



A quality debate on grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology? A commentary on potential areas for future debate

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The objective of this commentary on my own (Weed, 2009a) and Holt and Tamminen's (2010) recent contributions on the use of grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology is to identify those areas in which there is debate, and those where there is agreement, and to suggest the key areas on which future debate might most productively and usefully focus.

Methods: The two contributions are discussed to examine their contribution to a quality debate on grounded theory: both a debate about the quality of grounded theory research, and a debate of high quality on grounded theory.

Results: While there is some disagreement between Holt and Tamminen (2010) and myself (Weed, 2009a) on the appropriateness of search strategies used to identify grounded theory research in sport and exercise psychology, and on the extent to which an attempt is being made to police or correct methods, on the more substantive issues relating to micro-level research quality considerations for grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology there appears to be little on which there is substantive debate or disagreement. However, there appears to be much greater scope for productive debate on macro-level considerations relating to the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of variants of grounded theory, and their implications for research quality. This is clear from the wider grounded theory literature, but these important aspects of a high quality debate on grounded theory have not yet been extensively addressed in sport and exercise psychology.

Conclusion: While there is little substantive disagreement about issues of micro-level research quality considerations for grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology, a high quality debate in the future must recognise that micro-level research quality is inextricably linked with quality concerns for grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology at the macro-level.

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In writing my original article on research quality considerations for grounded theory research in sport and exercise psychology (Weed, 2009a), my hope had been that I would spark a quality debate on grounded theory. I intend this phrase to have a dual meaning, referring to both a debate about the quality of grounded theory research, but also to a debate of high quality that can contribute to the development and enhancement of grounded theory research in sport and exercise psychology and beyond.

Although I have had wide-ranging conversations, communications and correspondence with colleagues about the original article, I was delighted to hear that my article had stimulated a more formal set of further reflections from Nicholas Holt and Katherine Tamminen. The publication of these reflections in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (Holt & Tamminen, 2010) provides a useful opportunity for me to reflect on the extent to which a quality debate on grounded theory, in relation to both meanings intended, has been stimulated.

In relation to a debate on the quality of grounded theory research, my hope had been that the original article (Weed, 2009a) would engage researchers in a discussion of the meaning of research quality within the context of grounded theory research, and also of how research quality considerations might be integrated into the conduct of grounded theory research. I had also hoped that any debate that ensued would be a high quality and wide-ranging discussion of the grounded theory approach, rather than a series of tit-for-tat contradictions that can often be

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characteristic of a tendency towards paradigmatic behaviour in social science that I have discussed elsewhere (Weed, 2009b). Although I would like the primary focus of this commentary to be a prospective discussion about how a high quality debate can be taken forward, it is inevitable that some initial retrospective comments on the detail of the debate on quality are necessary.

The debate on the quality of grounded theory research

Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 1) seek to “critically examine... methodological issues in published grounded theory studies... to advance the methodological sophistication of research in sport and exercise psychology”. In doing so, it seems that their reflections both reinforce and validate the substantive conclusions relating to micro-level research quality considerations for grounded theory in my article. Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 3) noted that “[w]e tend to agree with [Weed that]... grounded theory should be used as a total methodology and that researchers should not simply pick and mix different methods (techniques)”. They also agree that the eight core characteristics of grounded theory that I identified (Weed, 2009a: pp. 505–506) “is a fair list of characteristics [which] certainly captures the essence of most variants of the methodology” (Holt & Tamminen, 2010: p. 3). Finally, in relation to the eight core characteristics of grounded theory research, their reflections (Holt & Tamminen, 2010: pp. 6–8) include discussions which highlight many of the same “common pitfalls” outlined in my analysis (Weed, 2009a: pp. 505–506).

However, while on one hand I am pleased that Holt and Tamminen (2010) have reinforced my substantive conclusions, on the other hand this level of agreement cannot really be described as a substantive debate. Consequently, I was both pleased and intrigued to note that Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 1) stated that “[o]ur objectives were to clarify and correct some issues” in my original paper. It is to these clarifications and corrections that I shall now briefly turn. In doing so I will limit my comments to what seem to me to be the two broad criticisms that Holt and Tamminen (2010) raise (search strategies and the policing of methods) because at this stage in the debate pedantically revisiting opinions about individual papers would be a little repetitive and, to a certain extent, futile.

