Grounded Theory: The Misunderstood Methodology Within Sport Management

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Sport management has tried to heed Chalip’s (2006) call of creating sport-focused theories (e.g., Lyras & Welty Peachey, 2011; Skinner, Zakus & Cowell, 2008). Creating robust sport management theory requires examining phenomena in sport through diverse lenses (Chalip, 2006; Doherty, 2013), including greater support of more qualitative work (e.g., Shaw & Hoeber, 2016). Grounded theory is a qualitative framework that simultaneously allows for a systemic, yet flexible approach to data generation and analysis with the goal of “constructing theory grounded in data” (Corbin & Strauss, 2015, p. 6). Grounded theory is an under-utilized, yet suitable methodology for sport management as it enables researchers to consider distinct aspects of the context – in this instance sport – to develop a theory to guide how a phenomenon occurs (Sotiriadou & Shillbury, 2010). Limited grounded theory research within sport management is mainly due to misconceptions around grounded theory’s execution (Sotiriadou & Shillbury, 2010). As a field, we believe that sport has “distinctive elements” and we are charged with “[identifying] what those elements are and what difference they make” (Chalip, 2006, p. 4). Utilizing grounded theory can enable a thorough examination of all the distinctive elements present in a specific sport phenomenon.

As a methodology that is designed to build theory based in data, the process of completing grounded theory research is distinct from other methodologies due to the relationship between sampling, data generation, and data analysis (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Corbin & Straus, 2015). The connection between these three aspects of research relate to the flexibility of the methodology, which allows researchers to adapt based on questions that develop through the data analysis process, which inform future theoretical sampling and data generation (Corbin & Straus, 2015). The process is designed to be iterative and exhaustive, which ensures all aspects of a phenomenon are considered and represented in the resulting theory (Corbin & Straus, 2015).

Drawing from two distinct grounded theory studies conducted by the presenters, the purpose of this presentation is threefold: 1) to discuss the tenets of grounded theory research, 2) provide an overview of the process of conducting a grounded theory study, and 3) demonstrate grounded theory’s use in developing sport-driven theories. Specifically, this presentation will discuss the epistemologies of grounded theory (pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, and constructivism) (Glaser & Straus, 1967; Corbin & Straus, 2015), and demonstrate the connection between the epistemologies and the respective methods decisions. In explaining how grounded theory was generated, the simultaneous processes of theoretical sampling, data generation strategies, and categorical development will be outlined. Additionally, the constant comparative analysis will be explained and how this technique is used to formulate saturated categories through open, axial, and selective coding techniques to generate theory. This presentation will conclude with sharing our reflections on the challenges of conducting grounded theory research as well as conceptualizing how insights developed through grounded theory can yield innovative directions for sport management.