Subjectivity as Operant: A Conceptual Exploration and Discussion

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Abstract. *William Stephenson defined subjectivity as an operant. This paper will consider what that definition means for our understanding of subjectivity and what implications it has, if any, for the process of Q sorting and Q methodology in general. Beginning with consideration of the term 'operant', its meaning, aetiology and derivation from the work of the behaviourist movement in psychology, a vision will be presented of subjectivity as a 'non-mental' concept which is synonymous with the current viewpoint of a particular individual (or participant in a Q-methodological study). The concept of a viewpoint will then be defined and discussed and its advantages as a methodological or operational definition of subjectivity will be outlined. Whilst subjectivity is, and should undoubtedly remain, of considerable theoretical interest to Q methodologists, this paper will argue that the concept is too weighed down by 'mentalist' baggage to be used effectively in methodological or applied contexts involving mainstream audiences (or audiences unfamiliar with Q methodology). Q methodology, it will be concluded, is not the foundation for a science of subjectivity, but the basis for an objective science conducted from the first-person rather than the third-person perspective.*

Introduction

A brief glance at William Stephenson's bibliography indicates that the better part of his career, and particularly his later career, was spent publishing a large corpus of theoretical and conceptual work. The result is an extended and rich literature, produced by an obviously very clever and scholarly man over a fifty-year period. This literature contains many concepts that are of potential interest to the Q methodologist, including concourse, communicability, self-reference and abduction (Stephenson, 1961, 1978, 1982, 1986). Watts and Stenner (2012) offers some introductory coverage of all these issues.

Of the many concepts Stephenson associated with his Q methodology, however, probably the most powerful and enduring

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connection has been established with subjectivity. Good (2010) provides an excellent summary of Stephenson's lifelong quest for a science of subjectivity. The importance and centrality of subjectivity to Stephenson's work is also reflected in the names of the main Q methodological organization, the *International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity* and, of course, its journal *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*.

This latter title is particularly important because understanding Stephenson's rather unusual use of the term *operant* is the key that unlocks his initial, and similarly atypical, understanding of subjectivity. What Stephenson means by subjectivity is, in fact, almost completely at odds with conventional usage, both lay and scientific. It follows that the main aim of this paper is to clearly define the nature of subjectivity 'as operant'. Completion of this task will lead, in turn, to a clear and definite vision of the Q-sorting process. The paper will then conclude with a brief reconsideration of the concept of subjectivity and some rarely considered downsides of its association with Q methodology. Stephenson's (1982, 1988) subjective science, it will be argued, is actually an objective science, but one that operates from the perspective of the *first* rather than the *third* person.

Behaviourism Defined: Subjectivity as Operant Behaviour

An operant or 'operant behaviour' is terminology drawn from the tradition of behaviourism, which dominated the discipline of psychology from the early years of the twentieth century until the late 1950s (Leahey, 2004). Behaviourism is perhaps most notable for its thoroughgoing rejection of all mental or mentalist terminology. The very existence of things like mind and consciousness were brought into question. Ivan Pavlov, for example, who famously won a Nobel award for his work on conditioned learning in dogs, would issue monetary fines to any laboratory assistant who tried to exploit such 'mentalisms' as a means of explaining their experimental results (Fancher, 1995). John B. Watson, the initial proponent of behaviourism in psychology, would also challenge opponents to prove they had a meaningful inner life. If anybody claimed they did or that this was self-evident, Watson would simply point out that the only evidence being provided was their 'unverified and unsupported word on the subject'. It followed that concepts like mind, consciousness, and the like were quickly expunged from the behaviourist scientific lexicon. Nor were they considered useful in the wider context of human life (Watts, 2010).

