

One Dataset, Two Methodologies: Comparing Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory and Descriptive Phenomenology in Parkinson's Disease Caregiver Grief Research

Dawn Reid White ^{a,b,*}

^a School of Health Professions, National University, San Diego, CA, USA

^b Glaser Center for Grounded Theory, Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies, USA

* Corresponding author: dawn.white@jbisa.org

Abstract

Qualitative researchers often face decisions about methodological fit when examining complex human experiences. This paper presents a structured comparison of Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory and descriptive phenomenology through sequential analyses of the same Parkinson's disease caregiver grief dataset. The initial Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory study generated a substantive explanatory framework, The Theory of Care Realignment, outlining how former spousal caregivers resolved their primary concerns following loss. A subsequent phenomenological analysis of the identical interviews produced a thematic structure that illuminated the lived experience of caregiver grief. By contrasting philosophical foundations, research aims, analytic logic, procedural rigor, and final products, this paper demonstrates how methodological orientation shapes what becomes visible in the data. The comparison offers practical guidance for qualitative researchers making design decisions related to theory development and experiential description.

Keywords: Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory, descriptive phenomenology, caregiver grief, Parkinson's disease, qualitative methodology

In 2022, a qualitative study was conducted with spousal caregivers of individuals living with Parkinson's disease to better understand the caregiving experience (White & Palmieri, 2024). Following publication of that study, two former participants reached out to share that their spouses had since died and that they felt unprepared for what life would look like after caregiving ended. Hearing these accounts highlighted a significant gap in understanding the post-caregiving grief experience of Parkinson's disease caregivers.

These personal communications prompted reflection on whether others in similar circumstances were experiencing comparable uncertainty and distress. The emotional weight of these stories underscored the need to examine what happens when caregiving ends through spousal loss. This led to the decision to undertake a focused qualitative inquiry addressing the transition from caregiver to surviving spouse.

A Glaserian classic grounded theory (GCGT) design was selected as the most appropriate initial approach to examine this phenomenon, informed by insight and scholarly feedback arising from the prior caregiving study. This methodology enabled the generation and development of a theory to explain the social and psychological processes by which former caregivers resolve their primary concerns following loss. The resulting study was completed and published, yielding a substantive theory, "*The Theory of Care Realignment*," which explained how caregivers navigate grief and role transition (White et al., 2025).

During this work, it became apparent that the same dataset could offer additional insights if examined through a different qualitative lens. While grounded theory explained what was happening and how caregivers moved through the process, it did not fully capture the depth of lived experience as expressed in participants' narratives. This realization led to the development of a secondary descriptive-phenomenological analysis using the same interview data, which is currently under review for publication. Through thematic analysis, the study produced five themes, which will be discussed later in this paper.

Examining the dataset through both methodologies provides a more comprehensive understanding of caregiver grief after Parkinson's disease-related loss. Glaserian CGT offers explanatory value for researchers, clinicians, and policymakers seeking conceptual clarity and theoretical guidance (Simmons, 2022). Phenomenology, which relies on lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019), centers participants' voices and offers resonance for caregivers, families, and lay audiences seeking to understand experiences like their own.

The purpose of this methodological paper is to compare and contrast GCGT and qualitative descriptive phenomenology through parallel analyses of the same Parkinson's disease caregiver grief dataset. By examining how each methodology shapes research aims, analytic processes, and knowledge production, this paper demonstrates that distinct qualitative traditions generate different forms of understanding from the same data. This

comparison is intended to clarify the methodological fit, strengthen rigor in qualitative design decisions, and guide researchers in selecting between theory generation and lived experience description in caregiver grief research. The comparison is based on this researcher's experiences during the analysis and write-up of each paper.

Philosophical Foundations

Working with the same dataset across two qualitative methodologies made the philosophical distinctions between GCGT and phenomenology especially visible. The GCGT analysis was conducted first, requiring a shift away from prior phenomenological habits towards conceptual abstraction and process. Making that initial transition proved challenging, as description had long been the primary analytic orientation for this researcher.

Learning to think conceptually required setting aside established description practices. Phenomenology emphasizes rich description and meaning, whereas GCGT requires restraint from description in favor of abstraction and theoretical development. Both methodologies serve distinct purposes and are not interchangeable.

