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Qualitative Research Approaches and Data Collection Methods: Understanding Meaning and Experience

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Abstract— *Qualitative research aims to explore and understand how individuals make sense of their experiences and the social world around them. Unlike quantitative research, which focuses on measurement and generalisation, qualitative inquiry values depth, context, and human meaning (Creswell and Poth, 2018). This paper outlines the primary approaches and data collection methods employed in qualitative research, illustrating how philosophical assumptions influence the design of inquiry. It discusses key qualitative approaches, including phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, narrative inquiry, case study, and participatory action research, each offering a distinct way to study human experience. The article also examines the most common data collection methods, interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis, and visual or digital tools, highlighting their role in generating rich and authentic data. Finally, it argues that qualitative research is guided by interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, where knowledge is co-created through a process of reflection and interpretation between the researcher and the participant (Schwandt, 2015; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). This discussion lays the groundwork for the subsequent section, which examines the philosophical foundations and methodological principles of qualitative inquiry.*

Keywords— ***qualitative research, research approaches, research design, data collection methods, interpretivism, constructivism, narrative inquiry, paradigm, and philosophical assumptions.***

I. INTRODUCTION

Every research study begins with certain ideas about the world and about knowledge. These ideas are referred to as philosophical assumptions or worldviews, which guide researchers in planning and conducting their studies (Creswell and Poth, 2018). They act like a pair of glasses; different beliefs make researchers see reality in different ways. For example, some believe that truth is one and can be measured; others believe that truth is multiple and depends on personal experience. These beliefs shape every step of a research project, from how questions are asked to how results are understood (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Since philosophical beliefs influence how knowledge is created, they naturally guide researchers in selecting an appropriate research approach that aligns with their worldview and study objectives.

A *research approach* is a broad way of doing research, and it depends on what the researcher wants to learn. There are three main approaches: *quantitative, qualitative*, and *mixed methods* (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

- In a *quantitative approach*, the focus is on numbers, measurement, and testing ideas. For example, a researcher may study how much students' motivation to learn English increases after using a new mobile app.
- In a *qualitative approach*, the focus is on meanings and experiences. The researcher may conduct interviews with students to explore their experiences with the app and understand why it is helpful or not.
- In a *mixed methods approach*, both numbers and words are combined. The researcher may collect survey data and then conduct interviews with students to gain a deeper understanding of the reasons behind the results.

Each approach helps answer different kinds of questions and offers a distinct way of understanding the world (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018). To understand why researchers choose certain approaches, it is essential to examine the underlying beliefs that inform their decisions. These beliefs form what is called a research paradigm. Before choosing a research design or tools, the researcher must decide on a *research paradigm.* A paradigm is a worldview; a general way of thinking about reality, knowledge, and values (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). It explains what the researcher believes to be true, how knowledge is acquired, and what values shape and guide the study. For example:

- The *positivist paradigm* assumes that there is one reality that can be measured objectively. It fits well with quantitative studies.
- The *interpretivist* or *constructivist paradigm* assumes that there are many realities, shaped by people's experiences and interactions. It supports qualitative studies.
- The *pragmatic paradigm* focuses on what works best to answer a question, often combining methods from both traditions.

Each paradigm contains *philosophical assumptions* that describe how the researcher sees and studies the world (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These include:

- *Ontology* – what is real (one truth or many truths)
- *Epistemology* – how we know and understand the world (through measurement or interaction)
- *Axiology* – what values and ethics guide the research
- *Methodology* – what process or logic is used to gain knowledge (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

To sum up, *a paradigm is* the *broad worldview* or belief system that guides the researcher.
→ It answers: *"How does the researcher see the world and knowledge?"*
→ It shapes everything — approach, design, and methods.

- *Philosophical Assumptions* = the *core beliefs* that make up that paradigm.
  → They are the inner parts of the paradigm — what the paradigm is built on.
  → They answer:
    - **Ontology:** What is reality?
    - **Epistemology:** How do we know it?
    - **Axiology:** What values matter?
    - **Methodology:** How do we find out?

For example, a qualitative researcher studying students' motivation to learn English believes that each student's experience is unique (ontology), that knowledge is created through conversation and reflection (epistemology), that emotions and values matter (axiology), and that interviews or stories are the best way to explore meanings (methodology).

In this example, the researcher operates within an interpretivist paradigm, which emphasises understanding individual meanings and lived experiences rather than seeking a single universal truth.

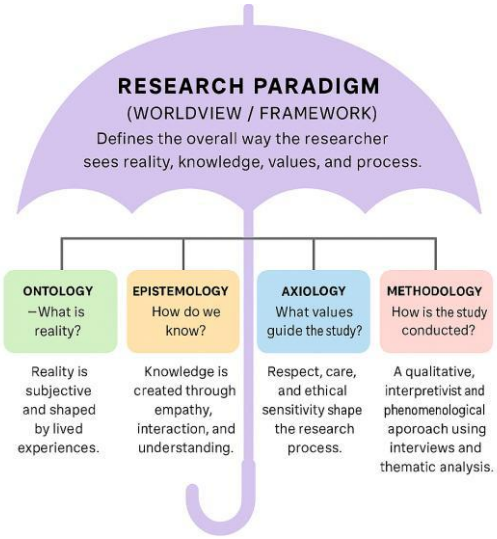

Fig.1: Relationship Between Research Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions, all four of them, are mini worldviews. They are combined into a coherent worldview (paradigm).

