Paper: On the Edge of Method: Qualitative Data Analysis Software and the Critical Researcher

It is often said that there are no clear rules for interpretation in qualitative analysis (Bannister, 2005; Carcary, 2011; Kvale, 1996, 13). This can pose a challenge for new researchers, who lack the experience to design their research with clear expectations of the analytical process. There are a number of texts that provide guidelines for avoiding what Kvale (1996) refers to as the "1,000-page question" (176) (e.g. Huberman and Miles, 1994; Kvale, 1996; Luker, 2008; Miles and Huberman, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), but such guidelines can, in turn, become a crutch for novices that adhere too strictly to what are meant to be suggested best practices rather than step-by-step instructions. Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) such as NVivo, MaxQDA or ATLAS.TI are intended to simplify the process of analysis by providing the means to create an "efficient data management system" (Carcary, 2011; Kikooma, 2010; Lewins and Silver, 2009). But similarly, CAQDAS can all too easily become a crutch for novices, who confuse these tools with the analytical method itself (Wickham and Woods, 2005). There have been few studies that offer a critical review of CAQDAS (Kikooma, 2010). This gap in research only adds to the pitfalls novice researchers must navigate when performing qualitative analysis.

This paper addresses both the research gap and the challenge of interpretation by examining how one novice researcher undertook analysis of 14 qualitative interviews using NVivo 10 for a grounded theory study of social media use in academic libraries. Throughout the process of analysis, the researcher maintained a journal of reflections about the implementation of CAQDAS to facilitate analysis and how it might affect interpretation of results. This application of "epistemological reflexivity" (Kikooma, 2010; Willig, 2008, 10) suggests an approach to maintaining critical distance and engagement with research goals throughout the interpretive process, while also revealing some of the underlying assumptions involved in the design of such software. This paper considers these journal entries as a form of autoethnography, in which the "other" is characterized as the software the researcher engages with. This paper will explore the advantages and dangers such software represents for new researchers through the analysis of journal entries.

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