

Comments on Watts and Stenner's *Q Methodology, Quantum Theory, and Psychology*

Steven R. Brown, Ph.D.

Kent State University

I still have vivid memories of entering the lecture hall at the University of Reading (England) April 4, 1989, the first day of *Subjectivity, Representation & Communication: A Workshop in Q Methodology and the Interpretational Disciplines*. There was tension in the air. The British participants had already arrived and were sitting close-knit on one side of the only aisle, which placed the small US contingent on the other side by default. Following introductory comments, I rose to make note of the physical division and suggested we alter the situation, but was the only person to cross the aisle. Distinct lines seemed to exist before a single paper had been presented, and this was still apparent in the concourse gathered to obtain feedback from registrants at the end of the workshop. (First British Q Conference 1989).

The Reading conference was by all accounts a rewarding intellectual event and of historical importance — William Stephenson made a presentation on the second day, his first on British soil since leaving for the US in 1947. Whereas many of the points of disagreement that emerged may have been rooted in irreconcilable differences, others seemed based more on misunderstandings, some of which were confronted at the time yet appear to have persisted in the paper under consideration. Social constructions do not simply exist; they do so for reasons, i.e., they serve some purpose. We must therefore ask what purposes are served by the representation of William Stephenson that has been constructed by members of the so-called *UK dialect*, itself a somewhat problematic construction?¹ Why is it that these

¹ It seems paradoxical that an anti-essentialist movement such as social constructionism would entertain an ostensibly essentialist category such as the *UK dialect*, as if all Q methodologists in the United Kingdom were chock-a-block with the same position. (This begs for a Q-methodological study.) Although *radical* in certain respects, some members of the UK dialect have also embraced various modernist practices more commonly associated with surveys and R methodology, such as relatively large (rather than focused) person and statement samples, principal components (rather than centroid) analysis, varimax (rather than theoretical) rotation, simple (rather than *simplest*) structure, and relatively large (rather than limited) numbers of factors. Intensive single-case studies are wholly absent. For further illustrations and comments sympathetic to the British dialect, see Stainton Rogers (1995).

Author's address: Department of Political Science, Kent State University, Box 5190, Kent, OH 44242-0001, sbrown@kent.edu.

Operant Subjectivity, 2003 (July), 26 (4), 176-183.

authors state that Stephenson regarded Q statements as meaningless, when he explicitly took the opposite stand? Why do they assert that his position implies a solipsistic inner world, a view he spent a lifetime opposing? Why do they suppose that Stephenson considered Q statements to be non-normative, which couldn't be farther from his viewpoint? What would prompt them to nominate freedom of choice as central to Stephenson's view of Q methodology, given that (as far as I am aware) he never addressed this issue? Stephenson once stated, "if my critics persist in arguing from premises I not only do not make, but am at great pains to deny, then I think I know where the charge of lack of care and explicitness has at least some of its beginnings" (1954, 333). With only slight updating, this comment may apply to the current situation as well.

Consider, for instance, the *normative* issue. Watts and Stenner regard Q statements as possessing a "normative content," i.e., expressing a social standard or ethical principle of some kind that exists prior to the Q sorting, as when someone asserts that "gays and lesbians deserve equal rights" or that "getting rid of Saddam is justification enough for sending troops into Iraq." Social and political moralities lie behind such pronouncements. By way of contrast, they quote Stephenson as stating that "no statement has a normative dimension" (1982, 239), and this they judge to be a defining difference between their view and his, theirs being "a quite radical departure." However, the view from which they depart is not one that was ever espoused by Stephenson, who was not using *normative* in a social sense, as Watts and Stenner assume, but in a statistical sense. Means and standard deviations are statistical norms based on large numbers of observations, and items and scales in R methodology are normed, each in its own separate way, so that determinations can be made as to whether individuals are above or below a trait average — e.g., an IQ of 115 is one standard deviation above the mean — as is required in documenting individual and group differences. *F*-tests, *t*-tests, and correlational analysis (indeed, R methodology generally) would be impossible without such norms. In Q methodology, matters are quite otherwise:

Instead of innumerable scales and norms for large samples of individuals ..., Q-technique called for only one scale, the same for everyone, for every Q-sort, for every problem, for only one attribute, that of pleasure-unpleasure, scored in such a way that everyone, for every Q-sort, gained score zero.... A Q-sort literally measures *nothing*. (Stephenson 1988a, 204)

In stating that "no statement has a normative dimension," therefore, Stephenson was not concerning himself with social norms, but with the kind of statistical norms that provide the foundation for a psychology of individual

differences. Moreover, he consistently questioned norms and standards across a variety of issues (e.g., with respect to standardized Q samples, large sample doctrine, validity, principal components analysis, simple structure, and related *a priori* principles), all of which he opposed in favor of the concrete specificity of each experimental situation. Subjectivity was to be studied on its own terms and not in reference to normative considerations of any kind. Social norms were an entirely different matter, and in this regard his viewpoint is hardly distinguishable from Watts and Stenner's: "Factors, for such Q-sort descriptions, ... are learnt ostensibly, in a social milieu ... [and] are likely to involve moral evaluations..." (Stephenson 1956, 9).

