Would the Real Grounded Theory Please Stand Up?

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Research/statistical methodology
Abstract 2012-271

Saturday, May 26, 2012 10:50 AM
20-minute oral presentation (including questions) (West)

The sport management community was charged with the mission of expanding its methodological horizons in Wendy Frisby’s 2005 Zeigler address. This call to action challenged sport researchers to embrace critical social science frameworks in an effort to “fully understand all dimensions” of our craft, while moving the sport discipline forward (Frisby, 2005, p. 2). In line with this task, Sotiriadou and Shilbury (2010) explicitly expressed a need for grounded theory research within the sport management field. Sotiriadou and Shilbury noted that grounded theory allows for the development of theories that are specific to our discipline, as opposed to forcing and/or adapting theories from other branches of knowledge. As we turn this new leaf and swell our research arsenal, the popularity of grounded theory research does appear to be on the rise. In light of this trend, a critique of the methodology is deemed necessary. The aim of this paper is to take stalk of sport management’s adoption of grounded theory and evaluate its use within the discipline.

Weed (2009) proposed that grounded theory research be evaluated at both the micro and macro levels. Weed’s micro level evaluation is concerned with the internal consistency of a research study. Weed identified eight core elements inherent in the grounded theory methodology: (a) an iterative process, (b) theoretical sampling, (c) theoretical sensitivity, (d) codes, memos and concepts, (e) constant comparison, (f) theoretical saturation, (g) fit, work, relevance and modifiability, and (h) substantive theory. At the macro level, evaluation is concerned with methodological coherence. Weed (2009) underscores the significance of “the research area, the appropriateness of methodologies and methods in exploring the area, and the contribution the research makes to the body of knowledge” (Weed, 2009, p.507).

Based on these quality criteria, we conducted a review of the use of grounded theory in the sport management field. A search of peer reviewed sport management journals was completed to establish a suitable sample for study. Each article was analyzed and constructively critiqued based on Weed’s (2009) quality concerns. Findings highlight how grounded theory is currently being used in the sport management realm while providing methodological considerations which we hope will be used as both a tool for neophyte grounded theory researchers, as well as a guide for the evaluation of this complex method.

Methodological coherence was particularly inconsistent in many of the studies in our sample. A majority of the articles lacked any acknowledgement of the type of grounded theory being utilized (i.e., Glasser, 1978; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2006). The impact of epistemological and ontological assumptions were largely glazed over or ignored. There was little or no mention of how philosophical underpinnings influence methodology or, more importantly, the findings of a study. Our evaluation revealed a prevalence of what we refer to as “generic grounded theory”. It was common for studies to pay lip service to the methodology by picking and choosing key terms (e.g., theoretical sampling, constant comparison, iterative process, saturation) without illustrating an understanding of their collective contribution to the grounded theory process.

Our intention with this study is to advance sport management along the grounded theory learning curve. As we grapple with the intricacies of conducting grounded theory research ourselves, we hope to inspire conversation within the greater sport management community. In so doing, we hope to raise awareness of the need to educate researchers, advisors, and both the editors and reviewers of our journals, as to the nuances and philosophical underpinnings of practicing grounded theory research. Grounded theory is a methodology that will assist in providing a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the sport management field. As we continue to develop the field and its theories, it is vital that considerations of quality remain at the forefront of our research.