This figure illustrates how the research paradigm serves as an umbrella, connecting four key philosophical assumptions: ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. Together, these elements form the researcher's worldview and shape how reality, knowledge, values, and research processes are approached within this qualitative, interpretivist study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Clarifying the Relationship Between Paradigm and Philosophical Assumptions

A research *paradigm* is the overall perspective a researcher adopts to view and understand the world. It includes four main *philosophical assumptions* (ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology). These four beliefs collectively form the paradigm. In practice, the paradigm also guides the use of these assumptions in the study.

Thus, the relationship is reciprocal; the assumptions shape the paradigm, and the paradigm, in turn, influences how the study is designed and carried out (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Once the researcher's philosophical stance and paradigm are established, these beliefs guide the development of a suitable *research design* that connects theory with practical steps of data collection and analysis. A *research design* is the overall plan or structure for conducting a study. It shows how the researcher will collect and analyse data to answer the research questions (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, common designs include *phenomenology*, *case study*, *ethnography*, *grounded theory*, *narrative inquiry*, and *action research*. In quantitative research, designs such as *experiments*, *surveys*, or *correlational studies* are often used. The design links the researcher's worldview (paradigm) with the practical steps of data collection and analysis (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

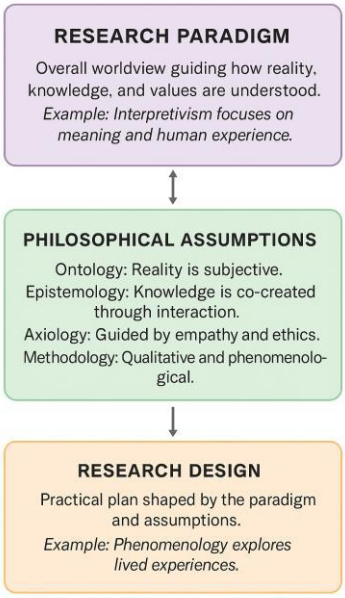

Fig.2: Paradigm–Assumptions–Design Relationship

This figure illustrates the interconnection between the research paradigm, philosophical assumptions, and research design. It shows that the paradigm provides the overall worldview that both shapes and is refined by the philosophical assumptions (↕), while together they inform and guide the research design. This reciprocal and integrated structure ensures that the study's philosophical stance, methodological choices, and practical strategies remain coherent and aligned throughout the research process (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

It is essential to recognise that research design and research methods or tools are distinct concepts. The *design* is the big picture that explains *how* the study will be organised. The *methods* are the specific techniques used to collect information, such as interviews, surveys, or observations (Flick, 2018). For example, in a qualitative case study about students' motivation, the design is "case study," and the methods might be "interviews" and "observations." The design gives the structure; the methods are the tools used within that structure.

In short, "design" is the big picture of how the study is organised, the overall plan of the study, "methods" are the approach or way to collect data, such as interviews, observations, and "tools" are the instruments or materials to use when collecting data, such as interview questions, questionnaire forms, observation checklist, audio recorder).

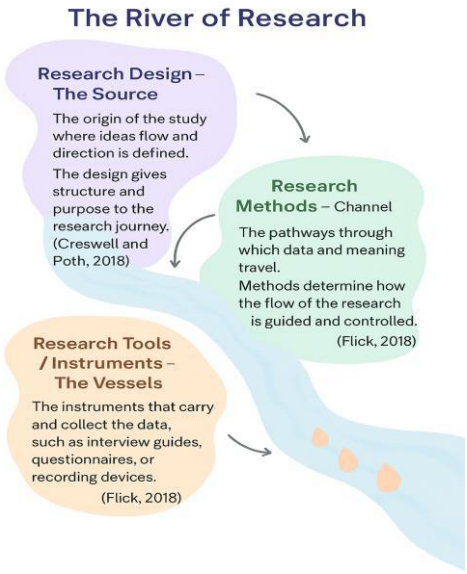

Fig.3: The Flow of Research Design, Methods, and Tools

This figure represents the flow of the research process, illustrating how ideas originate in the research design, travel through the methods that guide data collection, and are ultimately carried out using the tools or instruments that make the study possible. The river metaphor highlights the continuous and connected nature of research, where each stage supports and shapes the next (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

Qualitative studies focus on exploring meanings, emotions, and human experiences in depth rather than testing or predicting (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Researchers work closely with participants to co-create knowledge, respecting their voices and perspectives (Creswell and Poth, 2018). To explore these experiences effectively, qualitative researchers employ various designs that offer structured approaches to studying meaning and human experience.

Common qualitative designs include:

- *Phenomenology* – exploring people's lived experiences
- *Case Study* – studying one case in depth
- *Ethnography* – understanding culture and social behaviour
- *Grounded Theory* – building theory from data
- *Narrative Inquiry* – studying personal stories
- *Action Research* – working with participants to create change (Flick, 2018).

Once the design is determined, researchers choose the most appropriate tools for collecting rich and detailed data.

To collect data, qualitative researchers often use *interviews, focus groups, observations,* and *document analysis.* These methods allow them to understand people's feelings, beliefs, and meanings in natural settings rather than through numbers or tests (Flick, 2018).

