

THE VALUE OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW TOWARDS A QUALITY RESEARCH WORK

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Abstract

The theoretical framework and literature review are crucial aspects of research process, yet it is usually misunderstood by researchers as they prepare their research reports. This study accentuated the importance of theory-driven procedures concerning the selection of a topic, the development of research questions, the conceptualization of the literature review, the planning approach, and the analysis plan for research. This study used an integrative approach and different methodologies were combined to review the literature and summarise it for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena. The review of the literature revealed that trying to make use of theory while developing a theoretical framework under time pressure may appear to be a rather agonizing experience. As such, the challenging journey of creating sense of theory and developing a theoretical framework within a decent timeframe might be considered the rigour in research study. A researcher would be able to better empathize with the struggles and potential frustrations of researches with a full grasp of a theoretical framework that matches his/her research works through the review of the literature. The study gained insights into the previous study through the review of the literature and made useful suggestions on the benefits of theoretical framework and literature review that will allow scholar researches to make sense and enable them come out with quality works.

Keywords: *Theory, Theoretical Framework, Literature review, research.*

Introduction

Research can simply be viewed as the basis of scientific progression. The purpose of any research is to improve, enhance and expand a body of knowledge, establish facts and/or reach novel conclusions through systematic inquiry and disciplined methods (Tie, Birks and Francis, 2019). Research is that primary tool utilized in virtually all discipline to expand the frontiers of knowledge. Research work requires the writing of a dissertation. The dissertation may be a labour of affection requiring much work, sweat, and tears, as well as organization skills and extensive resources from others who are involved with the process. The final product may be a document that one can recognize as a once-in-a-lifetime achievement. The researcher's choice of a theory provides structure to the whole dissertation. It provides a standard world view or lens from which to support one's thinking on the matter and analysis of facts.

The theoretical framework is one among the foremost and important aspects of the research process. The importance of utilizing a theoretical framework during a dissertation or thesis in higher academic study

cannot be stressed enough. The theoretical framework is that foundation from which all knowledge is made for a research study. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the study, the problem statement, the aim, the significance, and the research questions. Theoretical framework provides a grounding base, or an anchor, for the literature review, and most significantly, the methods and analysis. Lysaght (2011) highlighted the necessity of identifying one's theoretical framework for a dissertation or thesis. A researcher's choice of framework is not arbitrary but reflects important personal beliefs and understandings about the nature of knowledge, how it exists (in the theoretical sense) concerning the observer, and the possible roles to be adopted, and tools to be employed consequently, by the researcher in his/her work.

Without a theoretical framework, the structure and vision for a study are unclear, much like a house that cannot be constructed without a blueprint. By contrast, a research plan that contains a theoretical framework allows the dissertation study to be strong and structured with an organized flow from one chapter to the next. The role of theory in qualitative research is basic, central, and foundational, although it may not be consciously recognized or even identified. Theory influences the way the researcher approaches the study and pervades almost all aspects of the study. It is two-sided, framing and shaping the researcher's perception about the study, the technique of conducting the study and, in the end, how the researcher conducts the study. Also, theory can be seen as a giant sieve used to describe the role that theory plays in qualitative research as a helpful tool.

Qualitative research cannot be done without attending to theory or examining the role it plays in the research. Research cannot be conducted without the conscious or unconscious use of underlying theory (Broido & Manning, 2002; Papineau, 1979). Literature has shown that the role of theory in qualitative research extends beyond the confines of a particular study. It situates qualitative research clearly within the scholarly conversation, adds subtlety and complexity to what appear at first glance to be simple phenomenon, and allows for building a repertoire of understandings, diverse perspectives of the same phenomenon (Anfara and Mertz, 2015). Nord, Koohang and Paliszkiwicz (2019) submitted that there are several ways in which a theory might make novel contributions to a discipline, these include: a theory's focal phenomena might not have been covered by prior theories; a theory might be considered novel because it frames or conceives existing, well-known focal phenomena in new ways; and a theory's novelty might arise because of important changes it makes to an existing theory possibly adding or deleting constructs and associations, defining existing constructs and associations more precisely, or specifying the boundary of the theory more precisely.

The theoretical framework is that "blueprint" for the whole research inquiry. It serves as the guide to be used to create and support one's study, and also provides the structure to define how you will philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach the research as a whole. Thus, the theoretical framework consists of the chosen theory (or theories) that guide one's thinking with regards to the way to understand and plan research topic, as well as the concepts and definitions from that theory that are relevant to the subject. Lovitts (2005) empirically defines criteria for applying or developing theories to the dissertation that must be appropriate, logically interpreted, well understood, and align with the question at hand.

