

Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory and Descriptive Phenomenology: Similarities and Differences

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Abstract

Though one may presume that all qualitative designs are similar—and to a certain degree, they are, there are some similarities and differences in two designs—phenomenology and Glaserian classic grounded theory—which need to be explored in a more nuanced manner. By explaining these connections and divergences, less-experienced researchers will not only gain a greater understanding of the designs, but also will be able to make more informed decisions about them. Though the use of description to talk about the given experience is not encouraged in Glaserian classic grounded theory, on some level initially it is present, whereas in phenomenology description of the experience is foundational and inextricably linked to the design. In both designs, a researcher needs to set aside judgments, theories, and previous ideas to see the data as purely as possible. Once greater focus is achieved, there are different ways, according to the design, that the researcher will assemble the data into a coherent explanation of the experience. In this paper, several connections and points of difference will be presented.

Keywords: phenomenology, Glaserian classic grounded theory, experience, setting judgments aside, reduction, data reassembly, conceptual data, descriptive data

All data have a “story to tell” (Yin, 2009, p. 130). The role of a researcher is to choose the best design and then the most appropriate analytic model they believe will help them collect, present, and analyze the data clearly. But there is a problem: many qualitative research designs have one or more shared commonalities causing potential confusion. For example, (a) four questions in Glaserian classic grounded theory are used in (and come from) ethnography, (b) behaviors and experiences in phenomenology have a parallel in Glaserian classic grounded theory, (c) descriptions exist in ethnography, case study, and phenomenology, and (c) study boundaries (Vold Hansen, 2022), also referred to as scope, qualitatively speaking, have connections to several qualitative designs like case study, phenomenology, and Glaserian classic grounded theory. Even similar analytic models could be used with different research designs.

A novice researcher needs to understand and be informed about the chosen design when a research-based decision about that design is required. Without a more nuanced understanding of some qualitative research designs, when there is a need to refute one over another, the scholar may be lost. Thus, there is a need to discuss several practical commonalities and differences between Glaserian classic grounded theory and descriptive phenomenology. Within the realm of these designs, several topics will be presented: (a) description and experience, (b) the need to set aside judgments, (c) reduction to achieve greater focus, and (d) reassembling the data. The paper will conclude with a reflective summary.

Description and Experience

The understanding of this topic may not as straightforward as one may expect because the concept of description is not completely separated from the ideas of explanation and conceptualization, two important elements in phenomenology and Glaserian classic grounded theory. On a basic level one may wonder what the difference is between the three terms and why such a distinction matters. The significance and distinction of these words point to a broader issue about language. While researchers and philosophers may be able to loosen a word from its meaning (as in offer a different interpretation of a word), the shared meaning of words (Barbero & Amaro, 2024; Claridge, 2020; Larsson & Myrendal, 2024) cannot be fully decoupled from the words themselves. This distinction is important for clarifying the roles that description and experience play in Glaserian classic grounded theory and in phenomenology.

Starting with description, one can see that a simple and straightforward definition is not present because, according to Walezak (2024), “description does not seem to have a proper definition” (para. 1). And that statement would be reasonable because Weaver’s (1919) definition is somewhat vague: “description is that form of discourse which has for its purpose the creation of an image” (p. 65). Yet, with this definition, as well as the one by Osman et al. (2024): “portraying an accurate profile of persons, events, or situations” (p. 57), at least a foundation exists.

According to ChatGPT, while description answers the question “what is

happening” (OpenAI, 2026), explanation offers an answer to “why or how does [something] happen” (OpenAI, 2026)? To explain why something happens, there must first be description. This idea would imply very strongly that first there is description and then explanation and that idea would be accurate.

Finally, conceptualization is more abstract than description and explanation. One may view description, explanation, and conceptualization as an inverted funnel where description is the narrowest and conceptualization is the broadest. Without a basis in description, explanation and conceptualization cannot happen.

While this discussion may seem clear so far, the reality is not always so straightforward. If the connections between words and their means are loosened, further confusion, misinterpretation, and misunderstanding may ensue, especially if a researcher is inexperienced and may not yet know the terminology. For example, in Glaserian classic grounded theory, when I present a theory, I state the core variable (or category) as well as its subcategories and their properties with support (like in vivo quotes). On some level, I am describing the theory and explaining how participants deal with the issue at hand. From a linguistic perspective, that statement may be completely factual. However, following the precepts of the research design, I am not describing anything. The conceptualized terms that may be used are above “time, place, and people” (Glaser, 2001, p. 10; Glaser, 2013, p. 12) whereas descriptions are not.

