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## **Exploring Caregiver Grief: A Glaserian (Classic) Grounded Theory Protocol**

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### **Abstract**

Preparing a research protocol using Glaserian (classic) grounded theory (GT) is often challenging for novice researchers due to aspects of the methodology deviating from more familiar quantitative research and also from some aspects of other qualitative methods. Yet, universities and ethics review boards often expect certain information to be presented for the researcher to receive approval to begin data collection. This article provides an example of a Glaserian (classic) GT protocol approved by an ethics review board. The exemplar explains how Glaserian (classic) GT will be used to formulate a theory about the primary concerns and behaviors of spousal caregivers who have lost their partners to Parkinson's disease. In-depth interviews of bereaved spousal caregivers will be analyzed using constant comparative method to identify the participants' main concern and the behaviors used to address it. The

unique nature of Glaserian (classic) GT necessitates navigating institutional requirements by providing the required information with the protocol while also educating the reader about GT.

**Keywords:** Glaserian (Classic) Grounded Theory, Research Protocol, caregivers, Parkinson's disease, ethics review boards

There is a critical need for well-constructed examples of grounded theory protocols<sup>1</sup> that meet both the institution and an ethics review board<sup>2</sup> standards. Many students and researchers, particularly novice grounded theorists and doctoral students, struggle with designing protocols that balance methodological guidelines with ethical requirements. This challenge is especially pronounced in Glaserian (classic) grounded theory, where aspects of the methodology deviate from traditional qualitative research norms. Universities programs and ethics review boards often expect specific information to be included in a research protocol. However, this can require researchers to navigate the dual task of meeting these expectations while educating the reader about grounded theory.

This paper addresses this gap by providing a protocol for a Glaserian (classic) grounded study approved by the institution that can serve as a model for student researchers and those

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<sup>1</sup> In academia, the terms prospectus, proposal, and protocol refer to distinct documents that serve specific purposes in the research process. The prospectus is a preliminary plan outlining the investigator's ideas regarding the research topic (Howard, 2019). The proposal builds upon the prospectus and justifies the research's need. This document is more comprehensive, detailing the project's objectives, significance, methodology, and anticipated outcomes, often including a literature review at this stage (Bhosale, 2022). Finally, the protocol is the most detailed research document, serving as a manual for conducting the study while ensuring adherence to ethical standards for the chosen methodology (Bhosale, 2022; Makram, et al., 2024).

<sup>2</sup> Within the United States, ethics review boards are called Institutional Review Boards (IRBs). Throughout the rest of the article IRB will be used to refer to ethics review boards.

new to Glaserian (classic) grounded theory. Once approved, the information within this protocol was used to submit an IRB application, which was also approved. This article provides a practical example that will assist researchers with meeting academic and regulatory requirements, reducing the risk of delays or rejections during the IRB review process, and supporting the integrity of their methodological approach.

### **Protocol Exemplar**

Recently, I completed a qualitative phenomenological study to evaluate caregivers who care for their husbands with Parkinson's disease. The informative study helped detail these women's lived experiences as caregivers (White & Palmieri, 2024). During their interviews, they explained how they often put their feelings and needs aside for the well-being of their loved one with Parkinson's disease. They lost their self-identity, and all their activities revolved around the illness.

Approximately six months after the completion of the study, I received a letter from a participant explaining how she had lost her husband. She went on to explain how thankful she was to have the opportunity to participate in the prior study, which offered knowledge about that season of her caregiving career. She explained that she was having difficulty adjusting to her new role of being herself, whatever that new season meant. About two more months passed, and I received another letter from a different participant. The second participant explained in more detail that she had no idea what to do, and when she started doing research, there was very little information that could offer her guidance. I began talking with my mentor about the problem and decided that something needed to be done for these wives or husbands who gave all their time to help care for their spouses.

## Background

Information about caregiver experiences after the death of their loved one is scarce. For this reason, this study will use a Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology. Existing research focuses its attention on how caregivers struggle with relationship death (Carter et al., 2012; Rigby et al., 2021) and mourning (Nielsen et al., 2016) their loved ones before they pass away. The common term "anticipatory grief" (Garner, 1997), or the act of preparing for the loss of a loved one (Nielsen et al., 2016), explains the feelings these women caregivers had as they slowly lost their spouses from neurodegenerative and neurocognitive diseases. Historically, caregivers have moderate assistance before death but not after the death of their spouse. However, caregivers still need support during the time after, as many levels of emotions will be processed, which can take extended amounts of time.

