



Comments from the Editor

Passion and Struggle Promised in This Theme Issue

Two World Views of Q Methodology

And now for something completely different ... This issue of *Operant Subjectivity* pauses from the usual reporting of empirical studies about subjectivity made operant to consider, in lively point-counterpoint style, the philosophically complex theoretical matters of William Stephenson's late-in-life views about subjectivity and his attempts to define a place for Q methodology relative to psychology and quantum theory. These matters are certainly not trivial. The viewpoints of Brown, Good, and Stenner and Watts, our four commentators, clearly delineate the poles of two world views of Q methodology. One view is rooted deeply in realism, the other reflects constructionism.

Read this issue carefully to experience the full complexity of the ideas and the passionate commitment of the contributors, witness a struggle for clarity, and admire the power of logical minds writ large. Then reread before attempting to extend the debate with colleagues and students on what may remain the indeterminacy of the multifactorial "British and American dialects of Q." ... Spirits — the distilled kind — may help to facilitate the transitive conscurring that must precede the enlightening communicability that ushers in greater appreciation of truly subjective viewpoints. [*Exhale now.*]

Subjectivity 101

Perhaps most of our students, many Q methodological research workers, and even some of our colleagues have successfully managed to conduct efficient Q studies with only a general grasp of the operational details of Q technique, plus, of course, a high powered microcomputer. Today's students are likely to begin their journey toward understanding a systematic and vigorously quantitative means for examining human subjectivity with the user-friendly advance organizer of the essentials, put down parsimoniously (barely 80 pages) in the slim paperback, *Q Methodology*, by McKeown and Thomas (Sage Publications 1988). From a few hours spent with this primer, clever students may recognize some of the "first principles" of Q methodology, such as the essential communicability of subjective viewpoints, conservation of the self referential perspective, and the take-home message that Q factors represent operant subjectivity.

However, for detailed guidance in the preparation of Q studies for theses and dissertations, more advanced students, still rely on Steve Brown's indispensable and somewhat more weighty paperback, *Political Subjectivity* (Yale University Press 1980). It is, after all, the unfailingly accurate and technically definitive manual of the *modus operandi* for Q technique, including Stephenson's innovative form of Q factor analysis. In Brown's

handbook all the steps for the proper conduct of a Q methodological study are demonstrated with accessible applications drawn from political science. Its pages detail the lawfulness of Q sorting, the quality of Q sort data, and the statistical rigor of the ordinary and familiar tools used in conducting a Q factor analysis. By the time of the public defense, the back pack of many a budding Q researcher still carries the well-thumbed copy of Brown's *vade mecum* in the safest recess, just next to the MP3 music player.

These few items comprise life's essential tools for the fledgling Q methodologist. And they usually suffice when accompanied by wise guidance from advisors and patience from a sympathetic committee of readers. The student labors in pursuit of a handful of *empirical* Q sorts to start that insightful induction that ultimately leads, after factor analysis, to the revelation of *theoretical* Q sorts. These generalized composites point the way to the set of attitudes that becomes the evidence of subjectivity made operant through a factor structure. In the science of subjectivity, inductive methodology flows from careful consideration of the factors, testing them in new ways by acting on hunches and mining their dimensional relationships for keys to new understandings about beliefs and behaviors.

Way Beyond Subjectivity 101

Yet for all their indispensable usefulness, neither of these now standard canons much hints at the fire of the big issues that stoked the last decade or so of William Stephenson's remarkably rich scholarly output. After all, he sought to anchor his science of subjectivity on the precepts of the advancements then being made in quantum physics — thereby setting his course for Q methodology along a trajectory guided by quantum theory and relativity. His lawful, scientific, and objectively data-driven methodology for studying subjectivity would best serve the needs of psychology if and when psychologists would embrace the new world view of quantum phenomena.

Those wishing to review the origins of the divergence between these two dialects of Q and their essential differences have an excellent resource in *Operant Subjectivity* 21(1/2), October 1997/January 1998. This special issue, "Using Q as a Form of Discourse Analysis," edited by Wendy Stainton Rogers, presents background explanations and examples illustrating the "British dialect of Q," including works by Wendy and Rex Stainton Rogers, Paul Stenner and Simon Watts, Una McCormack, and Susannah Chappell.

The current issue contains a contextual introduction by James M.M. Good describing the landscape features drawn by the main essay crafted by Watts and Stenner. Good deftly organizes much of our understanding of Stephenson's last decade of work, which is steeped in his exploration of the relatedness of physics and psychology and anchored on observations of the consequences of the necessary measurements involved in the events and behaviors of the Q sorting process. Steve Brown further sharpens the lines drawn by Watts and Stenner as being fundamentally incompatible with

Brown's evidence in letters, notes, published papers, and personal recollections of Stephenson's views of Q methodology founded on realism where quantum phenomena reign. Ahh, the dialects present a dilemma.

