

Delve A Little Deeper Into Your Research Material

by Raymond C. Maietta, Ph.D.
President Researchtalk Inc.

(Ray Maietta heads a team of qualitative research consultants and scholars. His company, Researchtalk Inc., sells ATLAS.ti, provides consulting and professional development training through all phases of a qualitative research project, and helps researchers to carefully integrate the ATLAS.ti software into their data analysis.)

Find detailed descriptions and explanations on how to get the most out of your work with ATLAS.ti. Get the inside scoop here, and learn the latest information and tips that haven't been included in the handbook yet.

How To Best Use ATLAS.ti's New Co-occurrence Tools

The ability to retrieve co-occurring codes is one of the major features that distinguishes qualitative software from simple code-and-retrieve programs. Rather than just see all quotations coded to money or all quotations coded to health, a researcher could use ATLAS.ti's "Query Tool" to retrieve all quotations coded to both money and health. This functionality allows you to better assess the ways in which two codes interact.

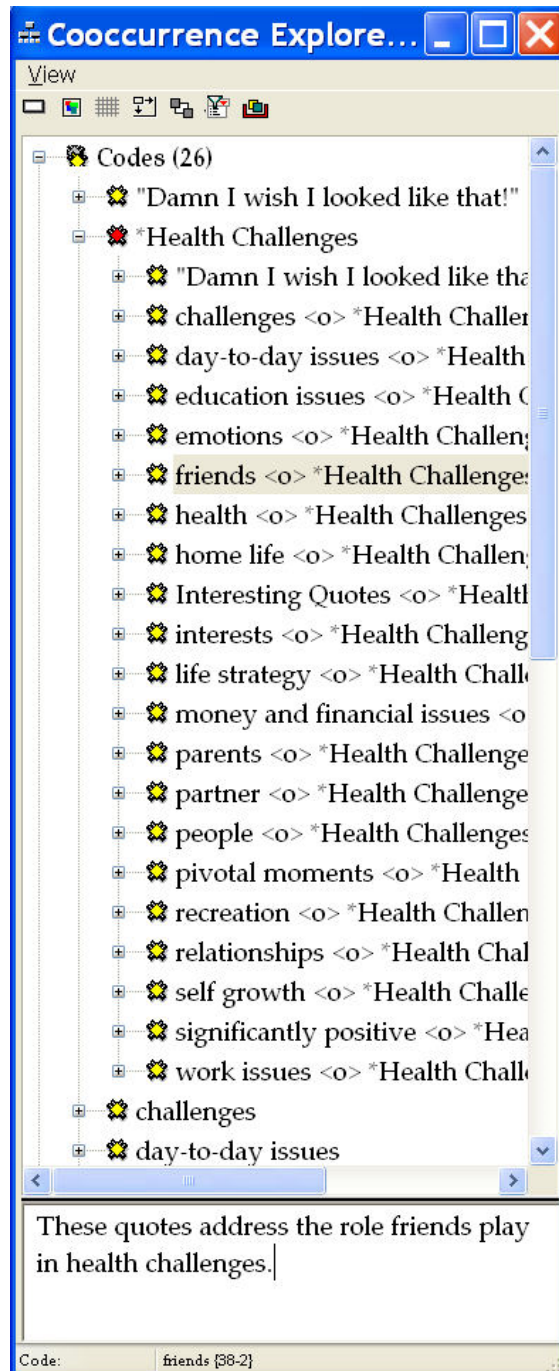
The query tool (see Figure 1) offers a powerful list of operators that enable the retrieval of a wide range of code combinations. In addition to finding all instances where two codes are applied to the same quotation, you can use proximity operators to find every instance where a code (like challenges) is coded within a quotation for health, or only the times it is "overlapped by" health. Boolean operators allow you to see the instances where two codes code the same quotation (the "and" operator) or even to gather quotations from more than one code (the "or" operator). You can find every quotation coded to best friend or romantic partner if you want to explore codes for quotations about close relationships.

Id	Name	S..	S..	D..
~..	accident + seme...	4	15	5
~..	Dad ill>Why do ...	2	52	8
3..	Time for sports=...	6	24	7
6..	I'd like enhanced...	8	14	6
7..	Bad allergies als...	3	16	3
1..	in hospital- not b...	4	16	3
~..	Friend helps wor...	2	49	6
~..	Prevent mental h...	4	15	7
1..	Stomach conditio...	4	15	7

A copy of the ATLAS.ti 5.0 Query Tool showing a supercode for the result of a query asking to see all quotes coded to health AND challenges.

The new Co-occurrence Explorer serves as a powerful complement to the query tool. The Co-occurrence Explorer is divided into a document section and a code section. In the document section, you will find a list of every code applied within each document. You can click on each code to see where it is applied within a particular primary document. The code section lists each code, and under each you see a list of every code that "co-occurs" (overlaps fully or partially) with any quotation coded to that code.

The Co-occurrence Explorer (see Figure 2) offers exciting and even revolutionary opportunities for researchers to understand connections between codes in their study. Previously, tools like the query tool were powerful enough, but required researchers to know code connections, such as challenges coded with health, before they did a query. With the Co-occurrence Explorer, you can find code connections that you anticipated and in addition you can now discover serendipitous connections between codes that emerge during your reading and coding of text.



A copy of the ATLAS.ti 5.0 Co-occurrence Explorer showing all codes that are coded in a way that overlaps all quotes for our supercode "Health Challenges."

In our Life Satisfaction study, we have a code for pivotal moments. When we look at this code in the Co-occurrence Explorer, we find several codes that overlap the code in our primary documents. One code is religion. When we spotted religion in the list, we weren't sure what to expect in the discussions connected to the overlapping quotations. We found a wide range of ways in which religion is involved in pivotal moments in people's lives. For some, religion inspires important life turn-arounds (from drug use and depression, for example). For others, conscious decisions to question and even turn away from religion led them to make more confident decisions in their lives. Had we not found this connection in the Co-occurrence Explorer, we may have missed these important findings.

The Co-occurrence Explorer is not only for finding places where two codes overlap. In our study, we found that people were becoming their parents. Through the document section of the Co-occurrence Explorer we were able to find instances coded to our categories parents and self-growth for each person in our study. This close person-by-person exercise showed us that people used the same issues they raised in complaints about their parents to describe pertinent issues they were dealing with in their own self-growth. For example, a young woman who couldn't wait to move away from her military father, who was too organized and time-conscious, also talked about how proud she was that she was recognized for her organizational skills and attention to detail with an award for her service as a dorm leader.

AND—don't forget the supercode! Save code combinations from within the query tool or Co-occurrence Explorer for easy access to quotes and codes that co-occur with that particular combination. Supercodes also automatically update as you continue to expand and adjust your coding.