

Reflections on NVivo and MAXQDA
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My research involves collaboration across methodologies and disciplines to understand how to best promote adolescent health through family and school based interventions. While completing my dissertation I experimented with two qualitative data analysis software packages, Nvivo 8 and MaxQDA 10. I had previous experiences with Nvivo on a team-based research and had only been introduced to MaxQDA at a conference workshop. I liked the open access to documents that MaxQDA offered but decided I would attempt coding in both software packages to determine what would work best for me and my research. So, once all my interviews, field memos, and other notes were accessible in written form, I aggregated and saved files into word documents which I then uploaded into both qualitative data analysis software packages.

My first “pass” through the data involved the use of both NVivo 8 and MaxQDA10. Because I was most familiar with NVivo 8, I used it to facilitate my first attempt at coding the data. This first pass involved open coding (Charmaz, 2005) of interview transcripts and fieldnotes for half the data (i.e., three cases). I generated twenty-four codes in my initial reading, many related only to the interview topics which, in a sense were de facto, a priori codes that I forced on the data through my interview questions (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

During my next analysis session, I switched software programs and coded through the other half of the data using MaxQDA10. I again divided the data into relatively exclusive categories based on the interview topics. In addition, during my reading of the second half of the data, I created some emergent codes.

Based on my use of both software programs, I determined to use MaxQDA 10 for the remainder of my coding. I liked that coding was easily visible on the source document (e.g., transcript) and that the program supported extended memoing features that also were visible on the document. What are called coding stripes in Nvivo, and displayed only upon request, are automatically displayed in MaxQDA. The user interface for coding was slightly simpler, too. In MaxQDA codes can be dragged to a portion of text or a portion of text can be dragged to a code and there also are keyboard shortcut options. MaxQDA also allows for “highlighter” coding which is simply marking a text with different colors. These colors become codes (for easy access later) but are not labeled, per se. Highlighter coding helped me to mark striking, memorable, or what seemed to be poignant quotations or observations for later reference without forcing me to assign them into a particular coding category or create an emergent code.

Memos also are automatically pinned adjacent to transcript segments, like sticky notes on a page. While memoing is also available in Nvivo, it is pulled up in a separate window (e.g., comments, annotation) rather than appended visually to the transcript. Memos can be color coded or marked with a letter code, such as “M” for Methodological Memo or “T” for Theoretical Memo. The memoing functions especially fit my thinking and coding style. It provided me a space to react or jot down thoughts about what I was reading and noticing in transcripts and fieldnotes. In many memos I wrote early drafts of what eventually was included in my study findings and discussion.

A final feature that I used extensively in MaxQDA was the segment retrieval function, which involved “activating” documents, codes, or sets. In MaxQDA only “active” items will be

“retrieved” and any combination of source documents and codes can be activated for viewing. The program then pulls segments of text that fit into “active” source/codes. Thus, using MaxQDA it was simple to view what was coded within a particular case or within a particular role across cases. For example, in my study I looked at how stepfathers in the six cases enacted support. Having coded various types of support, I was able to “activate” these codes and then “activate” the stepfathers for easy comparison across cases. I also looked within case to see how support was enacted by mothers and stepfathers in the same family.

I did not fully utilize all functions available in the program, but primarily used MaxQDA in tandem with other programs, such as Microsoft One Note and Word. MaxQDA was a useful tool that facilitated data coding, memoing, and management. I recommend the software for people who like to stay focused on their sources documents (e.g., transcripts, fieldnotes) and for those who like to think on paper (e.g., memoing, jotting sticky notes on files, to do lists, etc.).