In qualitative research, data collection methods are not fixed but rather chosen according to the study's purpose, design, philosophical stance, and context. They aim to capture depth, meaning, and lived experience, rather than numbers or variables (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

In short, every research project is built on several connected layers. At the base are *philosophical assumptions,* or "core beliefs," that shape the researcher's perspective on how knowledge is understood and studied. These inform the *paradigm,* which provides the worldview. The paradigm guides the *approach*, which determines whether the study is quantitative, qualitative, or mixed. The approach leads to a *design,* which gives the study its plan, and the design includes *methods* or *tools* for collecting and analysing data. Each level supports the next, creating a logical and meaningful research structure (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

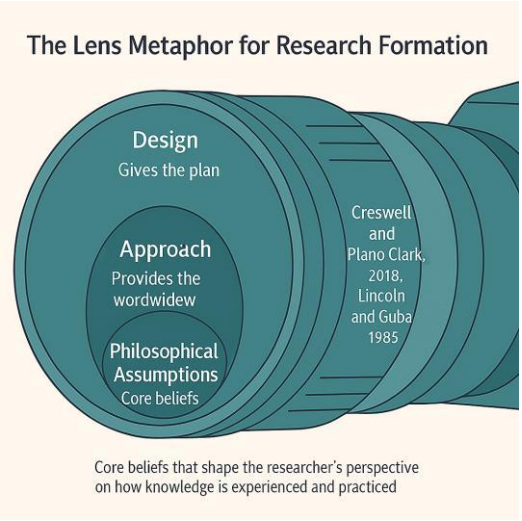

Fig.4. Viewing Research Through the Lens of Philosophy

This figure illustrates how a researcher's philosophical assumptions form the inner focus of the lens, shaping the paradigm, approach, and design of a study. Each outer layer refines how knowledge is viewed, interpreted, and explored within the context of qualitative inquiry.

This understanding forms the foundation of *qualitative inquiry*, which focuses on meaning, interpretation, and human experience rather than measurement or prediction. The following sections provide a more detailed examination of how qualitative approaches, paradigms, and methods work together to study lived experiences.

II. PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Every research study is shaped by philosophical assumptions, deep-seated beliefs about what constitutes reality, knowledge, and value. These assumptions form the foundation of every decision a researcher makes, from choosing a topic to interpreting findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Creswell and Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, these assumptions are especially important because the researcher is not a detached observer but a participant in the meaning-making process. Understanding the philosophical foundations allows qualitative researchers to design studies that are coherent, ethical, and true to the human experience.

To understand how these foundations shape research practice, it is essential to examine the key philosophical assumptions, ontology, epistemology, and axiology that underpin every qualitative inquiry.

2.1 Philosophical Assumptions: Ontology, Epistemology, and Axiology

Ontology refers to beliefs about the nature of reality. In qualitative research, reality is understood as subjective, multiple, and socially constructed rather than objective and measurable (Crotty, 1998). Different people may perceive and interpret the same event in distinct ways due to their backgrounds, emotions, and cultural experiences (Schwandt, 2015). For example, two migrants attending the same English class might experience "integration" differently; one may feel empowered, while the other may feel isolated.

Ontological assumptions, therefore, remind researchers that there are many truths rather than one single reality.

Epistemology concerns the creation of knowledge and what constitutes truth. In qualitative inquiry, knowledge is co-constructed between researcher and participant through dialogue, reflection, and interpretation (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Researchers do not stand outside reality; they

interact with it. This means that understanding grows from human relationships and the shared meaning they convey. The interview or observation process becomes a space where knowledge is collaboratively built rather than objectively discovered (Charmaz, 2014).

Axiology addresses the role of values, emotions, and ethics in research. Qualitative researchers acknowledge that complete neutrality is impossible and that their values influence every stage of the process (Tracy, 2020). Rather than trying to eliminate bias, they practice reflexivity; the continuous examination of how personal beliefs, emotions, and identities shape interpretation (Finlay, 2012). Axiological awareness ensures that research remains transparent and ethically sound, especially when dealing with sensitive topics such as trauma, identity, or inequality.

Together, ontology, epistemology, and axiology form the philosophical foundation of a study. They influence both the overall methodology and the specific methods used to collect and interpret data. For instance, a constructivist researcher who believes that reality is co-constructed tends to use open-ended interviews rather than structured surveys, as interviews allow shared meanings to emerge naturally (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Building upon these philosophical assumptions, research paradigms translate these abstract beliefs into coherent worldviews that guide the design and interpretation of qualitative studies.

2.2 Research Paradigms in Qualitative Inquiry

A research paradigm combines philosophical assumptions into a coherent worldview or lens through which the researcher views the world (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). Paradigms define what constitutes valid knowledge and which methods are suitable for discovering it. Qualitative research is most often guided by interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, but other paradigms, such as critical, feminist, postmodern, pragmatic, and transformative, also play significant roles (Mertens, 2015). Qualitative inquiry aligns particularly with interpretivist and constructivist paradigms because both emphasise understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences rather than seeking objective, generalisable truths. These paradigms assume that reality is socially constructed, context-dependent, and co-created through the interaction between the researcher and the participant (Schwandt, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Consequently, qualitative researchers aim to interpret rather than measure phenomena, focusing on how people make sense of their world within specific cultural and social contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

2.2.1 Interpretivism

Interpretivism assumes that reality is socially constructed through human interaction. Researchers working within this paradigm seek to understand the meanings people attach to their actions, rather than explaining behaviour through universal laws (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2018). The interpretivist researcher becomes a mediator who interprets the world through participants' perspectives.

For example, an interpretivist exploring the emotional lives of migrant learners would focus on how participants describe their experiences of belonging, shame, or pride. The goal is not to measure emotions but to understand what they mean to the people who experience them (Flick, 2018). In the interpretivist paradigm, interpretation is central, and empathy is the researcher's key instrument.

