



Towards Conceptual Clarity in Research Paradigms: A Theoretical Exploration for Doctoral Research

**نحو وضوح مفاهيمي في البراديفغات البحثية: استكشاف نظري للبحث
الدكتورالي**

Abir Temimi

Department of English, Algiers 2 University, Algeria

abir.temimi@univ-alger2.dz

Dr. Anissa Fizya Sari Ahmed-Bouchama

Department of English, Algiers 2 University, Algeria

fizya.sariahmed@univ-alger2.dz

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ملخص

تُعَدُّ البراديفغات البحثية بُعْدًا تأسيسيًّا في البحث العلمي، لأنها تُشكِّل الافتراضات الفلسفية التي تُوجِّه تصميم البحث، والتوجه المنهجي، وتفسير النتائج. ومع ذلك، فعلى الرغم من أهميتها، لا تُعرض هذه البراديفغات دائمًا في الأدبيات المنهجية بصورة منسجمة وواضحة بما يكفي، الأمر الذي قد يخلق صعوبة مفاهيمية لدى الباحثين المبتدئين وطلبة الدكتوراه. يهدف هذا المقال إلى استكشاف البراديفغات البحثية في البحث الدكتورالي استكشافًا نقديًّا، من خلال فحص أبرز التوترات المفاهيمية في الأدبيات وتوضيح العلاقات بين مكوناتها الأساسية. ولتحقيق ذلك، يعتمد المقال مقاربةً نظريةً نقديةً قائمةً على تحليل وتركيب أهم المناقشات المنهجية المتعلقة بالبراديفغات البحثية. وقد توصلَ المقال إلى ثلاث توترات رئيسة، تتمثل في: الغموض المفاهيمي في تعريف البراديفغم وتحديد موقعه داخل البحث، وعدم التوازن في تصوّر البنية الداخلية للبراديفغم، وتداخل الحدود بين البراديفغم والمنهجية والطرائق. واستجابةً لهذه التوترات، يقترح المقال إطارًا تكامليًّا للاتساق البراديفغي يعيد صياغة العلاقة بين الأكسيولوجيا والأنطولوجيا والإبستمولوجيا والمنهجية والطرائق بصورة أكثر انسجامًا. ويسهم المقال في النقاش المنهجي من خلال الانتقال من مجرد العرض الوصفي للبراديفغات إلى تقديم تصور أكثر وضوحًا من الناحية المفاهيمية، بما قد يدعم فهمًا أعمق للتموضع البراديفغي في البحث الدكتورالي.

الكلمات الدالة: البراديفمات البحثية؛ البحث الدكتورالي؛ الاتساق البراديفي؛ الأنطولوجيا؛
الإبستمولوجيا؛ الأكسيولوجيا؛ الباحثون المبتدئون

Abstract

Research paradigms constitute a foundational dimension of inquiry because they shape the philosophical assumptions that guide research design, methodological orientation, and the interpretation of findings. Yet, despite their importance, they are not always presented in the methodological literature in a sufficiently coherent and accessible way, which may create conceptual difficulty for doctoral and novice researchers. This paper aims to critically explore research paradigms by examining major conceptual tensions in the literature and clarifying the relationships among their core components. To this end, the paper adopts a theoretical and critical review approach based on the analysis and synthesis of key methodological discussions on research paradigms. The paper identifies three main tensions: conceptual ambiguity in how paradigms are defined and positioned, uneven conceptualization of paradigmatic structure, and blurred boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods. In response to these tensions, the paper proposes an integrated framework for paradigmatic alignment that rearticulates the relationship among axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods in a more coherent way. The paper contributes to methodological discussion by moving beyond descriptive overviews of paradigms toward a conceptually clearer account that may support a deeper understanding of paradigmatic positioning in doctoral research.

Keywords: Research paradigms; paradigmatic alignment; ontology; epistemology; axiology; methodology; novice researchers

Introduction

Research requires not only methodological rigor but also philosophical rigor, since the quality of inquiry depends on how reality, knowledge, values, and research procedures are understood and aligned (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Research paradigms are therefore foundational to inquiry because they shape research design, methodological orientation, and the interpretation of findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Yet, despite their importance, conceptualizing and articulating research paradigms can be difficult for novice and doctoral researchers (Makombe, 2017; Gringeri et al., 2013), especially when these issues are presented in abstract or overlapping ways (Crotty, 1998; Hussain et al., 2013).



