

Why Depend on Others? Why Not Thinking of Ours? A Methodological Approach to Conceptualization in Social Science Research

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Abstract

It is so clear that many of our researches depend on others' concepts and knowledge. It is the influence of scientific positivism into our research, as we always try to frame the research within a conceptualized frame developed from others' knowledge addressed in literature. There is no argument that others' knowledge is essential to be a good academic and scientific scholar, as the quality of our research is inevitably be judged in relation to other researchers' and scientists' work. But it is timely to re-think the extent to which such knowledge and concepts, particularly designed based on the literature, are relevant and applicable to different social and cultural structures. It is also timely to re-think whether we are ready to rely any further on such literature-based knowledge which could be or could not always be practicable and applied. On the other hand, is there any possibility of applying the concept of universalism emphasized by the scientific positivism to every society and culture neglecting their diversity? If so, have we so far thought of designing our own concepts or developing our own methodology to understand any of the knowledge belonging to us? It is correct to mention here that it is very rare in our literature of generating our own set of indigenous knowledge or suggesting an approach to generate such knowledge. Therefore, the objective of this plenary speech is to emphasize a research approach as one of the essential methodological approaches to generate knowledge for any given society or culture. Methodologically, this is a conceptual paper that emphasizes an approach to generate concepts or knowledge particularly by applying signs, objects and concepts as the instruments to generate knowledge. As the outcome, the practice of this approach by the scientists and researchers to conceptualize knowledge from ground level is expected.

Key words: Concepts; Knowledge; Objects; Scientific positivism; Signs

Introduction

It is so clear that we, as researchers, always try to depend on others' knowledge by practicing scientific positivism for our research. There is no argument that others' knowledge is essential to be a good academic and scientific scholar, as the quality of your research is inevitably be judged in relation to other researchers' and scientists' work. Accordingly, it is evident that many of our research are majorly influenced by the scientific positivism that emphasizes designing and controlling variables within a conceptualized frame and making conclusions by testing hypothesis. Apart from the scientific positivism, there are many researches practicing qualitative interpretive approach as well, but the extent to which such qualitative researches have also been able to generate our own set of knowledge is still in question. Even though the qualitative interpretive approach is the approach that supports to generate knowledge, it is obvious that qualitative studies are also based on predetermined concepts or conceptual framework which is emphasized by the scientific deductive research approach.

Accordingly, in the present research and academic environment it is so unfortunate to mention here that many of our research mainly rely on scientific positivism that emphasizes to conduct research based on predetermined conceptual frame developed from the review of literature relating to the research problem.

The scientific method is the method of investigating a particular research problem with a minimum of biasness so that productive unbiased solutions can be given by following the steps such as identification of a research problem, designing variables according to pre-determined concepts within a conceptual framework or model, constructing hypothesis based on the developed conceptual frame, testing of hypothesis particularly by quantitative methodology to see the relationship among designed variables and making conclusions based on the analyzed relationships.

If the scientific method is based on the approach of testing theory, have our qualitative researches been able to deviate from this approach? It has been difficulty to give a clear and direct answer to this question, as many of our qualitative researches are also based on testing of theory approach initially started from literature review. Such researches have only been nominally qualitative, as they have followed descriptive data gathering and analytical techniques and they also have failed to generate new concepts or knowledge to the societies, cultures and the countries like ours.

As confirmed above, there is no argument that the scientific method/positivism is essential in understanding the reality behind an issue as it has many advantages of its application. Particularly its capability of macro level application with large sample size and its strength of statistical inference by representing whatever the population challenge to other methodological approaches. But it is timely to re-think and evaluate the extent to which such concepts, particularly designed based on the literature, are relevant and applicable to different social and cultural structures. It is also timely to re-think whether we are ready to rely forever on such literature-based knowledge which could be or could not always be practicable and applied. On the other hand, is there any possibility of applying the concept of universalism emphasized by the scientific positivism to every society and culture neglecting their diversity? If so, have we so far thought of designing our own concepts or developing our own methodology to understand any of the knowledge belonging to us? It is correct to mention here that it is very rare in our literature of generating our own set of indigenous knowledge or suggesting an approach to generate such knowledge. Therefore, the objective of this plenary speech is to emphasize a research approach, as one of the essential methodological approaches to generate knowledge for any society or culture.

If the issue is so clear now it is the time to address in this plenary session how to practically suggest and do this process so that the knowledge or the concepts can be generated without depending on others. The following steps are basically emphasized in this regard.

