

## Operant Subjectivity

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## Musical Preferences and Forms of Life

Taylor P. McKenzie  
Charleston, SC

Steven R. Brown  
Kent State University

**Abstract:** The musical preferences of elementary students and their teachers are examined as expressions of forms of life, or musical habitus, which are in keeping with occupational and other life experiences a decade later. Administration of a Q sample composed of names of singers and song titles resulted in three factors, one of which was bipolar: (A) Popular Music Lovers, who embrace top-40 music; (B) Adult Listeners, who gravitate to country and classic rock, and a bipolar group of young males, who prefer Rap and Heavy Metal; and (C) Musical Omnivores, who like a variety of music. Concluding comments speak to the irreducibility of forms of life and their amenability to examination via Q methodology.

### Introduction

According to Wittgenstein (1971), a child learns a language much in the same way that it learns to play a game, and the complex of words, the things that words refer to, and the actions into which they are all interwoven he referred to as a *language game* (p. 5). Language games are embedded in a society or culture, and so we cannot think of language being used without at the same time imagining a "form of life" (p. 8), which provides the social context within which meaning arises and connotations attach themselves to words and things. As Wittgenstein says, "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (p. 20), and its use is both constrained and permitted (by history and the immediacy of the situation), where permission also implies opportunities for language to evolve and be used in novel ways.

We are accustomed to thinking this way in Q methodology where the chameleon-like character of words is ever-present and has to be dealt with at the point of factor interpretation. In his naming of the Studebaker *Lark* automobile, for instance, Stephenson (1979, p. 644) recalled the emergence of two Q factors: The first (dominated by ordinary car owners) gave the name *Lark* a high score as a mark of appropriateness for a practical car designed for busy lives (as opposed to the ponderousness of Ford, Chevy, and Plymouth); the second factor (dominated by copywriters from advertising agencies) was bipolar, with snobbish names (e.g., *Baronet*, *Squire*) at one end being countered by modern ones (*Nova*, *Civia*, *Lark*) at the other. The

name *Lark* won out, carrying connotations of conventional acceptability (Factor 1) as well as novelty and anti-snobbishness (Factor 2).<sup>1</sup>

Forms of life extend to specialized situations, or to the “suburbs of our language” as Wittgenstein (1971, p. 8) expressed it. In this connection, Wittgenstein made reference to the symbolism of chemistry and the special notations of calculus, but it is easy to see how this would apply as well to Q methodology and its specialized vocabulary of concourse, factor loadings, operantcy, and the like, as well as to its statistical formulas and their applications. The Q-methodological language game, too, has a community that socializes entrants and provides formal training about the rules of the game, much as occurs in other sciences (Traweek, 1988). Nor is there reason to suppose that the line has to be drawn at words and mathematics, but that language games can extend to art, music, and dance to the extent that these endeavors express meanings and help define the boundary lines among diverse forms of life. The kind of music that is played in a high school hangout vs. a singles bar vs. an elegant nightclub vs. a concert hall is part and parcel of each form of life and goes hand in hand with similar differences in attire, conversation, and other gestures to constitute a *musical habitus* (Rimmer, 2010).

This study begins with differences in musical preference (primarily among elementary school children) and shows how these differences are an integral part of participants’ diverse forms of life, of which music is an expression. These preferences take the form of Q factors that are loosely conjoined with different social trajectories, many of which evolve into occupational and related conditions in the decade following the initial study.

### Contemporary Music Preferences

The P set for this study ( $n = 21$ ) consisted primarily of fifth graders in a village within a rural county near to a major urban area in the Midwestern United States. Also included were a half-dozen teachers and parents. Two-thirds of the participants were female. The Q sorts were administered by one of the fifth-graders, who also assembled the Q sample.<sup>2</sup>

The Q sample was structured in terms of three broad categories: popular, rock, and country. In the context of the year 2000, when the study was undertaken, examples of *popular* music included songs by Britney Spears, ‘N Sync, Ricky Martin, Christina Aguilera, Brandy, and Backstreet Boys, among others. The *rock* category included rap and hip-hop and was represented by performers such as Korn, Limp Bizkit, Aerosmith, Will Smith, and Kid Rock. Singers such as Tim McGraw, Garth Brooks, Shania Twain, and Reba McEntire comprised the *country* category. The entire Q sample is in the Appendix, but it could easily have been substituted by another (in fact, by many others) of comparable breadth since, as a limited number of studies have shown (e.g., Thomas & Baas, 1992–1993), the results of Q-methodological studies are no more dependent upon particular samples of statements than the results of R-methodological studies are dependent upon particular samples of respondents.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephenson (1979) attests to the extent to which forms of life both constrain and permit meanings when he notes that “The name *Lynn* is suitable for a toilet roll, and *Rub-O* for a household cleansing powder: but not *vice versa*” (p. 643).

