



Ontological and Epistemological Foundations of Qualitative Research: Implications for Social Science Inquiry

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Abstract

Qualitative research is widely used in the social sciences to explore human experiences, meanings, and social processes. Despite its widespread application, researchers sometimes employ qualitative methods without fully considering the philosophical assumptions that underpin them. Understanding these assumptions is essential because they shape how reality is conceptualised, how knowledge is produced, and how research is conducted. This article examines the ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research and explains how these foundations influence research design and methodological choices in social science inquiry. Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality and what can be known about the social world. In qualitative research, reality is commonly understood as multiple, socially constructed, and shaped through human interaction and context. Epistemology focuses on the nature of knowledge and the processes through which knowledge about the social world is generated. Within interpretivist and constructivist traditions, knowledge is viewed as emerging from the interaction between the researcher and participants rather than as an objective, independent truth. By clarifying these philosophical foundations, the article highlights the importance of aligning research paradigms, methodological approaches, and analytical strategies in qualitative studies. A clear understanding of ontological and epistemological assumptions enables researchers to design coherent qualitative research and strengthens the methodological rigour of social science inquiry.

Keywords qualitative research; ontology; epistemology; interpretivism; constructivism; research design; philosophical foundations; social science inquiry

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1. Introduction

Qualitative research has become an important approach within the social sciences for examining human experiences, meanings, and social processes. Researchers often use qualitative methods to understand how people interpret events, describe their experiences, and construct social realities within particular contexts. Rather than focusing on measurement and numerical analysis, qualitative research emphasises interpretation, context, and the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). For this reason, qualitative approaches are widely used in fields such as education, sociology, psychology, and migration studies, where researchers seek to explore complex social phenomena that cannot easily be reduced to numbers.

Although qualitative methods are widely used, their philosophical foundations are not always fully discussed or clearly understood. In many studies, researchers focus primarily on research design, data collection methods, or analytical procedures, while paying less attention to the philosophical assumptions that guide the research process. However, every research study is shaped by assumptions about the nature

of reality and about how knowledge can be produced. These assumptions influence how researchers define research problems, interpret participants' accounts, and explain their findings (Crotty, 1998; Maxwell, 2013). Without recognising these underlying assumptions, research methods may appear as technical procedures rather than as approaches that are grounded in particular ways of understanding the social world.

Within research methodology, these underlying assumptions are commonly discussed in terms of ontology and epistemology. Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality and what exists in the social world. It addresses questions such as whether reality is independent of human perception or is shaped by social interaction and interpretation. Epistemology, on the other hand, concerns the nature of knowledge and how knowledge about the social world can be generated. It focuses on questions about how researchers come to know what they claim to know and what counts as valid knowledge in a research context (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). Together, ontology and epistemology form the philosophical foundation that informs how research is conceptualised and conducted.

In qualitative research, reality is often understood as multiple and socially constructed. From this perspective, social phenomena are not fixed or universal but are shaped by human interaction, cultural contexts, and individual interpretations. People may experience and understand the same situation in different ways, and these different perspectives are considered meaningful sources of knowledge. As a result, qualitative research aims to explore how individuals interpret their experiences and how these interpretations are influenced by social and cultural contexts (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective contrasts with approaches that assume a single, objective reality that can be measured and explained independently of human interpretation.

Epistemologically, qualitative research is commonly associated with interpretivist and constructivist traditions. These traditions emphasise that knowledge is not simply discovered but developed through interaction between researchers and participants. Researchers do not stand completely outside the research process; instead, they interpret participants' accounts and construct meaning through dialogue, analysis, and reflection (Schwandt, 2014). From this perspective, knowledge is shaped by the research's social context and by the relationship between the researcher and those who participate in the study. Understanding this relationship is therefore an important part of qualitative inquiry.

Recognising these philosophical foundations is important for several reasons. First, ontological and epistemological assumptions guide the choice of research paradigm and methodological approach. Researchers who understand their philosophical position are better able to select methods that are consistent with their assumptions about reality and knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Second, clear engagement with research philosophy strengthens the transparency and coherence of qualitative studies. When researchers explain the assumptions guiding their work, readers can better understand how conclusions are reached and how interpretations are developed (Maxwell, 2013). Finally, engaging with these foundations helps researchers avoid treating qualitative methods simply as a set of techniques. Instead, qualitative research can be understood as a coherent approach grounded in particular ways of understanding the social world.

This article examines the ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research and discusses their significance for social science inquiry. The discussion focuses particularly on how interpretivist and constructivist perspectives shape qualitative research practices and methodological choices. By clarifying these philosophical foundations, the article aims to support researchers in developing more coherent qualitative studies and in understanding how research paradigms influence the production of knowledge within the social sciences.

2. Research Paradigms in Social Science Research

Research in the social sciences is guided by underlying philosophical assumptions that shape how researchers understand reality, knowledge, and the research process itself. These assumptions are commonly organised within what are known as research paradigms. A research paradigm can be

understood as a set of beliefs and principles that guide how research problems are approached, how data are interpreted, and how knowledge is produced (Kuhn, 1962; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In this sense, paradigms provide the broader intellectual framework within which research methods and analytical strategies are developed.

