The Life Of An ATLAS.ti Quotation

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Sort And Sift, Think And Shift Your Way To Stronger QDA

When people ask me why I like to use ATLAS.ti in my own qualitative research work, my response is always, "The power of the quotation." Quotations are a tremendous QDA resource because they invite discrete interaction with text or multimedia segments in a way that's only available in ATLAS.ti.

This tool often goes unnoticed by ATLAS.ti users, as the program automatically creates quotations when you code a segment of a primary document (PD). Quotations take you far beyond coding – they can help you understand the full context of each individual data document before you begin to consider categories that cut across your entire project. The more you know about quotations, the more you'll know about your data.

Work with quotations is a core component of a QDA method, "Sort and Sift, Think and Shift: Multidimensional Qualitative Analysis," that I developed along with a team of consultants at ResearchTalk Inc. Our philosophy is to start with an open inventory of text as a means of putting your preconceived ideas aside to see what is in the data.

I use examples from a study of life satisfaction to show the powerful role quotations play in qualitative analysis.

Building An Inventory Of Quotations

Quotations emerge from your project's primary documents. You select a section of text and choose to mark it as a free quotation, code it, and/or link it to a memo.

We begin to create an inventory of what is in our data by simulating work we used to do with a highlight pen on a paper document. We find a segment of text that interests us and we use our mouse to highlight it.
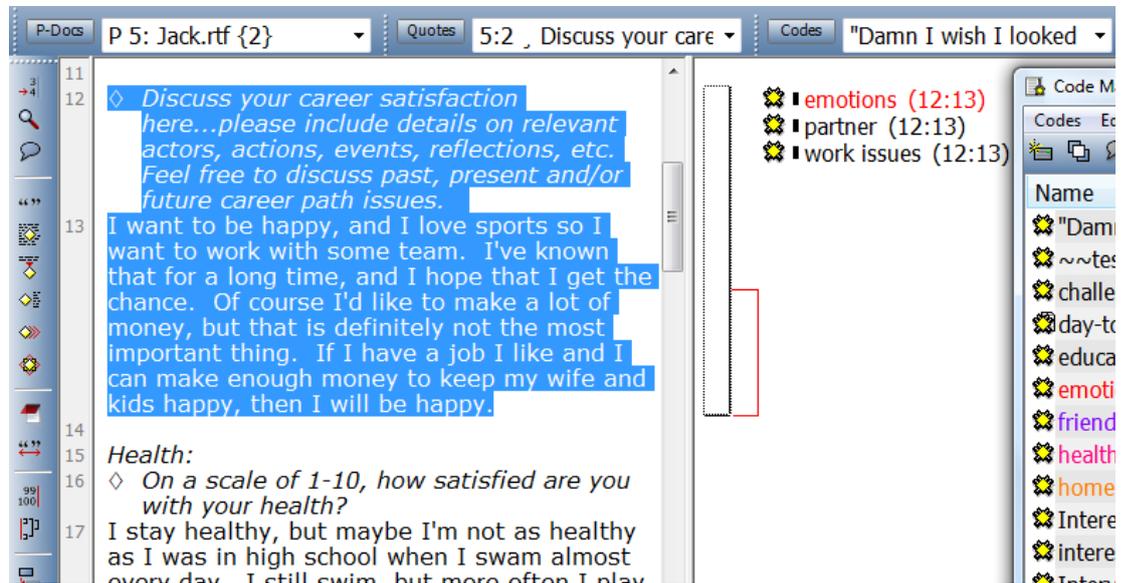

After you right-click on a highlighted section of text to create a free quotation, ATLAS.ti places a bracket next to that section and gives it a number, which appears next to the quote name. The number before the colon matches the PD number where this quotation originates. The number after the colon reflects the order of this quote relevant to all others created in the project. Here, the quote is the first we created while reviewing this document.

You can make quotations from any type of primary document assigned to your HU: text, multimedia, and even PDF files with the new ATLAS.ti 6.0.

This screenshot shows a quotation created from a video file. Notice that the rename function, discussed in more detail later in this article, is chosen within the quotation window. Using the "Sort and Sift" method, you create a list of renamed quotations that becomes an inventory list to review as you segue to later phases of analysis.

After you've marked a few quotations, you can use the quotation manager to see a complete list of quotations you created within a specific PD. The list pictured here shows how one of the respondents in our project enjoys success in her music career but is still looking for her "soul-mate."