The behaviourists concentrated instead on the study of orderly and goal-directed sequences of *behaviour*. An operant was a particular type

of behaviour that displayed two rather unique qualities. Both are important. First, an operant is produced and emitted naturally, without need for special training or any other form of artificial induction. In short, operant behaviours have no obvious or external *cause*. Second, and very significantly, an operant is defined by the relationship it establishes with, and the *impact* it makes upon, the immediate environment. An operant behaviour has no meaning—nor can it even be said to exist—outside of this relationship. To complete the definition, it is worth noting that the word operant can also be used as a collective noun, to denote a particular class of behaviours, all of which are observed to impact upon the environment in a similar fashion.

In using operant as an adjective, Stephenson clearly wanted to attribute these same qualities to subjectivity. That should immediately tell us that subjectivity, understood as an operant, is not a concept with mental connotations like mind or consciousness. It is not 'inside' us. On the contrary, subjectivity is an observable behaviour that is defined and has meaning relative only to its impact upon the immediate environment. This operant or behavioural definition of subjectivity finds its most famous expression in the title of Stephenson's (1953) *Study of Behavior: Q-Technique and its Methodology*. It also provides a definite, although perhaps unexpected, vision of the Q-sorting process. If subjectivity is an operant, a participant in a Q-methodological study is not being asked 'to introspect, or to turn on his stream of consciousness: instead he has expressed his subjectivity operantly, modelling it in some manner as a Q sort. It remains his viewpoint' (Stephenson, 1968, p. 501).

Understood in this way, Q sorting is not a phenomenological process. No introspection is required, nor any form of 'looking within'. Neither, by implication, is it necessary to invoke hypothesized mental domains, states or entities to explain the appearance of a participant's subjectivity or indeed the form of their completed Q sort. Stephenson's participant has 'expressed his subjectivity operantly', but this doesn't mean that a private, mental domain called subjectivity has caused the Q sort to appear. Subjectivity is operant behaviour. That means a Q sort cannot be an expression of someone's subjectivity as such, but rather it *is* their subjectivity, captured experimentally by Q methodology as it impacts upon the immediate environment (which is provided, in this experimental setting, by the provision of an appropriate Q set). In other words, Q methodology captures subjectivity in the very act of being an operant.

Subjectivity Defined: Viewpoints as Operant Behaviour

Brown (1980, p. 46) provides support for the above interpretation and clarifies matters eloquently in the following extract:

> Fundamentally, a person's subjectivity is merely his own point of view. It is neither a trait nor a variable, nor is it fruitful to regard it as a tributary emanating from some subterranean stream of consciousness. It is pure behavior of the type we encounter during the normal course of the day.

It is apparent that defining subjectivity in operant terms signals a thoroughgoing repudiation of all mentalist terminology. Subjectivity is not a mental entity. It does not reflect any inner experience and it has little in common with concepts like mind and consciousness. Brown's words nonetheless demonstrate what this repudiation leaves behind. Stephenson is using the word subjectivity to describe a person's current *viewpoint* or, as Good (2010, p. 213) suggests, their 'idiosyncratic "point of view"'. Subjectivity is the first-person perspective, no more and no less.

Given this conclusion, however, some clarification is now required. What does the first-person perspective *mean* in an operational sense? What is a 'viewpoint'? Well, since a viewpoint is synonymous with subjectivity, the first and most obvious response to these questions is that the concept has no mental connotations. In this sense, a viewpoint is very different to an 'attitude' as conventionally understood. It is not a permanent or semi-permanent disposition or mental orientation. This is why introspection is irrelevant. A viewpoint does not exist within a person, but only in their current *outlook* or *positioning* relative to some aspect of their immediate environment (a circumstance perhaps, an event, or some other object of enquiry). A viewpoint exists and takes a defined form only in the moment of *relationship* between a subject and its object, between knower and known, observer and observed.

Given this essentially relational nature, a viewpoint could never be described as belonging to a person in any enduring sense, nor could it even be made meaningful by reference to them alone. As an example, I currently have a particular viewpoint relative to a chair situated directly in front of me. It is nonetheless obvious that even the slightest shift in my position will change that viewpoint, as indeed would any movement of the chair. Another person could also *share* my current viewpoint, very easily, by positioning themselves in a similar way (which is precisely the mechanism through which factors appear in a Q-methodological study; see Watts, 2008). So, this relationship I have with the chair is certainly *my* current viewpoint, but there is little to suggest its enduring nature and no reason at all to suppose that the viewpoint is an inherent property of me.