In social science research, paradigms play an important role by shaping how researchers conceptualise social phenomena. Different paradigms offer different ways of understanding reality and different assumptions about how knowledge can be generated. As a result, methodological choices are rarely neutral technical decisions; rather, they are shaped by the philosophical perspectives that guide the research process (Crotty, 1998; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Understanding these philosophical perspectives is therefore an important step toward developing coherent, methodologically sound research.

Two of the most discussed paradigms in social science research are positivism and interpretivism. Positivist traditions generally assume that reality exists independently of human perception and can be studied through objective observation and measurement. From this perspective, the role of research is to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and explain causal relationships through systematic analysis (Bryman, 2016). Positivist approaches have historically been influential in fields where researchers aim to produce generalisable findings through quantitative methods.

In contrast, interpretivist approaches emphasise that social reality is shaped through human interaction and interpretation. Rather than assuming a single objective reality, interpretivism recognises that individuals may understand and experience the social world differently. Researchers working within this paradigm aim to explore these meanings and interpretations to develop a deeper understanding of social experiences (Schwandt, 2014). As a result, interpretivist research often relies on qualitative methods that allow for the exploration of participants' perspectives and lived experiences in detail.

Closely related to interpretivism is the constructivist perspective, which emphasises that knowledge is developed through social processes and interaction. From a constructivist viewpoint, knowledge is not simply discovered but constructed through dialogue, interpretation, and engagement with participants' accounts. Researchers, therefore, play an active role in interpreting meanings and developing explanations of social phenomena (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This perspective highlights the importance of recognising the role of context, language, and social interaction in shaping both experiences and knowledge.

In qualitative research, interpretivist and constructivist paradigms are often particularly relevant because they provide a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences. Many qualitative studies aim to explore how people interpret events in their lives, how they describe their emotional or social experiences, and how these interpretations are influenced by cultural and social contexts. For example, research exploring migrants' emotional experiences or help-seeking practices in educational settings often relies on interpretivist approaches to understand how individuals interpret their situations within complex social environments (Isik, 2024a).

Recent qualitative research has also emphasised the importance of recognising how multiple social factors influence individual experiences. For instance, studies examining migrant experiences frequently highlight the role of language barriers, social expectations, and cultural norms in shaping how individuals express emotional difficulties and seek support (Isik, 2024b). These perspectives illustrate how qualitative research frameworks allow researchers to explore the interaction between personal experiences and broader social contexts.

Furthermore, qualitative inquiry increasingly recognises the importance of considering how knowledge is produced through the interaction between researchers and participants. In many qualitative studies, knowledge emerges through dialogue, interpretation, and reflexive engagement with participants' narratives. This process highlights that research findings are not simply neutral observations but interpretations that develop through the research relationship and analytical process (Isik, 2024c).

Recognising this relationship is an important part of understanding the philosophical foundations of qualitative inquiry.

Understanding research paradigms, therefore, provides an essential foundation for discussing the ontological and epistemological assumptions that shape qualitative research. By clarifying these paradigms, researchers can better explain the philosophical position guiding their work and ensure that their methodological choices are consistent with their understanding of reality and knowledge. The following sections, therefore, examine in greater detail the ontological and epistemological foundations that underpin qualitative research within interpretivist and constructivist traditions.

3. Ontological Foundations of Qualitative Research

Ontology refers to assumptions about the nature of reality and what exists in the social world. In research methodology, ontological questions focus on what kind of reality researchers believe they are studying and whether that reality exists independently of human perception. These assumptions influence how researchers conceptualise social phenomena and how they interpret research findings (Crotty, 1998; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For this reason, ontology is often considered one of the key philosophical foundations that guide research design and methodological choices.

In the social sciences, different ontological positions offer different ways of understanding social reality. One commonly discussed position is *realism*, which assumes that reality exists independently of human understanding and can be observed and explained through systematic investigation. From a realist perspective, social phenomena are treated as objective structures that exist regardless of how individuals perceive them. Researchers working within this view often aim to identify patterns and causal relationships that explain social events (Bhaskar, 1978; Bryman, 2016).

In contrast, many qualitative approaches are influenced by *relativist* or *constructionist ontologies*, which emphasise that social reality is shaped through human interaction and interpretation. From this perspective, reality is not viewed as a single fixed entity but as multiple and socially constructed. Individuals interpret events, relationships, and experiences in different ways, and these interpretations contribute to the formation of social reality itself (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Schwandt, 2014). Rather than seeking a single objective explanation, qualitative research aims to explore how different individuals understand and experience the social world.