2.2.2 Constructivism

Constructivism builds on interpretivism, placing a stronger emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge. Meaning is created through dialogue between researcher and participant rather than existing independently (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This perspective sees both parties as active agents in the production of knowledge.

For instance, during a semi-structured interview, a participant may reflect on her struggles with learning the English language. Through the conversation, she and the researcher together construct a new understanding of how language learning influences confidence and identity. This interaction exemplifies constructivist epistemology, where knowledge emerges in the moment through reflection and relationship (Charmaz, 2014; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

Interpretivism and constructivism are closely related paradigms. *Interpretivism* is concerned with understanding what people mean when they discuss their experiences. *Constructivism*, on the other hand, is about *creating* meaning together through those experiences. In both views, knowledge is not something that exists independently; it is constructed through human interaction and reflection (Schwandt, 2015; Creswell and Poth, 2018).

2.2.3 Other Paradigms in Qualitative Research

Beyond interpretivism and constructivism, several other paradigms also guide qualitative research. Each offers a unique perspective on reality, knowledge, and power, enabling researchers to explore different dimensions of the human experience.

- *Critical Theory* seeks to uncover hidden power structures and inequalities. It argues that research should not only interpret the world but also help change it (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2018). A critical researcher studying education might ask

how class or race shapes access to learning opportunities.

- *Feminist Paradigms* foreground gender, emotion, and lived experience. They highlight how patriarchal systems shape knowledge and aim to amplify women's voices (Hesse-Biber, 2014). Feminist researchers frequently employ collaborative and narrative approaches to investigate identity, care, and empowerment.
- *Postmodern* and *Poststructural Paradigms* challenge universal truths and fixed meanings. They examine how language and discourse construct social realities (Foucault, 1980). Such research may analyse how "integration" or "success" are defined in policy or media.
- *Pragmatism* focuses on what works best to answer the research question. It values flexibility and practical outcomes over strict philosophical alignment (Patton, 2015). Pragmatists may combine methods to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a problem.
- *Transformative Paradigms* combine critical and participatory traditions, emphasising empowerment and collaboration. They engage marginalised communities as co-researchers to promote social justice and change (Mertens, 2015).

Each paradigm carries distinct ontological and epistemological assumptions, providing researchers with diverse ways to view and understand human experience.

After identifying the main paradigms, qualitative researchers must consider how reasoning connects their philosophical stance with the process of analysing and understanding data.

2.3 The Logic of Reasoning in Qualitative Research

Philosophical paradigms also influence the logic of reasoning, as well as how researchers navigate the relationship between data and theory. Three main reasoning processes are used: deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).

- Deductive reasoning starts with an existing theory and tests it against data. It moves from the general to the specific and is common in quantitative research.
- Inductive reasoning begins with data and builds a theory from patterns and insights that emerge during analysis. It moves from the specific to the general and is central to qualitative inquiry.
- Abductive reasoning moves back and forth between theory and data to explain surprising findings. It is used in some forms of grounded theory and case study research.

In interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, inductive reasoning predominates because researchers aim to uncover meanings from participants' voices rather than impose pre-existing frameworks (Creswell and Poth, 2018). However, abductive reasoning can be useful when theory and data interact to refine understanding.

In summary, qualitative research is grounded in philosophical assumptions that shape how reality, knowledge, and values are understood and interpreted. Ontology reminds researchers that reality is subjective and multifaceted; epistemology emphasises that knowledge is co-constructed; and axiology highlights that values and ethics are inextricably linked to inquiry. These assumptions form the basis of research paradigms, interpretivist, constructivist, critical, feminist, postmodern, pragmatic, and transformative, that guide methodological and ethical choices.

Understanding these philosophical and theoretical foundations ensures that qualitative research remains coherent and trustworthy. It connects belief with practice, linking how researchers see the world with how they study it (Schwandt, 2015; Tracy, 2020). In the next section, these paradigms and assumptions are translated into specific research approaches, the frameworks through which qualitative researchers explore meaning and experience in human life.

III. MAJOR QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACHES

Qualitative research is not a single method, but rather an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of research designs, each shaped by distinct philosophical beliefs and purposes. These designs guide how data are collected, analysed, and interpreted, ensuring that every decision reflects the study's underlying worldview (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Although they share the common goal of understanding human experience, they differ in focus, process, and outcome. The six major qualitative designs, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative inquiry, case study, and participatory action research (PAR), are described below.

3.1 Phenomenology

Phenomenology seeks to understand and describe the lived experiences of individuals. Originating from the philosophical work of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, it asks what a particular experience means to the

person who lives it (van Manen, 2016). The phenomenological researcher attempts to uncover the essence of a phenomenon, its deep, universal meaning across individual cases (Moustakas, 1994).

In this approach, participants are not seen as data sources but as meaning-makers. Researchers typically use in-depth interviews, diaries, or reflective journals to capture personal perceptions, feelings, and thoughts. Data analysis involves identifying significant statements, clustering them into themes, and describing the essence of the experience (Finlay, 2012).

Phenomenology aligns closely with interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, as it assumes that reality is subjective and knowledge is co-created through interaction. The researcher's goal is not to generalise but to illuminate the richness of lived experience.

Example: Exploring how adult immigrants experience learning a new language and how this affects their sense of identity and belonging in a new country.

