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## Psychology and physical activity advancing grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology

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### Abstract

**Objective:** This paper is a commentary on the use of grounded theory methodology in sport and exercise psychology (see Holt & Tammie, 2010; Weed, 2009, 2010). The purpose is to suggest ways in which researchers can plan grounded theory studies in a manner that demonstrates understanding of research philosophies, methodologies, and methods.

**Method:** One guiding principle for making research decisions is methodological coherence. An 'armchair walk-through' of a decision making heuristic for planning methodologically coherent grounded theory studies is provided. Issues addressed concern ontology and epistemology, research questions, selection of grounded theory variant, participants, sample size, planning for the interaction of data collection and analysis, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and the final product.

**Conclusion:** Ways to move forward with the sophisticated use of grounded theory are suggested, which include issues relating to training, supervision, and the acknowledgement of past mistakes.

**Keywords:** Kalaripayattu, physical fitness variables, college students, maximal oxygen uptake

### Introduction

Sport and exercise psychology researchers are encouraged to participate in the practice of examining, assessing, and analyzing previous research endeavors to propel scientific advancement (Bruner, Erikson, Wilson, & Côté, 2009). In this vein, we recently engaged in a dynamic and fruitful discourse with Professor Mike Weed regarding the application of grounded theory methodology in sport and exercise psychology research. The discussion was prompted by a review of grounded theory studies within the field (Weed, 2009) <sup>[11]</sup>. Our response (Holt & Tamminen, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup> scrutinized certain aspects of the search methodology utilized and contested some of the conclusions drawn, while also reinforcing several key points raised in the original work. Subsequently, the commentary provided by Weed (2010) <sup>[12]</sup> further elucidated areas of agreement, presented rebuttals to the criticisms raised, and extended the discourse to philosophical considerations. We have opted not to engage in petty disagreements but instead seize this opportunity to look ahead by offering suggestions for the planning of grounded theory studies based on the conclusions drawn from the ongoing debate. The genesis of this current paper was inspired by an adjustment made by Weed (2010) <sup>[12]</sup> to the conclusion of his original article (2009). In his '2010' publication, he posited that "authors must assume responsibility for demonstrating a comprehensive understanding of the methodologies and methods they employ, alongside the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underlie them" (p. 12, his emphasis). A pertinent question remains: how can researchers showcase their grasp of the issues highlighted by Weed? While we proposed six guidelines for establishing 'ideal conditions' for grounded theory studies (Holt & Tamminen, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>, none of the three preceding papers in this series adequately addressed how to plan high-quality grounded theory studies. Consequently, the aim of this paper is to offer suggestions on how researchers can plan grounded theory studies in a manner that evidences an understanding of research philosophies, methodologies, and methods. Methodological coherence stands as a guiding principle to assist researchers in their study planning endeavors.

### Methodological coherence as a principle for planning grounded theory research

Qualitative research endeavors should exhibit methodological coherence, ensuring alignment

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between epistemological and ontological perspectives, theoretical frameworks, research inquiries, and other pertinent aspects (Mayan, 2009) <sup>[6]</sup>. Morse (1999) <sup>[9]</sup> introduced the concept of methodological coherence through the heuristic of an 'armchair walk-through,' a process involving thorough consideration of the methodological trajectory of a research project. Building upon the works of Mayan and Morse, we have devised a heuristic model aimed at assisting researchers in making informed decisions regarding the utilization of grounded theory, thereby ensuring methodological coherence in their studies (Table 1). This heuristic amalgamates Weed's (2009, 2010) <sup>[11-12]</sup> insights on philosophical matters with our own focus on methodological concerns associated with grounded theory. Additionally, we have endeavored to craft this paper in a manner conducive to aiding students and novice grounded theorists in planning high-quality studies.

Before delving into the heuristic outlined in Table 1, two caveats warrant acknowledgment. Firstly, while Table 1 appears presented linearly, subsequent discussion will elucidate that decisions concerning methodological congruence are often made iteratively and cyclically. Secondly, the heuristic should not be applied in a rigid or formulaic manner. We do not advocate for its strict imposition on all grounded theory studies, as such an approach might stifle researchers' creativity. Instead, the heuristic serves as a guiding framework to assist researchers in making crucial research decisions as they embark on planning their grounded theory studies.

