On *Consciring*

Amanda Wolf

Victoria University of Wellington

This brief note introduces William Stephenson's "Consciring: A general theory for subjective communicability," originally published in 1980 in *Communication Yearbook 4* (D. Nimmo, Ed., pp. 4-36) and reprinted here with the permission of the *Yearbook*'s publisher, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, NJ. My note is one in an occasional series in *Operant Subjectivity*, in which Q methodology and Stephenson scholars offer 'appreciations'—personal reflections on one of Stephenson's works.

I start with a reflection on *genealogy*. My interest stems from genealogy's connotations both as lineage and as the transmission of knowledge in stories, which is better captured in the Māori tradition of *whakapapa* than in postmodernist or critical studies connotations of the lineage of concepts or the emergence of beliefs (for example, Aylesworth, 2008). Literally, whakapapa is 'to place in layers,' and describes the practice of reciting ancestral lines, a practice that encompass the web of "human stories that flesh out the genealogical backbone" (Anon., 2001). Informally, New Zealand people (of many cultures) use 'whakapapa' when they want to acknowledge the web of people and influences responsible for their present place.

The Māori concept draws my attention when I consider my intellectual lineage and debts with respect to Q methodology. In Western terms, I am an orphan and foster child: I did not learn Q methodology from someone who learned from Stephenson, nor from a student of such a person. I first learned Q methodology from texts first (Durning and Osuna, 1994, being the very first), from practice second (my first Q experiment was a modified replication of the Durning and Osuna study, with Durning's generous advice and heavy reliance on Brown, 1980), and finally directly from people in multiple and diverse ways at my first Q methodology conference and subsequent ones. So, my Q whakapapa is rich indeed, and I have had many opportunities to re-order the layers that describe the origins and evolution of my knowledge and understanding.

Neither first-published among Stephenson's works, nor most cited, nor available to me early on in my travels, "Consciring" nevertheless

Contact author: amanda.wolf@vuw.ac.nz

occupies the foundation layer of my Q whakapapa/story.

Written for communications scholars, "Consciring" presents Q methodology in terms of infinities of shared meanings. While Stephenson writes about 'subjectivity,' he does not belabor a distinction with 'objectivity.' His approach instead sets 'sharing knowledge' against modern science. Consciring predates science. With this deft shift of frame, Stephenson persuades us that there are worlds upon worlds of meaning that have nothing whatever to do with what science may put forward as 'truth.' And yet, we can conduct experiments with the material of shared knowledge, and reach interpretations and insights that rank alongside, or even higher than, the discoveries reached through other sciences.

In "Consciring" I hear Stephenson's voice most clearly: I imagine that had I learned from him, the article would read like a transcript of his lectures, comprised of assertions ("all subjective communicability is transformable to operant factor structure" p. 96, this volume); examples (from both other scientists—Gerbner's theory of images; and his own illustrations and experiments—'the sun is shining'); explanations ("factors have first to be found, like flowers in a meadow" p. 97, this volume); rules, and so on. As a careful student, the [apparent] fidelity of the text to the teacher's voice encouraged me to think through each section. This text helps me to feel confident that I understand Q methodology: Q methodology is theory *and* method and with it, we can inquire into consciring, not messages or attitudes *per se*. Stephenson, the humanist, believed that the study of everyday consciring was not only possible but necessary if we are to "fathom" social truths and thereby contribute most centrally to the knowledge society needs.

References

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