This issue is particularly relevant in doctoral research across disciplines, where the core building blocks of paradigmatic positioning (axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods) remain central to how research is framed and justified (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Although this paper is framed as a theoretical contribution to doctoral research more broadly, it is also relevant to doctoral research in the didactics of English as a foreign language (EFL), where questions of paradigmatic clarity are equally important to the framing and justification of inquiry. This reinforces the need for a clearer and more conceptually accessible account of paradigmatic positioning in research.

Much of the methodological literature defines paradigms and outlines their major traditions, yet it does not always present them in a sufficiently integrated and accessible way for beginning researchers (Mack, 2010; Eusafzai, 2014). Definitions vary, the relationship between paradigm, methodology, and methods is often blurred, and paradigmatic components are not always treated in a balanced manner, particularly when axiology is underrepresented or omitted (Heron & Reason, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 2011). However, although such issues suggest why paradigms can be difficult to understand and articulate, they tend to appear in a dispersed form across methodological discussions, and the literature has not sufficiently synthesized them into a clear conceptual account of the tensions that make paradigmatic positioning difficult for doctoral and novice researchers to understand and articulate. The issue becomes more significant when doctoral theses themselves provide limited models of explicit paradigmatic positioning, since beginning researchers often turn to such texts as references for how research should be framed and written. In this sense, the weak visibility of paradigmatic discussion risks being reproduced across generations of research rather than corrected through stronger conceptual awareness. This paper therefore aims to critically explore research paradigms, identify major conceptual tensions in the literature, and propose an integrated framework, adapted from existing models, that clarifies the relationships among the main components of paradigmatic positioning. It is particularly addressed to doctoral and novice researchers who must articulate paradigmatic positioning in their own studies. To achieve this, it adopts a theoretical and critical review



approach and seeks to contribute to a more conceptually accessible discussion of research paradigms for doctoral and novice researchers.

1. Theoretical Framework

This section provides the conceptual-theoretical foundation for the present paper by synthesizing how methodological literature defines research paradigms and presents their core components and major traditions. Rather than adopting a single theory-driven framework in the conventional empirical sense, it establishes the conceptual basis on which the subsequent analysis of tensions in the literature is developed. In doing so, it clarifies the main ideas and traditions that inform the discussion of paradigmatic positioning later in the article.

1.1. Conceptualizing research paradigms and their core components

The methodological literature generally treats research paradigms as the philosophical lenses through which inquiry is understood and conducted (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Paradigms are described as worldviews, basic sets of beliefs, or organizing frameworks that shape how researchers understand reality, knowledge, and the procedures through which knowledge is generated (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). At the same time, the concept is not always presented in a fully stable way, since the term paradigm often overlaps with related notions such as worldview, research tradition, and disciplinary matrix (Weaver & Olson, 2006; Laudan, 1989). Despite these variations, a recurring position in the literature is that paradigms guide inquiry by framing both the assumptions and the choices that underpin research design (Tuli, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Within this literature, paradigms are commonly articulated through a set of interrelated components: axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Heron & Reason, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 2011). Ontology concerns assumptions about the nature of reality and what exists to be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Crotty, 1998). Epistemology concerns the nature of knowledge, the relationship between the knower and what can be known, and the grounds on which knowledge claims are justified (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Carter & Little, 2007). Axiology concerns values and what is considered worthwhile in research (Heron & Reason, 1997). Methodology refers to the overall strategy



or logic of inquiry, whereas methods refer to the concrete procedures used to collect and analyze data (Carter & Little, 2007; Crotty, 1998; Jonker & Pennink, 2010).

These components are not isolated from one another. Rather, the literature presents them as logically connected, since assumptions about reality influence assumptions about knowledge, and these in turn shape methodological choices and the selection of methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Tuli, 2010; Wahyuni, 2012). For this reason, methodology is often understood as flowing from broader ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments, while methods represent the practical enactment of those commitments in research (Carter & Little, 2007). Distinguishing methodology from methods is therefore essential, especially because the two are often confused despite serving different functions: methodology provides the rationale and route of inquiry, whereas methods provide the specific tools and procedures through which the inquiry is carried out (Kaplan, 1964 as cited in Carter & Little, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Taken together, these discussions suggest that understanding research paradigms requires more than naming their individual components; it requires clarifying the relationships among them and the logic through which they align in research design.

