

الأسس الإبستمولوجية لمناهج البحوث الكيفية في الدراسات الإعلامية

**The epistemological foundations of the qualitative methods in media and communication  
research**

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**Abstract:**

This paper aims to show the epistemological foundations of qualitative research methods in media and communication research by defining qualitative research and presenting its basic features in addition to clarifying the elements of the difference between quantitative research and qualitative research and reviewing the differences between the quantitative and qualitative approach at the intellectual and epistemological levels based on the comparison between the two visions for a set of elements (objectivity, aim of research, The role of the researcher, measurement tools, research procedures).

**Keywords:** Qualitative research, quantitative research, interpretivism, positivism, research methodology, epistemology.

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## Résumé :

Ce document vise à montrer les fondements épistémologiques des méthodes de recherche qualitative dans le domaine des médias et de la communication en définissant la recherche qualitative et en présentant ses caractéristiques de base, en plus de clarifier les éléments de différence entre les méthodes quantitatives et les méthodes qualitative et d'examiner les différences entre l'approche quantitative et qualitative aux niveaux épistémologique sur la base de la comparaison entre les deux visions pour un ensemble d'éléments (objectivité, but de la recherche, Le rôle du chercheur, outils de mesure, procédures de recherche).

**Mots-clés :** Recherche qualitative, recherche quantitative, interprétative, positivisme, méthodologie de recherche, épistémologie.

## ملخص :

تستهدف هذه الورقة عرض الأسس الابستيمولوجية لمناهج البحوث الكيفية في الدراسات الإعلامية من خلال تعريف البحث الكيفي و تبيان سماته الأساسية إضافة إلى توضيح عناصر الاختلاف بين البحث الكمي و البحث الكيفي و استعراض مواطن التباين بين المقاربة الكمية و الكيفية على المستوى الفكري و الابستيمولوجي اعتمادا على المقارنة بين رؤى الاتجاهين لجملة من العناصر (الموضوعية، الهدف من البحث، الباحث و المبحوث، أدوات القياس، إجراءات البحث) الكلمات المفتاحية: البحث الكيفي، البحث الكمي، الاتجاه التأويلي، الاتجاه الوضعي، منهجية البحث، الابستيمولوجيا، النظرية.

## - Introduction: Theory and method

Linguistically The method is defined as the clear path and way and termed scientifically as the set of organized procedures that frame the research process in order to achieve accurate results about specific aspects; also, the method in the human and social sciences is defined as the objective scientific path that the researcher takes to study phenomena either to explore them, describe their variables and explain their introductions and causes to identify the laws that govern them or understand the indications and meanings that they contain, this means the method in The human and social sciences has different approaches with multiple intellectual references, epistemological principles and scientific justifications.

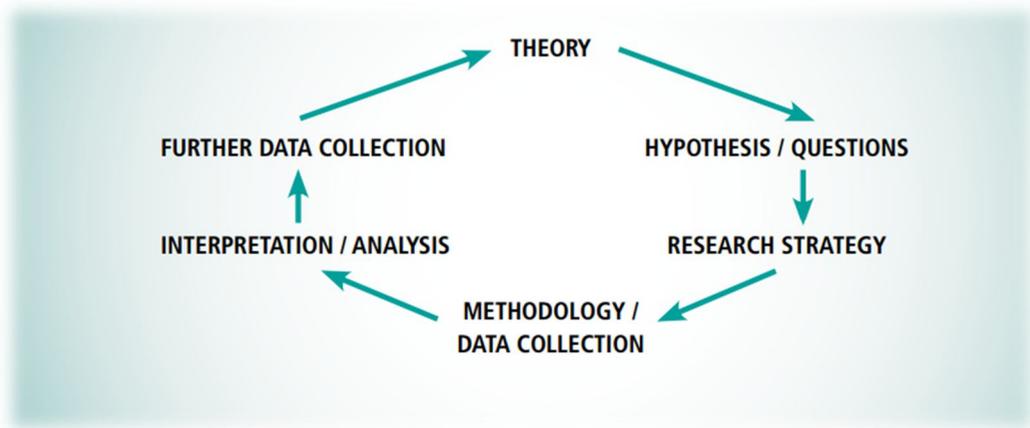
The history of scientific knowledge confirms that the disagreement about the method is old as its use to progress in the field of knowledge. Both the British philosopher Francis Bacon and the French philosopher Rene Descartes are considered the first to employ the method in achieving knowledge despite their differences about it; Bacon believes that the scientific method is set of rules that allow observing phenomena and concluding results asserting that knowledge can only be obtained on the basis of observations in the real world, while Descartes unlike Bacon believes in the effectiveness of analysis and deduction ... and supposes that " it is possible to start from supreme principles (metaphysical, religious ...) in order to extract mathematical facts about nature and human.