On the other hand, in descriptive

phenomenology, the researcher needs to situation the lived experiences of the participants within a specific context of time, place, and people—somewhat the opposite of what is done in Glaserian classic grounded theory. To borrow a term from another design, this specificity of time, place, and people creates a bounded environment opposite to what is required in Glaserian classic grounded theory. Giorgi (2012) offered a good example of a situation where a person was learning to drive. Such a situation where the person was nervous because of the size of the car and their experiences with it demonstrate clearly how lived experiences are based on a person’s experiences at a given time and location.

And the idea of explaining is important because the term *explanation* is used in a nuanced way in Glaserian classic grounded theory from how one may normally understand the term. According to Norman (2025), the term *explanation* has a causality to it. In Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is not necessarily a cause-and-effect component to the emergent theory. Rather, the researcher presents the theory which highlights the behaviors that account for, or explain, how participants resolve their main concern (Chametzky, 2022a; Glaser, 1992, 2005, 2012a). Given that *explanation* is slightly different from how one might interpret that word based on the explanation offered by Norman (2025), a novice researcher must not only learn the needed terminology but also how the terms are used so confusion and misinterpretation are minimized.

Attention may now be turned to a

brief discussion of experience. Though description and experience may be seen as potentially two unrelated items, they are quite closely tied to each other and the two designs because in both designs, experience is presented, broadly speaking, as description.

By way of a brief and vitally important digression, I am aware that I'm discussing an idea that requires extreme caution because the previous statement needs to be explained. Though "descriptions are stale dated" (Glaser, 2001, p. 15) and "run the world" (Glaser, 2002, p. 24), even conceptualized descriptions are not allowed in Glaserian classic grounded theory. But, from a linguistic sense, according to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), the term description is defined as "discourse intended to give a mental image of something experienced." In this exclusive light, then, when I present a theory developed using Glaserian classic grounded theory, though my concepts are conceptual, I am describing the theory. As a classic grounded theorist, I am not advocating that theories have descriptions (though, on some level, according to Dr. Helen Scott (a fellow classic grounded theorist), there is an element of description in explaining and elucidating a theory (personal communication, January, 15, 2026); I am not advocating the use of descriptions as they are tightly tied to "time, place, and people" (Glaser, 2001, p. 10; Glaser, 2013, p. 12) and result too often in "worrisome accuracy" (Glaser, 2009, p. 45); nor am I offering a "remodeled" (Glaser, 2012b, p. 29) version of grounded theory.

According to Glaser (2001),

This overdue of descriptive capture,

by going on and on at some length and redundancy, loses the parsimony of good GT explanation. Remember, description tends to go on and on until curbed only by external, preconceived cutting points and boundaries. Total coverage is actually preconceived bounded coverage. Descriptive coverage is a big emphasis in QDA. In contrast, the length of GT is systematically self delimiting [sic] by conceptual saturation, interchangeability of indices, changing from open to selective coding, memo-making and theoretical sampling. (p. 33)

On the other hand, what is evident is an undeniable limitation of the English language, which does not preclude a certain amount of confusion. The same may be said for cross-usage of terminology like the concept of *boundedness* to discuss a single unit or focused topic in phenomenology or Glaserian classic grounded theory; though the term is reserved for a different research design. Using it in the context of phenomenology or Glaserian classic grounded theory, while linguistically accurate, would most certainly result in confusion and potential misunderstanding.

Coming back to the concept of experience, on a foundational level, experience refers to understanding and subsequent elucidating of people's behaviors. Within the realm of experience, there is a great variety of common topics (John et al., 2025) that may be explored for each design. For example, personal loss can be presented in a phenomenological study or a Glaserian

classic grounded theory study (Parastou et al., 2025; White et al., 2025). Similarly, educator experiences (Chametzky, 2015; Yalçın et al., 2024) may be studied using either design. Of course, how the experiences would be presented in the two designs would be different. That rather nuanced point is worth discussing further.

