

Commentary on Ramlo and Newman, “Q Methodology and Its Position in the Mixed-Methods Continuum”

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The goals of Ramlo and Newman’s article (this issue, pp. 172–191)—to demonstrate that Q is a ‘mixed methods’ tool which can then be placed alongside other similar tools, thus enabling Q methodologists to claim a place at the broader methodological table—is commendable. I think Ramlo and Newman have developed a good argument. But I found myself wondering in what sense(s) Q is qualitative or quantitative and where subjectivity fits in. My commentary focuses on these two issues.

Qualitative vs Quantitative

The qualitative-quantitative methods debate has been ongoing for many years and claims that it is useful to think in terms of a continuum between the two seem to dominate current debate, as Ramlo and Newman show. Talk of mixed methods, however, leads us to ask how much there is that is qualitative or quantitative about a particular technique. This question is unfortunate because, as Kaplan (1964, p. 207) argued many years ago, “quantities are of qualities”. People first make qualitative distinctions (hot or cold, high or low, etc.) and subsequently quantify some of them. All quantitative techniques are thus logically a sub-set of qualitative ones.

More recently Michell (e.g., Michell, 1999, 2003) has argued that quantification concerns the attributes of categories or qualities. Classically we have little or no difficulty in accepting that length, for example, is an attribute of extensive things, and that length has quantitative structure. We are therefore justified in measuring length in quantified units (metre, foot, etc.). Conversely, we might agree that one person is more charitable than another (thus admitting degrees of charity) but might not agree on whether or not charity is an attribute that has quantitative structure. Some researchers would probably refuse to quantify it, while others would quantify it. Neither would produce a scientific justification of their decision. A refusal to quantify may be justified with reference to humanistic values, for example, while quantification might be justified on pragmatic grounds—

the results are useful for some purpose.

So at any point there are (1) qualitative distinctions (categories) without any attributes that have quantitative structure, (2) categories with demonstrably quantifiable attributes, and (3) categories with attributes that we treat as quantifiable only on pragmatic grounds. (For completeness, we can also add [4]: categories with demonstrably quantifiable attributes that some researchers refuse to admit as quantifiable.) Study of all but the first type of distinction implies the use of 'mixed methods'.

Where does Q fit into this? According to Stephenson, statistical considerations are at the heart of Q: "the scientific study of subjective communication begins with the statistical conception of concourses" (Stephenson, 1978, p. 25). I think it is safe to assume statistical conceptions involve quantification (though I am unsure of this point). Even if quantification is not necessarily entailed in making these statistical conceptions, it is assumed when we ask people to rank statements.

We could ask people to rank statements using categories that made sense to them (which could be overlapping fuzzy categories) and to put what is physically the same statement into more than one category (if it is judged subjectively as not the 'same' statement when placed in different categories). But we do not. Instead we provide discrete rank categories to which we assign numbers, assuming each rank is separated from the next by one unit, subjectivity determined. Michell (1999, 2003) argues that whether or not an attribute has quantitative structure is a scientific question. It is not clear to me whether Stephenson's work established this in the sense Michell describes. Pragmatically, however, there is much to commend this procedure.

So, from the point in a Q study where we ask participants to rank the statements, if not earlier, we have assumed subjectivity has quantifiable structure—in terms of the qualitative vs. quantitative discourse we have shifted over to the quantitative side. In this respect Q has much in common with the use of Likert scales and the like, which are typically placed on the quantitative side of the divide. Using a Likert scale, with numbers assigned to points on the scale, entails the assumption that whatever is being measured has quantitative structure.

Q is 'qualitative' inasmuch as we are interested in meanings that research participants attribute to the words that they use to create or to represent their viewpoints. We are further interested in what groupings (i.e., factors) of sorts emerge from the analytical process in terms of what idea- or thought-groups we can identify. Such concerns have traditionally been assigned to the 'qualitative' category of methods, thus making Q qualitative. But equally, when we ask people to indicate their

views using a Likert scale, they are offered verbal cues with which to represent their viewpoints. The poverty of the cues provided, and the failure to follow up (by asking, e.g., what someone meant by selecting 'satisfied') means we cannot do much other than report frequencies and other statistical combinations of the resulting data.

One of the strengths of Q is that we take views from the real world of discourse about a topic rather than make up a simplified discourse; we ask people to consider one viewpoint in the light of another (typical of real world situations); and so on. And when we have analysed the data, instead of being limited by the simplified language we use to write questionnaires, we have the richer (if partly standardized) language of what people are likely to have said. In addition, if we combine sorting with interviews and debriefing, or other ways of trying to get at people's interpretation of cards and the result of the sort, we have far richer resources with which to interpret the output of a Q study. (But in this respect there's nothing to stop a traditional researcher asking questionnaire respondents to explain what they meant when they said 'satisfied' as distinct from 'very satisfied').

Thus I agree that Q is a mixed method, in terms of the qualitative-quantitative mode of talk about research methods. But so is the use of Likert scales and other question techniques typical of questionnaires, analysed under R methodological assumptions.

Subjectivity and Objectivity

Tashakkori and Teddlie (2009) say that qualitative research projects have a "subjective purpose", and Ramlo and Newman place Q on that side of the continuum. I was puzzled by this decision, but think that perhaps there's an ambiguity in the phrase "subjective purpose" that is related to our concern as Q methodologists with subjectivity.

Constructivists claim that the results of research are only another form of subjective understanding of the world, one constructed by the researcher (sometimes in collaboration with the research subjects/participants). Associating "subjective purpose" with the qualitative/constructivist suggests that Tashakkori and Teddlie are proposing *researcher subjectivity* is an issue at the 'qualitative extreme'.

Stephenson argued that Q was the "*modus operandi* for a science of subjectivity" (1978, p. 21)—that is, we are concerned with the subjectivity of the persons who perform the Q sorts. Thus as Ramlo and Newman tell us, "Q-sort data are inherently subjective because the data involve sorters' preference for item A over item B" (this issue, p. 178). Our aim with Q is (in part) to describe the *participants'* subjectivity, as *objectively as possible*. Through sorting cards, someone produces/constructs a representation of their feelings. Once they have

done that, the sort is there for inspection by anyone. All (reasonable) observers would have to admit that card 14 has been placed at position -3, and so on. Thus, insofar as the continuums Tashakkori and Teddlie identified are useful for representing the variety of categorizations of research techniques, I would have placed Q at the "objective purpose" end of Table 2.

The subjectivity of the data in terms of participant preferences is also evident when a Likert scale is used. The choice of one point over another on the scale reflects their subjective estimation of an appropriate response. Which (Q sort or Likert scale) is a better tool for attempting to collect or generate data we can take as representing someone's subjective viewpoint is a different question. But both result in data concerning respondent subjectivity. In Q there is room for researcher subjectivity as regards the characterization of any particular factor. But R methodologists' decisions about how to proceed with analysis and how to interpret output are also subject to researcher subjectivity.

Finally, I wish that reviewers would now be persuaded to accept that Q methodology is a mixed method and evaluate studies accordingly. But I am not very hopeful and suspect we will still have to defend the use of centroid factor analysis or a lack of attention to eigenvalues for some time to come. Part of our difficulty lies in the tenacity of socially embedded practices of social scientists, such as the continued misuse of significance tests (Ziliak & McCloskey, 2008), the tendency to treat methods as a toolbox (Valsiner 2000), and a propensity to regard the qualitative-quantitative distinction as the only way to categorize tools (methods) and methodologies (see, e.g. Wilson, 2002, for an alternative to qualitative/quantitative; and Valsiner, 2000, for a more radical approach to thinking about methods and methodologies).

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