<sup>2</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, it is essential to acknowledge that the fifth-grader who carried out this investigation was, in fact, the first author, who conceived of the study, assembled a structured Q sample, and administered the Q sorts before approaching the second author for help with the factor analysis.

Once factor analyzed (centroid with varimax rotation), the individual responses revealed three factors, one of which was bipolar – hence, four patterns of musical preference: Factors A, B+, B–, and C, as shown in Table 1. With the exception of one male with mixed loadings (participant no. 21), Factors A and C were defined solely by female students. Factor B+ was defined solely by adults (both male and female), Factor B– almost wholly by male students (one female respondent was significant for both A and B–). One of the participants associated with Factor A was a young female teacher who apparently identified with the musical preferences of the younger generation rather than the Factor B+ preferences of parents and older teachers.

**Table 1: Musical Preferences**

	Factors <sup>b</sup>		
	A	B	C
1	<b>79</b>	15	14
2	<b>78</b>	-23	11
<sup>a</sup> 3	<b>48</b>	17	06
4	<b>67</b>	<b>-49</b>	-20
5	14	-09	-30
6	<b>71</b>	07	-03
<sup>a</sup> 7	14	<b>66</b>	-38
8	22	-14	<b>80</b>
<sup>a</sup> 9	-20	<b>43</b>	-16
<sup>a</sup> 10	03	<b>77</b>	-05
11	-03	-14	<b>76</b>
12	<b>83</b>	-17	-06
13	08	-08	<b>82</b>
14	-06	19	-22
15	-36	<b>-46</b>	-03
16	10	<b>-58</b>	03
<sup>a</sup> 17	10	<b>83</b>	-01
18	<b>70</b>	-04	19
19	20	-20	<b>57</b>
20	13	<b>-68</b>	<b>42</b>
21	<b>64</b>	-13	<b>59</b>

<sup>a</sup>Adult participants <sup>b</sup>Loadings in boldface significant; decimals to two places omitted.

### Factor A: Popular Music Lovers

Every generation has its in-crowd whose members keep up with all the latest fads and fashions, including music. This is the “top 40” group that knows all the latest song lyrics and relevant facts about all the popular performers. In previous generations, these were the 45 rpm record-buyers; today, of course, they download songs onto MP3 players, iPods, and other devices. They also keep up with the latest lingo and fashions. At the time of this study, no songs were doing better on the pop charts than those that Factor A liked best:

*Like (+3, +2): Genie in a bottle/ Christina Aguilera... The hardest thing/ 98 Degrees... Larger than life/ Backstreet Boys... You drive me crazy/ Britney Spears... All star/ Smash Mouth... God must have spent a little more time on you/ 'N Sync... The boy is mine/ Brandy & Monica.*

*Dislike (-3, -2): Freak on a leash/ Korn... Faith/ Limp Bizkit... Nookie/ Limp Bizkit... I never knew lonely/ Vince Gill... Boot scootin' boogie/ Brooks & Dunn... Fancy/ Reba McIntire... Achy breaky heart/ Billy Ray Cyrus.*

As the dislike pole of Factor A shows, these participants are mainly interested in the top of the popular music charts and not in specialized genres such as punk, rap, or even country. These are “middle-of-the-road” listeners, as Mulder and associates (2007) refer to them: They are socially adjusted and popular, and they embrace popular music as a way to express their popularity as well as retain it. It is worth noting that of those students significantly associated with Factor A, several “hung out” with one another (but not with students associated with the other factors) during school and after-school activities; moreover, during the years following the study, the students defining Factor A (aside from two who moved away) graduated from college and were gainfully

employed in occupations connected to communication, one with a radio station that plays only popular rock music.