- i. Determining what to conceptualize
- ii. Theoretical sampling
- iii. Identification of signs behind the concept
- iv. Construction of objects based on signs
- v. Construction of concepts based on objects
- vi. Conceptualization and comparison

i. Determining what to conceptualize

The first step of the approach is to determine the concept or theme that we are going to research and generate. It may be any of the matter practically or academically needed to generate and apply at policy level. Usually, research is generated from academic or professional perspective. Academic approach starts by highlighting the gap of knowledge and its main objective is to fill that gap. But in the process of conceptualization whether the theme is covered or not is not

important to the researcher because his main objective is to generate knowledge about the concept according to the real interpretation of active respondents.

ii. Theoretical sampling

After determining the concept or theme to research, next step is to design the correct target group by applying a proper sampling technique. Theoretical sampling is the method suggesting in this regard. Theoretical sampling can be defined as the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them in order to develop his theory as it emerges (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Thus, this sampling technique is closely associated with grounded theory methodology based on analytical induction. It attempts to discover categories and their elements in order to detect and explain interrelationships between them. Its main aim is to generate and develop theoretical data.

The first should be focused on designing the target group for knowledge generation based on where the problem exists and to whom the problem relates. Normally, in scientific positivism, probabilistic sampling techniques are used for the selection of the relevant target group for the study but here the target group should be designed at floor level, as the data is expected to generate at ground level. This sampling technique is applied, as the knowledge is expected to generate according to the perception of the active participants facing to the theme or problem. Thus, for the collection of data, the sample should initially be designed by the researcher depending on the situation. As there are many subject perceptions associated with the theme and its knowledge, researcher needs to select the sample as diverse as possible. Thus, the sample selected by the researcher should have the capability to strengthen emerging knowledge by defining the properties of the categories representing the sample. It means that the sampling should be based on theoretically relevant constructs by representing real respondents to whom the knowledge is relevant and applied. Thus, the following steps are important to follow in this regard.

- Making initial decisions regarding specific individuals or group of people who have knowledge about the research problem.
- Analyzing initial data until theoretical ideas start to emerge and particular signs, objects and concepts arise.
- Choosing further participants, events or situations on the basis of theoretical ideas and concepts as revealed in the previous stage.

- Continuing the process until theoretical saturation is reached. Theoretical saturation is the matter of theorizing the events sufficiently until they come to a comprehensive end.

iii. Identification of signs behind the concept:

After designing the sample as explained above, respondents of the sample should be requested to highlight the signs behind the concept according to their real understanding. In the process of conceptualization or knowledge generation, signs of individual or group of people can play a major role as they indicate the mental pictures of people which are very important in constructing the concepts. Sign is anything that can be known or perceivable. It may also be cognizable or recognizable. Signs are studied by semiotics. It studies how meaning is constructed and understood by signs. According to the principles of semiotics, meaning is constructed by the development of objects that function as signs. It helps to expand conceptual and practical domain of qualitative research (Chandler, 2002).

As pointed out by Leeuwen (2005), a sign is anything that can be used to mean and it is a resource which has been drawn into the domain of social communication. Thus, it is the ways that people understand different phenomena and organize them mentally. After understanding different phenomena, how it is transmitted for sharing with others is emphasized by semiotics.

According to Peirce (1995), a sign is anything and not necessarily to be a written or pronounced word. In semiotics, it is not linguistics extending itself in order to comprehend other types of codes. According to Peirce (1995), it is the semiotics that studies all sign systems, including linguistic systems as well. Thus, written or pronounced word, symptom, signal, dream, letter, sentence etc. are considered as signs. Thus, the researcher needs to ask from all respondents of the sample to signify different signs established in their minds regarding the concept that we are going to construct. As some of the guidelines, the following matters can be examined regarding the concept that we are going to develop.

- What mental pictures they have regarding the concept
- What explanations they can give as sounds regarding the concept
- What text they can write as words or sentences to explain their mental pictures of the concept
- What mental sketches they can create and draw regarding the concept
- What cognitive images they have that can be transformed into sketches, text, sounds, words etc.

