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Engaging with Qualitative Data Analysis: The Metaphor of "Looking at Data like a Landscape to Be Explored"

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Abstract

"Looking at data like a landscape to be explored" is the metaphor used by Susanne Frieze in her new book entitled *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti* (2014). In it, Frieze successfully guides new and experienced researchers to use ATLAS.ti as a computer-assisted tool to engage in qualitative data analysis. The book transcends from being a dry reading to become a companion for those who are living the journey of using different sources of data, mapping them and then integrated them into their analysis.

Keywords

Qualitative Data Analysis, ATLAS.ti, Qualitative Research, Computer Assisted Tool

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Engaging with Qualitative Data Analysis: The Metaphor of “Looking at Data like a Landscape to Be Explored”

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*“Looking at data like a landscape to be explored” is the metaphor used by Susanne Friese in her new book entitled *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti* (2014). In it, Friese successfully guides new and experienced researchers to use ATLAS.ti as a computer-assisted tool to engage in qualitative data analysis. The book transcends from being a dry reading to become a companion for those who are living the journey of using different sources of data, mapping them and then integrated them into their analysis. Key Words: Qualitative Data Analysis, ATLAS.ti, Qualitative Research, Computer Assisted Tool*

As a user of computer assisted software, I was very excited to read this book after being distant from ATLAS.ti for about three years. I was curious about both the innovations in the software and, most importantly, whether Susan Friese’s book, *Qualitative Data Analysis with ATLAS.ti* (2014) and accompanying website (<https://study.sagepub.com/friese2e>) could be my companion on this journey. The book does an excellent job in engaging the reader to explore the use of the software. It acts as a tour guide in which the author creates a different metaphor for qualitative data analysis and invites readers to enjoy the research journey. After reading it I am clear now that this is my new companion for that journey.

Susanne Friese’s work in the area of computer software for qualitative data analysis began in 1992 when she was introduced to Computer-Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) at Qualis Research in the USA. She then continued working with CAQDAS in England, specifically using Ethnograph and NUD*IST and subsequently she developed her expertise on MAXQDA and ATLAS.ti. Her knowledge and expertise have been acquired throughout diverse experiences with the software as a user, educator, researcher, mentor and consultant in different countries and universities working on diverse projects and with students at different levels. It is evident throughout this very illustrative and useful guide that Friese’s knowledge of ATLAS.ti is outstanding.

The book’s introductory chapter begins with a succinct description of CAQDAS as the umbrella genre of software of which ATLAS.ti belongs. Here Friese clearly explains the benefits of using computer software to effectively help the management and manipulation of data that facilitate the researcher to perform a methodological, systematic and thorough data analysis. Importantly, she also focuses on the issue that software can never substitute for the critical work researcher need to do in making meaning of his or her data. As Bazeley and Jackson (2013) affirm, “the use of a computer for qualitative analysis can contribute to a more rigorous analysis...computer software cannot turn sloppy work into sound interpretations, nor compensate for limited interpretative capacity by the researcher. As much as ‘poor workman cannot blame his tools’, good tools cannot make up for poor workmanship” (p. 3). Thus, this book covers a gap in the literature on how to use CAQDAS tools to help you in undertaking an analysis of qualitative data (Friese, 2014).

Before moving into the description, functions and use of ATLAS.ti, Friese dedicates chapters one and two to the process of data analysis, and an overall review of ATLAS.ti. These

two chapters provide the picture on how to do data analysis with ATLAS.ti. For instance, chapter one offers a simple approach to qualitative data analysis that includes Noticing, Collecting, and Thinking (NCT; Friese, 2014, p. 12). This chapter clearly maps the journey of data analysis and links each step with the ATLAS.ti functions and provides reference to the specific chapter that details each function. Chapter two describes the software including its main functions and tools and introduces some terms that are specific for ATLAS.ti. This chapter is very helpful in presenting the overall picture of the software and familiarizes the researcher with its different objects, functions and tools. Then, progressively, chapter three acts as an interface between the conceptualization and methodology of qualitative data analysis and the use of ATLAS.ti that helps the researcher to initiate the journey of data analysis. It also helps us to start thinking on our research project and data. In this way it works as a technical transition between creating your research project and using specific tools of the software. The reminding four chapters provide the technical guidance on how to use ATLAS.ti functions and tools. These chapters provide step-by-step instructions on how to manipulate the data such as text retrieval; text base management; coding and retrieval; code-based theory building; and conceptual-network building.

Friese's twenty-two-years of experience are evident in the enormous volume of instructional material, practical examples, tips, discussions and warnings that she includes throughout the book. She takes her readers through the ATLAS.ti data analysis journey in a step-by-step approach that provides practical hands-on 'skills training' sessions. These sessions are introduced at the beginning of each chapter. The training is well supported with practical exercises and examples, screenshots showing each stage of the analysis, and a companion website containing online tutorials and data sets. The book also has been supplemented with further information on data and project management (editing documents, merging projects and creating backups), as well as strategies for overcoming troubles when working with the software. Along with the companion website (<https://study.sagepub.com/friese2e>), these resources constitute important pedagogical tools. In this regard, the book could be enormously helpful in the facilitation of learning and research training in qualitative data analysis.

Written with great clarity, the book will appeal to new beginners, intermediate and knowledgeable researchers. It provides beginners with the basics of CAQDAS as well as step-by-step instructions on how to do qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti. For intermediate users like myself, the book provides useful tools to integrate different sources and types of data such as texts, audio, videos, pictures and digital links. More experienced users will appreciate her insights on new features of ATLAS.ti as well as information on how to maximise the various tools in more sophisticated research projects. Moreover, Friese offers a range of possibilities to diverse types of learners. For example, those who need to have a clear understanding of the conceptual and methodological context before starting hands-on research to those who likes to jump right in and play around to resolve problems and questions as they emerge during the experience. The design of the book facilitates the learning process of both types of learners by combining a clear explanation of each function, images of the computer screen lay-outs, list of instruction and exercises.

I predict that Susanne Friese's Qualitative data analysis with ATLAS.ti, along with the companion website and other educational resources, will help novice and experienced researchers alike to take the journey of data analysis using ATLAS.ti and will strengthen the use of software to maximize researchers' experience. Although ATLAS.ti is one of a number of CAQDAS from which researchers can select to adopt for their research project, this book could be used as a companion that offers diverse options to manage project and carry out qualitative data analysis.

References

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Author Note

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