1.2. Mapping selected major research paradigms

The literature on research paradigms includes a number of major traditions that differ in how they conceptualize reality, knowledge, values, and inquiry. For the purposes of the present discussion, this section focuses on selected paradigms frequently addressed in methodological literature, namely positivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, and the critical paradigm. The aim is not to provide an exhaustive historical review, but rather to briefly map their core assumptions, methodological orientations, and major limitations as a foundation for the discussion that follows.

Positivism emphasizes objective, observable, and empirically verifiable knowledge (Crotty, 1998). It assumes an external reality that can be measured through systematic scientific procedures and generally privileges structured inquiry, prediction, and generalization (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2009). While it is valued for rigor and control, it has been criticized for reducing social reality to measurable variables and



overlooking the interpretive dimension of human experience (Cohen et al., 2005).

Post-positivism emerged as a critical modification of positivism rather than a complete rejection of it (Grant & Giddings, 2002). While it retains the view that reality exists independently of the researcher, it treats knowledge as provisional and truth as approximate rather than absolute (Gannon et al., 2022). In this sense, it adopts a critical realist stance and replaces certainty with probability and falsification (Crotty, 1998; Wahyuni, 2012). Methodologically, post-positivism continues to value rigor, controlled inquiry, and causal explanation, yet it allows greater flexibility through the use of multiple methods, including qualitative approaches where necessary (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Weaver & Olson, 2006). Its relevance lies in offering a more self-critical and flexible alternative to positivism (Plack, 2005), although some classifications still merge it with positivism (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), which may itself contribute to conceptual ambiguity in the literature.

Interpretivism emerged in response to the limits of positivist inquiry in the social sciences (Taylor & Medina, 2011). It assumes that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is produced through understanding the meanings individuals assign to their experiences (Ryan, 2018). It is therefore associated with naturalistic and meaning-oriented inquiry that values context and interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Grant & Giddings, 2002). Its main strength lies in its sensitivity to lived experience, although it has been criticized for limited transferability and for relying on forms of rigor that differ from positivist traditions (Mack, 2010).

The critical paradigm moves inquiry beyond explanation and interpretation toward emancipation and social transformation (Neuman, 2014). It highlights the role of power, ideology, and historical conditions in shaping knowledge and social life, and it supports transformative forms of inquiry aimed at exposing injustice and promoting change (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Taylor & Medina, 2011). Its value lies in foregrounding justice and agency, although it has also been criticized for its overt political orientation and for the risk of emancipatory agendas on participants (Mack, 2010).



These paradigms differ in their assumptions about values, reality, knowledge imposing, and inquiry, and these differences shape how researchers justify their methodological choices.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts a theoretical and critical review approach to explore research paradigms and their conceptualization in methodological literature. This approach is appropriate because the purpose of the study is not to synthesize empirical findings through an exhaustive protocol-driven review, but to examine and interpret conceptual and methodological discussions in order to identify major tensions in the definition, structure, and articulation of paradigmatic positioning. Approaches such as systematic review or meta-synthesis were therefore not adopted, since the present study is concerned primarily with the conceptual analysis of methodological writings rather than the synthesis of empirical research results. Within this orientation, the paper does not collect empirical data; rather, it draws on a purposeful selection of foundational and widely cited methodological writings, together with later contributions that discuss the definition of paradigm, its philosophical components, and its relationship to research design. The review focuses on writings concerned with ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology, and methods, as well as texts addressing the classification and interpretation of major research paradigms. Given the conceptual nature of the study, the review was not restricted to a narrow publication period, since both foundational methodological writings and later contributions were necessary to trace the development and persistence of the conceptual tensions under discussion. The selection was therefore guided by conceptual relevance to the research problem rather than by exhaustive coverage, with emphasis on influential methodological authors and subsequent discussions that illuminate recurrent conceptual tensions in the literature.

The analysis proceeded through a close and iterative reading of the selected methodological literature, with attention to recurrent points of conceptual difficulty in how research paradigms were defined, structured, and related to research design. As recurring issues were identified across texts, they were noted, compared, and grouped into



broader categories of tension. Through this process, three major tensions were synthesized: conceptual ambiguity, uneven treatment of paradigmatic components, and blurred boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods. The analysis was therefore guided not by a pre-established external analytical framework, but by a critical conceptual reading of the literature aimed at identifying patterns of instability and inconsistency across discussions of paradigmatic positioning. These tensions were then interpreted in relation to their implications for research design and for researchers seeking to articulate paradigmatic positioning more coherently. On this basis, the paper proposes an integrated framework that rearticulates the relationships among the main components of paradigmatic positioning in a more conceptually accessible way.

