

Operant Subjectivity

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**Situating William Stephenson's
Psychoanalysis and Q-Method:
A Scientific Model for
Psychoanalytic Doctrine**

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In the Preface to this unpublished book-length manuscript, Stephenson suggests that it was probably written in 1953 when he was a visiting professor at the University of Washington, in Seattle, Washington.¹ He notes that he “rediscovered” the manuscript in 1979 but chose not to make any changes to the text. He did, however, insert some illuminating textual commentaries as to how he viewed the contents of the manuscript some 25 years later.

In one of these commentaries, he suggests that the manuscript's purpose “was to advance subjective science, by bringing self-reference into psychoanalysis. At that time the concept of ‘self’ was little in evidence in psychoanalytic thinking. Hartman was to say later (1964) that there was nothing against the concept in principle, but that psychoanalysis dealt with self-deception – one might say wholly so” (Stephenson, 1954/1979, p. 236)

Stephenson clearly regarded this book as more important than the *Study of Behavior: Q-Technique and its Methodology* (Stephenson, 1953). In a letter to David Shakow, he wrote: “It is more fundamental than the first, which I always regarded as merely introductory: It goes into the logic of abduction, uses Q to illustrate the logic, and uses psychoanalytic doctrine as content” (Stephenson, 1957, p. 1).

The manuscript was submitted to the University of Chicago Press. It was sent by the Press for assessment by a New York psychoanalyst, Harold Pinkney. Pinkney recommended publication provided that there was some fairly extensive re-working of the manuscript following the collection of additional case material. It is clear that the University of Chicago Press was keen to publish the work. Initially, Stephenson was happy to go along with the proposed revisions, all the more so as in early 1955 he had spent two months as a visiting consultant at the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH) in Bethesda, Maryland. There he had met and befriended the first director of the

¹ This significance of this manuscript is discussed in William Stephenson's “Ten Pillars of Q Methodological Wisdom”, a review of his unpublished work presented in a keynote address to the first Summer Institute for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity in July 1985. All but two of the manuscripts discussed by Stephenson were donated by him to what was then known as the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection of the University of Missouri-Columbia, Ellis Library. The Collection was subsequently relocated to the State Historical Society of Missouri, Research Center-Columbia, Columbia, Mo. This manuscript, together with *Intimations of Self*, was withheld as Stephenson had hoped to undertake revisions before their release to the Library.

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Psychological Laboratory, David Shakow, a distinguished researcher on schizophrenia, widely credited as the architect of the professional role of the clinical psychologist. Stephenson clearly had enjoyed working there and, as he had by this time virtually given up any hope that he would get tenure at the University of Chicago, he began contemplating the possibility of a permanent research appointment at NIMH.

In a letter to his wife, Maime, he wrote: “But . . . conditions have become quite intolerable, and I can’t stand it any longer. We must move to somewhere where conditions are more stable (if we can, if we can, if we can. . . . I haven’t the slightest feeling of hope that the university will do a thing – I’ve just wiped out another phase of my life, as I had to at Oxford. So let’s start up again” (Stephenson, 1955a).

And so it was that on 24 May 1955 Stephenson wrote to the Chief of the Psychological Laboratory, David Shakow:

I know that you will not mind me writing to you in confidence about the situation here with reference to myself, and about steps I must now take for my future. It seems clear that the Chancellor here is not willing to give me tenure. . . . I am sure that the dept has done everything possible for me, as have others in the university, including Hughes, Riesman, and Kluver. I am naturally deeply disappointed, more especially because I seemed to fill a position of real use here – I have by far the largest number of students at work, and seemed to be serving the university well. The whole matter is now past, however, and I now want some very honest advice from someone like yourself.

I am now 53 years old, but feel at the height of any powers I have. I have had two severe disappointments in my academic life – at Oxford, and now here, I simply cannot make another mistake of the kind. (Stephenson, 1955b)

Shakow was evidently sympathetic to Stephenson’s request and a new post was established for Stephenson to serve as acting chief of a Section on Personality and its Deviations. An application was completed by Stephenson and references were submitted.² It is clear that this new post would have allowed Stephenson to collect the case-study material that was needed to complete the *Psychoanalysis and Q-Method* manuscript.³

Stephenson resigned from the University of Chicago in 1955 having failed to get tenure despite strenuous efforts to keep him in Chicago made on his behalf by some of his contemporaries – especially Carl Rogers, James Miller and David Riesman. In his reference on behalf of Stephenson for the Bethesda post, Rogers wrote:

² The request for the appointment stated that “if appointed to the . . . position Dr Stephenson would serve as Acting Chief of that Section with responsibility for formulating, organizing, developing and conducting a program of research on personality and its deviations, with emphasis on development of new techniques and improved methodology” (Shakow, 1955, p. 2). The post was in fact established as Chief, Section on Personality. The intention was that once Stephenson had received his final U.S. citizenship papers, he would be eligible for a post at that level and then be nominated for a permanent appointment to that vacancy.

³ I discuss this Bethesda episode and its significance in Good (2023).

I think that perhaps the best way of stating my evaluation of Stephenson as a psychologist in the field of personality and research methodology is to state my deep disappointment at the fact that he is leaving Chicago. . . Not only I, but the whole Psychology Department appealed on three separate occasions to the Central Administration for an appointment of Stephenson to a tenured position in our Department. I regard it as a case of tragically mistaken judgment, due to a variety of special circumstances, that the Administration did not comply with our request. (Rogers, 1955)

It must have come as a surprise to David Shakow, then, when Stephenson wrote to him on 21 August 1955 to let him know that he had accepted an offer of an appointment as director of research with Nowland & Co., a market research firm of industrial consultants in Greenwich, Connecticut. In his letter Stephenson wrote:

This, I feel will come as a shock and disappointment to you. But I really have no choice. I am really very hard-hit, both financially and emotionally, after the Chicago debacle. In the short period of ten or fifteen years of active academic life left to me, I have to provide not only for the family, but for retirement, starting almost from scratch again – for the third time in my life . . . I simply must get some financial resources, and these as soon as possible. The offer of this appointment, with salaries that may mount into the \$25,000 and more range, has simply focussed for me the difficulties of my situation, and offered a way out. (Stephenson, 1955c)

Sadly, the way out offered by the Connecticut appointment proved to be short-lived. Within two years an economic downturn impacted the market research industry and Stephenson was again looking for a secure job.⁴

It is interesting to ponder the counterfactual question of what might have happened to Stephenson and the future development of Q methodology had he accepted the Bethesda post. It does seem very likely that the psychoanalysis book would have been published and that Stephenson might well have remained at Bethesda, directing the Section on Personality. Even more significantly, it seems likely that he would have remained within the discipline of psychology. It is a moot point, however, as to whether there might not have been a further disruptive episode in his checkered academic career. The discipline of psychology was about to embrace computational and information-processing models of mind, models that were at odds with many of the assumptions of Q methodology.

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⁴ An account of how Stephenson managed to weather this financial storm and eventually secured a permanent and tenured position as a Distinguished Research Professor of Advertising in the School of Journalism, University of Missouri can be found in Good (2010).

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