The intellectual debate about the nature of method and its function revealed a highly profound different methodological plurality governed by two major tendencies, a positivist tendency betting on the need to benefit from the development of research methods and tools in the natural sciences, and an interpretive tendency calling for a break with the borrowing of research procedures that is related to natural sciences and the necessity to adopt appropriate methods to the specificity of the human phenomenon; therefore, research methods vary in the human and social sciences, quantitative methods concerned with the interpretation of phenomena in order to reveal the causal relationships that govern them,

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and qualitative research depends on the understanding and interpretation to extract the meanings that individuals show on their behaviors within certain contexts.

It can be said, based on what has been mentioned earlier that methods, tools and procedures of research known in the research methodology concerning human and social sciences in general, and media and communication sciences as a branch from it, not separate data found in a vain, rather, they represent the outcome of various perceptions to the nature of scientific research, as the origin of this difference is closely related to the multiplicity of intellectual visions and their different positions concerning the goal and purpose of research, the position of the researcher within the research and the measurement tools used in it, as well as their difference in looking at a number of basic values in the research such as objectivity, Neutrality, honesty and persistence; “ the research methods are not neutral, rather they are a direct reflection of the perceptions that the researcher creates about the researched” (Kielmann, K et al, 2012, p. 07). It is reflected in Figure (1)



**Figure (N°1): The relationship between theory and method (Kielmann, K et al, (2012), p. 07).**

Therefore, this study seeks to answer a major problem that is: What are the epistemological foundations of qualitative research methods.

### **1- Quantitative research and methodological competency questions:**

Quantitative methods in the social sciences in general and the science of media and communication as a branch from it are based on a set of organized methodological procedures<sup>2</sup> that aim to scientificize research that deals with the study of the social phenomenon in general and the communicative phenomenon in particular seeking to achieve the features of the natural sciences in terms of accuracy, objectivity and neutrality as possibility to subject the social phenomenon to observation, experimentation and measurement in the same way in which the natural phenomenon is dealt with, which means describing and studying the social phenomenon quantitatively<sup>3</sup>.

The pioneers of the positivist trend believe that the human phenomenon can be explained, this means the researcher does not stop at the limits of description but transcends it through his ability to unveil causal relationships objectively; therefore, identify the laws that govern the patterns of phenomena; this ability comes from the structure of relationships that govern the variables of a single phenomenon, as well as, the relationships between the phenomenon and other phenomena, which makes it like a circle, within a group of circles linked by a serie of determinisms that make it capable to be interpreted as a product of variables that can be studied objectively.

This trend has been criticized by those who do not believe in the ability of research methods and tools that are used in the study of the natural phenomenon to study the social phenomenon, and they emphasize that the latter needs a deeper methods to analyze the relationship between the individual and his environment by studying this relationship in light of social and cultural contexts that affects the formation of these individuals'

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2 These methodological procedures were built and established in the frame of the positivist trend

3 It represents the positivist trend in journalism, media functionalism and empiricism research

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experiences; thus, formatting their interpretations of the reality around them, and they support their position with a number of arguments, including:

- The social phenomenon (including communication) is linked to the human being, which means that the researcher in social and human studies deals with a world made by human being; therefore, depending on quantitative research measures means neglecting the most important characteristics of the human being, perhaps the most prominent are the individual and individuality characteristics represented in freedom, choice and responsibility; which its study requires transcending research and measurement procedures adopted in empirical studies that can only lead to distorted results about the subjective experiences of individuals and which determine their perception of the reality around them and control their behaviors and attitudes towards it.
- Difficulty of achieving objectivity in research through leaving of subjectivity.
- The continuous change characteristic of the social phenomenon is not overlapping with the nature of statistical procedures in quantitative research, which is considered an attempt to fix the human phenomenon in the position of monitoring and analysis.

