'Is it just me... ?' Q Methodology and Representing the Marginal

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Abstract. *In this paper Q as a constructionist methodology is considered through its engagement with marginality. Drawing primarily on debates within and examples from the discipline of psychology, we aim to illustrate ways in which issues of marginality become relevant to constructionist concerns around knowledge production. A key focus of constructionism(s) is on multiple versions of social phenomena in situated and local contexts. This position represents a move away from, and a challenge to, totalising forms of knowledge associated with more objectivist epistemologies. Broadly speaking, Q's ability to tap into a range of perspectives or, what we will refer to here as, narratives—marginal or otherwise—provides a way to explicate constructionist concerns with multiplicity and unsettle mainstream notions of coherent and total knowledges of the social world. To contextualise the ways in which Q works with notions of marginality, this paper begins by delineating how Q itself is (re)produced as an othered methodology in debates around its location within the quantitative - qualitative dichotomy. We move on to consider the ways in which Q may offer a distinctive contribution within constructionist-informed research through its ability to make expressions of marginality manifest.*

Marginal Methodologies

The positioning of Q as a marginal methodology lies in its uneasy fit within the qualitative - quantitative divide that is commonly drawn upon in academia. More specifically, Q departs from and represents a critique of hypothetico-deductive logic which typifies knowledge production in much mainstream research, particularly, in the social sciences and psychology. The challenge that Q methodology presents to approaches such as psychometrics, for example, is embedded in Stephenson's concerns that this rationale for knowledge production limits and constrains what can be known about given psychological phenomena (for a full discussion of this see Watts and Stenner, 2005). Thus, unlike psychometrics, the aim of Q methodology is not to 'test' its participants or measure variables nor does it impose *a priori* meanings. Rather, the

focus of Q is on holistic patterns, variously labelled viewpoints, perspectives or narratives, which are expressed and shared by specific groups of participants.

The critique of the hypothetico-deductive imperative underpinning the development of Q undoubtedly reflects points of dissatisfaction with mainstream research for those working within qualitative traditions. As Watts and Stenner (2005) note, it is in this sense that Q methodology is quite typical of qualitative methodologies. Thus, like qualitative methodologies, Q's positioning as *not* positivist or hypothetico-deductive functions to locate it in the margins in relation to mainstream research. It might be argued that the outsider status of qualitative methods in psychology is intimately bound with psychology's own history as 'other' in relation to the 'hard' sciences of biology, chemistry and physics. In its pursuit of recognition as a 'proper' science, positivism and quantitative methods of knowledge production became positioned as normative within psychology. Whilst qualitative methodologies have always been used within the discipline, they have been variously othered as 'soft' and 'unscientific' (e.g. Griffin and Phoenix, 1994) and trivialised as an "an intellectual flirtation" (Kidder and Fine, 1997, p. 35). Thus, the positioning of qualitative and quantitative methods as polar opposites draws on a series of dichotomies such as objective-subjective, rational-irrational and science-non-science which function to position qualitative methods as the subordinate other.

The representation of qualitative and quantitative methodologies as diametrically opposed has, however, also functioned to position Q as 'other' from qualitative methodologies. For example, Stenner and Stainton Rogers (2004) argue that the "familial association [Q and R methodology] alone is sufficient ground for dismissal as 'another atomising numerology' in the eyes of some qualitative researchers" (p. 101). Similarly, Watts and Stenner (2005) suggest that this familial association underpins the misrepresentation of Q methodology by some strands of qualitative work as a more mainstream-aligned process of knowledge production involving conventional forms of variable relationship identification and measurement.

The positioning of Q methodology as 'other' from the mainstream and as neither a 'proper' quantitative nor qualitative approach has called into question the legitimacy of knowledge produced through Q. Within debates of the qualitative/quantitative divide, some arguments attempting to legitimise marginal methodologies (that is those which are not positivist, hypothetico-deductive or quantitative) in relation to mainstream psychology have drawn attention to the 'sameness' between

some qualitative and quantitative methods. In relation to Q, appeals to sameness underpin the positioning of Q as a bridge between qualitative and quantitative methodologies (e.g. Sell & Brown, 1984). Q methodology has been described as a flexible technique which can be used within constructionist or realist frameworks and as combining "the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative research traditions" (Dennis & Goldberg, 1996, p. 104). Capdevila (2003) has suggested that the appeal to sameness used in such arguments functions to position such methodologies as legitimate *in relation* to the mainstream. However, this strategy does not question the dichotomous relationship between qualitative and quantitative methodologies on which it is premised.

