

# The Role of Theory in Social Science Research (With special reference to Business and Management Studies)

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## ABSTRACT

*Theory is a backbone of research irrespective of the nature of research whether quantitative or qualitative. It is an overview about a phenomenon that explains how or why the phenomenon occurs. The application of theory in to these researches is different but both types researches accepted theory is a vital part of social science research. Social science is one of the extensive academic disciplines, mainly concerned with society and members of the society further it focus on the relationship among individuals within the society. It has many branches each branch is called as 'social science'. Economics is one of the main fields of social science and business and management is the subdivision of economics. The present study is mainly focus on the role of theory in these two specified studies. Most of the research reports in business and management incorporate appropriate theory in the report. As per the research methodology, the research report specifically allocates a separate heading for theory in introduction part or review of literature chapter.*

*The main objective of the study is to understand the role of theory in social science research with special reference to business and management studies. The other objectives of the study are to understand the concept of theory in social science research, to study the application of theory in different types of research and to understand the approaches of research and theory. In quantitative research the researchers test theories an explanation to answer the research questions. In qualitative research the researchers may generate theory as final outcome of the study. Theory is an overview about a phenomenon that explains how or why the phenomenon occurs.*

**Key word:** *Theory, quantitative research, qualitative research, deductive and inductive method.*

## 1. Introduction

Social science is an academic discipline focused on the study of the social life of individuals and human groups. This study mainly focuses on the fields of economics, political science, human geography, demography and sociology. In broader sense, social science also includes the field of humanities such as anthropology, archaeology, jurisprudence, psychology, history, and linguistics. Business and management are the sub classification of the field of economics, present study is mainly focus on the field of business and management related researches.

Theory is pillar for social science research; almost all category researches viz. thesis by higher degree, dissertation in masters and masters in course work, research report in undergraduate program, research report for grant etc. applies theory in the report. Theory which underpins research design or model therefore it is called as paradigm, it may provide understanding of the phenomenon under investigation as used a lens and it emerge new knowledge from the study. In general theory guides research and organize the ideas.

A research coming up with theories is the heart of the systematic development. Any observation of a phenomenon initiates an educated guess about what is causing and how it works. In the case of experiment form of research test the guess or hypothesis, if the guesses are accepted, a theory emerges. Some cases it answers why something is happening and also predict what should happen next.

An attempt is made to review few literatures in connection with application of theory in research. Alan Johnston, (2014), has presented a paper on "Rigour in research: theory in the research approach", the purpose of the research is to reexamine the significance of theory in research, further the study pointed out the role of theory is paramount to all research approaches especially in management studies. Bryman and Bell (2011) study indicates theory as observed realities, or observations around as and accepted by us. Theory leads research and informs what research is, further study focuses retrospective look at what basis theory and research constructed (Svensson, G., 2009). Another research conducted by Helen Haugh, (2012), review the importance of theory in social enterprise research and suggested better theories have the potential to improve practice. Walshaw (2012), stressed the importance of theory in research mentioned that use theory as a sharp instrument for interacting with data at a level beyond mere explanation.

## 2. Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study is to understand the role of theory in social science research with special reference to business and management studies. The other objectives of the study are as follows.

1. To understand the concept of theory in social science research
2. To study the application of theory in different types of research
3. To understand the approaches of research and theory (Deductive and inductive)

## 3. Concept of Theory

The term theory is a common phenomenon and it is applicable to all disciplines including business and management studies. The term theory is defined by Kaplan (1964) cited from the website, a theory is a way of making sense of distributing situation. Another meaning of term theory is as knowledge and it is body of interrelated proposition, statement and concepts subjected to empirical verification. Theories are partial part of research process and become self-corrective.

Theory is things to see and clarify any item in the domain that to see only because of that otherwise not see, or create confusing. Often theory tries to answer the question of 'why'. For example why are some people are leaders and others not. Thus, one characteristic of a theory is that it can be used as an explanation. One of theories of Leadership contributed by Stodgill Stodgill s' (1974) named as Traits and Skills theory – that the leadership is based on born with inherited traits and skills. The theory gives partial answer to a question about why few people become leader, because they have born inherited traits and skills. Now the researcher wants to know more than this in answer to the 'why' question. It is interesting to know what the mechanism to measure the traits possessed and how to measure the person possess the personality traits. Nevertheless, the inherited traits and leadership are connected does offer a solution to what would otherwise be a dilemma and is not understandable from direct common intelligence, both characteristics of good theory.