All that remains is to clarify, despite the physical analogy just employed and the earlier dismissal of mental connotations in this context, that a viewpoint is not simply a physical concept which implies

purely physical observations. As Watts (2008) highlights at some length, the environments we inhabit are constituted not just by physical objects, but also by semantic objects or *bodies of knowledge*. It follows that our analogy could just as easily have focused on an object possessing primarily *semantic* characteristics—perhaps the concept of justice for example—rather than a more straightforwardly physical object like the chair. More importantly, however, in both cases the adoption of a viewpoint suggests an overall orientation of a particular subject in relation to a particular object, which always carries both *somatic* and *semantic* connotations. In this sense, the viewpoint concept has several resonances with Davies & Harré's (1990) rendering of a 'subject position'. It is an empirically observable, inherently meaningful and interpretable relationship (between subject and object) that emerges naturally during the conduct of our everyday lives. It is also what Q methodology captures experimentally, through provision of an effective Q set, the Q-sorting activities of its participants, and ultimately through the factor analysis of their completed Q sorts.

Questioning Subjectivity (1): The Problem of Inner Experience

It should now be apparent, for purposes of Q methodology at least, that subjectivity can be understood as a person's current viewpoint. Q methodology then 'provides a rigorous set of procedures for identifying that point of view and relating it to the points of view of others' (Good, 2010, p. 213). In other words, application of the method, and its resulting factors, allow us to make sense of any subject matter from the first-person perspective. This is all very straightforward. The concept of a viewpoint seems to offer Q methodology a coherent and greatly simplified language, as well as a very workable operational definition of subjectivity. In fact, one might even wonder why the word 'subjectivity' is being used at all.

There is, of course, a danger that this wondering will seem heretical to some readers, although it is nonetheless being considered in a spirit of practical expediency. In coining the phrase 'operant subjectivity', Stephenson was trying to highlight that people's viewpoints are best understood, not as mental properties or entities, but as empirically observable, meaningful and relational behaviour of the type described above. As he admitted himself, however, the 'subjective arena, *terra incognita*, is variously thought of as psychical, phenomenological or the like' (Stephenson, 1968, p. 499). The imminent danger, therefore, is that reference to subjectivity might, in practice, lead an audience to draw all the *wrong* conclusions about Q methodology and its domain of study. It is likely, in other words, to make them think in mental terms and about the types of inner experience that Stephenson's operant definition was

trying so hard to avoid. The following extract from Stephenson (1953, p. 22) illustrates the ease with which this confusion can occur:

> Scientific method is objective, we say, insofar as testable operations are involved and reliable events. But the word 'objective' is also used to mean 'as observed by others', the contrast being with one's own 'inner experience', which can be observed (it seems) only by the experiencing person himself. The word 'subjective' has the same bifurcation of meaning. It means either inner experience or the opposite of scientifically objective.

It would be easy to conclude, on the basis of these words, that Stephenson himself equates subjectivity with inner experience. What he is doing, however, is pointing out the typical mistake. Where objectivity means *as observed by others*, the 'same bifurcation of meaning' does not lead us obviously or logically to inner experience. On the contrary, it leads precisely to what we already know; that subjectivity means *as observed by me*. It means my viewpoint.

