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Connecting the Dots: A Review of Traversing the Uncharted Arena of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software: Mapping Out QDA Miner 4.1 as a First-Time User

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Abstract

A review of QDA Miner 4.1, a mixed method computer assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS), was conducted to determine how accommodating (if at all) the software was for beginning researchers and/or individuals less proficient with computers. Rather than maintaining the more traditional focus on the technical functionality of QDA Miner, this review was structured around the needs and interests of a beginning researcher. Although QDA Miner offers a variety of helpful resources, questions regarding how to structure initial project to ensure findings yield methodological accuracy remain.

Keywords

QDA Miner 4.1, CAQDAS, Mixed-Method Analysis, First-Time Users

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Traversing the Uncharted Arena of Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software: Mapping Out QDA Miner 4.1 as a First-Time User

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A review of QDA Miner 4.1, a mixed method computer assisted data analysis software (CAQDAS), was conducted to determine how accommodating (if at all) the software was for beginning researchers and/or individuals less proficient with computers. Rather than maintaining the more traditional focus on the technical functionality of QDA Miner, this review was structured around the needs and interests of a beginning researcher. Although QDA Miner offers a variety of helpful resources, questions regarding how to structure initial project to ensure findings yield methodological accuracy remain. Keywords: QDA Miner 4.1, CAQDAS, Mixed-Method Analysis, First-Time Users

Provalis Research, the developers of QDA Miner, have been designing analytic software for the past 20 years and has provided mixed method data analysis solutions for several different professional populations since then. Throughout the years individuals within these various populations have provided elaborately technical reviews of QDA Miner depicting the fascinating features this program provides its users. While these articles were very impressive to read, as a beginning researcher, I found myself getting overwhelmed and slightly intimidated by the technical focus asserted in previous reviews. Since computer assisted qualitative data analysis software programs (CAQDAS) are completely foreign to me, and I'm pretty sure that most nine year olds could teach me a thing or two about "common" computer functions, I was more interested to know how (or if) my research could be enhanced through the use of such technical features. As a graduate student in the infancy stage of my research career (AKA the almighty dissertation), I'm enticed by the fantasy of electronic organization, and the alluring hints that CAQDAS might just help me expedite the completion of my dissertation; therefore, this review of QDA Miner 4.1 was conducted with the intention of gaining clarity and improved comprehension of software features as it pertains to a beginning researcher and a CAQDAS newbie.

Unfortunately, one of the first items of interest for grad-students is price; most students won't investigate a program beyond this point if it costs more than their budget allows. Provalis offers pricing categorized for commercial, governmental, or academic purposes. The academic cost for QDA Miner 4.1 is \$590, which could be a bit steep for grad-students on a fixed income. The good news is that Provalis also offers a free limited version of QDA Miner called QDA Lite, allowing individuals who may fall into the limited budget category to still gain access to some of the unique features offered in QDA Miner 4.1.

Despite my technological learning curve, I still maintain the belief that CAQDAS, QDA Miner 4.1 more specifically, were designed to simplify life for their users; thus, my primary curiosity was to gain an understanding of the potential time it would take me to competently use QDA Miner 4.1. With this curiosity in mind, I began my first-time experience with QDA Miner 4.1 by installing the program software. Much to my dismay I couldn't open the program because I have a Mac and QDA Miner 4.1 does not offer a Mac version; bummer! Determined to use my Mac, I searched around Provalis's website for ways to make that possible. Although Provalis does not offer a Mac version of QDA Miner, they do offer a variety of ways that users

could run their software on a Mac via a virtual machine (VM; <http://provalisresearch.com/products/simstat/simstat-technical-information/mac-os/>).

Most newer Macs have BootCamp already installed in them, which (I think) allows your Mac to run on two different operating systems; if Mac users fall into this category the VM is free, however, users could still be limited by not having enough available memory space to run the program—I ran into this problem. There is also an additional windows certification requirement, which, if a Mac user doesn't already have, will lead to additional costs in order to satisfy this requirement—I wasn't interested in paying for an operating system that I no longer used. Based on Provalis's detailed explanation of available VMs, it seems like users would have to purchase a VM, rather than selecting a free VM, to ensure that QDA Miner 4.1 runs most effectively.

After giving BootCamp a whirl, I attempted Virtual Box, one of the free VMs that Provalis suggested, but I didn't have any luck with that program either—I'm sure it would have worked just fine if I understood how to navigate through it, but since I had no clue, it turned into something else I needed to learn and I didn't want to invest the extra time it would have required me to do so. If I hadn't committed to writing this review these initial challenges would have eliminated my interest with learning anything more about QDA Miner 4.1. I did, however, commit to writing this review, so rather than running for the hills; I retrieved my old laptop and attempted to install QDA Miner on that good ol' machine. Oh but wait, silly me! I must have forgot that I had a Mac now because my old laptop had blue screened on me one too many times! I'll spare you from the extra details on that, but it's important to note that I did stumble upon several discouraging and time-consuming roadblocks prior to even getting QDA Miner 4.1 to run.

Once I finally cracked the code and was able to get QDA Miner 4.1 running, I began my experience by looking through the tutorials provided under "support" on Provalis's website (<http://provalisresearch.com/resources/tutorials/>). There were 30 different QDA Miner specific video tutorials, which were divided into seven categories including: overview, getting started, data management tasks (working with cases and variables), codebook management and coding, computer assistance to coding, analysis of variables and coding, and exporting, auditing and reporting. I found it useful to have access to so many video tutorials, but it was a bit challenging to follow the instructions provided in text boxes and absorb the entire visual benefits of the tutorial—perhaps the inclusion of voice guided instructions rather than the text boxes provided could help enhance the learning experience for beginning users.