3. Conceptual Analysis

This section presents the main theoretical tensions emerging from scholarship on research paradigms. Rather than treating the literature as a set of isolated definitions and classifications, it synthesizes the main areas of conceptual instability that shape how research paradigms are understood and articulated in doctoral research. The discussion is organized around three major tensions: conceptual ambiguity in the literature, uneven conceptualization of paradigmatic structure, and blurred boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods.

3.1. Conceptual ambiguity in the literature

One of the most visible tensions in the literature on research paradigms lies in the lack of conceptual stability surrounding the term itself. Although paradigms are widely recognized as foundational to inquiry, the concept is not always defined in a uniform way (Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In some accounts, the term “paradigm” is used to denote a worldview (Huitt, 2011); in others, it is discussed in relation to key notions such as disciplinary matrix or research tradition (Weaver & Olson, 2006; Laudan, 1989), while in still other discussions it is used almost interchangeably with broader philosophical positioning (Grant & Giddings, 2002). This semantic overlap makes the concept difficult to delimit clearly and contributes to ambiguity at the very point where conceptual clarity is most needed.



The ambiguity becomes more pronounced when the literature shifts from defining paradigms to discussing their practical role in research. Some scholars refer to paradigms explicitly as paradigms, whereas others discuss similar issues through alternative labels such as knowledge claims, epistemology, ontology, or methodology (Neuman, 2014). As a result, doctoral and novice researchers may encounter overlapping explanations of closely related concepts without always being shown how they differ or how they fit together within a coherent structure. This helps explain why many beginning researchers struggle not only to define paradigms, but also to articulate how paradigmatic positioning functions in the design of research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Creswell, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Conceptual ambiguity is also evident at the level of paradigm labels themselves, particularly within interpretivist traditions. The literature shows that interpretivism is at times referred to through a range of overlapping terms such as anti-positivism (Mack, 2010), naturalism (Eusafzai, 2014), humanistic inquiry (Mustafa, 2011), subjectivism (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988), constructivism (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006), and constructionism (Crotty, 1998), without always clarifying the distinctions among them (Schwandt, 1994). In some discussions, interpretivism, constructivism, and constructionism are treated as closely related orientations (Chen et al., 2011), while in others they are used almost interchangeably despite subtle philosophical differences (Elshafie, 2013). Such instability in naming does not merely complicate terminology; it also makes it harder for beginning researchers to identify what specific assumptions are actually being invoked when a paradigm label is used.

A further source of ambiguity concerns where paradigmatic discussion fits within the research process. Scholarly discussions differ on how explicitly paradigmatic placement should be addressed and where it should appear in research writing (Nguyen, 2019). In some studies, the researcher's paradigmatic stance is introduced at the beginning of the research design; in others, it is discussed later; and in still others, it is not explicitly mentioned at all, even though the study is clearly underpinned by philosophical assumptions (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Wahyuni, 2012). This inconsistency makes it difficult for beginning researchers to determine where paradigmatic positioning fits within research writing



and how visible it ought to be in the design of a study. Although some scholars recommend that researchers should clearly state their paradigm and articulate their ontological and epistemological assumptions, methodological literature does not consistently model this practice (Holliday, 2007).

Ambiguity also appears in discussions of where researchers should begin when formulating their studies. Crotty (1998) suggests that researchers may begin at different stages, including ontology, epistemology, methodology, or even methods, provided that their choices are justified. By contrast, other scholars argue more strongly for a top-down logic in which researchers begin by identifying their ontological position before moving to epistemology, methodology, and methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Creswell, 2009; Grix, 2004 as cited in Mack, 2010). The existence of these competing positions illustrates that the ambiguity in the literature is not merely semantic; it also affects how the process of research design is conceptually organized.

Another source of conceptual instability lies in the way paradigms themselves are classified. Some scholars present a limited set of paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), while others expand or reorganize these categories by introducing additional labels such as participatory (Guba & Lincoln, 2011), transformative (Mertens, 2007), or emancipatory paradigms (Oliver, 2003). In some accounts, these labels are treated as distinct paradigmatic traditions (Omodan, 2020), whereas in others they are positioned as variants, extensions, or overlapping strands within broader critical orientations (Plack, 2005). When such labels are used inconsistently, or when one label is treated as part of another without clear justification, the conceptual map of paradigms becomes less stable for readers trying to understand what counts as a distinct paradigmatic tradition.

