Q What is the difference between grounded theory and phenomenology?

A Grounded theory and phenomenology are the most common approaches to qualitative research used by nurses. While there are differences between them, they have much in common.

**Similarities**
Both approaches are used when the researcher seeks to explore real-life situations, and require a high degree of interaction between the researcher and the individual, group or situation being examined. Both take an interpretivist approach.

Both grounded theorists and phenomenologists seek to collect and analyse data from participants’ perspectives and try to ensure their findings are not influenced by preconceived ideas. To achieve this, they often involve participants in data analysis to make findings more trustworthy.

In brief, grounded theorists and phenomenologists both seek to explore individuals’ experiences in the context of the worlds in which they live.

Their differences might not be important for those reading qualitative research, but it is for those carrying it out. A good starting point is their philosophical and theoretical bases and influences.

**Differences**
Phenomenology emerged from philosophy, primarily influenced by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger; it aims to describe and explore experiences and is undertaken by collecting data from individuals who have lived through them. Hence phenomenologists often refer to the “lived experience”. Data is often limited to interviews, while findings are descriptions of the experience, drawing on characteristics identified during data analysis.

Grounded theory developed in sociology. It was first described by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss as a qualitative methodological approach that aimed to generate a “grounded theory” to describe and explain a phenomenon. Unlike phenomenologists, grounded theorists seek to include all data sources that might contribute to theory development. Interviews are commonly used; observations, diaries, images, past literature and research might also be included. Using a “constant comparison” technique, they compare all the data collected with all other data and look for contradictory cases, which might challenge the emerging theory but will ultimately strengthen it. This complex process of theoretical sampling, data collection and analysis can be extremely challenging.

**Evolution**
Both methodologies have evolved. Glaser and Strauss collaborated on the early development of grounded theory but, as it developed, they separated, developed their own ideas and became critical of each other’s ideas. As a result there are now multiple approaches to grounded theory.

Opinions have also diverged on phenomenology. Some favour a Husserlian approach, with its emphasis on description; others prefer a Heideggerian approach, with its emphasis on analysis and attempting to explain what is happening. Fortunately, good textbooks can aid methodological decision-making (see further reading).

Both grounded theorists and phenomenologists seek to understand people’s lives. Either approach usually gives researchers the tools they need. Grounded theory and phenomenology are research tools and neither is suited to all jobs. NT

**Further reading**