ATLAS.ti – The True Qualitative Tool

by Dr. Susanne Friese

There is a wide variety of tools for computer-based qualitative data analysis available out there. I recently reviewed the newest versions of them and can attest that you can find some nice features here and there from time to time. However, after this comparison, I was left with one feeling: ATLAS.ti is the most qualitative of them all.

Please read some of the arguments that support what started out as a gut feeling.

The latest hype are mixed-method functions. Producing numbers is not a big deal for computer software; ATLAS.ti supports this path as you can easily export your data with just one click either as Excel or SPSS syntax file and use Excel's comprehensive tools to present your results as well as for further quantitative analysis in Excel or SPSS. You can also prepare an XML output ready to be imported into QDA Miner in case your data is suitable for running correspondence, cluster or factor analysis.

But let's return to the real qualitative stuff. As ATLAS.ti does not provide a code list in the form of a tree, i.e. a hierarchical structure, you can begin coding very openly and remain close to your data. The interface with the data being shown on the right hand side and a margin area next to it on the right, gives you the feel of working with the data on paper.

This is important as software users (not only ATLAS.ti) still want to simulate the non-digital world even in this digital age. Smartphones offer virtual bookshelves from where to pick your eBooks. Pages of eReaders can be turned over like if they were real pages. Novice computer users still enter hard returns when they reach the end of a line even though they've never touched a mechanical typewriter. CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software) users ask for functions like being able to scribble notes within the text, draw lines or circles onto images and video files (the latter is not yet possible but the team at ATLAS.ti is listening carefully to those requests).

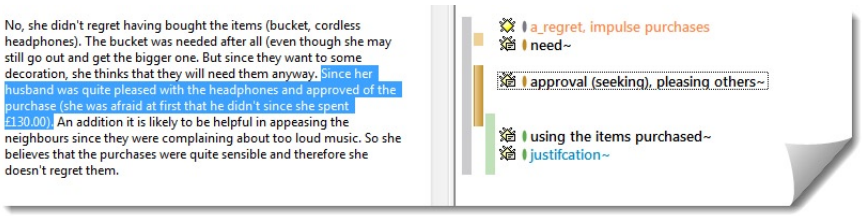
Non-hierarchical code lists

The current interface already prompts many users to state that they feel closer to the data as compared to other programs where coding is less "visible." Even if a code margin is provided, there is a difference between coding with a code tree provided compared to coding with a non-hierarchical list of codes (like ATLAS.ti allows). As someone who occasionally teaches other programs besides ATLAS.ti, I have solid experience with both ways of coding.

And I observe that when users are provided with a code tree, they immediately begin to sort their codes into higher and lower order categories. The problem that this creates is this:

Unless you work with a deductive coding frame, you simply do not know what is a higher or lower order category after 10 minutes of coding. You need to give it some time, work with your data, and get a feel for your data before you can begin to build a structured, hierarchical code list. If you know how, you can, of course, also do this in ATLAS.ti (see for example: **http://downloads.atlasti.com/library/Friese_2009-09_5.pdf**). But because there is no ready-made tree, ATLAS.ti's flat, non-hierarchical code list leads to more qualitative coding.

You can, of course, also disregard the tree structure that other programs provide and create your own flat, non-hierarchical code list. Based on my experience, however, I rarely see this being done.



Quotations as Self-Contained Objects

Another feature of ATLAS.ti that leads to more qualitative work is the treatment of quotations as independent objects. This allows you to link everything with everything else, down to the most basic unit, the quotation.

Linking data and other elements of your analysis is innate to working with ATLAS.ti and not an add-on function. Tools for a visual presentation like maps or models are available in other programs, but none of these allow you to be as connected to your data than the ATLAS.ti network view function. Ray Maietta has written an assessment of the central role of quotations in ATLAS.ti; you can read it here: **http://downloads.atlasti.com/library/Maietta_2009-05_6.pdf**

The way you query your data, e.g. by simply double clicking on a code in the Code Manager leads you directly back to your data via the quotation list that opens. The same is true for the query tool where you can access the data from within the results pane. The Co-occurence Table Explorer initially presents numbers, but with a click on the cell you can access the very data in its context.

As an ATLAS.ti user you are familiar with this procedure, and if you do not know other packages, you may think that this is just the way it works. Access to context is provided elsewhere as well, but there may be an additional window or an additional mouse click in between you and the data. It is not as immediate a connection as what you experience when working with ATLAS.ti.

Another current trend is to present results in the form of bar and pie charts, based on frequency counts independent of content. This may look nice, but can be actually misleading as the actual data behind the numbers may tell you a very different story.

These are some of the reasons why I recommend ATLAS.ti as the best choice for anyone looking for a truly qualitative program. Numbers and data can always be exported. This is easy enough for a computer to do. But providing you with a real "qualitative feel" for your data is an art that only ATLAS.ti masters perfectly.

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