Descriptive phenomenology represents one of several phenomenological traditions used within a qualitative research design (Patton & Broward, 2023). While interpretive approaches such as Heideggerian or hermeneutic phenomenology emphasize interpretation of meaning, descriptive phenomenology, rooted in Husserl's philosophy, focuses on describing the essential structure of a lived experience as it appears to participants (Caputo, 1984). The

phenomenological analysis conducted for the caregiver grief study followed Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological methods, which operationalizes Husserlian principles (Bernet et al., 1993) through systematic identification of meaning units and synthesis of the essential structure of the experience (Giorgi, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Because the aim of the secondary analysis was to illuminate the lived experience of caregiver grief rather than interpret it, a descriptive phenomenological orientation was selected.

Completing the GCGT analysis altered how the data were subsequently viewed. Returning to phenomenology with the same dataset required an intentional reorientation back to description after sustained conceptual thinking. That shift felt unexpected: descriptive writing, once familiar, now required deliberate effort after immersion in conceptual analysis.

A key philosophical shift involved the use of gerunds as analytic tools in GCGT. Framing participant actions in "ing" terms supported attention to movement process and change rather than static description. Using gerunds, such as grieving, reorienting, and rebuilding, reinforced the GCGT emphasis on theory development and reshaped how participant behaviors were understood.

Engaging both methodologies expanded the understanding of how philosophical orientation shaped analytic purpose. Hence, GCGT supported explanatory insight that can inform structured supports and broader applications. Phenomenology preserved experiential depth and participant voice, offering a meaning-centered understanding that may resonate

more directly with caregivers and the public.

Research Aims and Questions

Writing these two papers in sequence highlighted that research aims do not always align across qualitative methodologies, even when the phenomenon under study appears similar in nature. In GCGT, the same assumption cannot be made. The aim within GCGT is not to confirm the presence of an experience, but to discover what participants identify as their main concern and how they work to resolve it. During a GCGT analysis, grief could not be predetermined, even in the context of spousal loss, because doing so would have risked forcing the data into a preconceived conceptual frame.

In phenomenology, by contrast, research aims to understand the lived experience of a phenomenon. It is methodologically acceptable to begin with the assumption that participants are experiencing grief as part of their everyday reality. Phenomenological analysis, therefore, begins with the premise that caregiver grief exists and focuses on how it is subjectively experienced and given meaning.

Working across both methodologies required a deliberate shift in how the same data were examined and interpreted. Glaserian CGT demanded restraint from labeling emotional states, allowing meaning to surface through process and constant comparison. Phenomenology permitted a more direct engagement with grief, supporting rich description and the articulation of each participant's lived experiences.

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher involved

navigating methodological tradeoffs associated with applying GCGT and phenomenology to the same dataset in succession. Beginning with GCGT, it was necessary to limit early engagement with existing literature to protect theoretical emergence and reduce preconceptions (Glaser, 2012; Vander Linden & Palmieri, 2023). That decision shaped how knowledge was acquired and when contextual understanding became available across the research process.

An early literature review typically informs phenomenological studies by identifying gaps and situating lived experiences within existing scholarships. Conducting GCGT first altered that process, as engagement with the literature had been intentionally constrained during the initial phase of the analysis. As a result, the phenomenological study began with less conceptual framing than would typically guide the development and interpretation of the questions.

That interview structure aligned well with GCGT principles but introduced limitations when the data were later examined phenomenologically. A phenomenological approach would typically include additional probes and follow-up questions to elicit a deeper description of lived experience, with attention to meaning, emotion, and embodiment. Working with an existing grand tour structured limited opportunities to pursue those experiential dimensions in greater depth.

Using the same dataset highlighted how early design decisions shaped the possibilities for analysis. Protecting

emergence in GCGT influenced both the timing of literature engagement and the structure of data collection. Those choices preserved methodological rigor in the GCGT study while acknowledging constraints in the phenomenological analysis.

Despite these constraints, both approaches achieved their intended purpose. The GCGT analysis produced a coherent explanatory theory, while the phenomenological analysis yielded rich descriptive accounts of lived experience. Working within methodological boundaries did not diminish analytic depth but instead clarified how rigor is enacted differently across qualitative traditions.

Experiencing these methodological shifts clarified how the researcher's role extends beyond analysis into sequencing, judgment, and accountability. Each methodological choice carried implications for what could be known, asked, and described. Making those decisions explicit enhances transparency and supports the paper's comparative aim.