Or consider the related issue of the *meaningfulness* of statements. Watts and Stenner consider Q statements to be brimming with meaning "prior to the sorting process"; on the other hand, they claim that Stephenson "needed ... all of the statements ... to be inherently *meaningless*." In using the term *meaningless*, however, Stephenson was not implying that the Q sorter had no understanding of the words in the statements, or did not understand what the statements meant: to have implied such would indeed have been a blunder of the first order. On the contrary, the first postulate of his "theory of value-system modes of regard" was that "traits are considered to be meanings" (Stephenson 1956, 9). By *meaningless*, what Stephenson was saying was that statements have no *specific* meaning until endowed with such in the course of Q sorting. Take the following declaration as an example:

"No Q statement has a normative dimension."

Were this statement to have appeared in a Q sort, Watts and Stenner would presumably have assigned it a negative score, whereas Stephenson would likely have agreed with it. As suggested previously, this "difference of opinion" would have turned on the different meanings of *normative* that were projected onto the statement: Watts and Stenner would have attributed a sociological meaning, and Stephenson a statistical meaning. Until that determination has been made, the statement's meaning remains indefinite.² In this regard, Watts and Stenner credit me with defending an "isolated mind" for having said that statement meanings asserted *a priori* (as in the factorial

² There are expressive nuances over and above the meanings of specific words (such as *normative*) that contribute to communicability. Stephenson gives the following example: "The sentence 'I hate men' covers very different attitudes with different emphases. 'I hate men' indicates *hauteur*; 'I hate men,' irritation; 'I hate *men*,' deep anger; 'I hate men,' flat despondency; 'I hate *men*,' desperation; 'I hate *men*,' theatricalness – and so on" (1965, 281). Moreover, the Q sorter may be torn between two or more connotations of a word or phrase, with sense thus remaining in a suspended state until the actual meaning-in-use is determined. What is important, therefore, is not just semantics, but syntactics, intentionality, and context.

design of a Q sample) do not necessarily enter into the Q sorter's considerations. Had the above statement been categorized in terms of its statistical meaning, however, that *a priori* attribution would not have entered into their own consideration. Does this then imply that Watts's and Stenner's minds are isolated? I feel certain that they would deny this, and I would agree with them, and suspect that Stephenson would have as well.

Then there is the issue of the *inner subjective world*. Watts and Stenner approve of Stephenson's concept of shared knowledge (1980), which implicates culture, and they give it priority over "an inner (personal or individual) domain of subjectivity," and even go on to question the existence of that inner domain: Meanings are socially constructed, they say, and exist prior to the individual who, in the course of Q sorting, buys into one of the prevailing patterns of thought, which manifest themselves as Q factors. The idea of an isolated mind that gives meaning to otherwise inchoate communications is therefore not only inessential, but, in Watts and Stenner's view, a major inconsistency in Stephenson's "awkward position," and marks a fork in the road at which the UK and US dialects diverge. Ultimately, Watts and Stenner regard themselves as proponents of a strong and active culture that constructs meanings that comparatively passive individuals can either embrace or reject, whereas they view Stephenson as the defender of an isolated, solipsistic, and internal mind that exercises its freedom of choice by subjectively imposing meaning on an otherwise meaningless world. The division is considered as irresolvable as that between particles and waves, and as unbridgeable as the aisle separating participants at the 1989 Reading conference, or so it seems.