3.2 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), aims to generate theory from data rather than test existing theories. It is built on an inductive process; the researcher collects and analyses data simultaneously, identifying categories, relationships, and patterns through constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014).

The process usually involves open coding (naming and grouping data segments), axial coding (connecting categories), and selective coding (integrating core themes into a theoretical framework) (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). The goal is to produce a theory that is grounded in participants' lived experiences and explains social processes or interactions.

Originally, grounded theory had positivist tendencies; however, modern versions, particularly constructivist grounded theory, now embrace subjectivity and reflexivity. Charmaz (2014) argues that researchers and participants co-construct meaning, making grounded theory both rigorous and human-centred.

Example: Developing a theory that explains how migrant learners build resilience and emotional strength through participation in community education programmes.

Both phenomenology and constructivist grounded theory are qualitative designs that study people's real-life experiences. They are *subjective*, meaning they focus on personal meanings rather than numbers or measurements. However, they have different goals and approaches to work.

Phenomenology tries to understand what people experience and how they make sense of those experiences (Creswell and Poth, 2018). The researcher listens carefully to participants' stories to uncover the essence of their experience; the deep meaning that is shared by everyone (Moustakas, 1994). For example, if the study is about migrant women learning English, phenomenology would ask, *"What does it feel like to learn English in a new country?"*

Constructivist grounded theory, on the other hand, focuses on how people's experiences are shaped through interaction and meaning-making over time (Charmaz, 2014). It is not only about describing experience, but also about building a theory or model that explains the process. For example, it might ask, *"How do migrant women build confidence while learning English?"* The researcher and participants co-construct meaning together through reflection and dialogue.

In short, *phenomenology* aims to describe the essence of lived experience, whereas *constructivist grounded theory* seeks to explain the social processes underlying that experience (Birks and Mills, 2015). Both are flexible, interpretive, and value subjectivity, but grounded theory aims to move one step further by developing a conceptual understanding from the data.

3.3 Ethnography

Ethnography comes from anthropology and focuses on studying people within their natural cultural environments. The aim is to understand the social meanings, values, and practices that shape a community's life (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019). Ethnographers immerse themselves in the field, often living among participants for extended periods to observe interactions, routines, and rituals.

Ethnographic research relies heavily on participant observation, field notes, interviews, and sometimes cultural artefacts (Fetterman, 2019). The process of immersion enables researchers to observe how people perceive their world from within their own cultural context.

Ethnography assumes that culture is key to understanding human behaviour and that the researcher must balance involvement with observation. Reflexivity is crucial, as the researcher's identity inevitably shapes interpretation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Example: Observing migrant learners in adult education classes to understand how cultural norms and expectations influence participation, communication, and learning relationships.

3.4 Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry explores people's stories to gain insight into their experiences. It suggests that people give meaning to their lives through stories that link their past, present, and future (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Stories are not simply reflections of reality but ways of constructing it; they

reveal how individuals understand themselves and the world (Riessman, 2008).

Researchers collect stories through interviews, letters, diaries, or digital recordings and analyse them for structure, theme, and emotional tone (Webster and Mertova, 2007). Narrative inquiry values the individuality of each story and resists reducing experiences to abstract categories.

Because narrative inquiry is deeply relational, the researcher and participant co-create the story through dialogue. This process reflects the constructivist idea that meaning emerges in interaction (Charmaz, 2014).

Example: A narrative study with immigrant women exploring how education became a path from isolation to empowerment, showing how storytelling contributes to healing and identity reconstruction.

3.5 Case Study

A case study provides an in-depth exploration of a single case, which may be an individual, a group, an organisation, or an event, within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). It enables researchers to examine complex social phenomena holistically by utilising multiple sources of data, such as interviews, documents, and observations (Stake, 1995).

Case studies are flexible and can draw from various paradigms; however, qualitative case studies typically adopt an interpretivist or constructivist stance. The goal is to understand the unique characteristics of the case and to provide rich, contextual insights that others may learn from, even if they cannot generalise (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Researchers often distinguish between intrinsic case studies (focused on understanding one unique case) and instrumental case studies (using the case to understand a broader issue). Transparency, thick description, and reflexivity are key features of this approach.

Transparency means being open and clear about every step of the research process, such as how data are collected, analysed, and interpreted (Yin, 2018). It helps readers trust that the researcher works carefully and honestly.

Thick description refers to providing detailed and rich information about the people, places, and contexts studied (Geertz, 1973). Instead of providing short summaries, the researcher describes what happens, what people say, and what those events mean within their cultural context or specific situation. This enables readers to gain a deep understanding of the case and imagine being there.

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's thoughtful consideration of their own role, background, and emotions, as well as how these may impact the study (Finlay, 2002). By being self-aware, the researcher ensures the findings are thoughtful and balanced.

Example: Studying a specific adult education centre in London to explore how counselling and emotional support services influence the integration of Turkish-born Kurdish migrants.

This study can be viewed as an instrumental case study because it focuses on one adult education centre in London to explore a wider issue, the role of counselling and emotional support in the integration of Turkish-born Kurdish migrants. The case is studied in its real-life context, where educational, emotional, and social factors are closely connected (Yin, 2018; Stake, 1995).

3.5.1. Main Types of Case Studies

Researchers often describe three main types of case studies: intrinsic, instrumental, and collective. Each type serves a distinct purpose and enables the researcher to explore real-life situations in various ways (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018).