Sampling and Data Collection

Sampling and data collection for this study were initially designed and conducted using a GCGT framework. Participants were recruited through purposive and theoretical sampling strategies aligned with the goal of theory generation rather than description. Interview questions were intentionally broad and open-ended, allowing participants to articulate what they perceived as their main concerns and how they handled those concerns over time.

Because the study was not designed as a phenomenological inquiry, the interview

guide was not structured to elicit detailed descriptions of lived experience. Questions emphasized actions, decisions, and transitions following spousal loss, thereby supporting conceptual abstraction but limited direct exploration of meaning, embodiment, and everyday experience. As a result, experiential dimensions of grief were present in the data but were not always articulated through explicit descriptive prompts.

If the study had been designed with descriptive phenomenology as the primary methodological aim, the interview questions would likely have differed in both focus and structure. For instance, a phenomenological interview question would be structured to identify description such as "Can you describe what grief feels like in your daily life?" or "Can you recall a moment when the absence of your spouse was especially present?" Greater emphasis would have been placed on how grief was experienced in daily life, how meaning was constructed, and how loss was felt across time and context. This distinction influenced the phenomenological write-up, which relied on participants' spontaneous descriptions rather than targeted phenomenological questioning.

Acknowledging this design alignment clarifies how methodological intent shapes data generation and analytic possibilities. It also illustrates how the same dataset can yield different forms of knowledge depending on the guiding qualitative tradition. This transparency strengthens the credibility of the comparative methodological analysis presented in this paper.

Data Analysis

Analysis began with GCGT and focused on theory development through conceptual abstraction. Line-by-line coding was used to remain close to the data while avoiding premature conceptual closure. Each line of text was treated as a potential indicator of action rather than a descriptive account.

Gerunds were consistently used to capture movement, change, and process across participants' accounts. Coding emphasized what participants were doing rather than what they were describing. Conceptual labels replaced descriptive language as patterns became analytically meaningful.

Constant comparison was applied throughout the GCGT analysis. Codes were compared within and across interviews to identify similarities, differences, and emerging patterns of action. Comparison extended to categories and their properties as conceptual development progressed. Memoing played a leading role in supporting conceptual development. Analytic memos were used to explore relationships among emerging concepts and to document analytic decisions over time. Memo writing supported theoretical sensitivity while helping to delay forcing the data into familiar emotional or experiential explanation.

Analytic notes were also used to monitor assumptions and maintain openness during the analysis. Writing alongside coding supported awareness of how prior phenomenological experiences could influence interpretation. In fact, after the first coding attempt, many of the concepts remained descriptive summaries of

participants' statements rather than conceptual representations of action. Recognizing that GCGT requires conceptual abstraction, the analysis was repeated with greater attention to gerunds and process-oriented coding. The shift helped move the analysis away from description and toward theoretical development.

As the analysis progressed, certain concepts emerged as theoretically meaningful across multiple interviews. Attention then shifted towards those concepts through selective coding and theoretical sampling. Five additional participants were recruited and interviewed using a more concentrated approach informed by the developing analysis. These focused interviews enabled a deeper exploration of the participants' main concerns and how they worked to resolve them. Data collection and analysis continued iteratively until conceptual saturation was reached. Identification of a shared main concern, conceptualized as the core concept of Care Realignment, provided the foundation for integrating and developing the theory.

When the analysis later shifted to phenomenology, a different analytic logic was required. Because data collection had already been completed, there were no opportunities for additional questioning or clarification. Analysis, therefore, relied entirely on the richness of existing narrative data.

Descriptive phenomenology also involves several practices that guide analysis. Researchers repeatedly return to the transcripts to bracket prior assumptions and remain attentive to how participants describe

the experience itself. Through this process, meaning units are identified and gradually organized to reveal the essential structure of the experience.

Phenomenological coding emphasized shared language, meaning, and description rather than abstraction. Attention focused on repeated words, phrases, and expressions that conveyed how the participants experienced life after the loss of their spouse. Participant language was preserved to maintain descriptive depth and experiential fidelity. Themes and subthemes were developed to capture the structure of participants lived experiences. The resulting thematic structure conveyed a descriptive account of caregiver grief grounded in narrative.

Analytic Procedures

Analytic procedures differed across these methodologies in their structure and decision-making. In GCGT, procedures were iterative and nonlinear, with data collection, coding, and analysis occurring concurrently. Decisions about coding, memoing, and sampling were guided by theoretical relevance rather than completeness of description.