In this frame, it should be noted that the vision opposing the positivist trend and the quantitative methods in the investigation of social and human phenomena regardless of their starting points is consistent in the interest in qualitative methods of interpreting social and human phenomena in its overall frame within its social contexts.

### **2- Qualitative research: Definition:**

Roger Wimmer and Joseph Dominick point to the difficulty of defining qualitative research, as they explain this by several reasons, the most important ones is qualitative researchers' resistance to define the term for fear of setting limits to the technique, as well as the linkage of qualitative research with a variety of reference frameworks; perhaps what makes the definition of qualitative research more difficult is the use of a qualitative or specific term to

refer to multiple meanings, as it is used to express an approach to research sometimes and is referred to the research methodology or to express a certain group of research techniques at other times through it. In addition to all these reasons, the diversity of the conventional blog of qualitative research is added, as it is natural research concerned with researching phenomena in its natural context, and it is also interpretive research because it is not satisfied with the description, but goes beyond that to analysis and interpretation, which is research of Locational or field. (This type of research requires going into the field)

By focusing on the characteristic of interpretation in Qualitative research, the definition would be analytical explanatory knowledge with a high level of ability to accurately visualize, and is defined depending on the field of its research and the objectives underlined for it as "an organized effort that depends on the observation of attitude in order to realize the true causes of acting. and is known by focusing on the nature of social truth according to the interpretive view as "a kind of scientific research that assumes the existence of social facts and phenomena that are constructed through the perspectives of the individuals and groups involved in the research; and is recognizable by a methodology for research as the various methods of interpretation that can be used in order to describe and translate social phenomena and give attention to the significance of phenomena rather than its frequency, Qualitative research is also defined as field research as "studying people when interacting in normal activities of their daily life" (Nachmias, F. C., & Nachmias, D, 1996).

Qualitative research is defined in media studies as the methodological framework that determines the directions of research in media phenomena and problems in the presence of ideas or its statements of that the researcher puts through the mechanisms of dealing with the phenomenon (such as observation through participation and in-depth interviews ... etc.) that enable him to describe and interpreting the phenomenon and analyzing what he believes fact in the movement of the phenomenon and its elements

### **3- Qualitative research: Basic features:**

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Interest in qualitative research grew from the end of the sixties and the beginning of the seventies of the last century when researchers called for the need to adopt a new perspective<sup>4</sup> in the research of social phenomena by studying it in its context within its natural environment, and to provide a clearer image of qualitative research. The most prominent features that distinguish this type of research are presented as follows:

- Qualitative research is based on field work where the researcher in qualitative research is interested in studying the phenomenon in its current state direct natural observation is considered one of the most basic requirements in qualitative studies. It should be noted in this framework that the researcher during his study of the phenomenon cannot intervene by treating or experimenting elements and variables which form it; otherwise, he is limited to record his observations based on the tools he employs in order to dig deep in understanding and preparing for analysis and interpretation; in media studies, the symbolic activity has the highest attention in observation , it characterizes and reflects social and individual experiences whether through the various forms of communication or the media, and this calls for attention to linguistic symbols and their meaning.
- Qualitative research emphasizes more on process than outcomes and results, whether in researching the phenomenon or the relationship between its variables, for example, the study of receptivity searches reception as a process that takes place between a number of elements, each one has its characteristics and special role within a general context, and not by measuring a number of indicators that refer to it.
- Studying the social phenomenon including the media as a process leads the researcher to study it in its overall social context where interacts with it.