In phenomenology, the objective is to understand the lived experiences of participants to better comprehend human behavior (Moustakas, 1994). Only in this way could “the true essence of a phenomenon” (Madden, 2025, p. 50) be uncovered. To understand these defining characteristics, the researcher aims to understand the given experience “on the wholeness of experience rather than solely on its objects or parts” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). During data collection, the long interviews involve detailed questions (Moustakas, 1994) so rich and comprehensive data can be gathered. During the analysis process, the researcher would examine the experience from different perspectives with the sole objective of finding “a unified vision of the essences of [the] phenomenon or experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 58). This idea will be discussed in more detail in another section of this paper. In phenomenology, these four elements together help the researcher obtain a necessary comprehensiveness of the given phenomenon.

The four aforementioned elements— (a) lived experiences, (b) comprehensive understanding of the experience, (c) detailed interview questions, and (d) examination of the experience from different perspectives— are important to understand and require an

explanation, albeit brief, because there are some similarities and important differences with Glaserian classic grounded theory. Each concept will be discussed in turn.

The focus of Glaserian classic grounded theory is patterns of behavior and specifically how participants behave as they try to address whatever their primary concern is in a given substantive area (Chametzky, 2020; Glaser, 2012a). On one level, phenomenology and Glaserian classic grounded theory deal with human behavior. Such commonality is not surprising given that qualitative research designs stem from similar paradigmatic beliefs (Matta, 2022). According to Glaser (2001), “Through all this diversity of qualitative methods, the researchers do one fundamental thing: they tell stories about the worlds they have studied” (pp. 44-45). Where the two designs differ is in terminology. Phenomenology uses the phrase *lived experiences* and focuses on a specific phenomenon, while Glaserian classic grounded theory uses the phrase *main concern* (Chametzky, 2020; Glaser, 2012a) to understand how participants behave and attempt to address whatever issue is personally important in a given substantive area.

Concerning the comprehensiveness of the experience, though the researcher in phenomenology attempts to understand the phenomenon from all different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994), which will be discussed later in this article, theories developed using Glaserian classic grounded theory are not supposed to be comprehensive of all data. As the researcher codes and writes memos comparing the codes (and later indices and

properties of the category), the emergent theory is based only on a “slice of data” (Chametzky, 2022a, p. 24), which accounts for most of the behaviors of participants in a substantive area. To aim for a comprehensive theory would be counter to the tenets of Glaserian classic grounded theory. Glaser (2012a) clearly stated that,

The task of the GT researcher is to generate a theory within the chosen data boundaries. To start going elsewhere for more data under the guise of making the SGT [substantive grounded theory] ‘more comprehensive’ changes the goal of just generating a SGT for and from an available population, which is soon to be forgotten anyway by generating the [p. 10] conceptual theory abstract of time, place and people. (pp. 10-11).

He then went on to state that “More comprehensive is just a QDA [qualitative data analysis] excuse to keep collecting and even conceptualizing to pursue descriptive coverage” (Glaser, (2012a, p. 11).

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, after the core category (the one overriding concept to address most of the data) is discovered, the researcher continues to work on its subcategories and properties should any be insufficiently developed through theoretical sampling (Chametzky, 2022, 2025). This type of sampling would be the closest a Glaserian classic grounded theorist would come to having a comprehensive picture—and it is far from comprehensive in the socially accepted sense. Rather than using the word comprehensive, a better idea might be *fully saturated*. In phenomenology, on the

other hand, data are to be saturated for comprehensive description.

The third element under experience deals with having detailed questions. In Glaserian classic grounded theory a detailed data collection tool is not used. There are two reasons for this intentional practice. First, preconception violates a core tenet (Chametzky, 2024; Glaser, 2001, 2002) of the design whereby preconception results in forced and artificially manipulated data. Second, it is impossible to have any detailed questions in a data collection tool when the researcher does not know beforehand what will be discussed. Instead, a grand tour question, taken from ethnography, is used. Such a question is intentionally vague to allow participants to talk freely (Glaser, 2009) about whatever they may feel is important to them (Chametzky 2022b; Spradley, 1979). Simmons (2022) offered a few excellent examples of grand tour questions of which two will be mentioned here: “This is a new program. I’ve never done this before. If you were me, how would you do it?” (p. 186). A second example is “To what do I owe the honor of this visit” (in discussion grounded action) (Simmons, 2022, p. 259). In both instances, the grand tour question allows participants to talk in detail about whatever is important to them. Since the researcher does not know a priori how participants address their main concern, it is impossible to pose questions about something unknown. A grand tour question serves another important purpose in Glaserian classic grounded theory: to “set aside all preconceived thoughts [. . .] so the researcher can truly listen to what the participants are saying” (Chametzky, 2024, p.