At a deeper level, the literature also differs in how paradigm itself is conceived. Chafe (2024) argues that influential authors such as Kuhn (1970), Burrell and Morgan (1979), and Guba and Lincoln (1994) do not simply propose different paradigmatic positions within a shared framework; rather, they advance distinct conceptions of what a paradigm is, how it is structured, and how it relates to research. His analysis shows that these constructions differ in their rationale,



definition, scope, and implications for inquiry, which means that the literature may appear conceptually unstable not only because paradigms are classified differently, but also because the term paradigm itself is assigned different meanings across major traditions (Chafe, 2024). This deepens the difficulty for beginning researchers, who may assume they are navigating competing paradigms within a single model when, in fact, they may be encountering fundamentally different paradigm conceptions. Taken together, these inconsistencies suggest that the problem lies not only in the philosophical complexity of paradigms, but also in the fact that methodological discussions do not consistently present them in a stable and accessible way for beginning researchers.

3.2. Uneven conceptualization of paradigmatic structure

A second tension in the literature concerns how the internal structure of paradigmatic positioning is presented. Although paradigms are commonly described through interconnected philosophical dimensions, these dimensions are not always treated in a balanced way. Much of the literature gives sustained attention to ontology, epistemology, and methodology, while axiology often receives less explicit treatment or is positioned at the margins of paradigmatic discussion (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Scotland, 2012). This uneven emphasis can create the impression that some dimensions are foundational while others are secondary, even though they all contribute to how inquiry is framed and justified.

The underrepresentation of axiology has been explicitly criticized in the literature. While Guba and Lincoln's (1994) earlier formulation of paradigmatic structure centered on ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions, Heron and Reason (1997) argued that the omission of axiology constituted a serious oversight, since no inquiry can be fully understood without attention to values. In later work, Guba and Lincoln (2011) themselves acknowledged that axiology should have been included among the foundational philosophical dimensions of their framework.

The distinction between axiology and ethics is also important in this regard. While values in research are tied to questions of what is worthwhile and meaningful in inquiry (Heron & Reason, 1997), ethics concerns principles of conduct and responsibility in the research process



(Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Although the two are related, they are not identical. When axiology is left underdeveloped or treated as interchangeable with ethics (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mustafa, 2011), the internal paradigmatic structure becomes less coherent, and one of its major philosophical dimensions risks being misunderstood or overlooked.

A related issue is that the literature often presents the building blocks of paradigmatic structure without

showing how they form a fully integrated whole. Some discussions treat these philosophical dimensions as separate entities rather than as interconnected elements of a coherent whole (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Elshafie, 2013). Other accounts stress that these components function as “building bricks” of research and are essential to a holistic understanding of inquiry, even when their relationship is portrayed in simplified or directional ways (Grix, 2002; Brown & Dueñas, 2019). When one component is minimized or insufficiently connected to the others, the result is a fragmented rather than a coherent understanding of how the paradigmatic components align.

This unevenness is intensified when closely related philosophical positions are introduced without sufficient structural clarification. The literature may acknowledge connections among interpretivism, constructivism, and constructionism, yet it does not always explain clearly whether these terms refer to distinct paradigms, epistemological positions, or overlapping strands within a broader interpretive orientation (Schwandt, 1994; Elshafie, 2013; Chen et al., 2011). As a result, the internal structure of paradigmatic discussion may appear unstable not only because some dimensions are underdeveloped, but also because the conceptual layers within paradigmatic traditions are not always organized in a fully coherent manner. These patterns show that paradigmatic structure is not always conceptualized in the literature as a balanced whole, and this unevenness contributes to the difficulty that beginning researchers may face when trying to understand how paradigmatic positioning is constituted.



3.3. Blurred boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods

A third tension in the literature concerns the lack of clear boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods. Although these concepts are closely related, they do not refer to the same level of research design. At the paradigmatic level, inquiry is oriented by philosophical assumptions; at the methodological level, it is guided by an overall strategy or logic; and at the level of methods, it is carried out through concrete procedures for data collection and analysis (Crotty, 1998; Carter & Little, 2007; Jonker & Pennink, 2010). However, clarity in maintaining these distinctions is not always evident in the literature, which can make the structure of research design appear more straightforward than it actually is.