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<sup>4</sup> Within the requirements of the transition from quantitative research to qualitative research

- The qualitative researcher is interested in identifying the meanings that individuals add to their experiences, attitudes, and behaviors patterns as well as to their lives in general.
- The study of the social phenomenon as a process means searching it in its dynamic state which is characterized by continuous change
- Qualitative research do not commit to prior design to search the phenomenon
- The need to define the theoretical scientific approach to search in the qualitative study because this type of studies is concerned primarily with mental processes, building symbol and meaning and formulating social facts, all of these matters may differ according to the different schools of thought or scientific approaches or their applications

#### **4- Qualitative and quantitative research: Areas of difference:**

Morris Ingres defines qualitative research as a set of procedures to identify phenomena in contrast to quantitative research that represents a set of procedures for measuring phenomena comparison between quantitative research and Qualitative research reveals a profound difference between the two types, which appears in a number of aspects that we summarize as follows:

Epistemological difference: To recognize the difference between quantitative research and qualitative research, we must understand the nature of the epistemological difference between the two directions, through which both quantitative and qualitative research procedures have evolved as methodological procedures for searching the social phenomenon. Both quantitative and qualitative research are based Epistemologically on different intellectual and theoretical bases, "Each of the two directions has its own rules to rises upon it and derives its existence, and each one has its own unique way of asking questions and special way of thinking" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.39). Quantitative researches that are based on positivist thought look at the researched phenomenon according to the positivist perspective of the social fact nature; positivism believes in the

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existence of a knowable truth. It exists independently from the research process and every opinion or position waiting to be explored and studying the variables that constitute it as "A closed structure consisting of measurable elements" (Mucchielli, 2004). Positivists believe that the social world similar to the natural world is governed by rules that manifest in the form of patterns, accordingly, the causal relationships between variables have its existence, and it can be distinguished, demonstrated and interpreted; thus, the stereotypical social truth can be predicted and one of its characteristics is the possibility of controlling it" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.52) On the other hand, qualitative research are based on interpretive thinking that does not believe in the existence of a ready-made truth, rather, it believes in interpretation as a key to understanding, as it is not possible to imagine the existence of social phenomena in the position of the final and stable achievement that waiting to be explored and researched. The researcher in qualitative research must realize that the social phenomenon is an infinite phenomenon, so he needs to study it among the transformations that may affect it due to the continuous distinguishing state of "construction and building. In other words, qualitative research looks at the studied phenomenon according to the interpretive perspective of the social fact nature which considers it "a relational fact (created in relationships) and personal (subjective) that is generated during the research process" ((Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.55), this is because it is socially constructed through the perspectives of individuals, as qualitative researchers do not believe in the existence of a single truth, rather "every researcher creates a truth as part of the research process, it is subjective and exists only in relation to one being observed or the observer" ( Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

The epistemological positioning of both quantitative and qualitative research confirms the depth of the disparity between them and greatly influences the determination of the nature of knowledge and how it is obtained, which leads to a marked differentiation

between the two directions at different levels summarized by (Masse & Valle 1992, pp: 37,38) in The following elements: objectivity, the purpose of the research, data gathering and measurement tools, as well as the relationship between values and events.

- A difference in the concept of objectivity: Many researchers point to the necessity of distinguishing between objectivity and neutrality in the social sciences, as Morris Ingres begins his definition of objectivity as abandoning self-interests; thus it is not synonymous to neutrality, "as interest directs knowledge that is expressed by the person who produces it, or sought by the institution in charge of research. Since objectivity represents neutrality to a position or opinion, it means "the advantage of everyone who deals with a reality in the greatest possible sincerity, this suggests that objectivity is a value that the researcher cannot reach, although he is required to present an honest description of the phenomenon that he is working on studying it , but the research effort practiced by any researcher cannot be carried out in isolation from his entity that is formed by his feelings, experiences and knowledge, this is what the German philosopher Hans-Robert Jauss has expressed on it with the term The social and historical horizon of waiting for a researcher, which is summarized by the idea of the researcher has a social and historical horizon which he exists in it and through it, he is told to read the data he collects and the knowledge he deals with.

Based on the foregoing, the issue of objectivity depends on the status of the researcher and his position in relation to the topic of his research or his opinion on it, and his perception of the nature of scientific knowledge and the means of acquiring it and his position on the relationship between objectivity and neutrality, which reflects one of the most important differences between quantitative and qualitative research, the first deals with objectivity as basic feature and requirement in the research; therefore, the researcher's position is outside the research topic to achieve one basic condition of its objectivity terms, which is the independence of data and the results of its analysis completely from the conditions of its observation. Whereas qualitative research adopts a different perception of the concept of

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objectivity and presents it according to an intellectual interpretive vision "exceed the procedural dimension. Objectivity fit to what is agreed to be considered objective in specific contexts" (Masse & Valle 1992, p: 35).