As Capdevila (2003) has further argued, the presentation of quantitative and qualitative methodologies as dichotomous is problematic. This is because it relies on a series of potentially misleading distinctions between the two methodologies. Moreover, the positioning of marginal methodologies as credible through appeals to similarity with the mainstream, "whilst politically useful, can also serve to limit a method's usefulness in terms of interpretative power and theoretical authenticity and, as a result, methodologically" (p. 9). For some researchers, particularly those located within more constructionist frameworks, Q methodology with its particular 'mixing' of qualitative and quantitative pattern analytics represents a space to move away from conventional, taken-for-granted conceptualisations of methodologies as located as 'either' 'or'. For example, terms such as para-quantitative (Capdevila and Stainton Rogers, 2000) or qualiquantological (Stenner and Stainton Rogers, 2004) have been applied to Q methodology to point to the ways in which the qualitative and quantitative aspects of Q do not sit in a straightforwardly polarised relationship to each other. Indeed, Stenner and Stainton Rogers' description of Q as qualiquantological is used to express the hybridity of the methodological features of this research approach. The notion of hybridity troubles the polarisation of relationships in and through a questioning of constructed boundaries between 'I' and 'Other' and, in the case of Q, also between qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

The ways in which Q methodology can worry taken-for-granted polarisations operating in the wider debates in which various methodological approaches are constructed sets the scene not only for the ways in which Q can engage and work with marginal positions in this broader context but also in its practical applications to knowledge production within constructionist frameworks. To contextualise this latter point, the following section will begin with a description of the resonances between Q and discursive constructionist endeavours.

Discoursing Q

As has been noted elsewhere, the attraction of Q to some researchers working within discursive constructionist approaches centres around: (1) the ways in which both this theoretical tradition and this methodology commonly focus on multiplicity, and (2) how Q lends itself to discursive pattern analysis (e.g. Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1990; Curt, 1994). To clarify these two claims, it would seem pertinent to discuss them in relation to the practical workings of Q methodology.

Q's focus on multiplicity is rooted in both its method of data collection (Q sorting) as well as in the specific analytic it employs to identify patterns (by person factor analysis/qualitative reading of factors). We would argue that one of the most important characteristics of Q methodology is that it does not presuppose a polarised understandings of an issue; it does not assume a unidimensional perspective and it takes into account the relationship of all issues (or statements), which are variously positioned in the configuration of an understanding or perspective, to each other. The point of Q methodology is that (unlike traditional questionnaires) agreement and disagreement with specific statements is taken in the context of their relationship to other statements. So measurements are never absolute and always relative. As Good (2000) has argued, it is essentially a gestalt procedure and what is important for the study is the gestalt configuration of the items as put together by the participants (Watts & Stenner, 2005).

The identification of gestalt patterns through the inversion of conventional forms of factor analysis provides the backdrop to the location of Q within discursive traditions. The claim here is that through this analytic, holistic patterns identified can be conceptualised as narratives or perspectives which are composed of manifold (including marginalised) discourses. We would made, however, no assumption that we are representing any one participant or specific set of participants or that the variances explained can necessarily be generalised to the population (see also Stainton Rogers, 1995). Important to note is that Q relies on the conceptual notion of 'finite diversity' or 'that whenever or wherever persons are applied to a sample of elements the principle of limited independent variety holds' (Stainton Rogers, 1995, p. 180). In other words, in our culture there is a limit to the ways in which specific discourses will come together to form narratives about a certain issue. This limit is not an epistemologically fixed one but rather is determined by the context in which these narratives are, or can be, produced while maintaining their coherence and relevance as such.