Search strategies

Holt and Tamminen's (2010) primary criticism of my analysis, which is both explicitly and implicitly embedded throughout their article (pp. 2, 3, 7, 8, 9), is that in the process of collecting together research labelled grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology from which to “offer concrete examples and illustrations of some of the common pitfalls” (Weed, 2009a: p. 504), I did not employ a full and comprehensive search strategy. Yet my use of a more rapid review is something that is openly recognised in my paper, which states that the search was limited to “the electronic archives of the four sport and exercise psychology journals with the highest impact factors in 2007” and to the search term “grounded theory”.² Holt and Tamminen (2010: pp. 2–3) provide an extended discussion of their comprehensive search, which both includes a wider range of outlets and includes additional papers which did not use the label “grounded theory” in the abstract, title or keywords. Researchers familiar with the principles and procedures of research synthesis and systematic evidence reviews will recognise key elements of good practice for comprehensive searching in Holt and

Tamminen's (2010: pp. 2–3) search strategy. However, such researchers will also be aware that good practice in evidence review and assessment also includes provision for rapid reviews (Oxman, Schunemann, & Fretheim, 2006) as long as due attention is given to “the type of literature search and the degree of comprehensiveness that are likely to be appropriate for the review in question” (Egger, Juni, Bartlett, Hohenstein, & Sterne, 2003: p. 47). If rapid reviews are clear and replicable,³ then Lavis, Mynihan, Oxman, and Paulsen (2008: p. 6) note that in many cases, rather than being “quick and dirty”, they are “quick and clean enough”, although it is only on those rare occasions where substantive findings and conclusions can be shown to be similar to those of a later, more comprehensive review that the decision to conduct a rapid review can be retrospectively confirmed (Egger et al., 2003).

The key conclusion in my original article that Holt and Tamminen (2010) claim is affected by the rapid review search strategy is my suggestion that there does not appear to be a “cadre of authors” (Weed, 2009a: p. 503) working consistently on grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology. The basis for this conclusion from my review was that:

“32 of the 34 authors listed only contributed to one paper (although aspects of Bringer, Brackenridge, & Johnson, 2006 longitudinal study have been published in outlets outside sport and exercise psychology)” (Weed, 2009a: p. 509).

Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 3) suggest this is a strawperson argument based on incomplete evidence as a result of the use of a rapid review rather than a comprehensive search. To support this suggestion, Holt and Tamminen (2010) make two observations to counter my conclusion: firstly, that two of the 34 authors, Holt himself, and Peter Giacobbi (Giacobbi, Hausenblas, Fallon, & Hall, 2003; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006) have “been involved on several papers that used grounded theory” (p. 3), which of course leaves the other 32 authors that I identified as not appearing on more than one paper in my rapid review. Secondly, that Bringer et al. (2006) published related studies in outlets outside sport and exercise psychology (Holt & Tamminen, 2010: p. 3), something that I clearly recognised in the original article (Weed, 2009a: p. 509). Consequently, setting aside the above issue (on which it appears to me that we are saying the same thing), it does seem that Holt and Tamminen's (2010) substantive conclusions are sufficiently similar to my own to suggest that their more comprehensive review has provided one of those rare retrospective validations of the rapid search strategy I employed in my original paper.

The policing of methods

A second “clarification and correction” that Holt and Tamminen (2010) provide for my paper is that “there simply cannot be a single gatekeeper or viewpoint” (p. 6), suggesting that in my analysis of research quality considerations for grounded theory I am “assuming the role of the methods police for grounded theory

² This was operationalised as the appearance of the term “grounded theory” in the title, abstract or keywords for the article.

³ The search from the original article was replicated on 19th April 2010 and, with one exception, returned the same results. The exception was an article by Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock (2008) which, as Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 2) quite rightly point out, was not included in the original article. This is because it was published in September 2008, and the search for the original article was conducted in August 2008 prior to its submission in October. While the text of the original article noted that “since (and including) 2000, 12 articles were returned” (Weed, 2009a: p. 503), a statement that was correct, for the purposes of the article's abstract the search was transcribed as having “date parameters 2000–2008” (p. 502), a discrepancy which gave rise to the anomaly relating to the Gucciardi, Gordon, and Dimmock (2008) paper. However, as the discussions here note, this anomaly does not appear to have affected the substantive conclusions drawn.

research in sport and exercise psychology” (p. 6). As a researcher who has long argued against perspectives underpinned by traditional ontological realism in qualitative research (see, for example, Weed, 2008), I fully agree that a single viewpoint is inappropriate and, as such, I have no desire to assume the role of methodological lawmaker, methods policeman, nor, indeed, of the methodological Department of Corrections. My analysis is simply that: my analysis. That its purpose was to stimulate debate, and that it did, is a clear indication that both I and others recognise this.

