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Reflecting on CAQDAS and Ethics

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Reflecting on CAQDAS and Ethics

Abstract

As the use of Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) becomes recurrent in qualitative research, researchers who use this methodological approach need to consider how ethical issues present themselves when we use these types of tools. In this introductory text to the Special Issue of *The Qualitative Report,* we identify and discuss some of the ethical aspects that we believe are interconnected with CAQDAS. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the reflection on these aspects and the definition of a praxis regarding ethical procedures when using a CAQDAS.

Keywords

Ethics, CAQDAS, Qualitative Research, Mixed Methods Research

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Abstract

As the use of Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) becomes recurrent in qualitative research, researchers who use this methodological approach need to consider how ethical issues present themselves when we use these types of tools. In this introductory text to the Special Issue of *The Qualitative Report,* we identify and discuss some of the ethical aspects that we believe are interconnected with CAQDAS. By doing so, we hope to contribute to the reflection on these aspects and the definition of a praxis regarding ethical procedures when using a CAQDAS.

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Introduction

The **World Conference on Qualitative Research** (WCQR) presents itself as a forum for a very polysemic research area. It covers different application fields (Health, Education, Social Science and Engineering and Technology) and themes (e.g., Rationale and Paradigms of Qualitative Research, Qualitative and Mixed Methods Research, Qualitative Analysis with Support of Specific Software). In this introduction to the Special Issue of *The Qualitative Report*, we consider the diversity of research featured at this international forum and reflect on an element whose presence is becoming more and more evident at each WCQR edition – the use of Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). We specifically consider Ethics in relation with CAQDAS, as we continue a reflection that we started in Costa and Moreira (2019) in this same journal.

The emergence of CAQDAS packages has happened alongside the identification of the advantages and disadvantages of using these tools (Costa & Amado, 2018; Minayo & Costa, 2019). The use of specific tools, such as for the analysis of qualitative data, is something that some consider almost unavoidable today (Costa, 2016; Lage & Godoy, 2008; Spannagel, Glaser-Zukuda, & Schroeder, 2005), despite some researchers remaining unfamiliar with these tools and its usefulness to qualitative and mixed methods research (Silver, 2018). Moreover, we consider that CAQDAS in general are becoming a fully integrated component of qualitative and mixed methods research projects.

The increasing use of CAQDAS has shed light on a literature gap, namely, ethics in the use of technologies, and issues or dilemmas particular to the use of CAQDAS in research, "as we attempt to engage in ethical research practices" (Spickard-Prettyman & Jackson, 2006, para. 11). Ingleby (2012) states that "ethics concern right and wrong, good and bad" (p. 51) and "ethical considerations will arise from the very nature of the particular research being pursued at the time: situation determines behaviour" (p. 61). In this text we briefly present and reflect on some ethical issues we have encountered in our research and teaching with CAQDAS.

Did I really use it?

The increasing use and reference of CAQDAS in published research may, to some extent, build a pressure on researchers to inform the audience about the CAQDAS used in the study, «even though she / he did not use any of them" (Costa & Moreira, 2019, p. 2). This may be associated with the notion that software will automatically enhance the quality of a research (Spickard-Prettyman & Jackson, 2006). We agree with Prettyman and Jackson that this idea is not accurate, particularly if CAQDAS is mistaken with methodology, something that often happens with novice researchers, which we believe signals the (still) existing fragilities on the training of qualitative methodologies.

This is handy, isn't it?

Qualitative researchers are particularly sensitive to trustworthiness and transparency in their research. This requires that the research progress is kept open, transparent and receptive to criticism and suggestions, to allow the natural "blindness" of those who get too caught up in a study to be clarified by other perspectives and points of view, giving substance to the study and enriching it. In this sense, most CAQDAS enable researchers to keep a research journal and a project log, registering the researcher's work as it unfolds and turning it accessible to audit. They also allow aggregating different types of information and data, turning the research project easily portable, namely, in a hard disk or a computer. Nonetheless, we must acknowledge that this easy access enabled by CAQDAS (and which users advocate as an advantage), as it turns the data "easier to send, share, and copy (…) also [makes it] easier to access for those who do not officially have permission to see files and data" (Spickard-Prettyman & Jackson, 2006, para. 19), namely if computer is stollen or lost. One must also discuss if the potential level of participants' exposure may be different according to the data format - audio, image, text (Spickard-Prettyman & Jackson, 2006).[1] And how these issues play when our CAQDAS is web based, and what strategies are developers adopting to make sure our research data does not fall in to the wrong hands. These are big issues, which researchers need to reflect upon.