Confusion and mistakes will nonetheless abound, precisely because Stephenson's operant rendering of subjectivity is not widely known or appreciated outside (and often inside) Q-methodological circles. This means it has done nothing to free the concept from several centuries of mentalist baggage. For most people, therefore, and for most readers of studies using Q methodology, the word 'subjectivity' still points toward an isolated inner domain of non-testable operations and unreliable events. It means inner experience. Common usage further suggests the inherent bias, inaccuracy and unreliability of the subjective domain. This hardly feels like a profitable alliance for Q methodology. As early as the 18th century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant had rejected all possibility of a science of mind, on the basis that the subjective products of human thought were too transient and lacking in substance to be properly amenable to experimental or mathematical treatment (Watts, 2010). Several hundred years later, there is still no reason to challenge these assertions. Most of what passes through our minds *is* too transient and unreliable to support any kind of scientific study.

The most important point to grasp, however, is that this kind of ephemeral 'mind-stuff' is absolutely *not* what Q methodology is claiming to study, at least not where an operant definition of subjectivity is being employed. It is studying people's viewpoints. As we have seen, these are operant behaviours which only appear (and have a defined existence) relative to some aspect of the immediate environment. In marked contrast to the subjective products of mind, their appearance and nature is also of sufficient substance and reliability to support scientific treatment (Watts, 2008; Watts & Stenner, 2012). If these messages are to be understood by our various disciplines and audiences, however,

direct or indirect reference to inner experience should be avoided. Subjectivity does not refer to inner experience in the context of Q methodology and it is not what our study participants are *observing*. It is, in fact, Stephenson's name for their various *acts of observation*. Subjectivity is, and remains, *my viewpoint* and it might be sensible to make that clear.

Questioning Subjectivity (2): The Problem of Objectivity

A second reason to challenge the efficacy of the term subjectivity in Q-methodological circles is that its blanket use appears to dismiss any possibility that a first-person viewpoint could be *objective*. Again, associating Q methodology with objectivity may not be to everybody's taste, although it is clear that Stephenson never conceived 'of objectivity and subjectivity as radically opposed' (Good, 2010, p. 233). Subjectivity and objectivity, Stephenson said, 'should not be placed in opposition, except in common parlance to mean different *attitudes*' (1953, p. 100). An objective attitude could be distinguished from its subjective counterpart only in the sense that it was typically more dependable and reliable in character (for example, Stephenson, 1953, p. 87). Another way of saying this, which links nicely to Stephenson's earlier definition of objectivity, is that an objective viewpoint tends to reiterate, share or cohere with whatever is typically 'observed by others'. In philosophy, this would be recognized as a basic working of the coherence theory of truth.

Stephenson was, as Good (2010, p. 234) argues, actually interested in developing an 'anti-Cartesian approach to human experience that seeks to avoid such dualisms as body/mind, subjective/objective, and fact/value'. In practice, however, it is a little less clear how an apparently exclusive focus on subjectivity (and hence a single pole of the subjective/objective binary) could ever do anything but perpetuate this dualism. Yet reference to viewpoints, rather than subjectivity, resolves this problem straightaway. Q facilitates the scientific study of people's viewpoints and any viewpoint might subsequently turn out to be subjective or objective in character.

Either way, it seems wrong to automatically associate the first-person perspective with bias, unreliability, or even idiosyncrasy, especially when Q-methodological studies so often provide substantial empirical evidence to the contrary. It is apparent, for example, that a very large number of potential viewpoints exist relative to most objects of enquiry. The procedure of Q methodology is also designed in such a way that this multitude might easily be expressed (Watts & Stenner, 2005). Yet the number of factors which emerge from Q studies is generally very limited; 'two, three, or four are usual' (Stephenson, 1982, p. 216). This is hardly suggestive of profound idiosyncrasy or

unreliability. In fact, commonplace or shared viewpoints predominate in most data sets and it is this commonality (or, to use the statistical term, this 'communality') from which the factors of a Q study are ultimately built. Each factor simply identifies a distinct *class* of viewpoint, or class of operant behaviour, that is shared by a number of the study participants (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

It follows that any Q sort which associates strongly with (or loads significantly on) a particular factor, does so because the viewpoint it captures has effectively reiterated and cohered with the viewpoint of 'others' taking part in the study. In other words, it associates with the factor precisely because its viewpoint is exhibiting a certain *objective* quality. Stephenson confirms the accuracy of this argument. A high factor loading 'in Q technique', he says, 'may be regarded as a measure of "objectivity" in this sense . . . and low saturation as a measure of "subjectivity"' (1936, p. 356). A first-person viewpoint and a particular Q sort can, it seems, turn out to possess an objective character (see also Watts, 2008). The problem with the concept of subjectivity, however, is that it cannot, by definition, allow this to be the case.