Furthermore, given that, as Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 1) note, “a small number of research perspectives and designs have dominated the literature” in sport and exercise psychology, and “[c]ompared to fields such as nursing, we are a long way behind in the use and sophistication of qualitative research”, attempting to police such methods in the name of research quality is a little ridiculous, as to do so would restrict rather than enhance the field. Therefore, and in contrast, what is required is a wide-ranging and frank debate about areas in which methodological sophistication has yet to develop fully, with the aim being to “support the future use and evolution of the method” (Weed, 2009a: p. 502) and expand methodological heterogeneity. As already noted, the stimulus of such a debate has been the key intent of both this commentary and the original article (Weed, 2009a).

However, Holt and Tamminen’s (2010: p. 6) criticism centres on my inclusion in Table 1 of my original article (Weed, 2009a) of a summative yes/no evaluation of whether studies met the collectively sufficient conditions for grounded theory research (i.e., did studies include all of the “eight core characteristics of a grounded theory”). In claiming that their approach is markedly different to my own, Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 6) note that:

“Rather than positioning ourselves as the methods police..., we present evidence of our analyses and offer *the reader* the opportunity to evaluate the extent to which authors embraced grounded theory methodology and judge the quality of these studies”.

Unfortunately, what Holt and Tamminen (2010) invite the reader to do, perhaps unwittingly, is to judge the quality of other people’s studies on the basis of a double hermeneutic (Giddens, 1993), which assumes that the most appropriate way for the reader to assess quality is with the help of further analysis from an enlightened theorist (Kim, 2004). Therefore, rather than asking the reader to develop their own interpretation of the quality of the original studies (which would require reading the original studies), Holt and Tamminen (2010) are asking the reader to develop an interpretation of the quality of the studies based on Holt and Tamminen’s interpretation of the quality of those studies, albeit presented as a qualitative profile (in Table 1 of Holt & Tamminen, 2010) rather than a summative evaluation. Perhaps the key difference here is not that I presented my summative evaluation of the studies, but that I did not claim that readers could develop their own interpretations of quality through my analysis – to do that readers must read the original studies for themselves.

In summarising the debate on the quality of grounded theory research, it seems to me that the areas in which there has been debate between Holt and Tamminen (2010) and myself (Weed, 2009a) relate not to substantive issues or conclusions, on which there appears to be agreement, but to the appropriateness of search strategies and to the extent to which an attempt is being made to police or correct methods. On my reading, Holt and Tamminen (2010) and myself (Weed, 2009a) agree that grounded theory should be a total methodology not a pick and mix box, and that the eight core characteristics that I suggested, and that we each used to analyse grounded theory studies in sport and exercise psychology, capture the essence of most variants of the methodology. We also

seem to agree that, derived from each of our analyses, there are concerns relating to micro-level research quality considerations for grounded theory research in sport and exercise psychology.

The quality of debate on grounded theory

In my original article, I discussed research quality considerations for grounded theory research at both the micro- and macro-levels⁴ (Apthorpe & Gasper, 1982; Weed, 2009a). While both Holt and Tamminen’s (2010) further reflections, and the range of conversations, communications and correspondence I have had with colleagues about the article are a clear indication that the article has stimulated discussion of micro-level research quality considerations in sport and exercise psychology, I am disappointed that the article has not stimulated debate in relation to macro-level research quality. This is for two reasons: firstly, as the preceding discussions show, there appears to be little on which there is substantive debate in relation to micro-level research quality (other than differences of opinion about the extent to which individual studies in sport and exercise psychology have “embraced grounded theory methodology” – Holt & Tamminen, 2010: p. 6), and so it appears, both from the above discussion and the wider literature (see, for example, Bryant, 2009; Glaser, 2002; Kelle, 2005; Thomas & James, 2006), that the more substantive debate is in relation to macro-level issues of research quality. However, secondly, and more importantly, micro-level research quality considerations cannot be divorced from more macro-level considerations about the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin (variants of) grounded theory, and the implications they have for ensuring research quality at the micro-level and for the wider contribution to knowledge that a grounded theory study is able to make. This integration of micro- and macro-level considerations is reflected in my conclusion in the original article that:

“...[a]uthors must accept responsibility for ensuring they fully understand the methods and methodologies that they employ, as well as the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin them.” (Weed, 2009a: p. 509)

My suggestion, therefore, is that a high quality debate on grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology must embrace research quality considerations at both the micro- and macro-level, and that this is particularly important for grounded theory because different variants of the methodology are underpinned by different macro-level assumptions. Furthermore, such a debate must proceed in a way that is not constrained by entrenched ‘paradigmatic’ positions (Weed, 2009b) as is appropriate to the social sciences (McFee, 2007), with protagonists being willing to consider the implications of the position of others for their own approach, rather than simply seeking to assert the superiority of their own position (Weed, 2009b: p. 319). Unfortunately, grounded theorists have not always engaged with each other in this way (see, for example, Glaser, 1992, on emergence versus forcing, or Glaser, 2002, on constructivist grounded theory).

Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 8) do include a brief section relating to the macro-level on the issue of specifying types of grounded theory. In this section they suggest that it is not necessary

⁴ Derived from Apthorpe and Gasper (1982), micro-level research quality considerations are concerned with the extent to which research meets its own stated goals, and the way in which the research has been conducted in terms of its internal consistency and quality as an independent study. Research quality considerations at the macro-level focus on the appropriateness of research methodology and method to research questions, the significance of research questions themselves, and the contribution research makes to bodies of knowledge in particular fields. For further details, see Weed (2009c).

for sport and exercise psychology researchers to explicitly recognise that there are different variants of grounded theory and to note which variant they are using because, from the tone of the discussion and the references cited, “it should be clear to the reader which variant of grounded theory was used” (p. 8). However, this assumes that the only audience for grounded theory studies is experienced grounded theory researchers. Prospective grounded theorists in sport and exercise psychology, as well as those whom Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 7) term “neophyte grounded theorists”, may not be aware of the wider debates about grounded theory variants, and thus will not be able to locate studies within their ontological and epistemological contexts. As Holt and Tamminen (2010: p. 8) themselves note, being explicit about this issue does not require an extensive section, but only “a sentence or two in a research article”. However, this sentence or two is important, as it alerts researchers who may not be familiar with grounded theory to the nature of macro-level research quality issues associated with the approach, and encourages them to engage with grounded theory debates at this macro-level.

One of the key reasons for sport and exercise psychology researchers to engage with research quality considerations at both the micro- and macro-level is that grounded theory, like many other qualitative research approaches (see, for example, Sparkes & Smith, 2009), often has to resist the “imposition of criteria derived from ontological realism and epistemological positivism upon research that is not underpinned by such ontological and epistemological positions” (Weed, 2009a: p. 5). As such, the criteria used to assess and evaluate quality at the micro-level are inextricably linked to the macro-level assumptions that underpin (variants of) grounded theory. Consequently, although my original article sought to establish eight core characteristics that “capture the essence of most variants of the method” (Holt & Tamminen, 2010: p. 3), I would not recommend that these characteristics be used by grounded theorists in sport and exercise psychology as retrospective quality criteria for their studies.⁵ Rather, I would suggest that these characteristics be used prospectively by researchers to ensure that their planned research reflects the essence of grounded theory, but that the exact nature of the criteria for demonstrating quality in both the process and outcome of their grounded theory research should vary depending on the macro-level ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin the variant used, and the intended contribution of the outcome to knowledge. The nature of the outcome criteria of fit, work, relevance and modifiability (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) will vary depending on whether the substantive theory is seen to be the truth (as in Glaserian grounded theory) or a truth (as in constructivist grounded theory). For example, in ontologically realist Glaserian grounded theory, ‘fit’ might be seen as universal across the substantive theory, whilst in constructivist grounded theory, ‘fit’ might be seen as a more contingent and relative measure. Similarly, process criteria for quality may vary, with the post-positivist Straussian approach seeking to recognise bias and maintain objectivity in the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) because, despite this variant being “interpretive work” (p. 279), it remains ontologically realist (Anells, 1996, 1997; Charmaz, 2000).