32) and thus uncover what is most important to them. If further information is needed, then probing comments like Tell me more about . . . or What do you mean by . . . would be acceptable.

The final element is the examination of experiences from different perspectives. In Glaserian classic grounded theory as in phenomenology, there is a desire to understand the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). But researchers in Glaserian classic grounded theory go about that examination differently from phenomenology.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, the requirement to force data into predetermined categories similar to axial coding (used in a different design), or to look at data from multiple perspectives (Moustakas, 1994) is not done. Instead, as memos are sorted, the objective is to see how the memos fit together, much like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Sometimes memos will not fit together (determined through the constant comparative method [Glaser, 1965]), and it would be wrong to force them together. Similarly, viewing the memos from external and thus preconceived perspectives would violate a fundamental tenet of the design. “To preconceive relevance, is to force data, not to discover from data what really works as a relevant explanation” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 142-143).

However, through the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) and theoretical sampling, there is a somewhat tenuous similarity to the way a researcher using phenomenology would look at the experience from different perspectives. A phenomenologist wants to see the experience

in a complete manner; this desire is accomplished through horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). In Glaserian classic grounded theory, a researcher constantly compares one memo with another to build a rich and multivariate theory. Then a researcher uses theoretical sampling to further enrich the theory. Both techniques allow the theory to become focused and more developed. In phenomenology as in Glaserian classic grounded theory, broadly speaking, the analytic process allows the ideas to become “increasingly articulated in its features [. . .] and as a whole as [it is considered] again and again” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 73).

The Need to Set Aside Judgments

The reader is asked to consider this everyday experience: Imagine if two people are talking. If one of the people has some sort of prejudgment about the other person, societal politeness states that that person not say anything. But in reality, the likelihood is that the person will change the tone of voice or exhibit a facial gesture, however minimal and imperceptible it may be, to signal some sort of covert opinion. This brief scenario leads to the topic of whether setting aside judgements is possible, and if so, why it is needed. The “how” will be addressed later in this article.

In phenomenology, a researcher needs to set aside judgments so a focus on the issue or phenomenon at hand can be presented or explained without distortions. Only in this way, could there be a “focus on the participants’ descriptions instead of their own interpretations” (Oluka, 2025, Section 2). But according to Bytantas (2025), totally

eliminating one's "preunderstandings" (p. 4) is not possible. Similarly, in Glaserian classic grounded theory, looking at data with a complete tabula rasa is not possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). What is needed for researchers to do in both designs is to view the data without externally imposed ideas—theories, interpretations, and the like—on it. Only in this way, can a researcher focus exclusively on the situation and phenomenon at hand. This section forms a foundation for the next section concerning reduction.

In qualitative research some need to reduce the amount of data exists—whether it is to help limit the perspective of the researcher (Dahal, 2025; Moustakas, 1994) as in bracketing (Brajzel, 2025), or to help reduce large data sets (Ahmed et al., 2025; Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Hossain et al., 2024) as in data abstraction (Dahal, 2025). Regardless of the technique, the objective is to give the researcher a greater focus. Researchers using phenomenology and Glaserian classic grounded theory achieve the reduced scope and greater focus in different ways. In this section, each of these designs will be discussed in turn.

Reduction to Achieve Greater Focus

In phenomenology, the process of reduction starts with epoché (Moustakas, 1994; Schmitt, 1967). Similar to bracketing (Thomas & Sohn, 2023), epoché requires a researcher set aside any prejudgments (John et al., 2025; Moustakas, 1994), presumptions (Aziz & Khan, 2021), and prejudices (Moustakas, 1994) to "look at the world with 'new eyes'" (Schmitt, 1967, p. 59). Given that we humans all have experiences, such a

technique requires practice (Thomas & Sohn, 2023) to master. Through epoché, a researcher would be able to "look and see them [things, events, and people] again, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85) as well as be open to heretofore unknown possibilities (Thomas & Sohn, 2023).