An *intrinsic case study* focuses on understanding one case for its own sake. The researcher chooses this case because it is unique, special, or meaningful. The aim is not to generalise the findings but to gain a deep and detailed understanding of that specific situation (Stake, 1995). For example, a researcher may study a single school that uses an unusual counselling approach.

An *instrumental case study*, on the other hand, uses a specific case to explore a broader issue, idea, or theory. The case helps the researcher understand something larger than the case itself. For instance, studying one adult education centre in London to learn how counselling and emotional support influence migrant integration represents an instrumental case study (Stake, 1995; Creswell and Poth, 2018).

A *collective or multiple case study* involves examining several cases together to identify patterns, similarities, or differences. This approach enables researchers to compare findings across different contexts, thereby strengthening the overall conclusions (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

These three types of case studies offer flexible and rich ways to explore complex human experiences within their real-life settings.

3.6 Participatory Action Research (PAR)

Participatory Action Research (PAR) is both a methodology and a movement. It involves participants as co-researchers throughout the process, from defining the problem to analysing data and implementing action (Reason and Bradbury, 2008). PAR is grounded in critical and transformative paradigms, seeking not only to understand the world but also to change it (Mertens, 2015).

PAR assumes that knowledge is socially and politically constructed, and that those affected by a problem are best

positioned to understand and solve it. The process includes repeated cycles of reflection, action, and evaluation, often using methods such as focus groups, workshops, or community discussions.

This approach challenges traditional hierarchies between researcher and participant, promoting equality, collaboration, and empowerment. The findings are typically shared in accessible formats, allowing participants to use them for advocacy or community development (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon, 2014).

Example: Collaborating with immigrant learners to co-design a well-being and language-learning programme, reflecting their needs and supporting their emotional resilience.

Each qualitative research approach offers a distinct lens for examining the human experience. Choosing the right approach depends on the research question, the philosophical stance, and the desired level of participation. A *phenomenological study* may best answer "What is the lived experience of…?", while *grounded theory* explores "How does this process occur?", and *ethnography* asks, "How do people in this setting live and interact?". By aligning approach, paradigm, and purpose, qualitative researchers ensure coherence and depth in their studies (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Flick, 2018).

As a result, qualitative research approaches provide multiple pathways to the same goal: to understand human life as it is lived, felt, and told. Their diversity enriches the field, offering flexible yet rigorous frameworks for exploring meaning and experience in social reality.

IV. DATA COLLECTION METHODS IN QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Data collection is one of the most critical phases of qualitative inquiry. The aim is not to measure variables but to explore people's feelings, perceptions, and meanings in depth. Qualitative data are rich and detailed, allowing the researcher to capture the complexity of human experience within real-life settings (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Unlike quantitative methods, which rely on numerical data, qualitative methods use words, observations, and visual materials to understand lived realities. The most used data collection techniques are interviews, focus groups, observations, document and text analysis, and visual or digital methods. These can be used alone or in combination, depending on the study's purpose and paradigm.

4.1 Interviews

Interviews are the most frequently used data collection method in qualitative research. They enable researchers to enter participants' worlds through direct dialogue and are particularly effective for exploring personal experiences, emotions, and beliefs (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015).

There are three main types of interviews:

- Structured interviews follow a fixed set of questions, offering consistency but limiting flexibility.
- Semi-structured interviews balance structure with openness, allowing researchers to probe further based on participants' responses (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).
- Unstructured interviews resemble natural conversations, offering maximum freedom but requiring high reflexivity and skill (Seidman, 2019).

Semi-structured interviews are the most common type in interpretivist and constructivist research because they provide both guidance and flexibility. Questions are open-ended to encourage reflection and detailed storytelling. The researcher's listening skills, empathy, and cultural awareness are essential to create a trusting environment (Roulston, 2010).

Example: Asking migrant women, "Can you describe how learning English has changed how you feel about yourself?" allows participants to freely express their identity and emotions.

While individual interviews provide in-depth personal insights, focus groups allow participants to share and discuss their experiences collectively, creating a more interactive form of data generation.

4.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups bring together six to ten participants to discuss a topic, guided by a facilitator (Morgan, 2019). Interaction within the group stimulates ideas, memories, and perspectives that might not surface in one-to-one interviews. This method is particularly useful for exploring shared meanings, community dynamics, and social norms (Krueger and Casey, 2015).

Focus groups enable researchers to identify areas of agreement and disagreement among participants, as well as how they collectively create shared meanings through discussion. They are often used in community or educational research to explore how people negotiate group identities. However, they require careful moderation to ensure all voices are heard. Researchers must manage group dynamics and be sensitive to power relations, cultural hierarchies, and emotional comfort (Tracy, 2020).

Example: Conducting a focus group with adult immigrant learners to explore their perceptions of inclusion and belonging in classroom environments.

Focus group discussions reveal participants' perceptions, whereas observation provides a direct way to study their behaviour and interactions in natural contexts.

4.3 Observation

Observation allows researchers to witness actions and interactions as they occur in natural settings. It provides contextual data that interviews alone cannot capture, such as body language, routines, or environmental cues (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018).

There are two main types:

- Participant observation, where the researcher joins the setting and interacts with participants, gaining an insider's view (Spradley, 1980).
- Non-participant observation, where the researcher observes without taking part to minimise influence on the situation.

Observation is often employed in ethnography but can also support case studies or phenomenological research. Field notes and reflexive journals are vital tools for recording both what happens and the researcher's thoughts and feelings during observation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2019).