Additionally, the former caregivers have now found themselves with vast amounts of time on their hands, which can lead to loneliness, guilt, and depression, as their whole identity was wrapped up in being the caregiver (White & Palmieri, 2024). Post-caregiver syndromes occur when a caregiver experiences a state of burnout, marked by symptoms like feeling overwhelmed, constant worry, frequent fatigue, weight fluctuations, and easy irritability or anger, which serves as a warning sign for potential future despair (Mora-Lopez, et al., 2022). Caregivers lose their identity during caregiving, which becomes more involved the longer the caregivers must provide care to the patient/family member (White & Palmieri, 2024). Consequently, they deserve support after their partner's death as they learn their new roles and adjust their activities and behaviors to focus on themselves.

## **Purpose**

This study aims to formulate a theory regarding the primary concerns faced by spousal caregivers who have lost their partners to Parkinson's disease. It will also explore the behavioral patterns that emerge after their spouse's death. Therefore, the research question has evolved into: What are the main concerns for spousal caregivers who have lost their spouses to Parkinson's disease, and what are their primary challenges?

## **Methodology**

The proposed study employs a Glaserian (classic) grounded theory design to develop a comprehensive theory. The Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology is particularly suited to exploring complex social processes and behaviors, making it ideal for examining the experiences of caregivers following the death of their spouses due to Parkinson's disease. The primary objective is to uncover and conceptualize these caregivers' main concerns and the behavioral patterns of caregivers in the aftermath of their significant loss. By simultaneously gathering and analyzing data through interviews (Glaser, 1998), the study seeks to generate a theory that reveals bereaved caregivers' underlying dynamics and coping mechanisms, providing valuable insights into their unique challenges and needs.

## **Study Design**

This grounded theory study aims to explore the experiences of spouse caregivers who have lost their spouses to Parkinson's Disease. The focus will be on understanding the behaviors of these caregivers following their spouse's death. Participants will be interviewed using the Zoom platform, with each session lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. While Glaser (1998) recommended against recording and transcribing interviews, interviews for this study will be recorded and transcribed due to institutional requirements. Field notes will also be

taken. Field notes and transcriptions can be used as needed to begin data analysis immediately following each interview. Another reason interviews will be transcribed is that when working with a research team, having transcribed interviews ensures that all team members have access to the same exact information, which is crucial for consistent and collaborative analysis.

All participants will receive a copy of an informed consent and demographic questionnaire via email before their interview. This will give each person time to read the consent form and identify areas of concern. In line with Glaser's assertion that "all is data" (Glaser, 1998, p. 8), this demographic information will be analyzed as part of the overall data set.

To ensure the ethical integrity of this study, measures will be taken to protect participants' well-being and confidentiality. Psychological risks, such as emotional distress, from discussing sensitive topics will be mitigated by providing supportive resources and ensuring that participation is voluntary. Participants will have the option to pause or terminate their interviews at any time without penalty.

## **Sampling**

The initial sample for this study will include spouse caregivers whose spouses were diagnosed with Parkinson's disease and passed away more than six months before the start of the study. Individuals who cared for Parkinson's disease patients but were not their spouses or whose spouse passed away less than six months prior to participation will not be eligible for this study. In addition, all participants must be over the age of eighteen and speak proficient English.

### ***Sampling Strategy***

This study will use theoretical sampling. Theoretical sampling will help refine and expand the sample based on emerging concepts and categories (Glaser, 1978). Using this approach ensures that emerging concepts and categories from the data are fully explored to reach theoretical saturation, which is the point at which no new significant variation is found in the data (Glaser, 1998). However, when beginning a grounded theory study, there are no concepts or categories to guide theoretical sampling. Thus, this study will initially employ purposeful sampling to select initial participants from the topic area who meet the eligibility criteria and have first-hand experience with the topic.

### ***Sampling Size***

In Glaserian (classic) grounded theory, it is impossible to state an exact sample size because the sample size is based on when theoretical saturation is achieved. This study will achieve theoretical saturation by collecting data on each concept relevant to the theory until no new significant variation is found. Achieving theoretical saturation is an iterative process involving systematic coding, constant comparison, and regular team discussions about emerging concepts, as well as ensuring methodological rigor. We expect theoretical saturation to be reached with a sample size of between 25 and 30 participants.

### **Recruitment**

Participants will be recruited from the Colorado Parkinson Foundation (CPF) membership roster in Colorado Springs, Colorado. The researcher will conduct a live PowerPoint presentation at the CPF's monthly meeting and follow up with recruitment emails containing the study flyer. In addition, flyers will be sent to Parkinson's disease caregiver groups and individuals in the membership whose spouse has died from the disease.