According to Giorgi (2021), there are several kinds of reduction. But whether the specific type is epoché or bracketing—they are different—the objective is the same: being open to ideas requires a researcher to allow any "free fantasy variations" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 181) to exist. Only through one's imagination and the documentation of those free ideas could a researcher explore "divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions" (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97-98) which are needed to truly understand a given phenomenon and avoid a "surface-level inspection" (Gilicka & Mickiewica, 2025, p. 192).

With Glaserian classic grounded theory, though codes and memos might initially be somewhat descriptive, as the researcher compares the codes with each other via the comparable memos, via the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), the number of codes becomes reduced because of repetition and the progressive conceptual development of the codes. Thus, while the full process of phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) is obviously not done in Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is a way to achieve reduction.

Additionally, in Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is an important tenet that a researcher is not to preconceive (Glaser,

1992, 2001, 2002, 2013) and force the data into predetermined classifications based on pre-established beliefs, theories, and ideas. In this respect, setting aside preconceived ideas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) can be thought of as being comparable to epoché or bracketing just done in a different manner to allow a researcher a way to see data with a fresh set of eyes and a new perspective (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, the concept of “imaginative variation” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 180) in phenomenology has a connection with Glaserian classic grounded theory. In Glaserian classic grounded theory, as memos are written, the researcher engages in conscious and preconscious processing (Chametzky, 2023; Glaser 2014) to allow the researcher the opportunity to explore potentially many different connections that might not have been evident consciously. Some of these connections may spark additional ideas and memos which are valuable elements in the analysis process.

Reassembling the Data

There are some differences and similarities in how researchers reassemble their data in the two focused research designs. For phenomenologists, the process of phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) is a bit more delineated than what exists in Glaserian classic grounded theory. In phenomenology, a second step in the phenomenological reduction process (Moustakas, 1994) is horizontalization. During horizontalization, the start of the analysis process in phenomenology (John et al., 2025), all statements in the data have “equal value” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97).

During this process, the researcher selects “‘horizons’ or statements that represent a distinctive characteristics of the phenomenon’s meaning” (John et al., 2025, p. 5). These horizons point to different angles of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). When “overlapping and repetitive statements” (Aziz & Khan, 2021, p. 214) are found in the data, they are simply omitted or deleted.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, the idea of horizons showing characteristic features of a given phenomenon (John et al., 2025) cannot exist because the researcher does not yet know the phenomenon (that is, the emerging theory). However, similar to horizons is the belief that all statements are valuable (Moustakas, 1994) because in Glaserian classic grounded theory “all is data” (Glaser, 1998, p. 8, 2007). This phrase means that all statements hold equal weight. According to Glaser (2007),

the data may not be reality or the truth, should not disturb the GT researcher. He should keep in mind that, after all, socially structured, vested fictions run the world, accurate descriptions run a poor second. Thus, data is what is occurring, it is social produced and it is up to the GT researcher to figure it out, BECAUSE the participants are doing it, talking it, using it, think it, are it, respond to it, offer it and so forth (p. 2).

The last step in analysis in phenomenology is for the researcher to organize “the horizons into themes; and themes into a coherent textural [sic] description of the phenomenon” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). In Glaserian classic grounded

theory, such organization does not exist and the process is less structured than in phenomenology. Through the process of writing memos and then comparing them via the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965), the researcher can begin to develop the theory much earlier than in phenomenology.

Conclusion

When I started this article, my intention was to produce a concise white paper on the similarities and differences of the two designs, but other plans materialized because as I kept asking “why” and “how.” Through this questioning, I gained valuable information. As a Glaserian classic grounded theorist, I have spent approximately 15 years learning, using, training, and writing about the design; I believe I know the design well. While I know about phenomenology also, based on my readings and the doctoral

candidates I have guided to successful completion of their dissertations, I had never explored the design to this extent; this experience was an eye-opening one for me to see and truly understand the similarities and differences of these two designs. In this way, then, I was able to wear two valuable hats: that of an experienced researcher in Glaserian classic grounded theory and that of a less-experienced researcher in phenomenology. Given that this scholarship provided me with valuable and foundational elements, I am confident that doctoral learners and other scholars who may not as well-versed in the two designs as perhaps they would like to be, will find the ideas here enlightening, valuable, and foundational to help them when they need to discuss and perhaps make educated decisions about the two designs.

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