Example: Observing language classroom interactions to understand how cultural background and gender influence communication between migrant learners and teachers.

While observation helps researchers understand behaviour and interaction in real-life settings, document and text analysis provide insight into the written materials and policies that shape those experiences.

4.4 Document and Text Analysis

Documents, such as diaries, letters, reports, policy papers, social-media posts, and photographs, offer valuable insights into how meaning is expressed in written or visual form. Document analysis is the systematic examination of these materials to understand how language, discourse, and power construct reality (Bowen, 2009).

This method is useful for providing historical or institutional context and can be combined with interviews and observations to triangulate findings (Flick, 2018). Documents can reveal how ideas such as "integration," "achievement," or "identity" are represented and contested across social contexts (Prior, 2011).

Example: Analysing government or NGO policy papers to explore how immigrant integration is framed in educational discourse.

In addition to written documents, researchers can also utilise visual and digital materials to gain a deeper understanding of participants' experiences and social realities.

4.5 Visual and Digital Methods

Visual and digital methods have become increasingly popular in qualitative research, allowing participants to express experiences that might be difficult to articulate verbally (Pink, 2013). These include photo-elicitation, video diaries, drawings, and digital storytelling. Participants create or share images that represent their emotions or identities and then discuss their meanings with the researcher (Rose, 2016).

The rise of online platforms has also expanded the collection of qualitative data. Virtual interviews, online focus groups, and social-media ethnographies enable researchers to reach diverse and geographically distant participants (Salmons, 2021). However, digital research requires strong ethical consideration; privacy, consent, and data security are critical.

Example: Asking participants to share a photograph that symbolises "home" and explaining what it means to them helps uncover emotional and cultural layers of belonging.

To ensure that findings are trustworthy and well-balanced, researchers often combine different data sources and reflect on their own role throughout the study.

4.6 Triangulation and Reflexivity

Qualitative research values depth and credibility over replication or generalisation. To ensure trustworthiness, researchers often use triangulation, collecting data from multiple sources or using different methods to confirm consistency (Denzin, 2012). Triangulation can include data triangulation (using different participants or settings), methodological triangulation (combining interviews and observations), and theoretical triangulation (applying multiple lenses). This cross-checking strengthens confidence in the findings.

Equally important is reflexivity, the process of examining how the researcher's position, values, and assumptions influence data collection and interpretation (Finlay, 2012). Reflexive notes capture thoughts, emotions, and ethical dilemmas during fieldwork. This practice enhances transparency and shows how understanding evolves through interaction (Tracy, 2020).

Example: A researcher conducting interviews and classroom observations keeps a reflexive journal to record personal reactions and methodological decisions, later using these reflections to interpret data more critically.

In addition to maintaining reflexivity, it is essential to follow ethical guidelines that safeguard participants' rights and well-being throughout the data collection process.

4.7 Ethical Considerations in Data Collection

Because qualitative research often involves sensitive personal experiences, maintaining ethical awareness is crucial throughout the data collection process. Participants must give informed consent, and confidentiality must be respected. Researchers should also ensure emotional well-being, especially when discussing traumatic or personal topics (Orb, Eisenhauer and Wynaden, 2001).

Cultural sensitivity is another ethical imperative. When working with diverse populations, researchers must respect the language, religion, and social norms of these groups. Empathy, humility, and respect for participants' time and stories build trust and authenticity (Tracy, 2020).

Ethics is not a single procedural step but a continuous commitment that shapes the researcher–participant relationship. Data collection becomes an act of mutual respect and care.

4.8 Summary

Data collection in qualitative research is an interpretive and human-centred process that values meaning, context, and emotion. Each method —interviews, focus groups, observations, documents, and visual materials —offers different pathways for understanding experience. Combined through triangulation and guided by reflexivity, they allow researchers to construct a full and authentic picture of participants' lives (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Unlike quantitative surveys or experiments, the qualitative data collection process values empathy and conversation. It transforms the act of research into a shared journey of discovery, where both researcher and participant learn from one another. When designed ethically and analysed thoughtfully, these methods reveal the depth, emotion, and diversity of human meaning.

V. DISCUSSION

Qualitative research is more than a collection of techniques; it is a philosophical way of seeing and understanding the world. The approaches and data collection methods described in this paper are grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, which emphasise meaning, context, and human subjectivity (Schwandt, 2015; Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These paradigms remind us that knowledge is co-created through the interaction between the researcher and the participant. The relationship between ontology, epistemology, and axiology provides the foundation for a research design that is not only rigorous but also ethical and compassionate.

5.1 Connecting Paradigm, Approach, and Method

Qualitative research needs a clear connection between the researcher's worldview, the research approach, and the data collection methods. The worldview, or paradigm, shows how the researcher sees reality. The approach transforms this view into a plan for the study, and the methods refer to the practical ways used to collect information (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

For example, a constructivist researcher who believes that meaning is co-created may choose a phenomenological or narrative approach and use in-depth interviews as a method. In contrast, an ethnographer guided by interpretivism might focus on cultural meanings and rely on participant observation. When these three levels — philosophy, design, and method — are consistent, the research gains coherence, credibility, and theoretical integrity (Flick, 2018).

However, the inconsistency between them weakens the study. Using open-ended interviews under a positivist framework, for instance, would be philosophically contradictory because positivism seeks objectivity, while interviews rely on interpretation and emotion. Coherence across all levels ensures that the study genuinely reflects the researcher's worldview.