Theory using to generate ideas in this process it provides various characteristics are 1. Internally consistent than common sense: Theory does not contradict itself but the common sense contradicts itself, therefore the researchers trust the consistent theories rather than common sense in the research. 2. Consistent with existing facts than common sense: Theories are consistent with existing facts; the facts are constructed systematically through research process unlike common sense. 3. Make predictions: Theories helps to create predictions/hypotheses, in the quantitative research the researcher can test the predictions.

4. Provide individual facts in meaningful context: The individual evidences are viewed in broad sense as meaningful context. 5. Broad scope: Theories can be applied in to wide range situations, from a single theory; researchers can conduct so many studies. 6. Testable: The theories are scientifically testable and theories help to make predictions, and also can test the predictions systematically. 7. Verifiable, 8. Theories invite disagreement, alternative, and better explanations, 9. Theories can explain an effect but not a cause, 10. Theories can be disproven, 11. Constantly undergo revision and refinement, 12. Identify unit of analysis and 13. Identifying the independent and dependent variables

**4. Presentation of theory**

Researchers present their theories in the research reports through different format. According to John W. Creswell (2008) cited in the website stated that the presentation of theories is classified in to three forms are series of hypotheses, if-then statement and visual model.

The researchers present theories in the form of interconnected hypotheses. Theories are well established principle which predicts events in general terms but hypothesis is testable prediction about what is expected to happen in a study. On the basis of theory, predictions are constructed, hypothesis can be right or wrong, but theory is true and proved scientifically, the hypothesis has been verified, if the prediction is accepted it become theory. For example, Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory of motivation is a psychological theory based on fulfilling basic human needs in priority, ending in self-actualization. A study conducted by Taormina RJ, Gao JH (2013) presented Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory in to series of hypotheses are as follows.

H(1): The more the physiological needs are satisfied, the more the safety–security needs will be satisfied.

H(2): The more the safety–security needs are satisfied, the more the belongingness needs will be satisfied.

H(3): The more the belongingness needs are satisfied, the more the esteem needs will be satisfied.

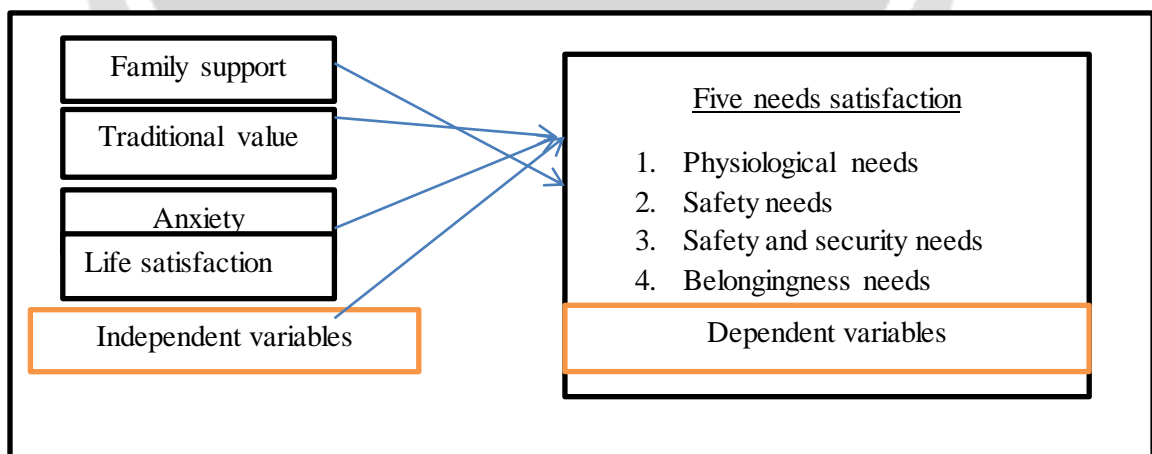
H(4): The more the esteem needs are satisfied, the more the self-actualization needs will be satisfied.

