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Case study and glaserian classic grounded theory: Commonalities and dissimilarities

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Abstract
Of the many qualitative and quantitative research designs that exist, case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory share some important similarities and several differences. When these commonalities and dissimilarities are viewed in a more nuanced manner and disassembled, valuable information is elucidated. Such information can be valuable to less-experienced as well as seasoned researchers. By having the information summarized and presented in one place, scholars may be able more easily to make important and valuable decisions about research designs through a more critical eye. In this article, the author will discuss similarities and differences in the two research designs with respect to purpose, data collection, analysis, and data explanation. Then, some broad challenges in the two designs will be presented.

Keywords: Glaserian classic grounded theory, case study, commonalities, dissimilarities

Introduction

There exists a number of "traditional research traditions" (Elliott *et al*., 2025 [18], para. 2): case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) [50, 55], grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), ethnography, (Fetterman, 2010), phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994)[20, 21, 42], narrative research or inquiry (Clandinin *et al*., 2017; Ferrell & Crowley, 2025; Syed, 2026) [13, 19, 52] and others, like action research (Öztüfekçi & Dikilitaş, 2025) [44], interpretive description (Elliott *et al*., 2025) [18], qualitative descriptive [sic] (Colorafi & Evans, 2016) [14], content analysis (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008) [53], and others depending on the type and focus of the research topic, and the needs and objectives of the researcher.

Given that all designs have advantages and shortcomings (Yin, 2009) [55], there is value to examine two in closer detail with the objective to focus on and discuss their similarities and differences. These designs are case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory. Since a perfect research design does not exist (Patton, 2002) [46] to address all the needs of a researcher, one objective of this scholarship is to help researchers make more informed decisions about research designs.

A tangential objective of this scholarship relates to the complexity of the two designs and the inherent need for greater understanding. No research design is easy and absolutely straightforward; case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory are no exception, but for different reasons. Because of the need for detail as well as the absence of a comprehensive plan, case study is challenging (Yin, 2009) [55], just like Glaserian classic grounded theory. Glaserian classic grounded theory requires not only a level of experience (Chametzky, 2023a, 2025a; Glaser, 2005) [6, 9, 28] but also the ability to conceptualize information. Without these practiced and developed skills, conducting research using Glaserian classic grounded theory will be extremely challenging. To assist less-experienced researchers, therefore, there is value to understand some important nuances in the two designs. The following topics will be discussed in this article: (a) purpose of the designs, (b) data collection, (c) analysis, (d) data explanation, and (e) challenges. The article with end with a conclusion section.

Purpose of the Designs

Broadly speaking, research designs help researchers understand some specific problem in a (relatively) precise "real-life" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 83) environment by providing a framework with which to conduct their research. Depending on the design, a purpose may be to understand more clearly participants' real-world experiences, participants' lived experiences, various environmental and cultural elements, and/or participants' behaviors.

Case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory have similar purposes: to understand more clearly a given group of people (Glaser, 2010; Stake, 1995) [31, 50] within a boundary or substantive area. The purpose is made stronger because not only because the given sample would be understood more clearly, but also strong generalizability is evident with both designs. Using either a qualitative or quantitative methodology, a case study is "generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes [and] not to populations or universes" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 15); similarly, in Glaserian classic grounded theory, abstract concepts are not tied to any specific "time, place, and people" (Glaser, 2001 [26], p. 10). Thus, the information gained from either a case study or Glaserian classic grounded theory study would have greater impact than people solely in the bounded or substantive area. With a discussion of purpose presented, attention can be turned to data collection.

Data Collection

When scholars speak about research designs, having an intimate understanding of data collection is necessary as it encompasses multiple broader decisions (Creswell, 2009) [16] such as objective or purpose (Klingberg *et al*. 2024) [37] in which a given phenomenon is explained (Leppink, 2017) [38], type of data collected or desired, or unit of analysis—whether that constitutes individuals' lived experiences (as in phenomenology), a bounded environment (as in case study), the behavioral norms of people in a given culture (as in ethnography), or a basic social process (as in grounded theory). These elements, and others (like a given philosophical perspective or worldview (Al Qur'an, 2025; Guba & Lincoln, 1994), paradigm (Chafe, 2024) [1, 2, 35], or

reflexivity (Moustaghfir, 2025) [41] come into play when discussing data collection. As such, the roots of data collection are deep and far-reaching. Given the depth of data collection, a highly nuanced and detailed discussion is warranted. In this section, several specific elements of data collection will be explored.