The idea that reality is socially constructed is particularly influential within qualitative inquiry. According to social constructionist perspectives, meanings emerge through communication, social interaction, and shared cultural practices. People develop understandings of their experiences through language, relationships, and social contexts. As a result, qualitative researchers are often interested in exploring how individuals describe their experiences and how these descriptions reflect broader social and cultural influences (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Understanding these ontological assumptions is important because they shape how qualitative studies are designed and interpreted. If researchers assume that reality is socially constructed, the purpose of research is not to discover a single objective truth but to explore different perspectives and meanings. Researchers, therefore, focus on participants' experiences, narratives, and interpretations to understand how individuals make sense of their lives and social environments (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This ontological perspective is particularly relevant to research examining complex social experiences, such as migration, education, and emotional well-being. In such contexts, individuals may interpret their experiences differently depending on their personal histories, cultural backgrounds, and social environments. Qualitative research allows these different perspectives to be explored in depth, highlighting how meanings are shaped through lived experience and social interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Recent qualitative studies have also highlighted how migrants' experiences are shaped by multiple social and contextual factors, including language barriers, cultural expectations, and social support networks. Research exploring migrants' emotional experiences in educational environments, for example, has shown

that individuals may interpret emotional challenges and support systems differently depending on their cultural and social contexts (Isik, 2024a).

These findings illustrate how qualitative research approaches can capture the complexity of lived experiences that might not be fully understood through more structured forms of data collection.

Similarly, qualitative research examining inclusion and support in adult education settings has demonstrated that learners' experiences are influenced by a range of social and institutional factors. Studies focusing on adult ESOL environments, for instance, have shown how educational institutions can shape learners' sense of belonging, participation, and emotional well-being (Isik, 2024b). Such research reflects a constructionist ontological position, where social experiences are understood as emerging from interactions between individuals and the environments in which they participate.

Recognising the ontological foundations of qualitative research, therefore, helps researchers clarify how they understand social reality and how they approach the study of human experiences. Rather than treating social phenomena as fixed and measurable entities, qualitative inquiry often views reality as dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped through social interaction. This perspective allows researchers to explore how individuals construct meaning in their lives and how these meanings influence social behaviour and relationships.

Understanding ontology also provides an important bridge to epistemology, which focuses on how knowledge about the social world is produced. While ontology concerns assumptions about reality, epistemology addresses how researchers come to know that reality and how knowledge claims are justified. For this reason, ontological and epistemological assumptions are closely connected and together form the philosophical foundations that guide qualitative research. The following section, therefore, examines the epistemological perspectives that underpin qualitative inquiry.

4. Epistemological Foundations of Qualitative Research

While ontology focuses on assumptions about the nature of reality, epistemology addresses questions about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge about the social world can be generated. In research methodology, epistemology concerns how researchers come to know what they claim to know and what counts as valid knowledge within a particular research tradition. These assumptions influence how data are interpreted, how findings are explained, and how conclusions are justified within a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018). Understanding epistemological positions is therefore essential to ensuring that research methods are consistent with the broader philosophical assumptions guiding the study.

Within the social sciences, different epistemological perspectives propose different ways of understanding knowledge. Positivist traditions generally assume that knowledge can be obtained through objective observation and systematic measurement. From this perspective, researchers aim to minimise their influence on the research process and produce findings that are independent of personal interpretation (Bryman, 2016). However, many qualitative researchers argue that such assumptions are difficult to apply when studying complex social experiences, where meanings are shaped through interaction, language, and context.

In contrast, qualitative research is commonly associated with interpretivist and constructivist epistemologies, which emphasise that knowledge is developed through interpretation and interaction rather than discovered as an objective reality. Interpretivist perspectives highlight the importance of understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and how these interpretations shape social behaviour. Researchers working within this tradition, therefore, aim to explore participants' perspectives and the meanings they attach to their experiences (Schwandt & Gates, 2018).

Constructivist epistemology extends this perspective by emphasising that knowledge is actively produced through the interaction between researchers and participants. Rather than treating participants' accounts as direct representations of reality, constructivist approaches recognise that research findings are developed through dialogue, interpretation, and analytical reflection. In this sense, knowledge emerges

through the research process itself, shaped by the interaction between participants' experiences and researchers' interpretive engagement with those experiences (Charmaz, 2014; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018).

This perspective also highlights the importance of recognising the role of context in shaping knowledge production. Social experiences are influenced by cultural norms, institutional structures, and interpersonal relationships. As a result, knowledge generated through qualitative research is often understood as context-dependent rather than universally generalisable. Researchers, therefore, aim to develop rich, detailed interpretations that reflect the complexity of social experiences within particular settings (Tracy, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Another important aspect of qualitative epistemology concerns the role of the researcher in the research process. In positivist traditions, the researcher is often expected to remain detached and neutral. However, qualitative research recognises that complete neutrality is rarely possible when studying human experiences. Researchers inevitably bring their own perspectives, experiences, and interpretive frameworks to the research process. Rather than attempting to eliminate this influence, qualitative inquiry emphasises the importance of acknowledging and reflecting on the researcher's role in knowledge production (Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

Reflexivity, therefore, becomes an important epistemological practice in qualitative research. Reflexivity is the process by which researchers critically examine how their background, assumptions, and interactions with participants shape the research process and the interpretations that emerge from it. By engaging in reflexive reflection, researchers aim to increase transparency and strengthen the credibility of qualitative findings (Berger, 2015; Lincoln et al., 2018).