H(5): The more satisfied are people’s (a) physiological, (b) safety–security, (c) belongingness, (d) esteem, and (e) self-actualization needs, the more life satisfaction they will have.

A second way of stating theory is as a series of if-then statements that explain the effects that the independent variables have on the dependent variables. The same study has taken for the discussion, if the independent variables (family support, traditional value, anxiety and life satisfaction) to influence the dependent variables (five needs satisfaction: Physiological, Safety–security, Belongingness, Esteem and Self-actualization).

Third, the researcher may present a theory as a visual model. It is translate the variables in to a picture. The variables of the example study are presented in the following visual format.

**Figure 1 Visual Model of presentation of theory**



**5. Placement and Citation of theory**

Appropriate place for present theory in the research report is varying from one research report to another. Most of the studies indicate theory may present in Chapter 1 introduction and chapter 2 literature reviews. A general guide is to introduce theory in to introduction part, further in a literature review section, either a separate section in this

chapter or immediately after the presentation of hypotheses or research questions. Most of the research proposals include theory in a separate heading and provide sufficient explanation about theory. Such a separate passage helps to readers to understand the complete description of the theory section.

Citations support is an effective communication and specialist knowledge; it allows the author and readers to make specified selection among the several contexts at the same time. In general the researchers cite the original source of a theory. For example X and Y (2009) used the Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory as the theoretical frame wok in their research; the text citation would Maslow, A.H. (1943).

**6. Application of Theory in Research**

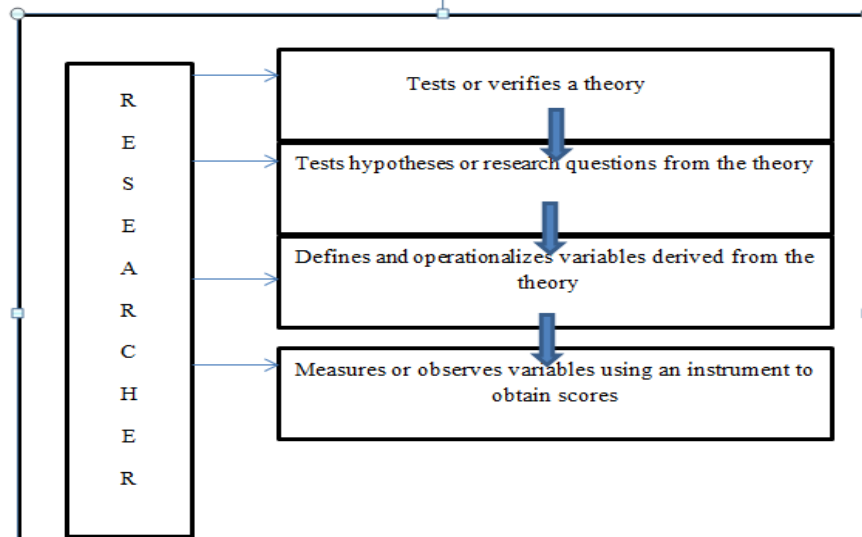
Theories are important tool in research; significantly application of theory is inevitable in all types of research. Systematic application of theory is helpful to understand the events, activities, behaviors and /or situations. According to Scott, Mathieu, Ayelet and Brian (2008) theory provides complex and comprehensive conceptual understanding of things; further theory gives different lenses to researchers to look at complicated problems, social issues focusing in their attention based on data providing a framework within which to conduct research. Application of theory is based on types of research. John W. Creswell (2008) carried out theory application in to three types of research namely qualitative research, quantitative research and mixed research.

**a. Application of theory in Quantitative Research**

Quantitative research is a systematic empirical investigation of observable data through statistical, mathematical or any other techniques. One of the objectives of quantitative research is to develop and employ theories pertaining to phenomena. The quantitative study is an inquiry based on testing a theory which comprises variables are measured through numbers and analyzed with statistical methods, in order to find out whether predictive generalization of theory is hold good/true.