Mertens (2018) acknowledged that the theoretical framework has implications for each decision made within the research process, which supports the assumption that the theoretical framework for a study must be identified at the inception of dissertation. The importance of theory-driven thinking and acting should be emphasized with the choice of a subject, development of research questions, focus of the literature review, the design approach, and analysis plan for the dissertation study. Evidence across disciplines is obvious that the specific identification and inclusion of a theoretical framework may be a necessity of sound research. Theories come from a multitude of sources in each discipline, and there are always more being created and applied across fields. For example, there are a plethora of options within the realm of educational leadership for selecting a theoretical framework.

A literature review is a systematic examination of the scholarly literature about one's topic. It critically analyses, evaluates, and synthesizes research findings, theories, and practices by scholars and researchers that are related to an area of focus. (Efron and Ravid, 2019) Similarly, Fink, (2014) defines literature review as a systematic, explicit, and reproducible method for identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded works produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners. The literature review accomplishes several purposes. It shares with the reader the results of

other studies that are closely associated with the one being undertaken. It relates a study to the larger, ongoing dialogue in the literature, filling in gaps and extending prior studies (Cooper, 2010; Marshall and Rossman, 2016).

Furthermore, Fink (2014) submitted that the literature review provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as a benchmark for comparing the results with other findings. In qualitative research, inquirers use the literature in a manner consistent with the assumptions of learning from the participants, not prescribing the questions that require to be answered from the researcher's standpoint. One of the major reasons for conducting a qualitative study is that the study is exploratory. This usually means that not much has been written about the subject or the population being studied, and therefore the researcher seeks to concentrate on the participants and build an understanding based on what is heard. Creswell, (2018) assert that carrying out a comprehensive literature review is a required step in any research project. Thus, a researcher cannot conduct the study without gaining a deep understanding of the research topic and learning from the work of other scholars and researchers in the field.

Objectives of the Study

The study is aimed at examining the value of the theoretical framework and literature review in conducting quality research. Other specific objectives are:

1. to analyse the concept and definition of the theoretical framework in research
2. to examine the place of literature review in quality research
3. to highlight the importance of theoretical framework and literature review in research.

Statement of the Problem

Quality research work is a demanding prerequisite that requires scholars to demonstrate expertise knowledge and a variety of skills and attributes, such as creativity and analytical ability (Lean, 2012). The task of finding a theoretical framework and identify gaps through review of related literature for research work is enormous. Even seasoned researchers can struggle with the process of finding and selecting an appropriate framework for the studies they choose to undertake. Admittedly, finding a theoretical framework, especially one that works well for the phenomenon being studied, is not always a simple process. While the choice of a theoretical framework delimits a study, it is of high essence that researchers thoroughly understand the theoretical framework chosen to frame their study while considering the potential problems that might be faced in attempting to import and apply a theory from another field, in particular its applicability and fit. Academic staff often cites students' lack of understanding of theory and theory building as common problems in PhD or master programs (Byron and Thatcher, 2016; Lings, 2008). Also, it's not uncommon to see researchers who find it difficult to review related works on chosen topics, thus given them problems in drawing inferences on qualitative type of research. Thus, this study, therefore, seeks to explain the concept of theoretical framework and literature review as it serves as the bedrock for quality research works.

Significance of the Study

The study will help potential researchers understand the relationship between theory and research and provide insightful ways of thinking and ways of seeing is importance in the conduct of qualitative research. Study of this nature would to a greater extent demonstrate the pervasive nature of theory in qualitative research studies. The study will assist the researcher within the process of sorting through data, of knowing how the pieces drawn from the varied data relate and where they fit. Also, the theoretical framework "frames" every aspect of the study, shaping and directing it in ways consistent with the theory, from the design to the interpretation of the findings, the process as well as the product. framework provides powerful concepts that may be used in the coding of data by researchers (Mills and Bettis,2016). On the other hand, one of the main benefit for conducting a literature review is to engage in the creation of knowledge (Lukenchuk, 2013). This knowledge entails the acquisition of skills and techniques involved in effectively finding, critically analysing, and thoughtfully synthesizing information on the research topic which will be of tremendous value to researchers.