These epistemological perspectives are particularly relevant in research exploring complex social experiences such as migration, identity, and emotional well-being. In such contexts, participants' experiences cannot easily be understood through standardised measurements alone. Instead, researchers often rely on qualitative approaches that allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words and within their own social contexts. Studies examining migrants' emotional experiences, for example, have shown that individuals often interpret emotional challenges in ways that are shaped by cultural expectations, language barriers, and social relationships (Isik, 2024a).

Similarly, qualitative research focusing on inclusive educational environments has demonstrated that learners' experiences of support and belonging are shaped through everyday interactions within institutional contexts. In adult ESOL settings, for instance, learners' perceptions of inclusion, participation, and emotional support are often influenced by classroom dynamics, institutional practices, and wider social expectations (Isik, 2024b). These findings highlight how qualitative research approaches allow researchers to explore the interaction between individual experiences and broader social structures.

Recent qualitative research also emphasises the importance of recognising how knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue and interpretation. In studies exploring emotional support and well-being among migrant learners, knowledge about participants' experiences often emerges from reflective conversations and the interpretive analysis of their narratives (Isik, 2024c). Such approaches illustrate how qualitative research does not simply collect information but actively interprets participants' accounts in order to develop deeper understandings of social phenomena.

Understanding these epistemological foundations is therefore essential for designing coherent qualitative research. When researchers clearly articulate their epistemological position, they can better explain how knowledge is generated within their studies and how interpretations are developed through the research process. This clarity enhances the transparency and credibility of qualitative inquiry and helps ensure that methodological choices align with the philosophical assumptions guiding the research.

The discussion of epistemological foundations also highlights how qualitative research differs from approaches that prioritise objectivity and measurement. Rather than seeking universal explanations, qualitative inquiry aims to develop contextualised understandings of human experiences and social

processes. This perspective emphasises interpretation, reflexivity, and engagement with participants' perspectives as central elements of knowledge production. The following section, therefore, examines how these ontological and epistemological assumptions influence methodological choices and research design in qualitative studies.

5. Implications for Qualitative Methodology and Research Design

The ontological and epistemological assumptions discussed in the previous sections have important implications for the design and conduct of qualitative research. These philosophical foundations influence not only how researchers understand social reality and knowledge, but also how they select research strategies, data-collection methods, and analytical approaches. In qualitative inquiry, methodological decisions are therefore closely connected to the researcher's assumptions about reality and knowledge (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

In research methodology, the term methodology refers to the overall strategy and reasoning that guide the research process, while methods refer to the specific techniques used to collect and analyse data. Understanding this distinction is important because methodological choices should be consistent with the study's philosophical assumptions (Flick, 2018). For example, if researchers adopt a constructionist ontological position and an interpretivist epistemological perspective, they are likely to choose research approaches that allow participants' perspectives and meanings to be explored in depth.

Qualitative research methodologies such as phenomenology, grounded theory, and narrative inquiry are commonly used within interpretivist and constructivist research traditions. These methodological approaches guide how researchers conceptualise social experiences and structure the research process. Within these approaches, researchers typically use data collection methods such as interviews, focus groups, observations, and document analysis in order to explore participants' perspectives and lived experiences in depth (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analytical approaches such as thematic analysis are then used to interpret the data and identify patterns of meaning across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

These qualitative approaches assume that social experiences are best understood through close engagement with participants' perspectives and interpretations. Rather than focusing on measurement or numerical patterns, qualitative researchers aim to understand how individuals interpret events in their lives and how these interpretations are shaped by social and cultural contexts. By examining participants' narratives, researchers can develop deeper insights into how people make sense of their experiences and how meanings are constructed within particular social environments (Tracy, 2020; Flick, 2018).

An important implication of interpretivist and constructivist perspectives is the emphasis placed on participants' voices and lived experiences. Qualitative research aims to provide space for participants to describe their experiences in their own words and to reflect the meanings they attach to those experiences. As a result, qualitative studies often yield rich, detailed accounts that highlight the complexity of social life and the diversity of human perspectives (Tracy, 2020).

At the same time, qualitative methodology recognises that the research process involves interpretation. Researchers analyse participants' accounts, identify patterns of meaning, and develop explanations of social phenomena through systematic interpretation of the data. Analytical approaches such as reflexive thematic analysis emphasise that themes are not simply discovered within the data but developed through the researcher's engagement with participants' narratives and through the interpretive process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This perspective reflects the epistemological assumption that knowledge is constructed through interaction between researchers, participants, and the research context.

Another important implication concerns the role of reflexivity in qualitative research design. Since qualitative researchers actively interpret data, reflecting on the researcher's position is an essential part of the research process. Reflexivity involves examining how researchers' backgrounds, assumptions, and experiences may influence data collection, interpretation, and the development of findings. Engaging in

reflexive reflection increases transparency and strengthens the credibility of qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

Context also plays a central role in qualitative methodology. Unlike research approaches that aim to produce universally generalisable findings, qualitative studies often focus on understanding social phenomena within specific cultural, institutional, or social environments. Researchers, therefore, aim to provide detailed descriptions of the research context to help readers understand how interpretations are shaped by specific settings and social conditions (Flick, 2018).