According to Brown (2004) after factor analysis, the elements of the sample reveal the structure of the community of discourse and of the groups that contribute to it. As a function of this, marginalised

perspectives are identified in exactly the same way as those that are mainstream or more dominant. More specifically, for a factor to be identified, all that is necessary is for two participants to sort the statements in similar ways "so minority views easily take their place in a Q factor matrix, alongside all of the other factors. In short, the mechanics of Q methodology make it difficult for any viewpoint to fall by the wayside unnoticed." (Brown, 2004, p. 11).

Moving to the Margins

The ability of Q to tap into marginalised perspectives is not a coincidence or by-product of its development. Unlike (most) other approaches, Q as a method was designed to identify patterns of subjectivity and, thus, manifold perspectives, or what we have termed narratives, rather than simply attending to dominant ones. Brown claims that Q, as a marginal methodology "is particularly suited to illuminating and clarifying perspectives, including those of marginalized populations." (Brown, 2004, p. 1) While it presents no guarantees, Q has built-in features that favour seeing things from many points of view, marginalised or otherwise.

This feature of Q methodology, we would argue, has afforded it a distinctive status within the panoply of mainstream methods in general, and qualitative methods in particular, available to research. For example, in relation to mainstream quantitative methodologies Dryzek (2004) has argued that conventional surveys often conceal marginalized viewpoints as these can be washed out in averages as across gender, SES, ethnic groups and other demographic categories which are structural rather than functional. Q factors, on the other hand, emerge from the population under observation and are thus indigenous to it (Brown, 2004). At the same time, many qualitative methods seek to identify dominant discourses within a particular culture. Q, on the other hand, treats all perspectives equally thus it does not artefactually produce marginality.

Empirical Explorations

To explicate our position thus far, we would argue that Q engages with marginality in at least three ways. Firstly, it is a method which itself has been marginalised by not fitting easily within the qualitative/ quantitative divide that is so commonly drawn upon in academia and particularly in psychology. Secondly, it works with marginality through its undiscerning quantitative identification of both marginalised and dominant narratives. Lastly, through the qualitative study of the narratives, or perspectives, produced through Q analysis, it looks at the positioning of specific issues within a broader context, that is, marginal discourses within a narrative. To illustrate these points further, the

discussion now turns to three Q studies which highlight the ways in which this method draws on both qualitative and quantitative procedures to identify and position a diversity of narratives.

If You Go Down to the Woods Today. . . (Capdevila and Stainton Rogers, 2000)

The broad focus of the first of these studies was on political engagement and the legitimation of minoritary or marginalised groups. This was explored through a Q study of the Newbury Bypass protest.

Environmental activism has often been presented as a polarised/polarising issue with two clearly defined sides—a battle between opposing 'armies': one for; one against. No other position appears to be available other than apathy. Whilst one might argue this is an overstatement, we would maintain that this polar narrative is recognisable to most of us. We would further maintain that this particular construction of activism, as a type of battle or a form of warfare, is only one of many possible understandings available in our cultural context. Given the discursive positioning being taken in the paper, this may seem an obvious statement. However, even in similarly positioned academic literature it is not uncommon for discourses of environmentalism to be presented as clearly polarised and in contrast to each other. One example would be *Greenspeak: A study of environmental discourse* (1999). The book's content is described as an: '. . . interdisciplinary examination of the discourse of environmentalism. . . it is an analysis of the means of persuasion and the techniques of advocacy used by both sides of the environmental debate between "conservationists" and "conservatives".' (Harré, Brockmeier & Mülhäusler 1999, back cover). What this statement appears to be telling us about environmental discourse is that, firstly, it can be defined exclusively as 'debate': secondly, the debate is one with two identifiable positions—the 'conservationists' and the 'conservatives'. Lastly, in using the word *both* it implies that these are the only positions that are, if not possible, at least relevant. The Q study undertaken aimed to allow a multiplex and varied perspective that is composed of many different considerations by avoiding the use of survey questions such as: *Do you support the Newbury Bypass protests?* which presume a polarised understanding of the issue.

The study involved participants from a variety of backgrounds, including both men and women of varying ages, ethnicities, social backgrounds and professions. Most importantly, the participants varied in their relationships and roles with respect to environmental activism e.g. activists, police and security staff, local residents, commuters. The logic behind this was to access as diverse a group of participants as possible.