### **Factor B: Adult Listeners vs. Rap and Heavy Metal**

It is not clear whether the participants at the positive end of this bipolar factor (all of them parents or teachers) have clustered together because they are older or because they like golden-oldies and country music, which characterize the positive end of this preference pattern:

*Factor B+ Like (+3, +2): Shameless/ Garth Brooks... Fancy/ Reba McIntire... Jailhouse rock/ Elvis Presley... Don't take the girl/ Tim McGraw... Boot scootin' boogie/ Brooks & Dunn... Old time rock and roll/ Bob Seger... Strawberry wine/ Deana Carter.*

A more thorough sampling from the musical concourse might help clarify whether these individuals simply like older music that was popular when they were younger or that it is country music per se that is the attraction. In either case, these participants are unified in what they dislike, and it consists of the newer heavy metal (more particularly, *nu metal*), rap, and rock sounds that are warmly embraced by the male students that cluster at the negative pole of Factor B (see Table 1):

*Factor B+ Dislike (-3, -2), Factor B- Like (+3, +2): Cowboy/ Kid Rock... Bawitdaba/ Kid Rock... Freak on a leash/ Korn... Gettin' jiggy wit it/ Will Smith... Faith/ Limp Bizkit... Nookie/ Limp Bizkit... All star/ Smash Mouth.*

These scores reflect those songs enjoyed by the negative pole of Factor B, hence are the reverse of the scores shown in the Appendix. And, as the mirror opposite of Factor B+, these participants express a dislike for Garth Brooks, Reba McIntire, Tim McGraw, Elvis Presley, etc., although again it is not entirely clear whether this rejection is of country music or music perceived to be associated with the preceding generation.

When these interesting results initially emerged, the first thought was that the young males comprising Factor B- were in active opposition to the adult culture as represented by musical symbols such as Elvis Presley, Garth Brooks, Reba McIntire, Bob Seger, and others (hence their embrace of counter-culture figures like Korn and Limp Bizkit), and this inference was reinforced by a participant observer<sup>3</sup> who at the time testified to the "weirdness" of some of these students and the fact that many of them wore black apparel, as if members of a gang or cult. This line of reasoning would have paralleled Arnett's (1993) proposition that students such as these are drawn to heavy metal by virtue of its fulfillment of a "sensation seeking" need combined with a sense of alienation from societal authority, as rejection of adults' musical preferences would suggest. Roe's (1995) concept of media delinquency is along the same lines (see also Singer, Levine, & Jou, 1993), as are the observations of Brauer (2012) concerning the potential threat to authority that is posed by counter-culture music adherents. In addition, the ready availability of teachers in the daily lives of students renders them easy targets for rehearsing the rejection of adult values, especially given the contrast between music appreciation and performance as academic pursuits (Bresler, 2010) as opposed to the popular music preferences of the peer group.

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<sup>3</sup> As noted previously (note 2), the participant observer was the first author (at the time a fifth-grader), who, it should be further noted, was thoroughly saturated with the pop-culture Factor A (participant no. 1 in Table 1), hence in a position detached from Factors B and C. It is an advantage of Q methodology that it can be explicit about the location of the investigator in the observer-observed field (see Brown, 1974).

With the benefit of hindsight, however, a more optimistic outcome comes into view – of achievement rather than burnout and delinquency. Of the three males who defined Factor B–, for instance, one graduated as salutatorian of his high school class and went on to earn a master’s degree, another likewise graduated from college, and the third, while thoroughly tattooed, is a member of a national punk-rock subculture whose members embrace vegetarianism and formally abstain from alcohol, tobacco, recreational drugs, and promiscuous sex. One is reminded in this regard of Lisbeth Silander, the counter-culture heroine of Stieg Larrson’s (2008) *Millennium* trilogy – an angry, body-pierced, black-leathered motorcyclist who (when the truth is finally revealed) turns out to be the bearer of society’s highest values. If members of Factor B– reject the culture of their elders, therefore, it is on the way to embracing a higher expression of that culture. Neither alienation nor conformity, but affirmation, is at issue.

