

## Introduction: Between *method* and *ology*

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The lure of this special issue is to open up fresh theoretical and meta-theoretical perspectives on Q methodology and hence to bring Q methodology into a more substantial dialogue with contemporary social theory and research practice. There is always a tension of sorts between the more general theoretical and philosophical concerns implied by the suffix *ology* in the word methodology, and the more technical concerns implied by the prefix *method*. In everyday practice, scientists tend towards the latter, valuing doctrines principally for their use as instruments for research rather than for their provocative theoretical implications. There is thus a preference for ideas that prove themselves by determining clear phenomena for observation that can be methodically applied in a range of circumstances. Perhaps inevitably, as Q methodology has gradually acquired a significant niche in the methods armoury of social and psychological scientists, it is the technical aspects of *method* that have been emphasised to the relative neglect of the philosophical aspects of *ology*.

Whilst it cannot be denied that Q methodology must ultimately be evaluated in relation to its successes as an instrument for research, it is nevertheless worth remembering that the inventor of the technical aspects of Q methodology, William Stephenson, repeatedly stressed that Q was not just a 'method' but a methodology, and was intensely engaged throughout his career in thinking through the broader epistemological and ontological issues that he saw as providing the essential background to the more technical aspects. For Stephenson, the Q methodological concern with subjectivity brings a very different set of epistemological and ontological assumptions into play than those assumed in research oriented towards an objective description of some state of the world. To some extent, these assumptions are, as it were, 'built in' to the very design of Q methodology. By-person factoring, for example, makes little sense when not combined with Q sorting as the means of data collection. For Stephenson, Q methodology is quite literally as different from r methodology as Quantum mechanics is to its Newtonian predecessor (Watts & Stenner, 2003). To conduct a Q study with tacit Newtonian assumptions would be, from Stephenson's perspective, to abuse the

methodology, and to miss the bigger picture (of a technique adequate to a scientific revolution) that he had in sight. For better or for worse, Stephenson thus took a dim view of what he thought of as misuses of Q and in this sense was not tolerant of the idea of a range of possible theoretical frameworks for interpretation.

If the broader concerns proper to methodology have been relatively neglected in recent years, this does not mean that they have gone away. Somewhat like garden weeds, if neglected they always return in abundance, taking unpredictable forms and occupying unexpected places. Over the years, for example, Q methodological studies have been conducted and interpreted, whether implicitly or explicitly, in the context of a number of very different theoretical and meta-theoretical frameworks. To give just three examples: for some Q is about subjectivity defined as a pure self-referential operant (Brown, 1980); for others it is about providing observer-evaluations that are as objective as possible (Block, 1961, p. 34); and for others still Q factors provide access to the “cultural manifold of discourses” circulating around an issue (Curt, 1994).

Little agreement appears to have been reached, therefore, as to what the transformed meta-theoretical assumptions proper to Q might actually be. Stephenson himself, following developments in contemporary physics, saw great mileage in the distinction between the objective and the subjective (Good, 2003). He made of this distinction the effective ground for discriminating Q and *r* methodologies, although his scattered remarks on the philosophical underpinnings of Q resist clear systematisation. Stephenson gave rise to a small but dedicated tradition of Q methodological work stressing that Q sorting is a means of operationalising subjectivity and that Q factoring is a means of capturing patterns of *operant subjectivity*. Q is thus presented as enabling access to the structure of points-of-view on topics of self-referential concern. It is this emphasis on subjectivity or self-reference that, from this perspective, constitutes the decisive epistemological break with *r* methodology. Block (1961), by contrast, inaugurated a tradition of use deviating significantly from that proposed by the “ingenious innovator, vigorous proponent and almost solitary expositor of the Q-method” (47). For Block, Q methodology is about combining multiple and independent expert judgements in order to enhance reliability and validity and avoid the “plague of subjectivity and unreproducibility” (28). Subjectivity in this scheme is less the basis of a paradigm shift than an “accusation. . . to be voided” (34). Block thus describes Stephenson’s forceful rejection of the idea of a standardized Q item sample as a “view contrary to the orientation of the present work” (51).