Methodology

The paper uses an integrative approach and different methodologies to review the literature and summarize it for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Integrative literature reviews are the broadest sort of research review methods and that they are distinctive for combining diverse data sources, like experimental and non-experimental research or theoretical and empirical literature. The purpose of an integrative review is to provide a holistic understanding of the topic of interest, which can be for example defining a concept, review of a theory or examination of methodological issues. (Whittemore and Knafl 2005).

Review of Literature

Over the years, scholars have argued that the precise definition of theory is hard to come by (Flinders and Mills, 1993). Grant and Osanloo (2014) defined a theoretical framework as a structure that guides research by counting on a proper theory...constructed by using an established, coherent explanation of certain phenomena and relationships. The theory has been defined in a variety of ways by philosophers of science and scholars in the academic disciplines. The theory has been defined as a group of interrelated constructs, definitions, and propositions that presents a scientific view of phenomena by specifying relations among variables, to elucidate and predict phenomenon. (Kerlinger (1986), LeCompte and Preissle (1993), Argyris and Schon (1974). Anfara and Mertz (2015) submitted that to understand a theory is to travel into someone else's mind and be able to perceive reality as that person does. Also, understanding a theory is to experience a shift in one's mental structure and discover a different way of thinking. To understand a theory is to feel some wonder that one never saw before what now seems to have been obvious right along. To understand a theory, one must stretch one's mind to reach the theorist's meaning. Wilkins, Neri, & Lean, (2019) citing Corley and Gioia (2011) define theory as "a statement of concepts and their interrelationships that shows how and/or why a phenomenon occurs." In the simplest terms, a theory may be regarded as a set of interrelated concepts or ideas that explain some aspect of the real world (Lee & Lings, 2008). Wilkins, Neri, & Lean, (2019) citing Hunt (1983) specifies three criteria for recognizing theory: the systematically related criterion; the generalization criterion; and the empirically testable criterion, while Whetten argues that theory contains four essential elements: the factors in the theory; how the factors are related; why the factors are related; and where which represent the boundary conditions. A model is a representation of a theory, which is generally shown in graphical or mathematical form.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest a three-level typology of theories. At the top of the pyramid, grand theories provide an abstract and general theoretical perspective that can influence how individuals think about the world. Researchers are often concerned with substantive theories, at the base of the pyramid, which is specific to a particular population, problem or research setting. It is often difficult to make generalizations from substantive theories. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the hallmark of qualitative research includes the researcher as the key to data collection, specialize on participants' meanings, interpretative enquiry, a holistic account and the use of theoretical lenses. The issue of generalizability in qualitative research is debated, with a difference being drawn between statistical generalization, typical of quantitative studies where an inference is made from the sample to the population of reference, and analytical generalization, or generalizable lessons learned or findings from qualitative studies

Value of Theoretical Framework in Qualitative Research

Although there is little disagreement about the role and place of theory in quantitative research (Creswell, 1994, 2002), such is not the situation concerning qualitative research. Indeed, there is no consensus either about the role of theory in qualitative research or about what is being discussed. Much of what is recognized as warranted knowledge about qualitative research comes through the relatively small, albeit growing numbers of textbooks in the field, materials widely used by teachers of research to organize and mentor students and neophyte researchers.

Examination of the most prominent of these materials for wisdom about the role of theory in

qualitative research leaves the reader with one of three different understandings: first, that theory has little relationship to qualitative research (Best & Kahn, 2003; Gay & Airasian, 2003); second, that theory in qualitative research relates to the methodology the researcher chooses to use and the epistemologies underlying that methodology (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003a, 2003b, 2013; Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and a subset of this position, that it is related to some methodologies (Creswell, 1994, 1998, 2014; Gall, & Borg, 2006; Patton, 2002; Yin, 1993, 1994); and third, that theory in qualitative research is broader and more pervasive in its role than methodology (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998; Flinders & Mills, 1993; Maxwell, 1996, 2013; Merriam, 1998, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Mills, 1993; Schram, 2003, 2006; Schwandt, 1993). On the other hand, Broido and Manning (2002) situated the role of theory within methodological paradigms, yet they hinted that theory features a much wider role to play. Similarly, Merriam and Associates (2002) acknowledged the part methodology plays in the “theoretical stances” researchers take while continuing to address what they perceived as the broader, deeper influence of theory on the research process. It is, however, these differences in emphasis about what theory refers to and is about that are a source of confusion for the student and the neophyte researcher. The theoretical framework specifies the theory that has guided the scholar in their research, which helps determine what the student will measure and what relationships are going to be investigated. It serves as the structure and support for the rationale for the research, the problem statement, the purpose, the significance, and therefore the research questions of the study. The theoretical framework is typically presented in the thesis/dissertation after the literature review, as it is based on the existing theory that is found in the literature. A theoretical framework could also be considered as the researcher’s lens with which to look at the planet world. (Wilkins, Neri, & Lean, 2019).