Interviews and Types of Questions to Ask

Depending on whether the case study is explanatory, exploratory (Yin, 2009), or evaluative (Stake, 1995) [50, 55], the questions asked during the interviews may take the form of how and why (Greenhalgh, 2025) [34] or how and what (Käss *et al*., 2024) [39]. Given the many types of case studies (Greenhalgh, 2025) [34], other question may be equally applicable. But, regardless of the type of case study, "a set of substantive questions reflecting your actual line of inquiry" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 86) is required. According to Stake (1995) [50], given the uniqueness of each participant and their experiences, identical questions should not be asked of each respondent. Rather, a short list should be created to allow for a semi-structured approach because "there is a concern about completing an agenda" (Stake, 1995 [50], p. 65).

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, on the other hand, there are no interview questions asked. There are several reasons for this intentional omission. First, given the objective of Glaserian classic grounded theory is to develop a theory to explain the behaviors of participants in a given substantive area, there is no way to know, a priori, what the theory would be. Hence, it is impossible to know what questions to ask. Second, the theory is developed endogenously (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) [21] with no preconception or researcher-based interpretations (Glaser, 1978, 1998) [23, 25]. Any predetermined questions would carry a high level of preconception which would be a clear violation of a foundational tenet of Glaserian classic grounded theory.

Instead, what is offered is a grand tour question—taken from ethnography (Fetterman, 2010 [20]; Spradley, 1979)—one type of tour question indented to allow respondents to respond freely (Glaser, 2009) [30] about whatever issue they feel is important to them (Chametzky, 2022a; Spradley, 1979). Simmons (2022) [4, 48] provided several examples of what grand tour questions might be: "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" (Simmons, 2022 [48], p. 259) (in discussing grounded action but equally applicable in other situations). With a grand tour question in Glaserian classic grounded theory: to "set aside all preconceived thoughts [. . .] so the researcher can simultaneously listen to what the participants are saying" (Chametzky, 2024 [8], p. 32), discover the thoughts and behaviors that are most valued to them, and collect as much data as possible. Generic probing statements like Tell me more about . . . or what do you mean by . . . can be employed if additional information is requested. Attention may now be turned to where and how data would be collected.

Using Other Instruments

In the previous section, interviews were discussed as one data collection tools, but there are other ways for researchers using the two research designs to gather data. For case study, Yin (2009) [55] was rather clear that "interviews of the persons involved in the events" (p. 11) are valuable but more than one source is needed for "data source triangulation" (Stake, 1995, p. 113). Stake (1995) [50] offered three potential data collection tools and explained that though an interview is an accepted instrument, "we are [. . .] speaking principally of observation, interview, and document review" (p. 114). Only with multiple data collection tools would a researcher be able to provide a complete picture of the bounded case—a basic objective of a case study design.

Similarly, in Glaserian classic grounded theory there can be many different other types of instruments (Glaser, 1992) [24] used in a study, but the number and type depend on different factors. An important dictum in this design is that "all is data" (Glaser, 2001, p. 145, 2007 [26, 29], p. 8) which means that anything and everything could be used as data in this design (Chametzky, 2022a, 2025b, 2026a) [4, 9, 11]. Given this aphorism, a researcher has many valuable elements potentially available in a Glaserian classic grounded theory study. Depending on the topic and researcher, there is no need solely to rely on participants and interviews (Chametzky, 2022a) [4] for data collection; instead, social media posts, internet videos, or even online documents could potentially be used as data sources provided there is no preconception taking place during data collection and analysis stages. And, obtaining data from outside the substantive area, could possibly help a researcher not only with the development of the substantive theory but also extend it and develop a formal grounded theory (Vander Linden, 2024) [54]. Insofar as the use of multiple data sources are potentially highly valuable, Glaserian classic grounded theory and case study share a similarity.

Listening During Interviews

Cell phone technology is ubiquitous (Ma *et al*., 2024; Sharma, 2024) [47] and has become an extension of ourselves in many respects; it is so ingrained in 21 st century society. It stands to reason, then, that novice researchers may want to use this technology to help them during data collection and record interviews that take place. While such a desire is understandable and perhaps desired in some research designs, it is discouraged in case study and in Glaserian classic grounded theory for similar reasons.

In case study, as in Glaserian classic grounded theory, "being a good listener" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 70) is a vital skill. However, novice researchers and doctoral candidates are scared (Chametzky, 2020) [3] for a number of reasons. They want to make sure that they are as meticulous as possible in collecting all the needed data. And this laudable goal may impact data collection because they potentially do not feel comfortable with their listening skills. In case study, data collection, as was stated in a previous section, is done via different and "multiple modalities—for example, making keen observations or sensing what might be going on—not just using the aural modality" (Yin, 2009, p. 70). Stake (1995) [50, 55] explained explicitly that "Getting the exact words of the respondent is usually not very important, [sic] it is what they mean that is important. A good interviewer can reconstruct the account and submit it to the respondent for accuracy and stylistic improvement" (p. 66). Thus, the reliance exclusively on listening skills is not a requirement. Stake (1995) [50] offered this advice:

Rather than tape-record or write furiously, it is better to listen, to take a few notes, to ask for clarification. Perhaps the most important thing is to insist on ample time and space immediately following the interview to prepare the facsimile and interpretive commentary. (p. 66)

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is also great value and need in developing good listening skills (Yin, 2009) [55] for interviews are passive (Glaser, 2002) [27] activities. The researcher does not need to be concerned with what Glaser (2009) [30] described as "worrisome accuracy" (p. 45)—the need to capture all the data as accurately as possible. Glaser (1998) [25] was very clear when he wrote "do not tape interviews" (p. 107). Instead, as in case study, minimal notes should be taken. In Glaserian classic grounded theory, memos are to be written shortly after the interview. If a concept is important, it will present itself repeatedly in subsequent interviews and through preconscious processing (Chametzky, 2022b, 2023a; Glaser, 1998, 2014) [4, 6, 25, 33].

Thus, the need for meticulous accuracy, that so many inexperienced researchers want to achieve, in Glaserian classic grounded theory as in case study, is unneeded and unfounded. With a discussion about data collection tools and questions a researcher could use in the two designs, the final element in data collection is a brief discussion about sampling.

Sampling

Regardless of whether qualitative or quantitative research is conducted, the sampling strategy is an important element in the data collection process. In case study, purposive sampling is an accepted strategy (Dahal *et al*., 2024; Palinkas *et al*., 2015) [17, 45] though there are also many different types of sampling strategies that could be equally acceptable (Greenhalgh, 2025; Palinkas *et al*., 2015) [34, 45]. Depending on what the researcher wishes to discover in the study, a researcher could even have more than one sampling strategy employed in a given study.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, however, such a variety of sampling strategies does not exist. If participants are used in a study, then initially, perhaps snowball sampling may occur for the first few respondents. After that, the sampling strategy that is used is theoretical sampling. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) [21],

Theoretical sampling is the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his theory as it emerges. (p. 45)

Additionally, with theoretical sampling the researcher will be able not only to enrichen given categories and properties but also determine where next to collect data, uncover categories, and discover potential interrelationships of the categories in the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) [21]. The goal in discovering categories and any interrelationships is to develop a theory that is multivariate and saturated (Chametzky, 2025b; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) [9, 21]. Attention can now be turned to a discussion of analysis in the two designs.

Analysis

Qualitative researchers know that numerous analytic models are available to them. Regardless of whether a researcher chooses thematic analysis (Miller, 2024) [40], three-step process (Stuckey, 2015) [51], data analysis spiral (Creswell & Poth, 2018) [15], five analytic phases model (Yin, 2016) [56], or another model, the objectives are the same: to make sense of the data in a logical, clear, and (hopefully) simple manner, and to build an explanation of the data.

In a case study analysis, Yin (2009) [55] explained that an element of comprehensiveness is needed whereby the researcher demonstrates four important points: "First, your analysis should show that you attended to all the evidence. . . . Second, your analysis should address, if possible, all major rival interpretations [. . . .] "Third, your analysis should address the most significant aspect of your case study. . . . Fourth, you should use your own prior, expert knowledge in your case study" (Yin, 2009 [55], pp. 160-161). Given that sometimes, precise data "is not readily predictable" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 69) or available initially, an iterative process is needed.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, analysis is done differently than in case study. A specific model of analysis is employed called the constant comparative method. This method allows a researcher "to codify the qualitative analysis process (Glaser, 1965) [22] and develop a theory" (Chametzky, 2023b [6], p. 116). Broadly speaking, as data are reviewed, codes are created to capture core ideas in the data. Memos are written on those codes and then those memos are compared with each other to discover hidden connections. As a memo is compared with another, a new memo is created thereby necessitating additional comparisons (Glaser, 1965) [22]. In time, through this continuous comparison and mandatory iteration, these memos become enriched and combined with other memos. This process leads the researcher to discover categories and ultimately a multivariate theory.

Case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory differ in two additional areas also. The first is data interpretation and the second is the use of technological tools in the analysis process. Each will be discussed in turn.

With respect to data interpretation, in case study, a researcher is to be open to what the data will show. To look at the data with biased or preconceived ideas (Yin, 2009) [55] will ruin it. When reviewing and explaining the analysis, though, researchers are encouraged "to include their own personal perspectives in the interpretation" (Stake, 1995 [50], p. 135). Such a perspective is not done in Glaserian classic grounded theory. According to Glaser and Strauss (1967) [21], "to preconceive relevance is to force data, not to discover from data what really works as a relevant explanation" (pp. 142-143). Chametzky (2025a)[9] explained that the researcher has no right, according to Glaser (2002) [27] to offer another way to view the data given the experience is so individualized and personal. Stated a bit differently, a researcher employing Glaserian grounded theory needs to adhere to Max Weber's notion of verstehen, 'whereby the investigator understands a group's behavior by viewing their action through their eyes' (Glaser, 1996, p. 47) (p. 33)

With respect to the use of technological tools during the analysis process, Yin (2009) [55] advocated for using tools like NVivo, Atlas.ti, HyperRESEARCH, or "computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS)" (Yin, 2009 [55], p. 128) to help with data analysis. To be sure, these are all fine tools and can assist the researcher in analyzing data in a case study by helping or organize the information and group it into themes.