Using Q, seven factors were identified as representative of the sorts produced by the participants. We make no claim here that these seven factors are exhaustive of the available narratives or perspectives. However, we would claim that these seven narratives do find expression within our cultural context when participants are given the opportunity to express them.   These narratives were labelled: the law abiding narrative (F1); the liberal humanist narrative (F2); the activist narrative (F3); the radical narrative (F4); the sceptical narrative (F5); the cynical narrative (F6); and the superficial motives narrative (F7).

The law abiding narrative (F1) bears some resemblance to Harré et al.'s 'conservative'. The focus of this perspective is that protesters deserve our disapproval as they do not abide by the rules and conventions of how things get done in our society. What has been termed the liberal humanist narrative (F2) is positive towards both the situation and the protesters, possibly a version of the 'conservationist' approach. It focuses on values and presents an awareness of pluralism within these, seeing the issue as complex. The activist narrative (F3) focuses on the value of activism and practical politics within our society. The radical narrative (F4), like the two before, can be seen as favourable but can be distinguished from these in that it broadens the context of the protest to the wider society. For this perspective, things have gone wrong, must be put right and doing so is unquestionably the role of the protesters. The final three, the sceptical narrative (F5), the cynical narrative (F6) and the superficial motives narrative (F7), present mixed accounts which bring in a broader context in varying ways to query different aspects of the issue.

These seven factors and manifold narratives identified might be seen to give us a more contextual reading of different viewpoints. What becomes clear from these viewpoints is that, as a result of one single event, each participant brought to this reading differing experiences and understandings. What we would like to highlight here is that the analysis of any perspective requires an understanding not only of what questions or issues are seen as relevant (i.e. those that participants might agree or disagree with) but also those that are not brought into the narrative. That is to say, the specific boundaries that each of us creates to tell a specific story at a particular time.

Drawing from this, in returning to the question of polarising perspectives into *pro* and *contra* or placing them on a continuum without considering how they are constituted, we would argue this is a dangerous assumption in that it is exclusive of those perspectives that do not fall into either of these categories. The image of an 'eco-warrior' might well be a colourful one, but if we are to study protest and its relationship in time with future events, we must take into account, rather than discount, the diversity of understandings available and

which are used to make up cultural representations of an event. These necessarily contextual and diverse understandings, we would argue, are inseparable from an understanding of protest.

Baby or Beauty? (Jordan, Capdevila and Johnson, 2005)

The second Q study we would use to illustrate our argument focused on new mothers' experiences of post pregnancy body image. An overview of the literature indicates that we cannot assume most women are dissatisfied with, or even concerned about, their bodies postpartum as some sources suggest (e.g. Drake et al., 1988; Strang & Sullivan, 1985; Walker, 1998). Likewise it would be incorrect to conclude that women are generally satisfied or unconcerned with body image as has been suggested by others (e.g. Hisner, 1986; Stein & Fairburn, 1996; Wood Baker et al., 1999). Jordan et al. (2005) argue that a lack of congruence in the types of questions posed or the participants used (e.g.: primigravid vs. multigravid women; two weeks vs. twelve months postpartum) might be the source of much of the variability in the research. Furthermore, the meaning and relative importance of some of the concepts can vary not only amongst participants, but also researchers. Hence generalisations are often made which do not reflect the diversity of experience in this area, limiting the applicability of the research for both new mothers and the relevant health professionals.

More recent studies, drawing on qualitative analysis, have reflected the complexity of addressing such an experiential issue without considering the context in which it occurs (e.g. Cappuccini and Cochrane, 2000; Nicolson, 2000). Given the multiplex character of the subject matter and in an attempt to engage with the evidence that a range of factors could potentially be relevant, Q methodology seemed particularly well suited to exploring the postpartum concerns expressed by women.

In this study, six factors were identified which were named: the family centred narrative (F1), the stressed narrative (F2), the happy mothers' narrative (F3), the missing personal space narrative (F4), the supportive family narrative (F5) and the mother/child oriented narrative (F6). A number of themes were found running through the six narratives generated which drew on issues around life in general after child birth. As expected many factors were seen to contribute to the issues and concerns of a new mother's life.