The flyer will also be posted on the researcher's social media pages, including Facebook, X, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Interested individuals will be asked to email the researcher using the contact details provided on the flyer. Potential participants will receive the consent form via email before the commencement of interviews and will have the opportunity to ask questions and receive comprehensive responses from the researcher. Those who see the recruitment flyer on social media will be asked to share the flyer on their private social media pages and forward it to individuals they feel may meet the criteria.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Participants interested in joining the caregiver Glaserian (classic) grounded theory study will initiate contact with the primary investigator (PI) to express their desire to participate. Upon contacting the PI, participants will be asked to provide their preferred email and physical addresses. This information is necessary for the PI to send each participant a ten-dollar Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their involvement in the study. If no address is given or they prefer not to provide their physical address, the gift card will be emailed to the address provided.

During this initial interaction, participants will also have the chance to ask questions about the study. The PI will provide detailed explanations to ensure participants clearly understand the study's purpose, procedures, and expectations. Once participants feel informed and agree to the study's terms, they will be asked to sign an informed consent form and return it to the PI. This process solidifies their commitment to participate and ensures they know their rights and the study's ethical considerations. At this time, participants will also select a flower pseudo-name, which will be used to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the study, from data collection to the final write-up and publication. The chosen



pseudo-names will be known only to the PI, adding an extra layer of privacy and protection for the participants' identities.

To further ensure confidentiality, all data will be de-identified from the transcribed interviews. Physical documents related to the study will be securely stored in a locked safe at the PI's residence, while digital data will be kept on a password-protected computer. These measures are in place to safeguard the participants' information and uphold the ethical standards of the research.

Data collection will involve one-on-one interviews conducted via the Zoom platform. These interviews will be audio-recorded to capture detailed accounts from participants. The recordings will then be sent to Rev.com, a transcription service that has signed a confidentiality agreement to ensure the privacy of the data. Typically, transcripts are completed and returned within ten hours. Field notes will also be taken, allowing for a prompt continuation of the research process.

### ***Grand Tour Question***

The study will involve conducting interviews using a single grand tour question to avoid introducing preconceived biases. This approach allows participants to narrate their experiences authentically, ensuring their shared stories are genuinely their own rather than being shaped by the researcher's expectations or preconceptions (Vander Linden & Palmieri, 2023), which aligns with Glaserian (classic) grounded theory studies. The grand tour question for this study will be: "What has life been like since your spouse passed away? This open-ended question encourages participants to provide comprehensive, in-depth responses that reflect their unique journeys and challenges, forming the foundation for a grounded and

unbiased analysis. In addition, probing questions, such as "Can you tell me more about?" will elicit a deeper, more detailed response to specific aspects of the participant's narratives.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis will consist of a constant comparative method, coding, and memoing. Once the first interview is completed and the transcription is received, the PI will simultaneously check the document and audio recording for accuracy. The data analysis in Glaserian (classic) grounded theory aims to systematically generate theory from data (Glaser, 1998). The process begins with formatting each interview to allow for a "line-by-line" (Glaser, 1978, p. 57) open coding process and remembering that "all is data" (Glaser, 1998, p. 8). Each sentence will be closely examined and initially coded, not by describing but by looking for the underlying conceptual patterns within the data. The coding process will begin upon the first reading of the interview to allow for a natural emergence of the concepts. The focus in the data analysis phase is for the researcher to limit their influence on the data and focus on the emergence of concepts from the data (Glaser, 1978, 1998).

### **Substantive Coding**

Substantive coding is the initial stage of the data analysis process in Glaserian (classic) grounded theory. It aims to identify key patterns, concepts, and categories directly from the data. There are two distinct areas of substantive coding: open and selective coding. The first phase will involve open coding, which includes looking for initial categories, properties, and dimensions (Holton & Walsh, 2017). The process will help break down data into discrete parts to closely examine and identify a comprehensive set of concepts and their relationships, which become the building blocks of the theory (Glaser, 1998). During this phase, the researcher identifies a wide range of possible concepts and categories that reflect the data's

complexity and richness. The main concern often begins to surface during open coding, a critical aspect of Glaserian (classic) grounded theory (Chun Tie, Birks, & Francis, 2019). The main concern is a primary issue or problem of people within the substantive area, and it guides the development of the core category, which explains the patterns of behavior used to address the main concern (Glaser, 1978).