As I noted in the original article, intuitively the term “constructivist grounded theory” suggests an ontological position in which, rather than an underlying singular reality, multiple realities are constructed by individuals (Weed, 2009a: p. 508). If this is the case,

then the potential to link substantive grounded theories across substantive areas of sport and exercise psychology to develop more generic formal theory, a recognised feature of all variants of the approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), seems to be undermined by a constructivist ontology as such a move requires that an underlying reality across substantive areas is acknowledged. However, Charmaz (2000: p. 253) has argued that constructivist grounded theory “remains realist because it addresses human realities and assumes the existence of real worlds”. Therefore, as I suggested in my original article, a fundamental feature of a high quality debate about grounded theory must be a consideration of whether constructivist grounded theory is, in fact, ontologically constructivist, or whether it might more accurately be described as being underpinned by ontological critical realism. Critical realism recognises that there can be an underlying reality, but that knowledge of this reality will always be partial (Downward, 2006) and therefore the nature of the underlying reality will always be subject to revision (see Weed, 2009a: pp. 508–509), something which appears to resonate with the ‘modifiability’ principle for grounded theory (Danermark, Ekstrom, Jakobsen, & Karlsson, 2001). This might suggest that approaches labelled “constructivist grounded theory” are, in fact, responding to a constructivist challenge, rather than necessarily being ontologically constructivist. These debates have clear implications for the possibility to develop more formal theories, and thus for an assessment at the macro-level of the contribution to knowledge in sport and exercise psychology that the different variants of grounded theory can make. If, as both Charmaz (2000) and myself (Weed, 2009a) argue, some form of realism (be it traditional realism or critical realism) is part of all grounded theory variants, then the potential for grounded theory to make a generic formal contribution across substantive fields of knowledge is considerably enhanced. If, however, constructivist grounded theory is understood as being ontologically constructivist, then its potential contribution to knowledge is more limited. This is an important issue to consider in a high quality debate about grounded theory, and one that does not seem to feature in the sport and exercise psychology literature at the present time.

In summarising how a high quality debate on grounded theory might be taken forward I would suggest that because there appears to be little on which there is substantive debate in relation to micro-level issues, future debate in sport and exercise psychology should focus on research quality considerations at the macro-level. In particular, a high quality debate might discuss what implications the differing macro-level ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin different variants of grounded theory might have for the conduct of grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology, and for the way in which researchers might demonstrate quality. Debate might also focus on the implications of ontological assumptions for the extent to which the different variants of grounded theory can make a contribution to knowledge beyond the substantive area of sport and exercise psychology in which they have been applied. Above all, however, I would suggest that a high quality debate on grounded theory must recognise that micro- and macro-level research quality considerations are inextricably linked, and therefore the key issues for debate at the macro-level will have implications for the conduct of grounded theory in sport and exercise psychology at the micro-level.

Concluding comment

Perhaps the key to ensuring a quality debate on grounded theory (in relation to both meanings intended) is to seek to encourage transparency in substantive published grounded theory studies in sport and exercise psychology, and to advocate that all published grounded theory studies, as a minimum, at least

⁵ Although, clearly, my original article retrospectively assessed the extent to which studies in sport and exercise psychology included each of these characteristics, the point here is that researchers commencing a grounded theory study should consider these characteristics at the start.

acknowledge the aspects of the macro-level debates germane to the variant of grounded theory they have used. This would allow experienced, “neophyte” and prospective grounded theorists to understand that there are a wider set of debates associated with grounded theory than can be discussed at length in individual sport and exercise psychology research articles, and that such debates have implications for research quality at the micro- and macro-levels. As such, I now propose a slight amendment to the conclusion of my original article (Weed, 2009a: p. 509), namely that: authors must accept responsibility for ensuring that they demonstrate that they fully understand the methods and methodologies that they employ, as well as the ontological and epistemological assumptions that underpin them. If authors demonstrate such an understanding by acknowledging the existence of these debates in their substantive grounded theory articles in sport and exercise psychology, then those who wish to engage with, or to adopt, grounded theory approaches can engage with such debates through accessing more general sources such as the Handbook of Grounded Theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007) or, indeed, this series of contributions in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*.

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