Procedural rigor in GCGT was maintained through constant comparison and memo sorting. Memos were revisited, compared, and reorganized as categories developed, allowing relationships among concepts to be refined and integrated. Theoretical coding supported movement from substantive categories to an explanatory framework grounded in participant data.

A theoretical outline was developed during the GCGT analysis to guide

integration of emerging categories. The outline functioned as a working map rather than a fixed structure and was revised as concepts developed and relationships became clearer. Adjustments were made iteratively to ensure theoretical fit, relevance, and parsimony as the analysis progressed. Theoretical sampling represented a key procedural distinction in the GCGT analysis. The decision to recruit additional participants was driven by need rather than sample size. Subsequent interviews were conducted to elaborate emerging concepts until saturation was reached.

Phenomenological-analytic procedures followed a more linear, bound structure. Because data collection had been completed before the decision to reanalyze the data using descriptive phenomenology, the procedure focused exclusively on careful reading, coding, and organization of the existing transcripts. Analytic decisions centered on preserving participant language and experiential meaning rather than refining conceptual categories.

Procedural rigor in phenomenology was supported by reading transcripts and carefully clustering words and phrases into meaningful units. Themes and subthemes were developed through attention to shared language and discernible patterns across participants. Decisions emphasized coherence of lived experience rather than theoretical integration.

Outcomes and Products

Applying two qualitative methodologies to the same dataset yielded two distinct products. Glaserian CGT yielded a conceptual explanatory theory that

accounted for how former spousal caregivers navigated life following loss. Phenomenology produced a descriptive thematic structure that articulated how caregiver grief was lived and experienced.

The GCGT product took the form of a substantive theory composed of related phases. Concepts were abstracted from participant data and integrated to explain the resolution of a shared main concern. The final product emphasized process, movement, and conceptual fit rather than narrative completeness.

The phenomenological product was organized into themes and subthemes that represented the structure of lived experience. Findings emphasized the importance of meaning, emotion, and everyday life following spousal loss. Participants' language and descriptive depth remained central to the presentation of results.

Table 1 presents the analytic products side by side to illustrate how each methodology organized findings from the same dataset. The table is intended to support comparison rather than integration and does not imply equivalence between theory phases and phenomenological themes. Each product reflects the distinct purpose and epistemological commitments of its respective methodology.

(see Appendix – Table 1)

Structure of the Papers

Writing the two manuscripts revealed two distinct visual and analytic spaces through which the same phenomenon was viewed. Each methodology functioned as a different lens, shaping how caregiver grief was organized, presented, and understood on

the page. Working with the same data underscored how structure shapes what the reader can see, understand, and feel.

The GCGT paper was structured to move the reader toward conceptual integration. Sections narrowed as categories were refined and phases were linked, drawing attention away from individual stories and toward process and explanation. Quotations were used sparingly and strategically to support theoretical claims rather than to carry the narrative.

The phenomenological manuscript unfolded in the opposite direction. Sections expanded participants' language, with quotations that shape the narrative and anchor each theme. The paper was intended to be immersive, allowing lived experience to remain visible and emotionally present.

Moving between these structures required a deliberate shift in how meaning was communicated. In the GCGT paper, meaning emerged through concepts and their relationships, with participants' voices supporting the analysis. In the phenomenological paper, meaning emerged from participants' voices, bringing the lived experience of grief to the forefront.

Conclusion

Working across GCGT and phenomenology, using the same Parkinson's disease caregiver grief dataset, clarified how methodological choice shapes not only analysis but also what becomes visible to the reader. One approach produced a conceptual explanation that made sense of process and resolution, while the other produced a rich description that allowed grief to be encountered as lived experience. Each

method fulfilled its purpose without diminishing the other.

Sequencing the analysis revealed important methodological trade-offs related to literature engagement, interview design, analytic focus, and writing format. Conducting GCGT first protected conceptual emergence but constrained the contextual knowledge typically available at the outset of a phenomenological study. Recognizing those constraints strengthens reflexivity and reinforced the importance of intentional methodological alignment.

Working with the same data underscored how structure shapes what the reader can see, understand, and feel. The reflections presented in this paper are grounded in my personal experience as the researcher moving between two qualitative traditions and represented insights gained through that process. Theory organized experience into an explanatory framework that can inform research and practice, while description preserved voice, meaning, and emotional resonance, highlighting how purpose and audience should guide methodological choice.