In the quantitative research the theory becomes a framework for the entire study, it organizing model for research questions or hypotheses and for the data collection methods. The researchers tests or verifies the theory through examining hypotheses or research questions which derived from the theory. These hypotheses and research questions consist of variables, the researcher needs to define or explain the variables in the report further the researcher find out the acceptable definition for variables from the literature. In this place the researcher ascertains an appropriate research instrument to use to measuring attitudes or behavior or participants in the study. Then the researcher collects score from the instrument in numerical form and to confirm or disconfirm the theory. The quantitative study applies deductive model of thinking for testing the hypotheses, the deductive model is aimed and testing theory. John W. Creswell (2008) explains the sequence of steps in deductive approach applied in quantitative research, the sequence of activities is graphically plotted in figure 2.

Figure 2 Deductive model of thinking in Quantitative Research



**Source:** John W. Creswell (2008), [http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/22781\\_Chapter\\_3.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/22781_Chapter_3.pdf)

In general majority of the field of business and management apply the quantitative research and tests or verifies theory. These studies construct hypotheses through theory and test each hypothesis by applying mathematical or statistical techniques.

#### **b. Application of theory in Qualitative Research**

Qualitative research is also a common method of conducting research in different disciplines specifically in social science and market research (Denzin, Norman K.; Lincoln, Yvonna S., eds., 2005). Qualitative research is designed to reveal the specified focus group of audiences. It collects their perception, opinion, feelings and that drives it with specific topics or issues. It is an in-depth study of specified small group or entity and support the construction of hypotheses.

The data collection method of qualitative research is unstructured or semi-structured technique. The common method of data collection is group discussion with focus group, interviews with individual and observation with participations. Generally the sample size is small and respondents are selected to fulfill a given quota. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative research as relating to an interpretive naturalistic approach to the world. The qualitative researchers study things in their natural backgrounds, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.

The result of the qualitative study is descriptive rather than predictive. For example the enterprise wants to know the employees mind about their job satisfaction, need to conduct qualitative research. Conduct face to face interviews and collect their valuable insights about the organization. This research is not only to conduct the opinion of small group further it asks why they think this, and to understand their feelings and expectations.

According to Yin (1989), a popular method of qualitative research is case study method; it applies purposive samples to understand the phenomenon in better way. Braddock, et al., (1995) opined that the smaller but focused samples are better than larger samples, in the case of qualitative research, selected specific organization or event, even though, the study analyzed the concepts in depth manner.

Qualitative research use theory in their research in several ways, the usage of theory in qualitative research is classified in to four types are used for broad explanation of attitudes, used as theoretical perspective, used as inductive process and used as starting point for the research.

Qualitative research used the theory for the purpose of broad explanation for behavior and attitudes and it may be complete with variables, constructs and hypotheses. The second use of theory in qualitative research is considered as theoretical perspective, here theory used as encouragement outlook model that shapes the types of questions asked, informs how data collected and analyzed also call for action or change. The third form of use of theory in qualitative research is inductive method. According to Lancaster (2005), under the inductive method the hypotheses are not found at the initial stage of the research like deductive method and the researcher is not confirmed about the research findings until the study is completed. From this method no theory in the beginning of the study and theories may evolve at the end as a result of the research. Finally the qualitative studies do not apply explicit theory for the study, in which the inquiries attempt to create the importance of experience from participants; from the study the inquirer constructs a detailed description of phenomenon.

### **7. Conclusion**

The present study is an attempt to analyze the importance of theory in research in the point of view of business and management. Both quantitative and qualitative research requires theory for their research. In quantitative research deductive process used to test pre-specified concepts, hypotheses etc. that make up a theory, but in qualitative research inductive process applied for formulate theory or hypotheses. Quantitative research is based on numbers and statistical technique can apply. But the qualitative research is text based, generally no statistical technique. Presentation and citation of theory in the report is essential, the specified place of presenting theory and citation is discussed and detailed explanation has been provided in the research paper.



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