These methodological considerations are particularly relevant in research exploring complex social issues such as migration, education, and emotional well-being. Studies examining migrants' experiences in educational environments, for instance, often rely on qualitative approaches because they allow researchers to explore how individuals interpret their experiences of adaptation, belonging, and support within new social contexts. Research focusing on migrant learners in adult ESOL settings has shown that experiences of emotional well-being and support are shaped by multiple factors, including language barriers, institutional practices, and cultural expectations (Isik, 2024a).

Similarly, qualitative research exploring inclusive educational practices highlights how learners' experiences of participation and support are influenced by interactions within educational environments. Studies examining support systems in adult learning contexts suggest that emotional well-being and social inclusion are often shaped through everyday relationships and classroom interactions rather than through formal institutional structures alone (Isik, 2024b).

Recent qualitative work has also emphasised the importance of culturally responsive and context-sensitive approaches when exploring emotional support and wellbeing among migrant learners. Research suggests that understanding participants' cultural and social backgrounds is essential for interpreting how individuals express emotional difficulties and seek support within educational settings (Isik, 2024c). Such findings demonstrate how qualitative research methodologies can provide deeper insights into the social and cultural dimensions of human experience.

Taken together, these methodological implications highlight the importance of aligning the research design with the ontological and epistemological assumptions that guide the study. When researchers clearly articulate these foundations, they are better able to justify their methodological choices and explain how their research contributes to broader social science knowledge. Recognising the relationship between philosophical assumptions and research practice, therefore, strengthens the coherence, transparency, and credibility of qualitative inquiry.

6. The Relationship Between Ontology, Epistemology, and Methodology in Qualitative Research

A central principle in research methodology is that philosophical assumptions, methodological strategies, and research practices should be conceptually aligned. In qualitative research, this alignment is particularly important because how researchers understand reality and knowledge directly influences how studies are designed and conducted. Ontology, epistemology, and methodology therefore form an interconnected framework that guides the overall logic of qualitative inquiry (Crotty, 1998; Scotland, 2012). When these elements are clearly articulated and coherently connected, qualitative studies become more transparent and analytically robust.

The relationship between these components can be understood as a sequence of conceptual decisions that shape the research process. Ontology addresses assumptions about what kind of social reality exists, while epistemology focuses on how knowledge about that reality can be produced. Methodology then translates these philosophical assumptions into a practical research strategy that determines how a study is organised, how participants are engaged, and how interpretations are developed. This connection between philosophical assumptions and research practice is widely recognised as a key feature of rigorous qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Importantly, methodological choices should not be treated as isolated technical decisions. Instead, they should reflect the broader philosophical perspective guiding the study. For example, researchers who assume that social reality is shaped through human interaction often adopt research approaches that allow participants to describe their experiences in their own terms. In such cases, research strategies are designed to capture interpretive accounts, contextual explanations, and the meanings individuals attribute to their experiences. This alignment between philosophical assumptions and methodological practice helps ensure that the research design remains conceptually consistent (Flick, 2018).

The relationship between ontology, epistemology, and methodology also influences how researchers approach interpretation. In qualitative inquiry, interpretation is not simply a final stage of analysis but a process that shapes the entire research design. Researchers interpret how research questions are framed, how participants' accounts are understood, and how analytical insights are developed. Recognising this interpretive dimension highlights the importance of methodological transparency, as readers must be able to understand how interpretations were reached and how analytical decisions were made throughout the research process (Tracy, 2020).

Another important aspect of this relationship concerns the role of research paradigms. Paradigms provide an overarching framework that connects philosophical assumptions with research practices. They help researchers position their studies within particular intellectual traditions and clarify how knowledge is understood within those traditions. When researchers explicitly situate their work within a research paradigm, it becomes easier to explain why certain methodological approaches are chosen and how findings contribute to broader theoretical discussions within the social sciences (Scotland, 2012).

Conceptual alignment between philosophical foundations and methodological choices is particularly important in qualitative research, as these studies often involve interpretive engagement with complex social experiences. Without clear alignment, research designs may appear fragmented or theoretically inconsistent. For instance, a study that adopts constructionist assumptions about social reality but relies on methodological strategies that assume fixed and measurable social structures may struggle to provide a coherent explanation of its findings. Ensuring conceptual coherence helps avoid such inconsistencies and strengthens the overall credibility of qualitative inquiry (Flick, 2018).

Another dimension of this relationship involves the role of research questions. Research questions function as a bridge between philosophical assumptions and methodological decisions. They guide the study's focus while reflecting the type of knowledge the researcher seeks to generate. Qualitative research questions often aim to explore how individuals experience, interpret, or understand particular social phenomena. As a result, research designs are structured to allow detailed exploration of participants' perspectives and the contexts in which these perspectives emerge (Maxwell, 2013).