References

- Bernet, R., Kern, I., & Marbach, E. (1993). *An introduction to Husserlian phenomenology*. Northwestern University Press.
- Caputo, J. D. (1984). *Husserl, Heidegger and the question of a "hermeneutic" phenomenology* (Vol. 1). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01569213>
- Giorgi, A. (2012). The descriptive phenomenological psychological method. *Journal of Phenomenological Psychology, 43*(1), 3-12.
<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1163/156916212X632934>
- Glaser, B. G. (2012). No preconceptions: The dictum. *Grounded Theory Review, 11*(2), 3-8.
<https://groundedtheoryreview.org/index.php/gtr/article/view/158>
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. SAGE Publication.
- Neubauer, B. E., Witkop, C. T., & Varpio, L. (2019). How phenomenology can help us learn from the experiences of others. *Perspectives on Medical Education, 8*(2), 90-97.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s40037-019-0509-2>
- Patton, C. M., & Broward, J. (2023). The giants and forerunners of phenomenology: Husserl, Heidegger, and their predecessors. *American Journal of Qualitative Research, 7*(4), 79-94.
- Simmons, O. E. (2022). *Experiencing grounded theory: A comprehensive guide to learning, doing, mentoring, teaching, and applying grounded theory*. Brown Walker Press.
- Vander Linden, K. L., & Palmieri, P. A. (2023). Developing a classic grounded theory research study protocol: A primer for doctoral students and novice researchers. *Grounded Theory Review 22*(1). <https://groundedtheoryreview.org/index.php/gtr/article/view/57>
- White, D., White, T., & Vander Linden, K. L. (2025). Emerging from grief: The theory of care realignment. *Grounded Theory Review, 25*(1).
<https://groundedtheoryreview.org/index.php/gtr/article/view/486>
- White, D. R., & Palmieri, P. A. (2024). There is 'no cure for caregiving: The experience of women caring for husbands living with Parkinson's disease. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-being, 19*(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17482631.2024.2341989>

Appendix A

Table 1

Study Outcome

Glaserian Classic Grounded Theory (Conceptual Explanation)	Phenomenology (Descriptive Lived Experience)
Substantive Theory <i>The Theory of Care Realignment</i>	Thematic Structure <i>Lived experience of caregiver grief following spousal loss</i>
Phase I: Experiencing Loss Grieving Identity Disruption Emotional Flooding Isolating	Theme 1: When the House Goes Silent The Weight of Early Grief Widow's Brain I'm So Tired It's Just Me
Phase II: Reorienting Meaning Reconstruction Self-Restoration Creating Connections	Theme 2: Finding My Way Through the Day It's All Up to Me Now Peaceful Spaces My Growth Starts Here
Phase III: Rebuilding Rediscovering Self-Reliance Restoring Stability Reintegration	Theme 3: Spark of Renewal Everyday Joy Creative Energy I Found Peace On the Move Theme 4: Standing on My Own Two Feet I Am Strong Here I Am Power Through Connections Being With People Again Looking Ahead in Small Ways

Disclosures

Author's Note: This paper reflects my personal experience applying two qualitative methodologies to the same Parkinson's disease caregiver grief dataset. Moving between GCGT and phenomenology challenged long-held analytic habits and reshaped my understanding of structure and researcher responsibility. The reflections offered are grounded in that lived methodological journey and are shared to contribute to ongoing methodological dialogue.

Acknowledgments: I would like to acknowledge Kara Vander Linden for her mentorship in Classic Grounded Theory, which supported the development of this work. I also extend my sincere appreciation to Tim A. White for his thoughtful feedback and for engaging in discussions that helped refine the ideas presented in this paper. Finally, I am deeply grateful to the participants who generously shared their personal experiences, making this comparison possible.

Conflicts of Interest: The author(s) declared no conflicts of interest regarding research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent: This study does not require a research ethics review. This paper is a methodological comparison study and not a research study.

Funding: The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Copyright: The author retains copyright for papers published in the *Grounded Theory Review*.

© 2026, Dawn Reid White

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of the *Grounded Theory Review* (GTR), the editor(s) and editorial board, and/or the Institute for Research and Theory Methodologies (RTM) and RTM board. The GTR, editor(s) and editorial board, and RTM and RTM board disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.