If video tutorials aren't your thing, there is also a 240-page user manual available for download (<http://provalisresearch.com/resources/manuals-2/>). If you're like me and still like to print and mark up your documents, I recommend using your student print card or stocking up on ink cause it's a big one. All joking aside though, it's cool that Provalis provides its users with a PDF option so at least you have the option to print or keep it green. Oh and don't worry if you're not the video tutorial or the reading type, because Provalis also offers on-site training, courses and workshops, web training, and webinars (<http://provalisresearch.com/resources/webinars/>); I'd definitely take advantage of those options!

Ok, I know I said I wasn't going to get all techy in this review, but the techy stuff is what gives QDA Miner 4.1 its value, so here is my translation of what QDA Miner 4.1 has to offer.

One of the most daunting tasks of conducting research is keeping every little bit of information organized so that it can be easily located when needed, so my second fantasy would be that I could find a CAQDAS that allowed me to store all of my research information from start to finish (including the literature collected for my lit review). From what I gather, QDA Miner 4.1 does allow me to store all of my data in one file via a .ppj file extension. I'm not

going to act like I know what a .ppj file extension is, but it seems to be the component that's responsible for information on QDA Miner 4.1 to be synced onto cloud-based storage like Dropbox, Skydrive, or Google Drive, which is a huge plus for anyone who has ever lost/broke a jump drive or have come face to face with the eternal blue screen!

With the variety of file types that are supported (MS Word, WordPerfect, RTF, PDF, Plain text, HTML, BMP, JPG, GIF, PNG, and WMF), it seems one would be able to store and code their entire project from start to finish on QDA MINER 4.1, but this is where I started getting a little confused. Between the user manual and the video tutorials, Provalis does a good job explaining "how to" import/export and or integrate such files into a project, but as a CAQDAS newbie, I never learned why (in which capacity) I would want to incorporate such files. For example, after learning that PDF files were supported I thought I'd be able to upload articles for my literature. To test out my assumption, I uploaded a few PDF articles, but when I opened them I noticed that the formatting had changed. One of the unique aspects of QDA Miner 4.1 is that it is programmed to automatically convert PDFs into rich text format, which allows the document to benefit from all of the analytical components QDA Miner 4.1 has to offer (p.14 of user manual). Based on this discovery, I would prefer to upload smaller sections of the PDF after gaining familiarity with the proper structure of the document to avoid producing any citation errors.

Once you've gotten all of your usable data imported and/or uploaded into a project file in QDA Miner 4.1, you can start using all of the other cool sounding features that allow you to code, track, and analyze your data. Since I can't offer the tech-specs here are some of the more fun sounding features QDA Miner 4.1 has to offer, and my translation of what each feature is used for: cluster extraction (allows for the coding of similarly worded sentences and/or paragraphs), code similarity analysis (expedites the process of finding and linking similar sections to previously coded information), hyperlinking (allows for code to be linked to other cases, files, or websites), geo-referencing and time tagging date (allows for the inclusion of location, location retrieval and coding (selects sentences containing specific dates and/or locations), code combination features (computes statistics for various code combinations), graphic highlighting (allows parts of or whole images to be coded), proximity plotting (depicted through the use of bar charts), multidimensional scaling plots (in 2D and 3D), and dendograms (tracks the frequencies of coded items).

Based on all of these intricate functions, it is clear that the designers of QDA Miner have created a CAQDAS that provides its users with out-of-the box innovative ways to analyze and showcase their findings. As a rookie user, however, I found myself rather confused regarding how to properly structure my project. What I understood after reading through the user manual (p. 7) is that each project is comprised of cases and variables, which in my mind translates similarly to a category-subcategory type of structure—most closely reflective of generating quantitative results. I wasn't able however, to find clarity on why I would want to structure my data in such a way if I were to run my data through a qualitative analysis (Blank, 2004).

Since QDA Miner is "considered by many to be the only true mixed-methods qualitative data analysis software on the market today" (<http://provalisresearch.com/products/qualitative-data-analysis-software/>), I'd attribute my confusion as being largely reflective of my novelty with this program and CAQDAS in general. Rookie or not, however, the bulk of my research will be conducted qualitatively; thus, not having clarity on how to properly structure my data to yield proper qualitative results is an area of concern that if not clarified, may dissuade me from using this program. Note: aside from QDA Miner 4.1, Provalis also offers a program called WordStat, which is said to provide analysis of "open-ended responses, interview or focus group transcripts" (<http://provalisresearch.com/products/content-analysis-software/>); I did not review this

software, so it's possible that WordStat might offer greater a qualitative focus. While this may be a far-fetched need, I think it would have been extremely helpful if either the tutorials and/or user manual provided examples utilizing various qualitative methodologies (phenomenological, case study, ethnography, narrative studies...) depicting how to properly structure projects to ensure appropriate qualitative results are yielded as per methodology (MacMillan & Koenig, 2004; Weitzman, 2000). Unfortunately, without this clarity I don't see the utility behind using QDA Miner 4.1 as resource for conducting mixed-method analysis.

Based on the challenges I experienced as a rookie CAQDAS user, it seems as though the structure and function of QDA Miner 4.1 was designed to reach/accommodate the needs of more experienced researchers who are conducting larger scaled studies and looking to gain quantitative results derived from responses to open-ended questions. Since I am neither a computer wiz nor a research prodigy (yet), the challenges, confusion, and suggestions I've shared were intended to provide readers with an idea of what QDA Miner 4.1 looks like through the eyes of a first-time CAQDAS user. It was also my intention, based on the previous accolades alluding to QDA Miner's superior programing, to use this review as a way of providing the developers with an alternative perspective, which if addressed, could lead to greater accessibility for researchers regardless of their level of proficiency.

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