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Commentary on ‘Illumination with a Dim Bulb?’

By Michael J. White, Maya Judd, and Simone Poliandri

By Graham R Gibbs

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I will focus here on the core example White, Judd and Poliandri discuss, namely the counts arising from a matrix search in NVivo using three nodes and an attribute¹. For me, it demonstrates some of the differences in logic between a typical quantitative approach and a typical qualitative one, which must be taken into account in mixed methods research.

The initial output from NVivo is shown in Table 3. The rows represent coding done to three sub-nodes, “Supports TMF”, “Supports SDT” and “Supports Both”. Reading between the lines it looks as if the authors started by identifying a section of the interview where respondents talked about “women’s considerations concerning the decision to have a first child” and then within that text identified some subtypes of answer. I think the authors treated this as if it were the categorization of answers to an open-ended question on a questionnaire. Such subcategories may be treated as mutually exclusive so that each case has just one, unique value. But, in some studies researchers might allow multiple answers and in that case there would be either one variable for each possible answer or a variable for each answer and each possible combination of answers. What we have in Table 3 is a mixture of the last two. There are two possible answers, so there need to be three nodes.

However, in unstructured interviews it is entirely possible to find text in the passage about “women’s considerations concerning the decision to have a first child” which cannot be coded with any of the three sub-nodes *and/or* to find text elsewhere in the interview that can be coded at one or more of the sub-nodes. Indeed, as becomes clear later in the paper, such considerations were not just expressed in one place, but occurred at different points in the interview. So, in addition to the possibility that some text is coded as “Supports Both” where the respondent expresses support for both theories *in the same passage*, there might also be cases where some text in one place is coded as “Supports TMF” and text in another place as “Supports SDT” or “Supports Both”. In which case this respondent would also be someone who supports both theories.

With these differences in coding approach it is not surprising, as the authors rightly suggest, that the output in Table 3 from NVivo does not tell us anything about the denominator/base numbers, so further work is needed to see this. White, Judd and Poliandri do this by exporting data to a statistical program, and in some cases this may be the easiest approach, but, in fact, the work can be done

¹ Actually it looks, judging by the column heading in Table 3, as if the authors have used two more nodes for the columns rather than two values of an attribute. Either is fine as long as the coding is done comprehensively.

in NVivo using what Richards (1999) calls, ‘coding on’. This is doing a query in NVivo and then assigning the resulting retrieved text to a new node (or an existing one if appropriate). By doing queries based on Boolean combinations of nodes (AND and NOT) and the non-Boolean operator CO-OCCURENCE, it is possible to create new codes that when used in a matrix search and showing the number of sources coded will produce the figures in Table 5.

Table 5 is initially surprising. It is clear that by including respondents who mention both considerations anywhere in the interview as “Supports Both” the numbers in these categories have gone up from 11 and 19 to 16 and 33 for parity 1 and 0 respectively. But why the numbers in the other categories have gone down is more of a mystery. I can only assume that in Table 5 the number of Parity 0 who “Supports TMT” has gone down from 42 to 21 because all those who also had text coded as “Supports SDT” or “Supports Both” somewhere else in their interview have been excluded.

The following table shows the different allocations for Tables 3 and 5. X indicates the case (source document) has some text that is coded with this node at some place.

Sup. TMF	Sup. SDT	Sup. Both	Table 3	Table 5
x			Sup. TMF	Sup. TMF
	x		Sup. SDT	Sup. SDT
x	x		Sup. TMF, Sup. SDT	Sup. Both
x	x	x	Sup. TMF, Sup. SDT, Sup. Both	Sup. Both
	x	x	Sup. SDT, Sup. Both	Sup. Both
		x	Sup. Both	Sup. Both
x		x	Sup. TMF, Sup. Both	Sup. Both
			Missing	Supports neither

What is missing from this table and from the authors’ account is any mention of respondents’ considerations concerning the decision to have a first child that could not be coded as “Supports TMF” or “Supports SDT”. This highlights a second difference in the logics of qualitative and quantitative approaches, which is the ability to be exploratory, something that is rather underplayed in the authors’ discussion of sampling. A key strength of the qualitative approach, especially as promoted by supporters of grounded theory, is that the process of coding can discover new ideas, codes or concepts (e.g. Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the case of this study it might be women’s discussion that fits in neither with TMT nor SDT. This is a case of not supporting either, what the authors have labeled as missing, but it is in fact a positive giving of reasons.

I certainly agree with White, Judd and Poliandri’s conclusion that there is scope for a lot more use of QDAS’s functions to undertake mixed methods research. The conversion of qualitative coding into quantitative variables is clearly one of them, but it needs to be done with a great deal of care to take account of the different logics of coding that are used.

References

- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Richards, L. (1999). *Using NVivo in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.