Reviewing this list provides a holistic picture of what is discussed in the PD and helps you understand the context of each quotation within the PD.
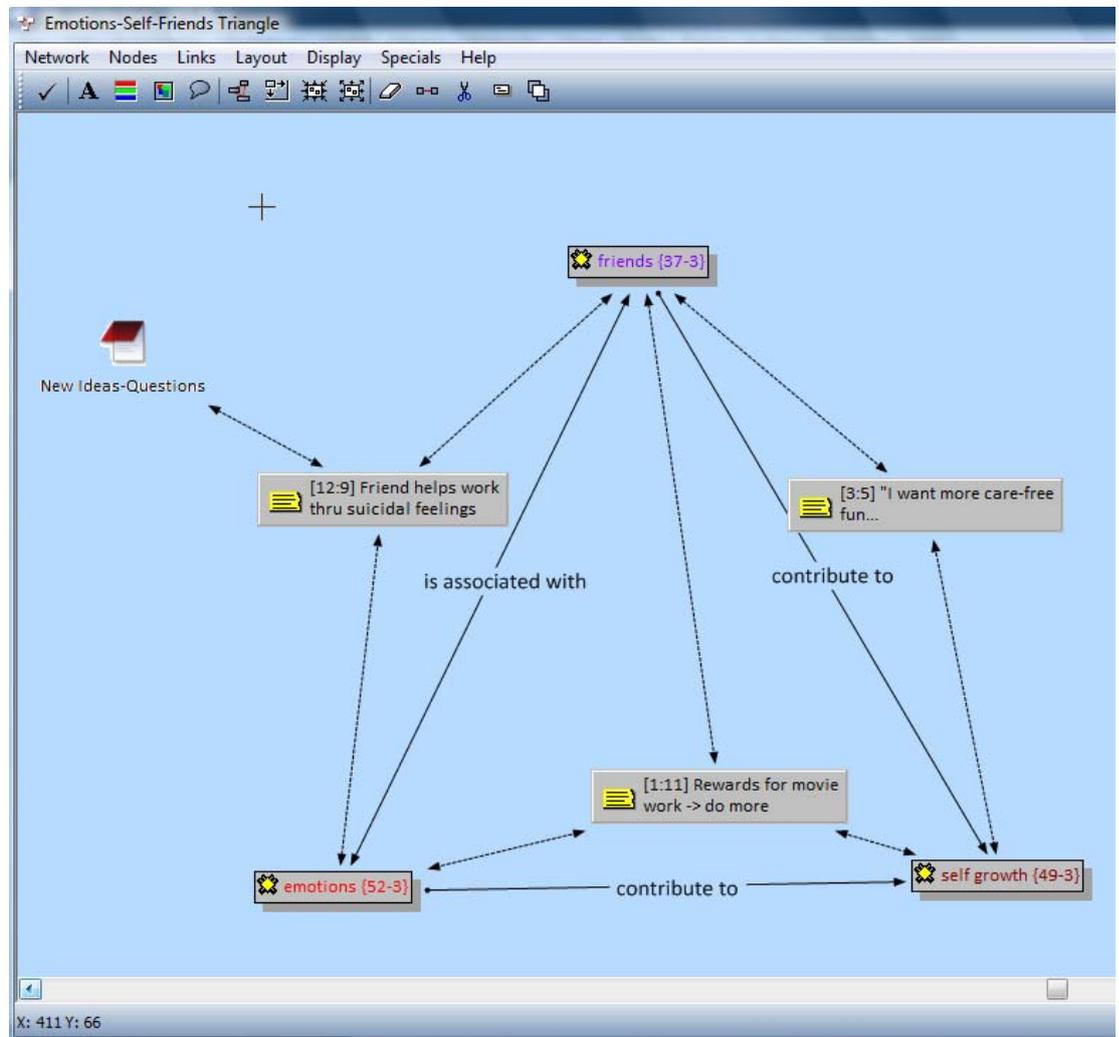
Linking Quotations To Codes And More

You can link a quotation that you created via the free quotation function to other ATLAS.ti objects like a code or a memo. Alternatively, when you start with a section of text that is not a quotation and drag it into a network diagram, code it, or link it to a memo, ATLAS.ti will automatically make that section into a quotation. You can write a comment for each of these quotations and/or rename them after they are created.

Choose your code color: ATLAS.ti 6.0 allows you to assign colors to your codes. In this example, we use red for the code "emotions" so that we can easily spot that code every time it appears in the margin area.