The relationship between paradigm and methodology is particularly important in this regard. Several authors emphasize that methodology does not stand independently from philosophical assumptions; rather, it flows from ontological, epistemological, and axiological commitments and provides the blueprint through which research is organized (Wahyuni, 2012; Carter & Little, 2007). In this sense, methodology is not merely a technical choice but a route shaped by how researchers understand reality, knowledge, and values (Tuli, 2010). When this relationship is not made explicit, methodological choices may appear detached from the paradigm that is supposed to justify them, thereby weakening the coherence of the research design.

The distinction between methodology and methods is another site of conceptual blurring. Methodology has been described as the explanation and justification of methods rather than the methods themselves, whereas methods are the practical tools and procedures through which data are generated and analyzed (Kaplan, 1964 as cited in Carter & Little, 2007; Crotty, 1998). Yet, novice researchers often confuse the two, and the literature itself sometimes contributes to this confusion by using them interchangeably or by reducing methodology to a list of techniques (Jonker & Pennink, 2010). As a result, the deeper philosophical rationale of inquiry may be overshadowed by the more visible procedural steps of research.



This blurring is also visible when interpretivism is treated as if it were equivalent to qualitative research. Although interpretivist studies are often qualitative, qualitative research itself is not exclusive to interpretivism and may be conducted from other paradigmatic positions as well, such as positivism or the critical stance (Grant & Giddings, 2002). Equating interpretivism with qualitative research therefore collapses the distinction between paradigm and methodological approach, and risks presenting research design as if philosophical positioning could be reduced to the choice of a qualitative label alone (Schwandt, 1994). Such slippage makes it more difficult for researchers to understand that methods and approaches do not, by themselves, fully define paradigmatic commitments.

A further complication arises from the assumption that certain methodologies belong exclusively to particular paradigms. Some methodological discussions challenge this view by arguing that paradigms do not always have clear-cut borders and may intersect, which makes it possible for methodologies associated with one paradigm to be used, under certain conditions, within another (Tuli, 2010). This blurring is also reflected in confusion between methodology and familiar labels such as qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods, which are sometimes treated as if they themselves were paradigms rather than broader methodological or methodological-method combinations (Grant & Giddings, 2002; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Altogether, these tendencies indicate that the conceptual separation between paradigm, methodology, and methods is not uniformly sustained across the literature, and this makes it more difficult for novice and doctoral researchers to design and justify philosophically coherent studies.

4. Theoretical Discussion

The preceding analysis shows that the literature on research paradigms is marked by interconnected tensions that shape how paradigmatic positioning is understood and articulated in research. These tensions extend beyond isolated terminological issues and point to broader conceptual difficulties related to the definition, structure, and alignment of paradigmatic elements. The present discussion interprets these tensions collectively and considers their implications for doctoral



and novice researchers who rely on methodological literature to frame and justify their studies.

4.1. Interpreting the identified tensions

The tensions identified in the previous section suggest that paradigmatic positioning may at times be presented in the literature on research paradigms in ways that lack conceptual stability and coherence. Conceptual ambiguity appears in the variation of definitions, the inconsistent use of related terminology, the instability of paradigm labels and classifications, and the lack of agreement on where paradigm should be positioned in the research process (Weaver & Olson, 2006; Laudan, 1989; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006; Wahyuni, 2012; Chafe, 2024). At the same time, the internal structure of paradigm is often treated in an unbalanced way, especially when axiology is underrepresented or omitted despite its importance in shaping inquiry and its values (Heron & Reason, 1997; Guba & Lincoln, 2011). These patterns suggest that the difficulty of paradigmatic positioning stems not only from the abstract nature of the concepts involved, but also from the way the literature organizes, labels, and presents them.

This issue is particularly significant for doctoral and novice researchers, who often turn to methodological literature for conceptual guidance when designing their studies. When the literature presents paradigms through overlapping labels, unstable classifications, or blurred distinctions between paradigm, methodology, and methods, beginning researchers may struggle to move from abstract understanding to coherent application in their own work (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Nguyen, 2019; Carter & Little, 2007; Jonker & Pennink, 2010). The problem, therefore, appears to lie not only in the philosophical complexity of paradigms themselves, but also in the way their internal logic is presented in the literature, which may not always render it sufficiently visible or accessible for those still developing research competence.