Positional thought believes in the existence of an independent truth that can be known, "Positional epistemology assumes that there is an objective truth that exists (outside the mind of the researcher) and it can be revealed by objective researchers unaffected by value judgments through the use of objective research methods" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.54). This means that the reality and truth of the phenomenon can be revealed according to a very high objective degree through studying it empirically depending on the quantitative measurement which allows the researcher to reference in his analysis of the phenomenon under research and on the statistical data the strictness of quantitative processing of data gives quantitative research its objective feature, and makes it free from manipulation, and far from the subjectivity of neutral researchers whose degree of commitment to objectivity can be shown through a set of procedures such as ensuring consistency. On the other hand, in qualitative research "The researcher is not supposed to be committed to neutrality and objectivity, rather to be a positive contributor in parallel with the respondents in building descriptive, exploratory and interpreted knowledge at the same time" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.55). Quantitative methodology does not only value subjective facts and inter-subjectivities as sites of knowledge, but also considers it tools for collecting data, as they distinguish between empirical reality on the one hand and the perception of this reality which is called epistemological reality on the other hand, as it represents the only way of access to the empirical reality, bearing in mind that the researcher, even if he is able to make himself away from any position or opinion in the achieving of an empirical reality "objective", he cannot produce an epistemological reality independent from

its production conditions and its intellectual, cultural, social and political contexts (Guillmette & Anadon 2007).

- A difference in the purpose of the research: Quantitative research aims to generalize the results of the study to the research community while qualitative research seek deeply to understand the phenomenon under research, in other words, it can be said that "quantitative research produces a set of data that can be generalized, while qualitative researchers seek to analyze their data deeply more than paying attention to the quantity." (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006 p.49). Therefore, we can conclude that quantitative research aim to explaining and interpreting phenomena, and elucidate the laws that allow its prediction of occurrence , While qualitative research give more attention to this matter , it is limited to ensure that the goal of the research lies in how to realize knowledge not achieving knowledge itself, meaning that it seeks to understand phenomena and review forms of its accommodation through the process of interpretation .

- A difference in the position of the researcher and his role: the positivist thought places the researcher and the topic at two different levels within the research process, the first is considered the knowledgeable part, as he enjoys preference, while the second represents the subject of the research. Thus, the respondents represent the subjects which are totally submitted to the researcher's vision and decisions. On the opposite, "the interpretive perspective specialized in building knowledge is based on methods of knowledge acquisition that are stand on observing the respondents and interacting with them. This type of research includes building relationships between the researcher and the respondents who are participants and collaborators in the research process" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) , as the qualitative researcher is considered "an essential part of the data, in fact, without the active participation of the researcher, the data would not exist" (Wimmer & Dominick, 2011).

On the other hand, the researcher in quantitative research can conduct his study in fully controlled conditions that enable him to control the intermediate and intrusive

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variables to measure the degree of its influence on the nature of the relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variables; while the researcher in qualitative research passes up doing that by studying the phenomenon in the field within its natural conditions without seeking to interfere in moving its elements or controlling its variables.

- A difference in the research design: In the quantitative research a prior plan is prepared while the qualitative research design is developed during the research, which gives this type of research according to the interpretive vision the flexibility that is lost in quantitative research, as the qualitative researcher conducts the study of the phenomenon Without starting from perceptions and prejudgments, so it works to determine the research procedures during the research process (and not before it) as each procedure depends on the information and data gathered in the previous procedures.

- A Difference in the theory construction: the researcher relies in quantitative research on the theory deductively, as the theory represents a framework for his study and a model for organizing its procedures, so he formulates hypotheses or poses questions and collects data according to dictated principles , which allows him to verify them through Research as "the positivist researcher uses research to test, support or reject the theory" ( Wimmer & Dominick, 2011). In contrast, the qualitative researchers adopt the inductive direction in building the theory, this latter can be developed as part of the research process itself "the theory is driven by data, and it emerges as part of the research process, then develops from the data during collection" ( Wimmer & Dominick, 2011) . Therefore, the researcher adopts in this type of research "inductive models in which the theory is extracted directly from the data" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006) A difference in the sampling method and the type of the sample: the probabilistic method (random) is used in selecting the sample vocabulary in quantitative research which has a large number of vocabulary compared to the sample size

in the qualitative research in which the number of its vocabulary is very limited and is chosen in an intended way.