Quotations in Networks: You can add another dimension to your network diagrams by using quotations as well as codes and memos. Below, we include key quotations, which we have renamed, to show the strongest examples relevant to the connections between three key codes in a diagram we call our "emotions-self-friends" triangle.
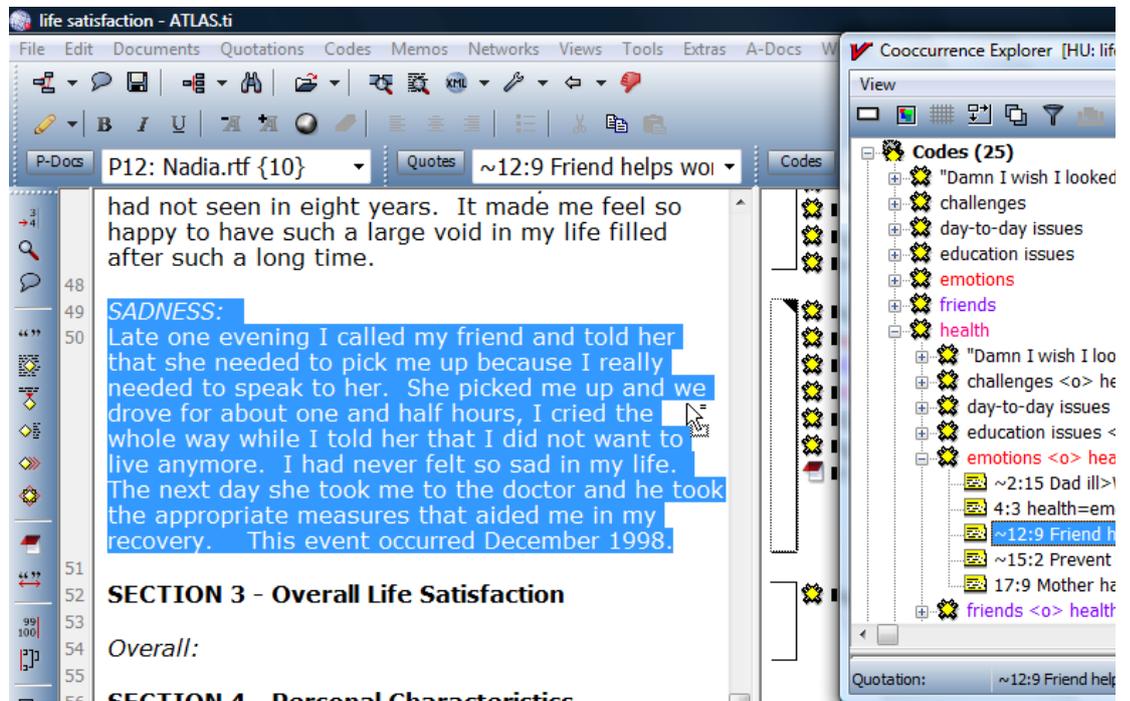
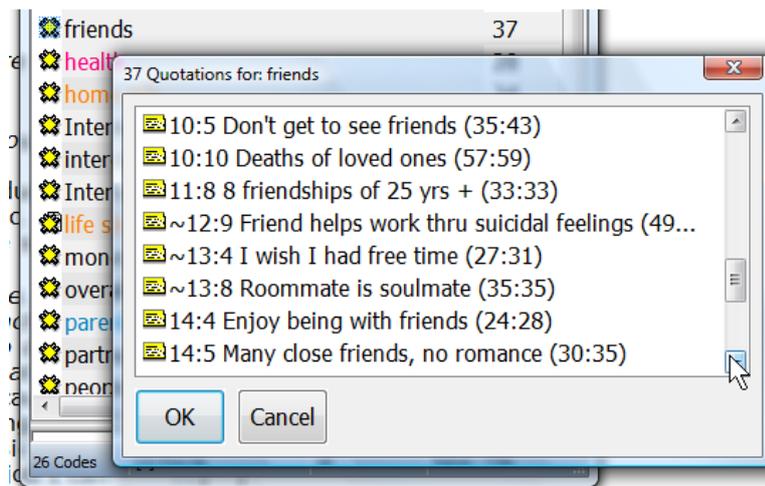Useful functionality of renamed quotations within analytic tools

Taking full advantage of the various properties you can assign to ATLAS.ti quotations helps you as you move to later phases of analysis.

Naming Your Quotations: The process of naming quotations, and then reviewing those names during code review and exploration of cooccurrence, brings continuity and fluidity to your QDA. Start simply by right-clicking on a quotation bracket and selecting rename. Right-click again and select edit comment. Write notes about the selected quotation within the comment.

Renamed quotations help give us a feel for what we might learn from the codes even before we begin to read each text segment coded to a category. A review of renamed quotations that were assigned to the code "friends" reveals a wide range of serious topics, like death and suicide, that are discussed along with friendship.

Renamed quotations also enhance our work within the cooccurrence explorer. Here, we're using the "codes" section of the cooccurrence explorer to look at sections of text we coded to "emotions" and "health." The code names in the window to the right show how emotions and health evoke discussion of serious illness (2:15); philosophies on health (4:3); and discussions of suicide (12:9).

Conclusion: Quote And Explore

ATLAS.ti was designed with the philosophy that any statement, from any document, can be as important as any other item in your project. It's not uncommon for a single statement to turn your attention in new directions. Name your quotations, write comments on them, and include them in network diagrams. You might be pleasantly surprised at how much more deeply you can explore the processes that drive the behaviors and attitudes you are studying.