After ensuring consistency between the paradigm, approach, and methods, researchers must reflect on how their own beliefs and experiences shape the research process.

5.2 The Role of the Researcher and Reflexivity

The researcher in qualitative inquiry is not a detached observer but a co-constructor of meaning. Their background, values, and emotions shape every stage of the process, from formulating questions to interpreting data (Finlay, 2012). This is why reflexivity is essential. Reflexivity involves constant self-examination of how one's identity and assumptions influence the research. It turns awareness into a tool for improving depth and honesty (Tracy, 2020).

A reflexive researcher keeps a journal, notes emotional responses during interviews, and acknowledges personal biases. Rather than trying to be neutral, they aim to be transparent. This honesty strengthens the study's trustworthiness and ensures that the findings genuinely represent participants' voices rather than the researcher's projections (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Reflexivity also promotes empathy. When researchers recognise their emotional reactions, they can better connect with participants without overstepping ethical boundaries. This emotional awareness transforms data collection into a mutual act of respect and understanding.

5.3 Integrity and Trust in Qualitative Research

Ethical awareness is a cornerstone of qualitative inquiry. Because qualitative studies often explore sensitive, emotional, or private experiences, researchers must ensure that participants provide informed consent, maintain confidentiality, and feel emotionally safe (Orb, Eisenhauer, and Wynaden, 2001). Ethical practice extends beyond institutional approval—it is an ongoing commitment to treating participants with dignity.

In addition, qualitative research is judged by its trustworthiness rather than by numerical reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define trustworthiness through four criteria: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Researchers can enhance credibility through triangulation, member checking, and thick description, providing detailed, contextual accounts that allow readers to visualise the setting (Geertz, 1973; Denzin, 2012). Dependability and confirmability are achieved through careful documentation of all research decisions, creating an audit trail. Transferability refers to the extent to which readers can apply insights to similar contexts.

When reflexivity and ethical care are combined with transparent reporting, qualitative findings become trustworthy, rich, and meaningful. They invite readers not only to understand participants' experiences but also to reflect on their own.

5.4 Integration of Approaches and Methods

Each qualitative approach and method offers a distinct perspective on understanding human life. Phenomenology captures individual meaning; ethnography reveals culture; grounded theory builds explanations; narrative inquiry explores identity; case studies offer depth; and participatory action research connects understanding to change (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Integrating these approaches requires philosophical sensitivity. For example, combining narrative inquiry with participatory action research can allow participants to both share their stories and take collective action. Such flexibility is a hallmark of qualitative inquiry, as it values creativity as long as the design remains consistent with its underlying paradigm.

Qualitative research thus becomes a space for dialogue, empathy, and imagination. It invites both researcher and participant to explore meaning together, bridging personal stories and social understanding.

5.5 Summary

This discussion highlights that qualitative research is most effective when philosophical assumptions, methodological design, and ethical reflexivity work in harmony. The interpretivist and constructivist paradigms emphasise co-creation of knowledge and meaning, guiding researchers to listen, interpret, and connect. Reflexivity ensures transparency and emotional awareness, while ethical commitment guarantees respect and trust. When combined, these qualities make qualitative inquiry not only a method of investigation but also a moral and emotional act of understanding human experience (Tracy, 2020; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018).

VI. CONCLUSION

Qualitative research offers a human-centred way of understanding reality. Rather than seeking prediction or control, it values meaning, emotion, and lived experience. Guided by interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, qualitative inquiry posits that knowledge is constructed through a dialogue between the researcher and the participant (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Schwandt, 2015). This philosophical stance enables researchers to examine how individuals perceive their world and how culture, identity, and context influence their understanding.

Throughout this paper, qualitative research is presented as a coherent system that links philosophy, approach, and method. Its foundations, ontology, epistemology, and axiology remind us that reality is subjective, knowledge is relational, and values are integral to every decision (Creswell and Poth, 2018). These assumptions guide the choice of research paradigm and the selection of appropriate approaches such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, narrative inquiry, case study, and participatory action research. Together, these frameworks enable researchers to explore human experience from multiple perspectives.

The discussion of data collection methods, including interviews, focus groups, observations, document analysis, and the use of visual or digital tools, demonstrates how qualitative researchers capture complex emotions and social meanings. When combined with triangulation and reflexivity, these methods produce findings that are credible, transparent, and ethically sound (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Tracy, 2020). Ethics in qualitative inquiry extend beyond procedure; they are an ongoing act of respect for participants' stories and dignity.

As a result, qualitative research contributes not only to academic knowledge but also to empathy and social understanding. It gives voice to those whose experiences are often overlooked and helps transform personal narratives into collective insight (Denzin and Lincoln, 2018). By illuminating how people construct meaning in their daily lives, qualitative inquiry deepens our awareness of humanity's emotional and cultural complexity.

Looking forward, the field continues to evolve. Digital technologies, the creative arts, and participatory practices are expanding the scope of what constitutes qualitative data and how it can be represented. Future researchers are encouraged to combine methodological rigour with imagination, to listen carefully, think reflexively, and engage ethically. As Tracy (2020) suggests, qualitative research at its best is an act of care, connecting intellect with emotion, analysis with empathy, and knowledge with humanity.

In conclusion, qualitative research is not merely about collecting data; it is about understanding the lives of individuals. It transforms inquiry into relationship, information into insight, and research into a shared journey of meaning-making. Through this commitment to understanding and compassion, qualitative inquiry continues to shape a more reflective, inclusive, and humane vision of knowledge.

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