- What mental map they have about the concept
- What images they have in their mental world regarding the concept

Based on these different words, sketches, pictures, images, mental maps, sound etc. respondents of the sample must be allowed to signify their signs about the concept in different manner. For example, one can draw some mental map of the concept according to his mental setting. Another can draw a sketch about the concept according to his/her perception. Thus, these sketches, maps, words, sentences or whatever the signs are originated according to their mental setting which suits to create a better concept or concepts according to their real social and cultural structures.

iv. Construction of objects based on signs:

In many instances, signs cannot be seen in a tangible or visible manner. Therefore, it is essential to convert them into tangible format that should be given in object form. For this purpose, signs must be converted into object that is what the sign refers to or represents. A sign stands for an object and it can be perceptible or imaginable. Thus, without a sign it is impossible to know the object, as the sign refers to the object. On the contrary, object determines the sign but it exists apart from the sign. It means that an object exists independent of a sign, but it is cognizable only through a sign. In order to act a sign as active or potential sign, it has to be converted into an object. Thus, the transformation of the identified signs of the concept into objects could be done in the following manner.

What highlighted signs mean and refer to can be questioned from the subjects of the sample. It is one way of understanding about the signs that they highlight by asking and allowing them to interpret their meaning. Then the signs can be labeled by converting them into objects. For example, one person of the sample may have drawn a sketch about the concept. Another one may have drawn a picture or his/her mental map about the concept. Then we need to ask and know what such sketch, picture or mental map mean. Definitely respondents then highlight the meaning of their sketches, pictures, mental maps, texts, sounds etc. so that the researcher could be able to develop the qualities, features or characteristics of the concept in object form.

v. Construction of concepts based on objects:

Based on the signs highlighted relating to the concept, objects should be constructed by indicating what different signs mean or refer to. Thus, the final step of the conceptualization is to convert identified different objects into

concepts. A concept is an object type, understood as a kind of psychological entity that is shared by speakers, and which is a condition for determining a referent (on a particular occasion of using signs) or a category (across occasions of using signs) (Kockelman, 2004). Traditionally, the concepts were understood in terms of a set of necessary and sufficient features (Taylor, 1995). In contrast to classical understanding, modern theories of concepts are couched in terms of prototypes with the combination of salient features, indicators or dimensions abstracted from previously experienced instances. Thus, in the conceptualization process, features, indicators or dimensions of the identified objects must be highlighted to convert objects into the concepts. Here, it is essential to compare the similarities and dissimilarities of the features, indicators or dimensions emphasized by the subjects of the sample as the concern on similarity is very important to generalize the ultimate picture of the concept. It means that concept should not be an individual subject entity or feature and it should have the capability of representing the ideas or perceptions of majority of respondents of the sample.

vi. Conceptualization and comparison:

Final step of the process is the conceptualization of whatever the theme or matter explored by the respondents or the subject matters of the sample. Accordingly, the theme or matter researched is conceptualized in terms of the concepts generated by the objects. It means that the final conceptualization of the theme or matter is a set of concepts identified by the features, indicators or dimensions by which the objects were identified in the research process. That is the emerging knowledge generated from ground level by following inductive bottom up approach.

After generating concepts or knowledge, comparison can be done by examining similarities and dissimilarities of generated knowledge with existing knowledge particularly to confirm whether generated concepts are new or same as the knowledge so far addressed by the literature. This is important to get it confirmed the extent to which generated knowledge has contributed to fulfill the lacuna of existing knowledge. But that is not the main importance or purpose of this approach. The main purpose of this approach is to generate our own set of knowledge which is more suitable to our environment by emphasizing that the knowledge should be time and place specific and accordingly our research should focus.

Conclusion:

The above research process illustrated how to conceptualize a theme or matter by exploring it according to active participants views, ideas and perceptions by generating data and information at ground level. It is mainly associated with the principles of grounded theory, as the concepts are generated from ground level by the first-hand original data and information. As the knowledge is derived from the interpretations given by the subjects of the concerned matter, it is the most suitable and applicable approach at policy level, as it does not depend on others' knowledge. Thus, it is clear that this is not the deductive reasoning followed by the scientific positivism mainly based on others' concepts and knowledge. It is so interpretive as the knowledge relating to the study matter is generated according to real life experience of the subject matters of the sample. In the real sense, such conceptualization or knowledge generation is a product of social construct and not like scientific positivism it may vary across time and space by rejecting replicability and the universalism emphasized by the positivism and scientific method. It means that it depends on the way of conceptualizing by different people, societies and cultures.

Finally, we need to understand whether we are any further ready to depend on others' knowledge, which may be or may not be suitable to our own social and cultural structures. Someone may question about the quality, validity and the practicability of this approach without the knowledge so far developed but it is time for us to think why we attempt to apply forcibly some other knowledge which may not be suitable and inherent to us in many instances. Anyhow, the decision and the comments are open to the forum at plenary session.

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