Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide (2nd ed.) – A Review

By Neville Li   Nov 14, 2014

In this "review", as with all my other summary documents, my intention is to provide very concise and practical pointers and tips for researchers to consider and/or use in their own projects. Therefore, I am depicting the most notable points from the book as well as the major gaps that it does not address. Essentially, I am extracting some take-home messages from a book of over 350 pages of dense text and using the gaps I can identify to inform a conference workshop I am developing on "How do I choose a qualitative data analysis (QDA) software?" to present at a number of conferences in 2015.

This book is structured based on the functions of qualitative data analysis (QDA) software, i.e. data preparation (Chapter 4), early tasks (Chapter 5), data exploration (Chapter 6), coding (Chapters 7-9), mapping and modeling (Chapter 11), using participant variables/attributes (Chapter 12), and querying (i.e. asking questions of) your data (Chapter 13). One major strength of the book is its companion website http://www.uk.sagepub.com/silverlewins2e/ with openly accessible data of three case studies (i.e., Case Study A-Young People's Perceptions; Case Study B-The Financial Downturn; and Case Study C-Coca-Cola Commercials) to test the functions in your own software.

The seven software packages compared in this book are:

- ATLAS.ti
- MAXQDA
- NVivo
- HyperRESEARCH
- Dedoose
- QDA Miner
- Transana

Most notable points from the book

1) The seven software packages included in the book *ARE* the most reputable products chosen by qualitative researchers around the world.

2) The book walks you through a qualitative research project using software from beginning to end, including what is qualitative data analysis, nature of software in data analysis, setting up a project, early data exploration, coding, interrogating the data, and outputting the results, regardless of the software package chosen.

3) Chapter 3 – Software Summaries is an important overview of all the software packages covered by the book because the authors edited it so that it is not a "sales pitch" from the respective companies, which could understandably be biased.

4) Snapshots of examples from various software packages are included under each element of qualitative data analysis in each chapter. This provides easy comparison of the functionality across different products sorted by analytic purposes and gives you a visual idea of how the software interfaces look like.

5) Don't miss the "Notes boxes" throughout the book. Those are written from the experiences of the two authors from actually using various software for the last 20 years and offer valuable insights. Those are experiential, not theoretical notes.

Gaps that this book does not address

1) A burning question of mine and of many of my students/clients often is: ***Which software is most suitable for what methodology and why?*** For example, to conduct a grounded theory research project, or an ethnography, which software package can facilitate the most effective and efficient data management and analysis? This question is not addressed in the book.

2) If you have already chosen a software package, reading the help menu and training menus from the respective developers can more effectively equip you with using the software than going through the materials on the companion website of this book.

3) Using the sample case study data from the companion website may be useful for familiarizing with the functions of different software, but trial and error by using your own data will likely yield more analytic insights than using readily available sample data, regardless of software package.

4) The chapter exercises at the end of each chapter does help with understanding the functionality of different software. However, researchers rarely have time to go through different packages in such great detail before deciding on which one to choose. And if they have already chosen a product, there is no need to engage in exercises to compare different products anymore.

5) Quirkos, the latest product developed in Oct 2014 designed specifically for analyzing textual data at a hugely discounted price, is not included in this book.

Conclusions

Overall, this book is great for researchers who are at the stage of *choosing* a software package to use because they can see the comparisons of the layout and functionality of various QDA products before making a decision. However, if because of institutional constraints (e.g. organizational licenses), group collaboration requirements (e.g. some international team members insist on using a particular package) and personal preferences, you have already chosen

a software package to employ, then it may be more efficient to learn from the training manuals from the respective software developers to maximize the ways you can manipulate it.

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