Many conceptual discussions of paradigms also remain primarily descriptive. They define paradigms, classify their major traditions, and outline their philosophical assumptions (Wahyuni, 2012; Elshafie, 2013), yet they often stop short of fully engaging with the conceptual difficulty such presentations may create for beginning researchers. In other words, the literature often explains what paradigms are but pays less



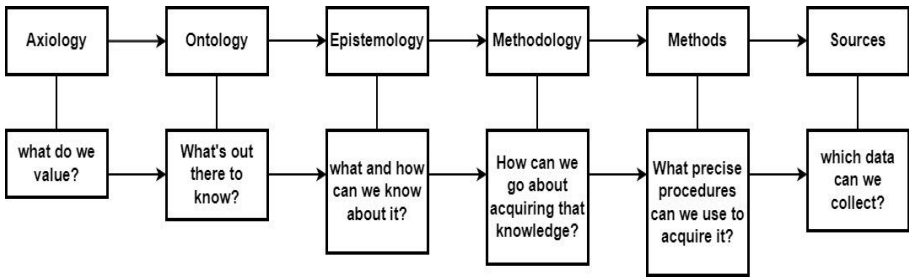
attention to how researchers can navigate the relationships among ontology, epistemology, axiology, methodology, and methods in a coherent way (Grix, 2002; Brown & Dueñas, 2019; Crotty, 1998). This leaves a gap between paradigmatic description and paradigmatic usability, especially for doctoral researchers who must justify their research designs in philosophically defensible terms.

These tensions should therefore not be reduced to minor inconsistencies in terminology alone. Rather, they point to a broader need for conceptual clarification in the methodological literature on research paradigms. If paradigms are to function as meaningful foundations for inquiry, their components must be presented not as isolated philosophical categories, but as interrelated dimensions shaping research design as a whole (Carter & Little, 2007). For this reason, the present paper moves beyond a descriptive overview of paradigms toward an integrated framework for paradigmatic alignment, through which these components can be understood more coherently.

4.2. An integrated framework for paradigmatic alignment

The tensions identified in the literature point to the need for a more integrated way of understanding paradigmatic positioning. In response to these tensions, the present paper draws on two complementary figures to clarify the relationship among the core paradigmatic components. The first presents these building blocks in a directional form, while the second provides a broader framework that elucidates how these elements relate to one another at both the philosophical and methodological levels. Rather than introducing a wholly new model, this section rearticulates and integrates these existing conceptual resources in order to make the internal logic of paradigmatic alignment more explicit and navigable.



Figure 1: The building blocks of research paradigm

Source: Adapted from “A Medical Science Educator’s Guide to Selecting a Research Paradigm: Building a Basis for Better Research”, by M. Brown and A. Duenas, 2019, *Medical Science Educator*, 30(1), p. 2.

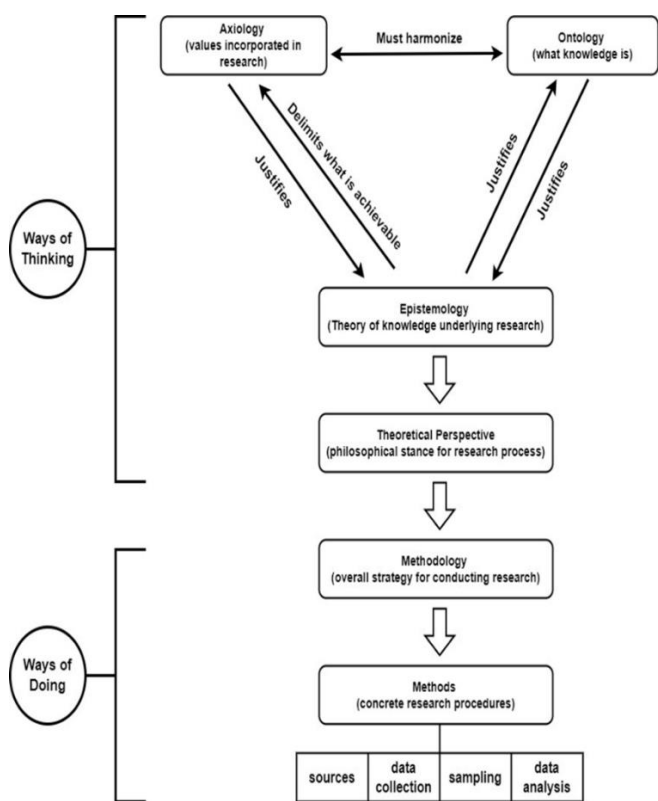
The first figure is useful because it gives a holistic view of the main paradigmatic building blocks, namely axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods. As noted in the associated discussion, these elements are often addressed in the literature as separate entities, which can make it difficult for beginning researchers to grasp how they connect within the research process. Although the figure presents their relationship in a simplified and directional way, it remains important because it makes visible the idea that research is not merely a set of techniques, but a structured process shaped by interrelated philosophical and methodological assumptions (Grix, 2002; Brown & Dueñas, 2019). In this sense, the value of the figure lies less in its simplicity than in its capacity to counter fragmented presentations of paradigmatic structure by foregrounding the existence of an internal relationship among its components.