This relationship also shapes how qualitative researchers approach rigour. In qualitative inquiry, rigour is not evaluated solely through statistical reliability or replicability. Instead, credibility, transparency, and conceptual coherence are often considered more appropriate indicators of research quality. When researchers clearly explain how philosophical assumptions inform their methodological choices, readers are better able to understand how conclusions were developed and how interpretations relate to the broader research framework (Tracy, 2020).

Recent qualitative scholarship has increasingly emphasised the importance of explicitly discussing these philosophical relationships within research publications. Transparent engagement with ontology, epistemology, and methodology allows readers to evaluate the conceptual foundations of a study and understand how interpretations were developed. This level of clarity also contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of qualitative research in addressing complex social issues within contemporary social science scholarship (Flick, 2018).

Studies exploring migrants' experiences in educational contexts illustrate how this alignment can strengthen qualitative research design. Research examining emotional well-being and support among migrant learners often requires approaches that allow individuals to explain their experiences in relation

to language, identity, and social belonging. When philosophical assumptions about socially constructed experiences are clearly connected to interpretive methodological strategies, researchers are better able to capture the complexity of these lived experiences (Isik, 2024a). Such alignment supports the development of nuanced interpretations that reflect both individual perspectives and the broader social environments in which these experiences occur.

Similarly, qualitative investigations of inclusive educational environments benefit from methods that acknowledge the roles of social interaction and institutional context. Studies examining adult ESOL classrooms, for instance, demonstrate that learners' experiences of participation and emotional support are closely linked to classroom dynamics, relationships with teachers, and opportunities for social engagement within learning communities (Isik, 2024b). Research designs that integrate philosophical reflection with methodological planning are therefore better positioned to explore these multifaceted experiences.

In addition, qualitative studies exploring emotional support and well-being among migrant learners often highlight the importance of culturally sensitive research approaches. Understanding how individuals interpret emotional difficulties and coping strategies requires attention to cultural beliefs, social relationships, and community practices. When research designs incorporate these contextual considerations, qualitative inquiry can provide deeper insight into how individuals navigate complex social and emotional environments (Isik, 2024c).

Overall, the relationship among ontology, epistemology, and methodology serves as a central organising principle in qualitative research. Recognising this relationship enables researchers to develop studies that are philosophically grounded, methodologically coherent, and analytically transparent. By aligning philosophical assumptions with research practices, qualitative researchers can produce interpretations that offer meaningful insights into the complexity of human experiences and social processes.

7. Contemporary Debates in Qualitative Research Philosophy

Qualitative research has expanded significantly across the social sciences in recent decades. As its use has increased, scholars have engaged in ongoing debates about the philosophical foundations, methodological standards, and evaluative criteria of qualitative inquiry. These discussions reflect the evolving nature of qualitative research and highlight the importance of continuously examining how knowledge is produced and interpreted within social science research. Contemporary debates often focus on issues such as research rigour, transparency, the role of the researcher, and the relationship between qualitative and quantitative traditions (Tracy, 2020; Flick, 2018).

One of the most prominent debates concerns how the quality and credibility of qualitative research should be evaluated. Traditional scientific standards such as reliability, validity, and replicability were originally developed within positivist research traditions. Some scholars have questioned whether these criteria can adequately assess research that aims to interpret meaning and explore context-dependent social experiences. As a result, qualitative researchers have proposed alternative criteria that are more consistent with interpretive approaches to knowledge production. Concepts such as credibility, transparency, reflexivity, and analytical coherence are often used to assess the quality of qualitative studies (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Another important discussion concerns the level of methodological transparency expected in qualitative research. In recent years, journals and research institutions have increasingly emphasised the need for clear explanations of research design, data analysis, and interpretive decisions. Providing detailed descriptions of the research process helps readers understand how the findings were developed and allows them to evaluate the analysis's logic. Transparent methodological reporting has therefore become an important component of qualitative research practice, particularly in interdisciplinary fields where diverse research traditions coexist (Flick, 2018).

A related debate focuses on the role of reflexivity within qualitative inquiry. Scholars widely acknowledge that researchers actively interpret qualitative data. However, discussions continue regarding how

reflexivity should be incorporated into research practice and how researchers should represent their positionality within academic writing. Some researchers emphasise the importance of explicitly discussing their perspectives and experiences in order to enhance transparency. Others argue that reflexivity should remain analytically focused, ensuring that reflections on the researcher's role contribute meaningfully to data interpretation rather than becoming overly descriptive narratives (Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

Contemporary qualitative scholarship has also engaged with discussions about methodological diversity. Qualitative research now encompasses a wide range of methodological traditions, analytical strategies, and theoretical perspectives. Scholars have highlighted the importance of recognising this diversity rather than treating qualitative research as a single uniform approach. Different qualitative methodologies may emphasise different forms of knowledge production, analytical procedures, and research aims. Acknowledging this diversity allows researchers to select the most appropriate approaches for the research questions and social phenomena under investigation (Flick, 2018).