However, such is not the case with Glaserian classic grounded theory, because these tools violate a fundamental principle/tenet because codes may automatically be placed in preconceived groups. Such preconception reduces theoretical sensitivity (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) [21]. Even AI poses concerns; a tool as popular as ChatGPT—at least how it behaved as of 2025—did not function exactly as a human would with respect to coding and comparisons (Chametzky, 2025a) [9]. Thus, no technological tool is advised when doing a Glaserian classic grounded theory study; the researcher is strongly advised to do to the required analysis manually. With detailed information about analysis completed, the attention of the readers may now turn to a discussion concerning data explanation in the two designs.

Data Explanation

Scholars know that conducting research has great value but only if data are presented so other people can know and see what was done. Only in that way, can those researchers stand "on the shoulders" (Newton, 1645, para. 1) of those who came before them. But not only must those other researchers know that data were generated, they must understand it. To that end, in this section, there is a discussion of how data are explained and presented in the two designs.

To give the reader an indirect experience (Stake, 1995) [50] of a given case, the researcher must have some description. There is no other way to provide such a vicarious experience (Stake, 1995) [50]. In talking about the physical environment of a case, Stake (1995) [50] commented "to develop vicarious experiences for the reader, to give them a sense of 'being there,' the physical situation should be well described" (p. 63).

In this regard, Glaserian classic grounded theory differs from case study because there is no need to be descriptive, though, Chametzky (2026b) [11] might disagree because description forms the basis for the required abstract conceptualization used in the design. But, during the constant comparison method, "the successive raising of the description through conceptual abstraction" (Glaser, 1978 [23], p. 84) takes place. This point is worth noting because Glaser (2009) [30] stated that though description connects to people, place, and time, this is not the goal of a substantive grounded theory. He offered this statement: "Perhaps the most important aspect of conceptualization is that concepts last forever, descriptions are stale dated" (Glaser, 2001 [26], p. 15). Additionally, full or nearly full description is not done because only a "slice of data" (Chametzky, 2022b [4], p. 24) to account for the majority of participants in the substantive area is provided in the theory. The final section in this article are potential challenges in both designs.

Challenges

One challenge common to both designs is complexity. A case study is challenging (Yin, 2009) [55] because there are different types (for example, single or holistic, multiple, intrinsic, embedded, descriptive, instrumental, exploratory, and explanatory). As a researcher reads seminal literature (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009) [50, 55], choosing the correct type of case study may be a bit perplexing because not only of the different and nuanced perspectives, but also Yin and Stake did not use the exact same terminology so a researcher needs look beyond the terminology to understand the design characteristics.

In Glaserian classic grounded theory, there is only one variation, though many scholars after Glaser and Strauss [1967 [21]] would have argued for numerous varieties of grounded theory. Glaser (2012) [32] had described these other varieties as "remodeled" (para. 9) and though they were not bad designs, in his eyes, and to those scholars who use Glaserian classic grounded theory, the other versions are not grounded theory.

Glaserian classic grounded theory has an additional challenge: researcher experience. (Chametzky, 2020, 2023a) [3, 6]. Especially for the novice researcher—master's or doctoral learners/candidates—the inexperience and potentially insufficient understanding of how to conduct research is paramount in their minds. These younger scholars want to conduct the research correctly according to the design (Chametzky, 2022b) [4]. What some novice researchers may not realize, though, is that fear is normal with this design (Glaser, 1998) [25] and must be accepted and tolerated—even welcomed. Both elements are part of researcher experience.

Conclusion

Case study and Glaserian classic grounded theory share a number of similarities as well as some differences which were elicited in this article. Each design offers researchers rich and rewarding opportunities for valued and valuable scholarship. But, to do the chosen research design justice and to honor the seminal author or authors of the design, there is a need to understand the designs in a more nuanced manner; such was the goal of this scholarship. An additional goal of this research was to present some challenges in the two designs as a way to let less-experienced researchers know that it is absolutely normal and acceptable to be anxious and troubled; that is part of growing as a scholar. Finally, through this scholarship, just as this author has stood "on the shoulders" (Newton, 1645, para. 1) of scholars who went before him, the next generation of scholars can benefit from this research to stand "on the shoulders" (Newton, 1645, para. 1) of this scholar.

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