### **Factor C: The Musical Omnivores**

If Factors A, B+, and B– have definite points of view, musically speaking, those individuals comprising Factor C can be characterized as musically omnivorous (a term borrowed from Mulder, Ter Bogt, Raaijmakers, & Vollebergh, 2007) in that they appear to like all kinds of music, and also to dislike all kinds indiscriminately:

*Like (+3, +2): Back at one/ Brian McKnight... Don't take the girl/ Tim McGraw... Strawberry wine/ Deana Carter... The hardest thing/ 98 Degrees... Cowboy/ Kid Rock... Nookie/ Limp Bizkit... Genie in a bottle/ Christina Aguilera.*

*Dislike (-3, -2): Boot scootin' boogie/ Brooks & Dunn... Livin' the vida loca/ Ricky Martin... Amazing/ Aerosmith... Musta got lost/ J Geils Band... Old time rock and roll/ Bob Seger... Freak on a leash/ Korn... 9 to 5/ Dolly Parton.*

It is hard to identify a coherent rhyme or reason within this pattern of music preferences,<sup>4</sup> and perhaps that is the point; i.e., the persons comprising Factor C may have wanted to establish links with other students – any other students – hence did not wish to foreclose on any basis of affiliation, consequently claiming to value all kinds of music. Two of the four persons defining this factor had been best friends in grade school, but in the year following the study, one of them had become sexually active and eventually gave birth to three children left fatherless, and at last report was incarcerated. In subsequent years, the other best friend had adopted a trade after being in and out of college, which she never completed. Establishing and maintaining relationships were apparently difficult for these two in particular. Now more than a decade later, the participant observer queried past classmates, none of whom could even remember the third member of Factor C. The fourth member had not remained in touch, but was rumored to have graduated from college. If these factor mates’ music preferences were indistinct, their lives appear to have been no less so.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This highlights why variance analysis is not the analytic method of preference in Q-methodology studies. An analysis of differences among the three categories (pop, country, rock) would not produce a significant *F*-ratio due to large within-group variability. Factor analysis, on the other hand, and especially the factor scores, gives the investigator a second opportunity to determine (even if only in the way of a guess) what principle or schema has governed the preference ordering for Factor C.

<sup>5</sup> Space precludes more detailed treatment of the data, but it should be noted in passing that the four perspectives described above do not exhaust all possible outcomes. Participant no. 14 (see Table 1), for instance, is associated with none of them. At this point in his life, he was remembered by classmates as clever, not involved in sports, and friendly toward all, and during

### Coda: The Study of Lives

A circumspect reviewer of our original manuscript reminded us of the fragility of our post hoc interpretations and we are only too willing to acknowledge their tentativeness, even though their coherence provides much to recommend them. In the above cases, the first author contacted former classmates and inquired about participants with pure factor loadings (their current location, occupation, whether they had attended college, etc.), and the salient (if limited) facts are reported above. The original study was designed as a class project rather than for publication, and more care and forethought would have been expended had publication been anticipated, particularly with regard to the tie between past and subsequent behavior.

The literature of Q methodology contains some guidelines for more systematic inquiries along developmental lines. Baas (1997), for example, reveals the consistencies and changes in behavior - but changes consistent with the past - in a life examined in real time, as did Block (1971) in his massive 50-year time-span study of 170 individuals (but using Q-sort technique rather than its broader methodology). There are also retrospective-prospective studies that begin in the immediate present and look backward and, Janus-like, into the future (e.g., Flemming et al., 2010; Stephenson, 1954). One such, for example, reveals the extent to which present-day work dynamics mirror retrospective accounts of family dramas (Chusid & Cochran, 1989). Our more limited intent in this study, however, was to reveal how musical preferences - and this could no doubt be extended to food, art, literature, theatre, and other preferences - are embedded in and are extensions of forms of life, with suggestions regarding continuity being based on admittedly limited evidence about current activities.

#### The Irreducibility of Forms of Life

This study is not the first to employ Q technique in the examination of musical taste (e.g., Wacholtz, 1992), but its results suggest that musical preferences are not isolated from, rather are enmeshed in, a larger fabric to which they contribute and by which they are enriched. Nor are they a subsidiary part in any reductionist sense; e.g., as a function of more fundamental socioeconomic and consumer forces, as suggested by Bennett (1999). As Wittgenstein (1971) asserts, "What has to be accepted, the given, is - so one could say - *forms of life*" (p. 226). These forms are *given* and present themselves for direct inspection and understanding and not so that they can be peered under. Danford (1978) concurs:

We must understand a human form of life on its own terms. We do this by looking at the overall place it occupies in our lives, which means we begin by asking what its purpose or goal is. Wittgenstein's account directs us to inquire into the relations among our forms of life without necessarily seeking to reduce complicated ones to more simple or basic ones. (p. 120)

Danford goes on to criticize a social science modeled after natural science, "with its particular emphasis on explanation by reduction" (p. 121), as inapplicable to the study of forms of life.<sup>6</sup> Science, however, does not assume a reductionist form only.