Interestingly, these six narratives suggested that body image was of variable importance for many mothers. So whilst it was clear that body image could be an important aspect of this experience, other issues and contexts were also prioritised within and across some of the perspectives. The notion of family, which could be read as the specific context in which some issues, and not others, became concerns, was the

focus of four narratives. This has been reflected in some of the literature which has argued that extended family support can be protective of weight concerns (Harris *et al.*, 1999). However the description of family varied.

In different contexts, the participants in this study constructed various narratives to describe and prioritise those issues that were relevant to them. The narrative called happy mothers (F3) sidelined interest in body image altogether and was positive about every aspect of motherhood. Whilst the supportive family narrative (F5) similarly did not focus on body image, the mother herself was also not prioritised. Instead importance was placed on the father's support, in particular, and the families' more generally. However the father and his family were absent in the narrative mother/child oriented (F6) which prioritised the relationship between the mother and child, but also the mother's family and particularly the maternal grandmother. Hence the issue of body image, so ubiquitous in the literature, was not key to these three perspectives.

Some factors did suggest a dissatisfaction with appearance. The family-centred narrative (F1) was one of these. However, this concern was subsumed under the greater importance of children and family. The stressed narrative (F2) expressed dissatisfaction about the changes that came with pregnancy, but this was not limited to bodily changes. Alternatively, the missing personal space narrative (F4) appeared to be satisfied with body image, but highlighted many other issues that impacted negatively on experience.

Possibly the point we would most want to highlight here is that all the narratives are viable and available to new mothers in our society at specific points in time. Although in specific embodiments some are more viable that others, new mothers can take them up in different contexts. We would posit that concerns about changes in body shape might be reduced, or indeed discounted, if these changes were perceived in a supportive social environment. Likewise, specific cultural surroundings might serve to problematise weight gain, in spite of the fact a new mother's concerns may lie elsewhere. We would argue that a focus on the complexity of narrative, rather than on isolating correlational variables or entering into singularising or polarised discourses, allows for a deeper reading of these accounts. That is to say, it is possible to learn more about the role body image plays in women's self narratives by exploring how women relate body image to other concerns pertinent to their lives.

An awareness of the existing diversity of narratives might allow new mothers more ways in which to tell their stories, thus offering them more of a 'say' in how these are constructed. For instance, an alternative

narrative might be preferable within the context of their specific lives. From the position of the experienced health professional, alternate narratives which recognise the complexity of the experience of becoming a mother (be they dominant or not) can be offered avoiding the problematising of body image in pregnancy or post pregnancy. These alternate narratives might thus be promoted over those that unnecessarily pathologise new mothers.

Call it What You Want! (Lazard, Buchanan and Capdevila, 2002)

The last study to be discussed here addresses concerns within the literature on sexual violence that victims, particularly women, are generally reluctant or 'refuse' to label their experiences of unwanted sexual attention as 'sexual harassment'. The use of the term 'sexual harassment' to describe experiences has been presented as a critical political step in reframing and problematising particular behaviours that have been predominantly represented in both public and academic arenas as 'normal' interaction. It has been argued that the construct of sexual harassment can serve to undermine normalising constructions of masculinised sexual dominance and (re)position such acts as violence (e.g. MacKinnon, 1979; Lee 2001; Dougherty, 2006). Thus, the label 'sexual harassment' has been treated by some researchers as important for the destabilisation of gendered power relations in which these types of behaviours are positioned as 'normal' or natural.

Despite the potential politicised benefits of the use of the term 'sexual harassment', it appears that many women have not "accepted this feminist redefinition of women's experiences" (Kitzinger and Thomas, 1997, p. 8). As a number of researchers have argued, this is evidenced in the literature by a widespread reluctance to use the label 'sexual harassment' to describe experiences which could be contextualised in this way (see, for example, Lee, 2001; Marin and Guadagno, 1999; Herbert, 1997). This has raised concerns in the field that behaviours which primarily subordinate women are being treated as acceptable, trivialised as ordinary or otherwise unchallenged.