Is my data safe?

We believe researchers using CAQDAS will all agree that these tools may enhance the opportunity for participant's exposure. As Spickard-Prettyman and Jackson, (2006) say, "It is no longer about abstracted pieces of data to support claims, rather it is becoming increasingly easy to find where and from whom that data came" (para. 15) The researcher needs to be particularly careful with the fact that these tools help associate (personal) content data with characterization data. This is useful when collecting and analyzing data, but it comes with risk.

In the last five to six years one of the authors of this paper has several times worked as an evaluator of master's theses that presented excerpts of data transcriptions, easily obtained with any software package, where the names of people and organizations were mentioned. In the same theses, the methodological section informed the reader that anonymity and, frequently, confidentiality was assured to participants. In these situations, the author asked the researchers to review or delete the material that called into question the consent negotiated with the research participants, something particularly important, given that these works become public and freely accessed. However, the author cannot say with certainty that all researchers

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[1] Researcher needs to anonymize the names of individuals and institutions, and blur faces in videos and images (Dooly, Moore, & Vallejo, 2017).

have accepted this request, nor that this (i.e., presenting names) has not happened in other works. What we have tried to do in our practice, in an attempt to reduce the possibility of this happening, is to make our students aware of the importance of knowing the meaning of confidentiality and anonymity (in this respect, the reader may see Tolich and Tumilty (2020), in this volume).

Are we collaborating or is this sharing too much?

Collaborative research (Costa, 2016; Costa & Costa, 2017; Costa, Souza, & Souza, 2016) mediated by technologies may involve online sharing and the simultaneous work on data, in order to turn the analysis reliable. This collaborative work is not without dangers, regarding ethical issues (Costa & Moreira, 2019). Consider this episode, that one of the authors of this text observed. While talking to a researcher in their first stages of working with a CAQDAS, they told the author that, in order to decide if they should use this specific software package, a colleague who was using the software shared their license with the researcher, so that they could first explore the software features. As this does seems to be an altruistic act, especially when talking of paid software, it in fact, does not comply with the ethical standards that researchers should and must observe.

Final remarks

From our experience, we have learned that a less informed ethical practice in research is naturally transported to the use of a CAQDAS. This requires a high level of scrutiny, which must be assumed by peers and, in the case with junior researchers, foremost by supervisors, as the research is developed. In the case of specific qualitative data analysis software (for example webQDA, NVivo, MaxQDA, Atlas.ti, Dedoose), it would be possible to list a set of principles that would begin with the organization and importing of the data, then their interpretative and descriptive codification, followed by questioning the data, up to the exporting of results and their written "exhibition." These principles could set the boundaries or define an ethics in the use of software, referring to any research activity that tackles what is right or wrong, good or bad, moral or immoral (Stahl, Eden, Jirotka, & Coeckelbergh, 2014) as far as data analysis supported by software is concerned (Moreira & Costa, 2019). We strongly advocate for researchers to extend on the reflections we present here as they use CAQDAS while conducting research, informing the research community in a way that we may identify in a clear manner what constitutes good ethical practices when using CAQDAS.

The 4th World Conference on Qualitative Research (WCQR2019) took place in Oporto, Portugal, October 16th to 18th 2019. In this special issue, we publish eight articles, with the first two pieces coming from invited speakers at the event - a commentary by Rosalind Edwards, Helen Moewaka Barnes, Deborah McGregor and Tula Brannelly (2020), "Supporting Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Research Partnerships," and a text by Martin Tolich and Emma Tumilty (2020), "Practicing Ethics and Ethics Praxis." These two texts refer to the nature of the qualitative researcher's work, considering its origins, culture, and practices. What better way to start a qualitative research special issue?

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