Once open coding has generated several preliminary categories, selective coding will be used to refine and develop core categories that are central to the research. In this phase, the researcher will focus on selecting the most relevant and frequent categories that emerge from the open coding process (Glaser, 1998). During this stage, the relationships between the core category and other subcategories are explored and elaborated upon, leading to a more detailed understanding of the data and emerging theory (Simmons, 2022). Using both open and selective coding will increase the rigor of the codes, which will assist in the theory development (Holton & Walsh, 2017). By continuously comparing data and refining codes, the researcher ensures that the emerging theory is deeply grounded in the participants' realities and addresses their primary concerns (Chun Tiet et al., 2019).

### **Constant Comparative Method**

The constant comparative method is the analysis method used within the Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology (Holton & Walsh, 2017). This method involves systematically comparing each new piece of data with previously coded data to identify similarities, differences, and emerging theoretical patterns. Researchers iteratively refine and expand their coding categories through constant comparison, allowing concepts, patterns, and relationships to emerge directly from the data rather than imposing preconceived frameworks. (Simmons, 2022). This iterative process ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the

data, facilitating a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study and supporting the development of substantive theories (Holton & Walsh, 2017).

### **Memoing**

Memoing is a critical component of the Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology, capturing the researcher's thoughts, insights, and hypotheses that emerge during data collection and analysis (Vander Linden & Palmieri, 2023). Memos are written reflections that form connections between codes or categories (Chamestzky, 2022). In this study, memos will be written immediately after each interview and during the transcription and coding phases. Memoing allows the researcher to reflect on the data, explore emerging concepts, and develop a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences. As recommended by mentors Dr. K. Vander Linden and Dr. O. Simmons, memoing will consist of an audit trail by referencing the interview and line number (e.g., B:17) so the memo can be easily traced back to the exact quote or grouping of words. This continuous and iterative memoing process ensures that the analysis remains grounded in the data while facilitating connections between different codes and their relevance to each other (Glaser, 1998).

### **Sorting and Theoretical Outline**

The sorting process is a pivotal stage of data analysis in the Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology, used to systematically organize memos and codes to assist in building a theoretical framework (Simmons, 2022). During this stage, memos that help capture insights or generate hypotheses are reviewed and categorized (Vander Linden & Palmieri, 2023). The careful organization of memos and codes during sorting helps "identify concepts, similarities, and conceptual reoccurrences in data" that might not be immediately apparent during initial coding (Chun Tie et al., 2019, p. 6). Sorting involves an iterative process in which memos are

compared and contrasted, allowing the researcher to continually refine the categories and subcategories. This process not only helps in honing the theoretical constructs but also ensures that the final theory is both coherent and comprehensive.

### **Theoretical Codes**

Theoretical codes are essential to the sorting process and the development of the theoretical outline in grounded theory, as they help connect and organize the core concepts that emerge from the data (Holton & Walsh, 2017). These codes show how different categories and concepts relate, making building a clear and complete theory easier. Using theoretical codes, researchers go beyond just describing what they see; they find patterns and processes explaining what is happening on a conceptual level rather than a descriptive level (Glaser, 1998). Theoretical codes help researchers discern the underlying structure of the theory, ensuring it is based on real data and providing a clear and understandable explanation of the studied topic; however, researchers must be careful not to form preconceived expectations of specific codes (Simmons, 2022).

### **Theory Development**

The primary focus and critical stage of a Glaserian (classic) grounded theory study is the development of the theory. At this point in the research, the data, codes, and memos will be synthesized to build a theory that explains the behaviors of individuals who have lost their spouse to Parkinson's disease. Using synthesized data will result in a theory that goes beyond descriptive analysis, systematically explaining the underlying processes and patterns observed in the data. The ultimate goal of this study is to develop a theory that will contribute valuable insights to the field. The theory can then be moved into a grounded action study,

which will assist in social change for the participants and those like them (Simmons & Gregory, 2003).

### Conclusion

The current article presents an exemplar protocol using the Glaserian (classic) grounded theory methodology while also addressing many of the often-required elements in a research protocol. These required elements are often defined by institutions of higher education and ethics review boards and based on qualitative research norms. The unique nature of Glaserian (classic) grounded theory often makes it difficult for novice researchers to navigate institutional requirements while developing a research protocol. This often requires a balance between providing the required information and educating the reader about grounded theory. This article provided one example of how a grounded theorist may be able to address common elements required in a research protocol and by IRBs while educating the reader about Glaserian (classic) grounded theory.

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