Value of Literature Review in Qualitative Research

A literature review is a superb way of synthesizing research findings to point out evidence on a meta-level and to uncover areas during which more research is required, which may be a critical component of making theoretical frameworks and building conceptual models. By integrating findings and perspectives from many empirical findings, a literature review can address research questions with a power that no single study has (Snyder, 2019). Literature reviews are important to research work because they made substantive contributions to the knowledge base of human resource development (Torraco, 2005). Syntheses of existing literature on any given phenomenon are important because they improve evidence-based decision making (Tranfield et al., 2003; Whittemore & Knafl, 2005), they identify gaps in knowledge about particular phenomena (Booth et al., 2012), they identify synergies within existing literature (Booth et al., 2012), and that they narrow the gap between knowledge and experience within the field (Kennedy, 2007). Furthermore, literature reviews are important within the publishing process for at least two reasons; several high-impact journals exclusively publish review articles and therefore the high citations often attributed to review articles are useful for enhancing the reputation and readership of both the author and the publishing journal (Denyer & Pilbeam, 2013).

Procedures for literature review

Osuala (1993) as cited in Isa (2012) identified seven (7) specific procedure as the means by which a good literature review can be carried out successfully, which include:

- i. Getting a clear picture of the subject under investigation
- ii. Orientating oneself toward the empirical research done in the broad area in which the problem lies
- iii. Demonstrating a good ability of reading at a high rate of speed.
- iv. Searching for library sources in a systematic and thorough manner
- v. Taking notes systematically in the light of such criteria as uniformity, accuracy and ease of assembly.
- vi. Taking as complete notes as he might need.
- vii. Recording reference on 3x5 cards, each carrying labels of topic or topics.

Function of literature review

Isa (2012) quoting from opeke (1995) highlighted functions of a good literature review such as:

to study the history of the problem being investigated, to aid in the selection of investigative procedure i.e. methodology, to become familiar with the theoretical background of the problem being investigated, to assess the merits of previous studies, to avoid unintended duplication, to justify the selection of the problem.

Discussion and Implications

Trying to make use of theory while developing a theoretical framework under time pressure may appear to be a rather agonizing experience. As such, the challenging journey of making sense of theory and developing a theoretical framework within a decent timeframe might be considered as the rigour in quality research. A doctoral researcher or master students would be able to better empathize with the struggles and potential frustrations of having a grasp of a theoretical framework that matches his/her research through the review of the literature. The insights gained from the previous study through the review of the literature would allow doctoral or master students to make sense of theory and to design a theoretical framework underpinning their research work. Going by the literature, it is pertinent that scholars need to understand that making sense of theory and conceptualizing a theoretical framework is a lengthy process that requires patience and hard work. It might be a good idea to form a study group in which doctoral students for instance, can discuss theory, ask questions, and share insights they gained from their readings. On the other hand, supervisors of research works may want to guide their students' exploration of theory within defined boundaries. In light of the circular nature of theory, it is easy to imagine how exploring theory can spin out of control and become an overwhelming undertaking that impedes understanding and learning. It is important to note that researchers attempt to understand and to make sense of theory can be a multifaceted and lengthy process. Thus, having scholars who intent to carry out research keep some form of a logbook to record their thoughts about theory may facilitate their attempts to connect theory with research works.

Conclusion

This paper aligned with the conception that learning is a complex endeavour. It should be noted, however, that, understanding of theory is purely academic, which would be remarkable for research at higher level. There is a need for researchers to develop a personal process of making use of theory. The paper has also shown that the value of the literature review cannot be overemphasized as it makes basic influences on the knowledge base of human resource development. Review of existing literature on any given phenomenon is important as they advance evidence-based decision making (Tranfield et al., 2003; Whitemore and Knafl, 2005), through the identification of gaps in knowledge about a particular topic.

Conclusively, the paper has been able to reflect the dialogic nature of theoretical framework and literature review as it affects the writing of qualitative research. The answers discussed in this paper are not necessarily a reflection on the quality of the study, but rather a reflection of the dialogic nature of the narrative inquiry. That is because learning is after all, an individual process (Burri, Baker, & Chen, 2017).

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