- A difference in measurement tools: The questionnaire is the most used data collection tool in quantitative research that deals with researching social phenomenon in general and communicative in particular, in addition to content analysis, observation, interview and experiment, which are carefully designed in advance, we refer here to measurement as a process, acquires the characteristic of quantitative through its dependence on this type of tools, because the procedures of analysis and interpretation come after subjecting the studied vocabulary to measurement and not before it, and this what made quantitative research subject to criticism, as for qualitative research, different measurement tools are relied upon in terms of their nature, design methods and methods of working with it than those adopted in quantitative research, most notably participatory observation, in-depth interview and focus groups, these are tools that are used in a complementary manner, as the qualitative researcher deepens his thinking about the phenomenon and its nature, depending on the measurement with its various tools.

- A difference in the nature of the data: the data collection tools and measurement methods adopted in quantitative research produce quantitative data, while in qualitative research the numerical and statistical methods are not focused on to express the reality of the phenomenon being investigated, but rather depend on the word and the clear sentence to express what is the phenomenon and the nature of the relationship between its elements.

### **5- Conclusion: Epistemology of qualitative research:**

Qualitative researchers believe that the nature of the phenomenon in the human and social sciences which are characterized by being filled with the values of the individual as a social doer is completely different from the phenomenon in the natural sciences which are characterized by complete independence from the consciousness of individuals; therefore, they believe that it is illogical to study it with the same methodological tools " if

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interpretation has proven its arguments in the field of physics where systems are purely materialistic, independent and subject to an universal nature, it is difficult to apply in the spiritual sciences (human and social sciences) where phenomena are variable, live and filled with the values of its pioneers, as well as, reflecting their existence and social and cultural positions.

Qualitative research is based epistemologically on the interpretive perspective, the latter which derives its name from a central belief surrounded with many intellectual trends considers interpretation is the basis of understanding as it is the process that enables the researcher to extract the reality of the phenomenon under research through the collection of the indications that individuals impart to the world around them as the understanding represents an awareness to the reality of a living experience, so in this sense, the understanding represents a pursuit to realize existential and sentimental position while it considers the explanation as a justification or explanation for the occurrence of the phenomenon in a certain way with the assumption of the existence of relations that combine with other phenomena .

The interpretive perspective emerged as a “direct objection to the positivist knowledge theory and its interpretation or its application to the concept of objectivity” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006), where the interpretive thought basically interprets the processes of interaction among individuals on the one hand, and interpreting the social meaning that these individuals attribute it to those interactions on the other hand. The interpretive perspective does not see social and cultural phenomena in its finalized state and final form, but rather in the process of construction and formation. People make their social reality based on the interaction of each other on the one hand, and between them and their reality on the other hand. Realizing of this reality does not happen without the views of the doers, so it is necessary to clarify their interpretation of their positions and social

phenomena. Thus, it can be said that the interpretive perspective believes that the reality of the phenomenon under research takes its meaning during the process of interaction between its elements.

It should be noted in this context that qualitative knowledge is the product of a wide variety of theories which its pioneers were interested in researching and studying the social phenomenon, as these theories although they agree in adopting the principle of interpretation in approaching the social phenomenon, they adopt different approaches. The qualitative trend is established on a number of thought schools and deriving its richness from their different interests in studying the social phenomenon, perhaps the most important of these is the phenomenological theory that ensures that the reality of daily life is the supreme truth and the theory of symbolic interaction which is concerned in central study of the position of communication in society, as well as, the structural theory whose pioneers studied social phenomena as linguistic phenomena with communicative dimensions.

The research methodology represents a reflection of the relation between theory and research tools to produce together a guide for the research plan, starting from formulating the problem, data collection and analysis and presenting the results, which is confirmed by many researchers<sup>5</sup> as epistemology, theory and research tools are overlapped, which leads us to conclude that there is between the folds of each thought vision a certain theory of knowledge.

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<sup>5</sup> See: Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber & Patricia Leavy: The practice of qualitative Research

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