Understanding the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of research is paramount, as underscored by Weed (2009, 2010) <sup>[11-12]</sup>, a facet often neglected in the sport and exercise psychology grounded theory literature. Ontology pertains to inquiries about the nature of reality, while epistemology addresses how knowledge is generated. Awareness of these philosophical underpinnings is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, different variants of grounded theory are associated with distinct philosophical frameworks, necessitating alignment between the chosen variant and the researcher's philosophical stance to ensure methodological coherence. Secondly, philosophical preferences can shape the researcher's choice of research topics, influencing subsequent decisions and the eventual formulation and presentation of the grounded theory. Lastly, philosophical underpinnings influence how the research is evaluated, highlighting the importance of transparency regarding one's philosophical stance for appropriate evaluation of the research.

The selection of the grounded theory variant holds significant implications for subsequent methodological decisions. Given that various grounded theory variants are associated with different philosophical underpinnings, researchers must choose a variant congruent with their philosophical orientation. While Glaser, Strauss (and Corbin), and Charmaz's approaches dominate the literature, numerous variants exist within the grounded theory family. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) <sup>[13]</sup> advocate for understanding these variants to make informed choices. While the decision may be influenced by philosophical perspective, one variant is not inherently superior to another; rather, researchers must justify their selection, emphasizing methodological coherence.

### Some concluding thoughts

Looking ahead to the future of grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology, we anticipate that a significant responsibility for nurturing the next generation of grounded theorists will rest with their supervisors. Although grounded

theory stands as the most prevalent qualitative approach (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) <sup>[13]</sup>, it originated in other disciplines and remains relatively novel in sport and exercise psychology, with the first papers emerging only six or seven years ago. Introducing established techniques from other fields often brings about various challenges, many of which have been documented in this ongoing debate. Traditionally, quantitative research has held sway in sport and exercise psychology, with numerous senior academics receiving robust training in various quantitative methodologies and passing on their knowledge to subsequent researchers, thus perpetuating a cycle of excellence. However, it is unlikely that many senior academics received training from grounded theory methodologists outside the field, making it challenging for them to impart the intricacies of different grounded theory approaches to their mentees. This scenario, described by Morse (1994) <sup>[7]</sup> as 'the menace of minus mentoring,' occurs when researchers learn methods solely from literature without practical experience, leading to confusion.

Although the 'armchair walk-through' provided here can be helpful, one of the main challenges faced by young researchers when using grounded theory lies in making numerous research decisions throughout the study. It is nearly impossible to plan a grounded theory study without deviating from the initial plan at all. Therefore, there is a significant component of 'on-the-job' training involved in mastering grounded theory methodology. If supervisors lack experience in confronting these challenges, mentoring trainees through crucial decisions becomes arduous. However, avenues for support exist. Firstly, there is no substitute for reading the original methodological texts and examining published grounded theories. Secondly, researchers can benefit from attending international grounded theory workshops and conferences regularly. Lastly, it is advisable for trainees wishing to conduct grounded theory studies to seek supervisors with requisite experience.

To enhance mentorship in grounded theory studies, researchers must acknowledge past mistakes to avoid repeating them. This necessitates setting aside egos for the betterment of the discipline. Some mistakes are overt, visible in published manuscripts, while others are more subtle. For instance, in prior grounded theory work conducted by the lead author (Holt & Dunn, 2004) <sup>[3]</sup>, excessive emphasis was placed on coding techniques, with insufficient attention paid to interpretive analysis and theory building. The valuable lesson learned is that grounded theorists should adopt a theoretical mindset from the study's outset, rather than attempting to create a final model or theory solely through coding and analytic techniques. Moving beyond past mistakes requires designing studies conducive to theoretical sampling within an iterative process of data collection and analysis.

In conclusion, we propose that methodological coherence serves as a valuable and crucial principle for planning grounded theory studies. As previously argued (Holt & Tammie, 2010) <sup>[4]</sup>, identifying one's philosophical perspective can be succinctly achieved within the constraints of journal page lengths. Ensuring methodological coherence demonstrates the researcher's understanding of their philosophical stance across all study elements. While methodological coherence does not guarantee research quality, it aids researchers in planning high-quality studies. Furthermore, as Mayan (2009) <sup>[6]</sup> suggests, methodological coherence may increase the likelihood of publication upon study completion. We hope that the ongoing debate on grounded theory will prompt researchers to explore new

issues and embrace more sophisticated qualitative methodological approaches. Thus far, sport and exercise psychology researchers have primarily relied on grounded theory variants proposed by Glaser, Strauss (and Corbin), and Charmaz, but numerous other variants exist (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) <sup>[13]</sup> that could be employed to address a myriad of questions, advancing the science of sport and exercise psychology.

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