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Factor D: "Beyond Orthodoxy"

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If I remember correctly, it was an afternoon in early May. I had failed my in first attempt to defend my dissertation proposal about a month earlier, and sat in a meeting with my advisor. The major concern of my committee was that I did not have an adequate methodology for conducting my research and answering my research questions. There had been at least four meetings before this one, and I could not find any method that would work for me. I felt hopeless and frustrated, and was beginning to wonder whether I could ever complete my proposal. The discussion with my advisor went on, and at one point he asked whether I had ever considered using Q methodology. I remembered having read about Q methodology in Kerlinger's (1986) book, but beyond that I knew nothing more. However, I promised my advisor that I would look into it and see if it would work for me. This is how I came to use Q methodology and began to learn more about it.

My personal experience has influenced my view about how Q methodology should progress from this point. I had difficulty finding a methodology for my dissertation, which was aimed at understanding why a policy consensus could not be reached in Taiwan on the issue of fiscal decentralization. It seemed to me in retrospect that there was a perfect match between my research topic and Q methodology. Had I been better informed about Q methodology from my methodology classes, from articles applying it, or from my colleagues using it, I would have been more familiar with it and more readily drawn to it as my research methodology. Unfortunately, I knew little about Q methodology and it did not even occur to me as a possible solution to my problem until my advisor asked me if I had considered it.

As a student of public policy analysis, I quickly discovered that Q methodology is a powerful methodological tool for helping researchers explore and understand the views held by stakeholders. Moreover, by comparing, contrasting, and evaluating the different opinions at issue through the statement arrays identified by factor analysis, information revealed through Q methodology enables researchers to find the issues at stake, the differences in stakeholders' views, and issues that have the potential for providing a basis for reaching a policy consensus. Based on my limited experience of using Q methodology, I find that it also provides a unique opportunity for researchers to interact with participants while doing Q sorting. When conducting the Q sorting on a face-to-face and one-on-one basis, researchers not only learn

participants' opinions about an issue in the form of statement arrays, but also obtain in-depth information about the phenomenon studied through interpretation, evaluation, and comments made by participants about each Q statement. After I witnessed the results of the data analysis from my first Q study (and, unfortunately, my only one so far), I was extremely surprised to see how powerful the methodology is in the sense that the factors which had emerged made perfect sense to me.

After I realized the extent to which Q methodology can help an analyst to conduct policy inquiries, I was led back to my earlier question concerning why it was that I did not know about Q methodology earlier. In fact, this question needs to be reframed: Why have so many students like me not realized the power of Q methodology and applied it in the conduct of their own studies? I have studied in two separate public policy schools in the United States, and I am sure that I am not alone among my fellow graduate students at these two schools in terms of knowing about Q methodology. There may be several answers to this question. For example, almost no methodology books devote as much space to Q methodology (if they even mention it at all) as they do to other research methods. In fact, the new edition of Kerlinger's book has dropped the chapter on Q methodology (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). In addition, I have seen few published articles that have used Q methodology in research on policy problems. Of course, there are not in the first place that many scholars in the field of public policy or public administration to consider employing Q methodology as one of the possible methods in their investigations. Consequently, professors do not teach Q methodology in policy schools and their students therefore hardly have a chance to see what Q methodology can do for the policy analyst.

With these thoughts in mind, there is little doubt that this methodology has enormous potential to become widely used in the conduct of policy research. In order to enhance the potential of Q methodology in my field of study, there are three things that I would suggest being done: creating a Q textbook, improving Q's practical value, and increasing its recognition. A detailed, step-by-step textbook is the first thing needed. The information that I have gathered from the Q-Method website and Q-Method listserv has been useful and helpful. The "Q Methodology Tutorial" (Brown, 1991/1992) and Political Subjectivity (Brown, 1980) are detailed and easy to follow. As a result, I would not argue that it would be difficult for a determined novice to learn and use Q methodology without a textbook. What I would argue, however, is that there would be at least two advantages to learning and applying Q methodology were a textbook available. First, it would be more likely to have classes teaching Q methodology were a textbook handy. If more classes were available for students to take, the more likely it would be that they would apply Q methodology in their research. Second, it would be easier to convince committee members that Q methodology is appropriate for master's theses or doctoral dissertations were there a book or even a few of them to show to the committee. Moreover, when questions are raised about the procedures

associated with Q methodology, a textbook would definitely help students to make a strong case to their advisors and committee members.

Improving the practical value of Q methodology for policy researchers is the key to attracting more people to it. Wildavsky (1969), Lindblom (1959), Kingdon (1984), and others have taught us that policymaking is a political process by its nature. By understanding the policy process as a political process, Q methodology becomes attractive to policy analysts because it can help them to understand the views of different stakeholders, identify the differences in their opinions, and find a policy consensus that is agreeable to all. Then a policy proposal is more likely to be developed, accepted, and implemented, thereby leading to the solution of real policy problems. This also means that Q methodology has to go beyond the identification of factors and to emphasize how data can be used to find the policy issues at stake, differences and consensus among stakeholders, and eventually acceptable policy proposals for policy implementation. In addition, developing a better understanding concerning the limitations of Q methodology and the extent to which it can be used to conduct policy analysis are also important considerations in making sure that Q methodology is not being used improperly.

Finally, increasing the recognition of Q methodology means that Q methodology needs to be promoted to get more people to understand and realize its power in conducting research. Scholars applying Q methodology should be encouraged to present their works at conferences in their fields of study, and then to try to get their manuscripts published in peer reviewed journals. In addition, efforts should also be made by advocates of Q methodology to reach international audiences. At least based on my experience in my home country of Taiwan, students show some resistance to reading materials in English. Offering workshops in these foreign countries, or translating learning materials into foreign languages, will provide additional incentives for them to learn the methodology.

Q methodology should not be treated merely as a methodological tool, but as a procedure that can lead to the solution of social and policy problems. Although there are still some methodological issues that need to be resolved, the next step should not be to constrain methodological development. When more people know about and learn how to use the methodology, new ideas about developing it and new ways of applying it will evolve as well. Then we will be better equipped to deal with a vaster array of policy problems.

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