Once again, however, this social construction of Stephenson's view is achieved at the expense of the historical record. In support of their argument, Watts and Stenner quote Stephenson as saying that "it is unsound, except on grounds of convenience, to distinguish between the *inner* and *outer*, *internal* and *external*' frames of reference" (1953, 88), but in keeping with their own project they take this phrase to refer to a distinction between what is cultural on the one hand and what is personal on the other. But by "external," Stephenson was not referring to culture; rather, to the privileged position of 1950s behaviorists — the title of the section from which his quote is taken is "Behaviorism" — who took the liberty of assuming that behavior could only be reliably measured from their own vantage point, external to the person being studied. The scales and traits of R methodology have meanings known only to the diagnostician, with respondents, their intentions ignored,

relegated to producers of responses, and this results in a bifurcated space.³ X may have a view of Y (that Y is naughty, for instance, or that Y's expressed attitude is socially constructed), but if X's view of Y is the only measurement that has been taken, then X and Y are in bifurcated space (and Y has been left out in the cold). The virtue of Q technique is that it enables us to observe that Ys also have views of themselves, and also of X, which brings all observation into a single, monistic space in which interpretation is an essential function (Stephenson 1984). Moreover, Q methodology also provides a way to show that when X provides an assessment of Y (e.g., with a Q sort), the traits attributed to Y may actually be *modes of regard in X* that X has absorbed in the course of interacting with individuals of Y's type (Stephenson 1956, 8-9).

At the 1989 Reading workshop, Stephenson was faulted for entertaining such *inner* agents as if they were substantive entities, and he endeavored to correct his critics by noting that "self" and "subjectivity" were *methodological*, not *substantive*. What lends *subjectivity* operational status is not that some ego or self has stepped to the internal podium to speak its mind, but the fact that *I* am doing the Q sort, not *you*. This has nothing essentially to do with whether what I have to say is socially constructed or not, but everything to do with who is performing the Q sort. Moreover, a completed Q sort is not simply a behavioral manifestation in the real world that provides the basis for inferring the existence of an inaccessible self in the inner world, and Watts and Stenner quite appropriately banish this remnant of medieval demonology. *Self* is given operational meaning when I assign a +4 to an item such as "No Q statement has a normative dimension," because a proposition of this sort requires someone to endorse it. It is equivalent to prefacing this proposition with the phrase, "Speaking for myself..." or "As far as I'm concerned..." etc. To believe that there is a substantive self behind the word *self* is to be beguiled by nouns, and this applies to nonbelievers as well.

³ Stephenson used the term *behaviorism* in a functional sense to refer to the tendency, protopostulatory throughout the human sciences, to adopt an external standpoint. Even psychiatry and psychoanalysis were not immune, as suggested by the case of Myra (Parloff, Stephenson, and Perlin 1963), whose psychiatrist did not understand her, i.e., who was unable from his standpoint to understand her from her standpoint. Indeed, even in "subjectivity, traditionally considered," as Stephenson (1984) lamented, "the space in which a person's experience is placed is isolated from the space in which he moves about among things and people" (p. 3). It is this traditional understanding of subjectivity (i.e., *subjectivism*) that Watts and Stenner erroneously attribute to Stephenson. In rejecting this position, however, they themselves run the danger of reverting to bifurcated space when they assert that "'inside' is precisely the wrong place to look... [W]e must instead turn our attention 'outward', toward the multiple story-lines and diverse readings which constitute our shared fields of knowledge and communicability." The mistake is in accepting bifurcation and assuming that *inner* and *outer* exhaust the available choices.

Watts and Stenner reject the idea of encapsulated experience and, “in contrast to Stephenson,” also reject the premise “that meaning can ever issue exclusively from an isolated mind” separated from the rest of the world. They would therefore also presumably agree with the complaint that “everywhere ... these spaces or worlds or the like are isolated from one another by impassable barriers placed there by definition, implication, or postulation.” It might surprise them, therefore, to learn that this complaint is in *The Study of Behavior* (Stephenson 1953, 94). Watts and Stenner are not the first to have been critical of the psychology of isolated minds.

And what has all of this to do with quantum theory? I am inclined to think that there is little of consequence inasmuch as Watts and Stenner appear to regard quantum theory as of mainly analogical value. As they say, for instance, “... in analogously considering his hybrid psychological/cultural field to be the *quantumstuff* of psychology, Stephenson also needed this field ... to be inherently *meaningless*. The Copenhagen interpretation would otherwise be compromised.” Later, they refer to Stephenson’s “most direct quantum analogy” of equating Q statements with subatomic particles. Of course, Stephenson did not *need* the concourse to be meaningless, as has already been discussed, and it is doubtful that he had much investment in the Copenhagen interpretation as such. Furthermore, it was subjectivities (not statements) that were quantized, with statement scores providing observable effects comparable to traces in a bubble chamber. In one of his final publications, Stephenson recounted that as far back as the 1930s he had taken the view that “if quantum theory had to apply to psychology, it must do so on its own grounds, and not with purely analogic ties to physics” (1988b, 180; cf. Brown 1992). In short, the so-called quantum theory of subjectivity owes little to the quantum theory of the material world. The two merely parallel one another in interesting ways, among the more remarkable being the common mathematics employed: Is it not astonishing that light and *mind* (in the sense not of consciousness, but of subjective communicability) both yield to the same mathematics? Had matrix mechanics not been useful in describing the subatomic world, however, this would in no way have nullified the applicability of Q factor analysis to subjectivity.