Another ongoing debate concerns the relationship between qualitative and quantitative research traditions. Earlier methodological discussions often presented these approaches as fundamentally different or even incompatible. However, more recent scholarship increasingly recognises that qualitative and quantitative research can provide complementary forms of knowledge. While quantitative approaches often focus on identifying patterns across large datasets, qualitative research offers detailed insight into how individuals interpret their experiences and how social meanings develop within particular contexts. This recognition has encouraged the growth of mixed-methods research, in which qualitative and quantitative methods are combined to provide a more comprehensive understanding of social phenomena (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

In addition, contemporary discussions in qualitative research philosophy emphasise the importance of addressing complex and rapidly changing social issues. Social scientists are increasingly studying phenomena shaped by global mobility, technological change, and cultural diversity. These developments require research approaches capable of examining context-dependent experiences and evolving social relationships. Qualitative research provides important tools for exploring such issues by allowing researchers to examine how individuals interpret their experiences within changing social environments (Tracy, 2020).

Research focusing on migration and education illustrates how qualitative approaches contribute to these contemporary discussions. Studies examining migrants' experiences in educational settings highlight how emotional well-being, identity, and social belonging are shaped through interactions within institutional and cultural contexts. Qualitative research enables scholars to explore how individuals navigate new environments, interpret social expectations, and seek support within educational systems (Isik, 2024a).

Similarly, qualitative investigations of inclusive educational practices emphasise the importance of understanding learners' perspectives when examining participation and support within educational institutions. Research conducted in adult ESOL contexts suggests that emotional well-being and integration are influenced by classroom relationships, language development, and opportunities for meaningful engagement within learning environments (Isik, 2024b). These findings demonstrate how qualitative approaches contribute to broader discussions about educational inclusion and social participation.

Recent qualitative research has also emphasised the value of culturally responsive approaches when exploring emotional support and wellbeing among migrant learners. Studies indicate that individuals' interpretations of emotional difficulties and coping strategies are often shaped by cultural beliefs, social expectations, and community networks. Qualitative research can therefore provide important insights into how culturally sensitive support systems can be developed within educational and community contexts (Isik, 2024c).

Overall, contemporary debates within qualitative research philosophy highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of qualitative inquiry. Discussions about research quality, transparency, reflexivity, and methodological diversity reflect broader efforts to strengthen the conceptual foundations of qualitative

research while responding to new social challenges. Engaging with these debates enables researchers to refine their methodological approaches and to contribute to ongoing discussions about how social science research can best understand and interpret complex human experiences.

8. Discussion

This article has examined the ontological and epistemological foundations of qualitative research and considered how these philosophical assumptions shape research practices in the social sciences. The discussion highlights that qualitative inquiry cannot be understood solely as a collection of research techniques. Rather, it represents a coherent approach to knowledge production grounded in assumptions about reality, knowledge, and the interpretation of human experience. Recognising these philosophical foundations is therefore essential for developing rigorous and conceptually consistent qualitative research.

One of the central arguments of this article is that ontological and epistemological assumptions influence every stage of the research process. Researchers' views about the nature of reality shape how research problems are framed, how participants' experiences are interpreted, and how conclusions are presented. When researchers assume that social reality is multiple and shaped through social interaction, research aims to explore how individuals interpret and experience the social world rather than to identify a single objective explanation of social phenomena. Such assumptions are consistent with interpretivist and constructivist traditions, which emphasise the importance of understanding meaning, context, and lived experience within social research (Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

The discussion also highlights the importance of epistemological clarity in qualitative research. When researchers explicitly articulate their assumptions about knowledge production, it becomes easier to understand how interpretations emerge from the research process. Qualitative inquiry recognises that knowledge is not produced solely through detached observation but develops through interaction among researchers, participants, and the social contexts in which research takes place. This perspective emphasises interpretation, reflexive engagement, and contextual understanding as key components of knowledge generation (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Another important point concerns the relationship between philosophical assumptions and methodological choices. When ontology and epistemology are clearly defined, methodological decisions become more transparent and logically consistent. For example, interpretivist and constructivist positions typically encourage research approaches that allow participants to describe their experiences in their own terms and within their social contexts. Methods such as interviews, narrative accounts, and qualitative observations are particularly useful in such studies because they provide access to the meanings individuals attach to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Analytical strategies are then used to interpret these accounts and develop conceptual insights into the social processes being studied.

The discussion also emphasises the role of reflexivity as an important element of qualitative inquiry. Since researchers are actively involved in interpreting participants' narratives, reflecting on the researcher's position is a key methodological consideration. Reflexivity encourages researchers to examine how their assumptions, experiences, and interactions with participants may influence the research process and the interpretations that emerge from it. This reflective engagement helps strengthen transparency and credibility within qualitative research (Berger, 2015; Tracy, 2020).