Conclusion: Scientific Study from the First-Person Perspective

It is important to emphasize at this stage that nothing in this paper has been written to detract from anyone's appreciation of Stephenson's highly innovative writings on subjectivity. The identification of people's viewpoints with operant or pure behaviour is very clever indeed. It should also be noted that a number of Stephenson's later works appear to operate using a slightly different and perhaps more 'mental' definition of subjectivity, inspired by the work of William James and the influence of the quantum theory (Watts & Stenner, 2003, 2012), although that assertion can just as easily be resisted (Brown, 2003; Good, 2003). Either way, subjectivity will, and undoubtedly should, continue to stimulate interesting theoretical debates amongst Q methodologists (for example, Brown, 1994/95, 2005; Stenner, 2008; Wolf, 2008).

It follows that the problems being raised here are simply matters of practical application and expediency. Interminable and basically unresolvable debates about what Stephenson 'really meant' by subjectivity are of relatively little help or interest when it comes to publishing Q-methodological studies in subject-interested journals. In these circumstances, reference to subjectivity is likely to mislead a lot of potential audiences. It immediately suggests something mental, some inner or phenomenological experience, and it actually has very few positive connotations as a scientific concept. As Stephenson (1968, p. 500) puts it, the 'trouble comes when it is denied that this subjectivity is inside the realm of science, and the trouble is confounded if ideas of

consciousness are introduced, streams, introspection, phenomenology, psychisms and all'. From the author's perspective, it is also relevant that subjectivity is not 'a term that figures at all prominently in the literature of academic psychology' (Good, 2010, p. 213).

For reasons of clarity, therefore, this paper has proposed a workable operational definition of subjectivity, based upon the concept of a viewpoint. This concept is straightforward and within the realms of everyday language. It is not weighed down by mental preconceptions and it is free for us all to use, develop and define. It will work most effectively, however, where Q methodology is no longer associated with the scientific study of subjectivity. Stephenson (1988) claims that Q methodology makes his 'subjective science' possible. The alternative would claim that it actually facilitates an objective science, but an objective science different to all others and capable of operating from a *first-person* rather a *third-person* perspective.

One might argue that this only a matter of presentational semantics and this may be true on one level, but presenting Q methodology to best advantage will nonetheless be vital if its range and influence are to be expanded. Q methodology does not merely study subjectivity and, as we have already argued, a claim to the contrary is unlikely to turn many heads. Subjectivity is of little interest to science in general and there are, in any case, a whole host of other methods that can legitimately make the same claim (Willig & Stainton Rogers, 2008). It might be altogether more profitable, therefore, to present and promote Q methodology like this: as the *only* method capable of studying and comparing the viewpoints of everyday people mathematically, holistically, *objectively* and 'with full scientific sanction, satisfying every rule and procedure of scientific method' (Stephenson, 1953, p. 25).

Stephenson developed, and has given us all, an original and innovative research method that offers researchers opportunity, in a very wide range of disciplines, to deliver a *first-person science* of exactly the same standing and quality as the third-person science currently being delivered by more conventional methods of experiment. Whilst the latter access their subject matters through the restricted lens of some preconceived test, scale or measure, however Q methodology gains access, so much more directly and immediately, through the unrestricted viewpoints of its participants. In psychology at least, this represents a much more powerful argument and status claim for Q methodology. Its relevance to Q-methodological work in other disciplines, however, and the usefulness and applicability of the viewpoint concept, must remain a matter for others to consider.

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