In arriving at a conclusion concerning the location of causation in human conduct, social constructionism has cast its lot with the social environment (i.e., culture), just as psychoanalysis has sided mainly with internal forces. To the former, Smith (2001) has attached the more generic label *envirocentric*, which indicates that the sources of causality lie outside the organism, whereas to the latter, he has attached the label *organocentric*.⁴ Smith has

⁴ More accurately, Smith (2001) uses the more general label *envirocentric* to refer to Skinnerian behaviorism and similar approaches, and *sociocentric* to refer to social constructionism, while recognizing that sociocentrism is a subspecies of envirocentrism.

referred to Q methodology as *noncentric*, however, and this could be the nub of Watts and Stenner's difficulty in seeing Stephenson as coherent and consistent rather than contradictory and in need of their counsel. Rather than adopt either an internal or external frame of reference, Stephenson (1982) aligned himself with the interbehaviorism of Kantor (and also the transactionalism of Bentley) in a world comprised of people interacting with things; moreover, of people who could reason about things. There are no doubt pressures on us all to think in socially constructed ways, which Stephenson readily acknowledged and incorporated as matters of *social control* (Stephenson 1967), but individuals are also capable on occasion of marching off in directions of their own choosing. Q methodology is perhaps as good an example as any of a mainly new idea with little in the way of social constructionist antecedents, and it will be recalled that Einstein, too, regarded the concepts and fundamental principles of physics as "free inventions of the human intellect" (1934, 15). Perhaps social constructionists disagree that this is possible and can only see polar opposites (internal vs. external) where others see person-object interactions. But within a noncentric framework Stephenson was entirely consistent and in need of no advice about the importance of culture and other influences in the world around us; nor of reminders from the organocentrics about desires, values, and intentionalities. He was quite at home in a monistic space that included both culture and intentionality (Stephenson 1998), which those loyal to socially constructed dialects may have difficulty understanding. 'Tis a pity, in this regard, that others didn't cross that aisle in 1989. The cross-pollination of dialects could have been mutually enriching.

Acknowledgements: This paper has benefited from comments by Carolyn Brown, Dennis Kinsey, and Dan Thomas.

References

- Brown, S.R. 1992. Q methodology and quantum theory: Analogies and realities. Paper presented at a meeting of the International Society for the Scientific Study of Subjectivity, University of Missouri-Columbia, October, 1992. Available: <http://facstaff.uww.edu/cottlec/QArchive/qindex.htm>
- Einstein, A. 1934. *Essays in science*. New York: Philosophical Library.
- First British Q Conference, The. 1989. *Operant Subjectivity* 12(3/4):110-14.
- Parloff, M.B., Stephenson, W., and Perlin, S. 1963. Myra's perception of self and others. In *The Genain quadruplets: A study of heredity and environment in schizophrenia*, pp. 493-501, ed. D. Rosenthal. New York: Basic Books.
- Smith, N.W. 2001. *Current systems in psychology: History, theory, research, and applications*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning.
- Stanton Rogers, R. 1995. Q methodology. In *Rethinking methods in psychology*, pp.178-92, ed. J.A. Smith, R. Harré, and L. Van Langenhove. London: Sage.
- Stephenson, W. 1953. *The study of behavior: Q-technique and its methodology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1954. Comments on Cronbach and Gleser's review of: *The study of behavior: Q-technique and its methodology*. *Psychometrika* 19:331-3.
- . 1956. Methodology of trait analysis. *British Journal of Psychology* 47:5-18.
- . 1965. Definition of opinion, attitude and belief. *Psychological Record* 15:281-8.
- . 1967. *The play theory of mass communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- . 1980. Consciring: A general theory for subjective communicability. In *Communication yearbook 4*, pp. 7-36, ed. D. Nimmo. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- . 1982. Q-methodology, interbehavioral psychology, and quantum theory. *Psychological Record* 32:235-48.
- . 1984. Perspectives on Q methodology: II. Monistic protopostulate of communicability. *Operant Subjectivity* 8(1):2-5.
- . 1988a. William James, Niels Bohr, and complementarity: V. – Phenomenology of subjectivity. *Psychological Record* 38:203-19.
- . 1988b. Quantum theory of subjectivity. *Integrative Psychiatry* 6:180-7.
- . 1998. Quantum theory media research: II. Intentionality and acculturation. *Operant Subjectivity* 21(3/4):73-91.