In contemporary social science research, qualitative approaches are increasingly used to explore complex, context-dependent social phenomena. Issues such as migration, identity formation, educational participation, and emotional well-being often involve experiences that are shaped by cultural, social, and institutional contexts. Qualitative research provides valuable tools for examining how individuals interpret these experiences and how social meanings develop within particular environments (Flick, 2018). For example, research exploring migrants' emotional experiences in educational settings has shown that emotional challenges are often interpreted through cultural expectations, social relationships, and language barriers (Isik, 2024a).

Similarly, qualitative studies examining inclusive educational practices have highlighted how learners' sense of belonging and participation develop through everyday interactions within educational institutions. Research conducted in adult ESOL contexts demonstrates that emotional well-being and social integration are closely connected to classroom relationships, institutional support structures, and opportunities for meaningful participation in learning environments (Isik, 2024b). These findings illustrate how qualitative approaches allow researchers to capture the complexity of social experiences that might not be visible through more structured forms of research.

Recent work has also emphasised the importance of culturally responsive approaches when exploring emotional well-being among migrant learners. Qualitative research can provide deeper insight into how individuals interpret emotional difficulties and support systems within the cultural and social contexts in which they live. Studies focusing on migrant learners' experiences suggest that understanding cultural beliefs, language practices, and community relationships is essential for interpreting how emotional support is sought and experienced in educational settings (Isik, 2024c). Such findings highlight the contribution that qualitative research can make to broader discussions about social inclusion and educational support.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that qualitative research is grounded in a coherent philosophical framework that connects ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Understanding these relationships allows researchers to design studies that are conceptually consistent and methodologically transparent. Engaging with these philosophical foundations also deepens the interpretive depth of qualitative inquiry and supports research that provides meaningful insight into complex social experiences.

9. Conclusion

This article has examined the ontological and epistemological foundations that underpin qualitative research and considered how these philosophical assumptions influence social science inquiry. The discussion has highlighted that qualitative research is not merely a set of techniques for collecting and analysing data. Instead, it represents a coherent approach to understanding social phenomena that is grounded in particular assumptions about the nature of reality, the production of knowledge, and the interpretation of human experience.

The analysis has shown that ontology and epistemology play a central role in shaping qualitative research. Ontological assumptions influence how researchers conceptualise social reality and interpret individuals' experiences within specific contexts. When researchers adopt the view that social reality is multiple and socially constructed, research shifts from seeking universal explanations to exploring how individuals interpret their experiences within particular social environments. Such perspectives are closely associated with interpretivist and constructivist traditions, which emphasise the importance of understanding meanings, perspectives, and contextual influences in social research (Schwandt & Gates, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

Epistemological assumptions further shape how knowledge is produced within qualitative research. Rather than viewing knowledge as something that can be discovered through detached observation, qualitative inquiry recognises that knowledge emerges through interpretation and interaction. Researchers engage with participants' accounts, analyse narratives, and develop interpretations that reflect the complexity of social experiences. This interpretive process highlights that knowledge in qualitative research is shaped through the interaction between participants, researchers, and the broader social context in which research takes place (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2018; Flick, 2018).

The article has also emphasised that methodological decisions in qualitative research are closely connected to these philosophical assumptions. When researchers clearly articulate their ontological and epistemological positions, they are better able to justify their methodological choices and explain how their research contributes to knowledge within the social sciences. This alignment between philosophical foundations and research design strengthens the coherence and transparency of qualitative studies. It also helps readers understand how interpretations are developed and how conclusions are reached.

In contemporary social science research, qualitative approaches are increasingly used to examine complex and context-dependent issues such as migration, education, social inclusion, and emotional well-being. These topics often involve experiences that cannot be easily understood from numerical data alone. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore how individuals interpret their experiences, how meanings are shaped through cultural and social contexts, and how social relationships influence personal experiences. Studies exploring migrants' experiences in educational environments, for example, have demonstrated that emotional challenges and support systems are often shaped by language barriers, cultural expectations, and institutional contexts (Isik, 2024a).

Research examining inclusive practices within adult education has similarly highlighted the importance of social interaction and supportive learning environments in shaping learners' experiences of belonging and participation. Qualitative studies conducted in adult ESOL settings show that emotional well-being and integration are often connected to classroom relationships, access to support networks, and opportunities for meaningful engagement in learning communities (Isik, 2024b). Such findings demonstrate how qualitative approaches can provide valuable insights into the lived experiences of individuals navigating complex social environments.

Furthermore, qualitative research can deepen understanding of culturally sensitive approaches to emotional support and well-being. Research exploring migrant learners' experiences suggests that emotional coping strategies and help-seeking behaviours are often influenced by cultural beliefs, social expectations, and community relationships. Understanding these contextual factors is essential for developing supportive educational environments and inclusive social policies (Isik, 2024c).

Overall, this article has emphasised the importance of engaging with the philosophical foundations of qualitative research. Recognising the relationships between ontology, epistemology, and methodology allows researchers to design studies that are conceptually coherent and methodologically transparent. Such engagement also strengthens the credibility of qualitative inquiry and supports the development of research that provides meaningful insight into complex social experiences. By clarifying these philosophical foundations, qualitative researchers can contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of human experience in the social sciences.

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