Chapter 10

Considering Abductive Thematic Network Analysis with ATLAS–ti 6.2

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ABSTRACT

Social research carried out through the use of new media technologies can generate large volumes of qualitative data. A systematic and rigorous approach is therefore important in analysing large volumes of qualitative data. Computer-aided qualitative data analysis programmes—such as Atlas-ti 6.2—have managed to facilitate the process of data analysis, to some extent. However, researchers remain central in designing and deciding how the qualitative data gathered as evidence from the field are to be analysed, interpreted, and presented. Within this context, this chapter aims to consider Abductive Thematic Network Analysis (ATNA) with Atlas-ti 6.2 as a systematic way of carrying out qualitative data analysis. A data set from a study on Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health is used as an example for facilitating the explanation on the steps in carrying out, and for providing an illustration of the outcome of, ATNA. The objectives of this chapter are to make a brief presentation of abductive approach to social research, describe ATNA, and demonstrate the techniques for such an analysis using Atlas-ti 6.2. The chapter concludes that ATNA can be a useful systematic way to proceed with qualitative data analysis that can be facilitated by the use of Atlas-ti 6.2.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-3918-8.ch010
INTRODUCTION

Social research allows social scientists to gain knowledge on social phenomena from various different perspectives. By looking at social phenomena from different angles and by using various different methodologies, social scientists are therefore expected to provide possible logico-empirical explanations on various types of reasoning. Thus, in trying to understand and explain social realities related to various social phenomena, social researchers embrace different epistemological stands, which are basically different ways and perspectives on the science of knowing. In this way, social research becomes diverse, complex, challenging and more interesting.

In particular qualitative and quantitative methods have been regarded as emerging from two different paradigms. Quantitative methods emerge from a positivist/realist paradigm (Bryman, 2007). The positivist approach is based on an ontological stance (how we can know), which assumes that truths can be explained and predicted; and holds an epistemological belief in objectivity guided by the quantitative methodology (Lee, 1992). Qualitative methods emerge from the constructivist/interpretive traditions (Silverman, 2000). Constructivist traditions are based on the belief that humans create meanings that can be scientifically studied, understood and explained through qualitative inquiries (Silverman, 2000). In qualitative method, researchers therefore tend to espouse a constructivist ontological view of the world, where ‘reality’ on and about social phenomena is believed to be socially and discursively constructed (Lee, 2011). For qualitative researchers ‘reality’ is constructed by means of conceptual systems that provide understanding to ‘meanings’ regarding social phenomena (Robson, 2002). In this sense, qualitative method has long been recognised as having its own specificity and uniqueness in making important contributions to the understanding of social phenomena (Newman et al, 2006).

A number of researchers have argued in the past that positivist and constructivist antologies are irreconcilable (Cutchik, 2001). Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2005) argue that this polarization of realist and constructivist paradigms has promoted ‘purists’ researchers, who restrict themselves exclusively either to quantitative or to qualitative research methods. Recently, there has been the development of the “third methodological movement” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007, p. 13), which promotes the combination of qualitative with quantitative methods within social research. Those who promote this approach are pragmatists who argue against a false dichotomy between the qualitative and quantitative research paradigms and advocate for the efficient use of both approaches (Cameron, 2009). Morgan (2007: 48) advocates for a pragmatic approach also “as a way to redirect our attention to methodological rather than metaphysical concerns”.

Within qualitative method the emphasis in data analysis is on the process and in-depth understanding of meanings and interpretations regarding the social phenomena that are being studied. Qualitative methods therefore aim to describe social phenomena through the use of rich contextual data (Power, 2002). However, Cupchick (2001: 9) argues that qualitative method is not about access to the ‘meaning’ of individual events, texts, and so on, but rather a rich and scientific description of “events or episodes in which the phenomenon in question is well represented.”

In qualitative research one of the main challenges is the analysis and interpretation of the data so as to provide a scientific explanation regarding the social phenomena being studied (Pope, Ziebland & Mays, 2000). In particular, qualitative data analysis requires a range of knowledge, skills and techniques for sorting, organising and indexing qualitative data, which can be in the form of text, image, audio, video and so on (Manson, 1996). Analysing qualitative data can be a difficult and complex process, especially when a large volume