What has received less attention in the literature is the ways in which the issue of what counts as sexual harassment is constituted, how the term is used and how such use is contextualised. We would argue that implicit within the sexual harassment literature is a dichotomy which positions non-labelling as 'bad' and labelling as 'good'. It appears that the implicit position of labelling as 'good' has functioned to distract attention away from the issue of how the label is applied or how the phenomenon of sexual harassment is variously defined and understood within the current cultural context. In addition to this, the specific focus on the use of the term 'sexual harassment' has worked to minimise or discount the problematisation of conduct through the use of

other means, such as using notions of sexism to make sense of an incident. The aim of this Q study was to explore how the term 'sexual harassment' is variously understood within the current cultural context. Particular attention was paid to the ways in which particular issues such as notions of sexism and power were included, excluded or otherwise contextualised in narratives on this issue.

Analysis of completed Q sorts yielded six factors which were referred to as: the sex(-isms) narrative (F1), the vulnerable victim narrative (F2), the equal opportunities narrative (F3), the boundaries narrative (F4), the unjust narrative (F5), and the dispersed power narrative (F6).

The multiplicity of narratives identified, the ways in which they were composed of a diversity of considerations including those centred on sexist/power practices, suggest that it is not the case that the prioritisation of sexualised manifestations of sexual harassment necessarily preclude particular sexisms in understandings of sexual harassment. Nor is it always the case that behaviours falling outside the boundaries of sexual harassment in particular narratives are positioned as 'normal', rendered acceptable and/or trivialised. Rather, it seems that these issues are contextualised differently depending on specific boundaries created within the story that is being told.

Within the sex(-isms) narrative (F1), sexual harassment is represented as unwanted sexualised conduct—sexist behaviour was positioned as a different but nonetheless problematic experience. The vulnerable victim narrative (F2) takes up a different stance to the issue of sexual harassment by prioritising the ways in which it is a means to exploit already vulnerable individuals. Like the aforementioned factor, the equal opportunities narrative (F3) centralises issues of power. However, it places more emphasis on sexual harassment as a form of gendered/sexualised discrimination. The boundaries narrative (F4) shifts focus to making explicit subtle distinctions between harassing and non-harassing behaviour or events which constitute a different issue to sexual harassment. In a similar vein, the unjust narrative (F5) also makes distinctions between harassing and non-harassing behaviour but does so by using liberal notions of fairness. Lastly, the dispersed power narrative (F6) moves away from hierarchical understandings of power operating in sexual harassment scenarios by emphasising the use of power in a range of victim-perpetrator configurations.

Whilst the narratives identified in this study resonate with some aspects of previous literature on the topic, they did not align with prior research on sexual harassment in any clear or uncomplicated way. Thus, we would argue that the analyses of this study highlight the ability of this methodology to draw attention to perspectives that may not have found expression in the literature and thus provide insight into the

manifold accounts of sexual harassment produced in the current cultural context.

Marginalisation and Method

In this paper we have discussed the relationship between Q and marginality. In doing so we have looked at the role of Q within the broader panoply of methods and how it can be seen to negotiate its own marginality. Through the example Q studies outlined above we have further sought to highlight a job that Q, by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches in constructionist work, can do and does do well. Through the positioning and practice of Q, we would argue, these issues of marginality can be seen as relevant to constructionist approaches by avoiding totalising forms of knowledge production. The first study on road protesters highlighted the ways in which Q avoids polarisation. The second study on post-pregnancy body image identified how specific elements of an issue can be made relevant or not to a specific issue. The third study on sexual harassment, highlighted the implications of multiplicity for our understandings of a given phenomenon.

Based on the arguments presented above, we would argue that, unlike most other methodological approaches, Q engages with both marginal and dominant (or mainstream) narratives in a way that is both methodologically useful and theoretically productive because it relates them to each other. As Brown (2004) has argued, responding to marginalisation in a contextual form "requires procedures, such as Q methodology, that can render marginalized viewpoints manifest—which is in itself an empowering act—and bring them under systematic scrutiny" (p. 13). That is to say, "for those interested in the problems associated with marginalization, Q methodology offers much of value" (Brown, 2005, p. 14). We would argue that this value is premised on the positioning of Q as a constructionist methodology.

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