Watts and Stenner describe a substantially different perspective, namely that psychological phenomena are produced under normative rules and constraints that make up the cultures that influence us all our lives. Drawing on discursive models of culture they argue the possibility of basing Q methodology on an alternative interpretation of quantum theory, that takes Q out of the cognitive tradition. In their interpretation, concourses are drawn from cultural experiences, and are seen as active maps of discourse domains rather than passive meaningless spaces. Culture is recognized as a process rather than a passive representational system, and the relationship between concourse and Q sorter as fluid and multidimensional.

The purposeful development of concourses containing social constructionist or discursive frameworks defines for the Q sorter the limited and leveled cultural field on which the non-foundationalists advocate a use for Q methodological studies. The act of sorting the Q sample represents alignment of the sorter's perception onto a sampled concourse pre-structured to contain several distinct, identifiable, communicative themes.

These researchers monitor the capacity to value and prioritize incoming stimuli and watch to see which discourses will claim the allegiances of Q study participants. They do not, however, agree with the premise that subjectivity is the foundation for communication. For them, the multiple stories diversely read into our knowledge and shared through communicability exist as distinct discourses that comprise our individual, self-referential understandings cast in terms of our own cultural experiences. In this framework, Q sorters actively generate accounts from their own histories and social experience, they cannot simply ignore the substantive aspects of their culture which impact them in all aspects of life as it is lived.

Factoring the Q sorts repositions those accounts within an array of normative contexts. When we as investigators change the Conditions of Instruction, Q sorters respond to the different circumstances. Q methodology rewards us by making apparent the sensitive ways that the sorters relate to these changes in context.

Brown is likely in the best position of anyone to offer commentary on the scene in general and on what he sees as specific deviations between Stephenson's stated opinions and what Watts and Stenner attribute to Stephenson as a basis for differentiating the *British dialect* regarding the purpose and use of Q. Brown concisely raises what he sees as several instances of misreading of Stephenson's ideas by the essayists, Watts and Stenner. He asserts that they have ignored explicit clarity in Stephenson's works and elsewhere have misread into the record unintended interpretations and errors that they attribute to the innovator of Q method. Brown makes

pointed use of specific quotations and citations to demonstrate the variation in understandings between Stephenson's writings and what Watts/Stenner use as the basis of their alternate view of Q methodology, most especially in the impact of cultural field upon the activity of individual Q sorters. The wellspring of the Q factors becomes the *hot button* issue, particularly with regard to the two dialects of Q. The *social constructionist* approach is based on concourses ripe with pre-embedded discourses developed and shaped by the social milieu in which the sorter lives. In contrast, in the *realist* view the sorter is seen primarily as pragmatist arranging the Q set to reflect a wholly personal, self referent, view of a complex topic.

My Q sort is mine; I made it, and it is not yours. Furthermore, if you ask me, I can model my interpretation of your own perception of the same complex topic; however even the story about you told in that Q sort is still mine. It is not yours and never will be. Until you contribute to the mix your own Q sort about how you feel regarding the topic, nothing can truly be *known* about your attitudinal perception. Your Q sort trumps all the others, even the ones I made to be expressly about you — just as mine, because it is mine, reigns unchallenged as testimony of my own point of view.

Operant Subjectivity and a Dialogue about the Dialects

The permanence of the pages of this peer-reviewed international Journal of Q scholarship offer us all, as students of Q methodology, a convenient guardianship to explore and debate the large conceptual areas that, while not yet necessarily fully integrated into the bedrock of common shared understanding of Stephenson's creative output, nevertheless underpin not only Q technique but also its resultant methodology. The fundamental nature of the arguments to be encountered between the covers of this issue demands deep thinking and careful consideration of the implications and possibilities enabled by the so-called *British* and *American* dialects of Q methodology. *Operant Subjectivity* serves a teaching role when it functions as protective repository that encourages deeper understanding of all the ways our colleagues find Q method useful in their work.

This issue of *Operant Subjectivity* seeks to provide greater insight into the philosophical and theoretical underpinnings of psychology. The science and arguments of that discipline that Stephenson faced in the past are still present and there is need for mutual understanding. Dialogue, discussion, disagreement, and divergent thinking all invite further consideration and greater understanding of Q methodology as the foremost research tool for understanding human subjectivity. Passion and struggle are indeed on display. Protect the live coals you take away. They are needed to advance our work.