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his secondary years as having a different set of friends in theater before moving on the university. He was, in effect, an outsider to all four of these groups, which perhaps prepared him for his later profession as a successful stand-up comic in one of America's major metropolitan markets.

<sup>6</sup> The same non-reductionist assertion is made for the related concept of *habitus*, which can be traced to Aristotle, but is connected to the Scottish Enlightenment and more recently to the

Stephenson (1953), for example, was a behaviorist and considered himself a positivist, and he regarded subjectivity as natural behavior, hence its study as a natural science (see also Brown, 2006; Midgley, 2005–2006). The fifth-graders examined in this study were doing nothing more than participating in their social milieu and concretely with the Q-sample items, and this is the given that must be the focus of attention in inquiries into musical or any other preferences.

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theorizing of Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and especially Bourdieu (see Hilgers, 2009; Moran, 2011; Ostrow, 1981). For instance, in the sport of boxing (to draw upon an example frequently used), the formal and informal rules and practices that have evolved from past habits place a priori constraints on current performance, yet no two boxers are identical, which illustrates the generation of "an infinite number of behaviors from a limited number of principles" (Hilgers, 2009, p. 730). Similarly, Q factors of musical preference represent limited principles, yet within these factors there is room for a practically infinite number of differences in preference, the differences asserting their relative freedom from the a priori principles.

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**Appendix: Music Q Sample and Factor Scores (N = 30)**

	<i>Songs/Performers*</i>	<i>Factor Scores</i>				<i>Songs/Performers</i>	<i>Factor Scores</i>		
		<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>			<i>A</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>C</i>
1b	<i>Livin' the vida loca/</i> Ricky Martin	+1	+1	-3	16b	<i>The hardest thing/</i> 98 Degrees	+3	-1	+2
2a	<i>Amazing/</i> Aerosmith	-1	-1	-3	17a	<i>Faith/</i> Limp Bizkit	-3	-2	+1
3c	<i>Don't take the girl/</i> Tim McGraw	0	+2	+3	18c	<i>Honey, I'm home/</i> Shania Twain	+1	0	+1
4a	<i>Gettin' jiggy wit it/</i> Will Smith	+1	-2	0	19a	<i>All star/</i> Smash Mouth	+2	-2	0
5a	<i>Cowboy/</i> Kid Rock	+1	-3	+2	20a	<i>Old time rock and roll/</i> Bob Seger	0	+2	-2
6c	<i>Shameless/</i> Garth Brooks	-1	+3	-1	21c	<i>Grandpa/</i> The Judds	-1	+1	-1
7b	<i>Lodi/</i> Creedence Clearwater Revival	0	0	-1	22b	<i>Larger than life/</i> Backstreet Boys	+3	0	0
8b	<i>God must have spent a little more time on you/</i> 'N Sync	+2	+1	-1	23a	<i>Freak on a leash/</i> Korn	-3	-3	-2
9c	<i>Boot scootin' boogie/</i> Brooks & Dunn	-2	+2	-3	24c	<i>I never knew lonely/</i> Vince Gill	-2	0	0
10b	<i>You drive me crazy/</i> Britney Spears	+2	-1	+1	25b	<i>The boy is mine/</i> Brandy & Monica	+2	0	0
11b	<i>Genie in a bottle/</i> Christina Aguilera	+3	-1	+2	26a	<i>Musta got lost/</i> J Geils Band	0	0	-2
12c	<i>Fancy/</i> Reba McEntire	-2	+3	-1	27c	<i>Achy breaky heart/</i> Billy Ray Cyrus	-2	+1	+1
13a	<i>Bawitdaba/</i> Kid Rock	0	-3	+1	28b	<i>Jailhouse rock/</i> Elvis Presley	-1	+3	0
14b	<i>Back at one/</i> Brian McKnight	+1	-1	+3	29c	<i>Strawberry wine/</i> Deana Carter	0	+2	+3
15c	<i>9 to 5/</i> Dolly Parton	-1	+1	-2	30a	<i>Nookie/</i> Limp Bizkit	-3	-2	+2

\*Q-Sample Structure (letters following statement numbers): (a) rock, rap, hip-hop, heavy metal; (b) pop, R&B, rock 'n roll; (c) country.