions about what to research, and the development of research questions. In addition, the theories support the methodology, method adopted which at the end has implications for how data is analysed and interpreted. Besides, people's behaviour has to be studied in everyday contexts, rather than under experimental conditions created by researchers. Consequently, the approach will provide in-depth information mainly generated from the few key informants, which facilitated considerable presence in the field. Moreover, the approach relied more on gathering data through spoken words from the key informants in order to understand their views about the case being studied. Thus, the approach is a non-statistical one which involved documenting real events and recording the informants' expressions, what they say or do through gesture and tones.

As it appears from the above summations, the qualitative researcher uses an appropriate theory which suits the topic by using the inductive method. In this regard, the standpoints of Anfar& Mertz (2006) have highlighted three distinct

understandings about the role of theory in qualitative researchers: (a) Either the chosen methodology underlying it relates to the researcher's theory (b) or in the qualitative research, the use of theory when compared to the methodology, has a relatively more broad role, and (c) the theory do not typically have a solid relationship with qualitative research. Therefore, the understandings are not finalized in this field of Arts and humanities, as well as and social sciences. This is because, some experts have acknowledged that there are no clear boundaries among such opinions.

V. CONCLUSION

Consequently, the fact that there is no clear consensus that exists regarding the appropriate application of theory in qualitative studies, I have intentionally chosen to use theory as it provides basic concepts which aided in deliberating the findings, discussions, and debate of my earlier study. To sum it up, whenever a researcher embarks on ethnography as a method, then the use of theory would serve as a tool for selecting the observed items, and will also be a guiding principle for the researcher in interpreting and limiting the role of cultural biases in the research (Maxwell, 2012, Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

In conclusion, as a consequence, the data obtained through ethnographic research findings are interpreted based on informants' assertions and according to the theories rather than using the researcher's own experiences and insights as a means for describing, interpretations and in reporting the research discussions.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

To cap it all, it is recommended that the use of theory(s) in qualitative inquest is important as it allows the researcher to define specific questions, make links between the theoretical and the empirical; influence the research design, define setting, identify the informants, collect initial data through observation, interviews, thought statements etc.

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AUTHORS

First Author – Aisha Ibrahim Ningi, Department of History
Yobe State University Damaturu, aishatuindo@gmail.com