This relationship can be illustrated clearly through the interpretivist paradigm. At the axiological level, interpretivism begins from the recognition that values are inevitably present in inquiry, which is why reflexive awareness is emphasized rather than the denial or elimination of the researcher’s influence (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Taylor & Medina, 2011). Once inquiry is understood as value-laden, reality itself is approached ontologically not as singular and fixed, but as multiple, socially constructed, and shaped through perception, language, and context (Plack, 2005). This ontological position, in turn, leads to a subjectivist and transactional epistemology in which knowledge is produced through the interaction between researcher and participants rather than through



detached observation (Grant & Giddings, 2002). Because knowledge is understood in this way, interpretivism is methodologically aligned with naturalistic, hermeneutical, and dialectical inquiry aimed at understanding social phenomena from within their historical and cultural settings (Scotland, 2012). Such a methodological orientation then supports methods such as in-depth interviews, observation, and other forms of qualitative engagement carried out in participants’ natural environments, while the main sources of knowledge are participants’ words, meanings, and lived experiences as interpreted in context (Neuman, 2014).

Figure 2: Research framework illustrating the relationship among the building blocks of paradigmatic alignment



Source: Developed from Crotty (1998), Laudan (1989), and Chowdhury (2019).



The second figure extends this clarification by presenting paradigmatic alignment through two broad phases: ways of thinking and ways of doing. The framework itself is developed from a combination of Crotty's model (1998) and Laudan's paradigmatic commitments model (1989), while the distinction between ways of thinking and ways of doing is adapted from Chowdhury (2019). In the first phase, the researcher reflects on axiological, ontological, and epistemological commitments. Axiology is treated as an important starting point because it concerns what is valued in research, the goals that underlie inquiry, and the criteria by which research is considered meaningful or worthwhile. Ontology then concerns the nature of social reality, while epistemology addresses the nature of knowledge within that reality and shapes the researcher's relation to what is known. Once these philosophical positions are aligned, they provide the basis on which methodology can be selected, and methods are then chosen in relation to that methodological orientation. The framework thus makes explicit that paradigmatic positioning is not a matter of attaching abstract labels to research, but of recognizing the logical relationship between philosophical assumptions and research action (Patterson & Williams, 1998; Grix, 2002; Chowdhury, 2019).

Taken as a whole, this integrated presentation is particularly significant in light of the tensions discussed earlier and responds directly to the research problem addressed in this paper. It addresses conceptual ambiguity by clarifying the order and relationship among paradigmatic components (axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods); it counterbalances uneven conceptualization by restoring axiology to a visible place within the overall paradigmatic structure; and it responds to blurred boundaries by showing that methodology and methods follow from broader philosophical commitments rather than standing independently of them. In this way, the framework supports the objective of the paper by moving beyond a descriptive presentation of research paradigms toward a clearer account of how philosophical assumptions are translated into methodological decisions. The framework therefore does not function as a practical prescription, but as a conceptual clarification that makes paradigmatic alignment more intelligible. Its value lies in re-presenting the paradigmatic building blocks as interconnected rather than isolated, and in making explicit the



logic through which philosophical assumptions shape methodological orientation and, ultimately, research practice.

Conclusion

This paper has examined research paradigms as a foundational yet conceptually difficult area within methodological literature. The analysis has shown that the presentation of paradigms in the literature is often marked by limited coherence and accessibility. Three main tensions were identified: conceptual ambiguity in defining and positioning the concept of paradigm, uneven conceptualization of its internal structure, and blurred boundaries between paradigm, methodology, and methods. The paper contributes to the discussion by moving beyond descriptive overviews of paradigms toward a more integrative reading of their internal logic. Its main contribution lies in bringing together the conceptual tensions surrounding paradigmatic positioning and rearticulating the relationships among axiology, ontology, epistemology, methodology, and methods through an integrated framework for paradigmatic alignment. The present discussion also opens future perspectives for examining paradigmatic alignment across different traditions and disciplinary contexts. Rather than closing the discussion, this study contributes to ongoing efforts to render the conceptual structure of research paradigms more visible and coherent.

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