In the late 1980s, another tradition of Q methodological work—now associated with Beryl Curt and her circle (Curt, 1994, Stainton Rogers,

1995, Stenner, Watts and Worrell, 2007)—adopted Q methodology as a critical psychosocial methodology consistent with the social constructionist perspective associated with the ‘discursive turn’ in the social and human sciences and humanities (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990). This broadly ‘postmodern’ or ‘poststructuralist’ interpretation holds that notions of subjectivity are inextricably bound up with—and mediated by—*discursive practices* (Dryzek, 1990). From this perspective, the epistemological shift at stake is construed in relation to the inescapably *social* and communicatively mediated nature of the issues dealt with in Q methodology (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This in turn connects up with some of Stephenson’s own comments on the *communicative* basis of Q methodology, particularly in respect to his *concourse theory* (Stephenson, 1978, 1986). From this perspective, Q is associated with *discourse theory* and enters into dialogue with forms of qualitative analysis such as discourse analysis, conversation analysis, semiotics and hermeneutics (Stainton Rogers, 1997/8).

In contrast to Block’s more pragmatic agenda, both the ‘subjectivity’ and the ‘discourse’ schools of thought tend to agree that Q methodology is part of a radical shift in ontology proper to a profound ‘post-Newtonian’ reorganisation of scientific and philosophical thought. The former, however, tend to follow as closely as possible the principles which guided Stephenson and to accuse the latter of deviation from this doctrine and, in so doing, of collapsing the subjective and individual into the discursive and social (Brown, 2003). The constructionists, like Block but for different reasons, are less prepared to unquestioningly accept the principles which, so far as they can be clearly established, guided Stephenson in his more philosophical thinking. The following four papers agree that there is a pressing need to clarify the meta-theoretical issues which should inform Q methodological work. In the first paper, Amanda Wolf identifies exemplars from three distinguishable strands of Q-methodological work which claim in turn to be studying ‘perceptions’, ‘attitudes’ and ‘accounts’. Wolf suggests that each of these strands of work has a tendency to downplay Stephenson’s key concept of subjectivity in preference for a plethora of diffusely connected terms that are rarely defined. Her contribution thus invites us to consider the difference it might make to describe our results in terms of ‘attitudes’ as opposed to ‘discourses’ or ‘accounts’ or ‘viewpoints’ or ‘perceptions’ or ‘meaning systems’. Equally importantly, her paper seeks to build bridges by urging us to reflect upon how these concepts might be squared with Stephenson’s various statements about the nature of subjectivity, and with the important notion of *vectors of feeling* in particular.

A key theme is the idea that one possibility of common ground is to be found in the notion of *constructivism*. Simon Watts’ contribution to this issue deals with the distinction between constructivism and

constructionism by pointing out that constructivism tends to be associated with reality construction at the personal level (as illustrated by the constructivisms of theorists such as Jean Piaget and George Kelly) whilst constructionism deals with reality construction at the social, cultural and institutional levels (as illustrated by the social constructionism of Berger and Luckmann). In this sense, constructivism and constructionism together reflect what is in fact an artificial divide between the personal and the social, the deconstruction of which might enable new communication between 'discourse' and 'subjectivity' schools of thought. Watts proposes the concept of 'human selectionism' as a means to foster such dialogue.

My own paper takes a slightly different tack in suggesting that constructivism might be the more general orientation of which social constructionism is a special case. Social constructionism would thus be specific to the social sciences in that it orients the researcher towards the constructed and constructing character of social and cultural life. Constructivism, by contrast, emphasises the inherently constructed and constructing character of *all* existence. In this sense, constructivism is not limited to the human domain but extends into the provinces of the physical, chemical and biological sciences as well. This would entail an ontology of process grounded in the idea that ultimate reality is neither somatic nor semantic but always a concatenation of massed *events* or actual occasions, each of which is a composite of object and subject. In suggesting such an ontology, I draw upon the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and try to bring this into resonance with Stephenson's thinking. Whilst Watts' arguments should prove useful in integrating social science approaches with psychological concerns, my own concern is not to exclude the natural sciences from consideration.

In the final paper, Rose Capdevila and Lisa Lazard draw attention to an important and more directly political aspect of Q-methodological constructivist thought, namely its concern to move away from totalising forms of knowledge, to acknowledge the existence of multiple and context-embedded versions of social phenomena, and to speak up for those versions which have been marginalised in processes of ever-unfolding ontological politics. Giving worked examples from three empirical studies, Capdevila and Lazard illustrate the ways in which Q methodology negotiates its own marginality as a method, whilst providing an empirical means to avoid oversimplifying bifurcations and to access some of the subtle differentiations of relevance and value at play in social issues.

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