

Q Methodology and "Going Critical": Some Reflections on the British Dialect

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ABSTRACT: In seeking to explain what Q methodology has made possible for those of us working within a critical "climate of perturbation" framework, we have employed the device of inventing a "British dialect of Q." While I would still hold to the argument that there is something distinct about our approach, that distinctiveness really requires a more encompassing tag than might be taken from the anodyne term "dialect." My ambition in this paper is to spell out our position (and mine within that) and to leave readers to make up their own minds as to whether we are: still operating in the Q-methodology community; schismatics; or, even, heretics.

Introduction

My originary discipline, psychology, which was also Stephenson's academic location at the time he first developed Q methodology (1935), has over the last quarter decade seen the emergence of a "multi-faceted new paradigm" (Smith, Harré and Langenhove, 1995, p. 3). This has, to date at least, no more resulted in a paradigm shift for the discipline *in toto* than did Stephenson's innovations overthrow the established order of his day. I am sanguine over this because I see psychology, and indeed the human disciplines generally as creatures of their time and place—structures that reflect the concerns of Modernism and, as far as the social sciences and practices are concerned, of the *humaneering*

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Operant Subjectivity, 1997/1998 (October/January), 21(1/2), 19-26.

project (Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson and Stainton Rogers, 1995). Change, I would argue, will only come out of transcending disciplinary into a transdisciplinary condition (Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1996).

In other words, the "new paradigm" as far as the condition of psychology is concerned, while it can be seen as revitalizing the discipline, can also be seen as abandoning the idea of a discipline-bound approach to knowledge to the dustbin of history. The new paradigm is particularly evident in psychology because psychology has accrued so much of the humaneering mission to itself, moved to such an imperial position—that it has become a "fat cat" capable of sustaining even major parasitic forms of life upon its political body.

The New Paradigm

However, in terms of the textuality and tectonics of ideas, as they move in space and time, the new paradigm is well worth exploring. For it to emerge, much that grounded psychology as a positivist project had to be rejected—not least the idea that human affairs could be understood and changed by the uncovering of lawful properties of behavior. Here, new paradigm scholars drew heavily upon critical ideas from a whole raft of locations including: critical philosophy, so-called "French Theory", the Feminisms, and the Sociology of Scientific Knowledge. Informed by this "climate of perturbation" (cf. Curt, 1994; Stainton Rogers, Stenner, Gleeson and Stainton Rogers, 1995), the new paradigm is marked by recourse to alternative analytic concepts such as:

- discourse and narrative;
- a skepticism over explanation by intrapsychic essences;
- a valorization of qualitative methods;
- an escape from laboratory investigation.

In short, what is often tagged as new paradigm psychology often shares more in common (including its warrants as indexed by references cited) with work coming from locations such as Cultural Studies, Film Studies, and post-structural anthropology and sociology, than it does with mainstream psychology. We refer to this new communality of interests—a transit from foundationed disciplinary—as the *critical*

forum and, we would argue, what is often its hallmark is a concern not with measurement but with the scrutiny of pattern.

The Challenge of Pattern

Under the pressure of Modernism, the social sciences were tempted to run before they could walk, to claim an empirical scientificity, grounded in mensuration, that could not be sustained (the implication here is to epistemological substance, as bureaucracies and as devices of governance their "success" is all too obvious). The critique of essentialism and positivism *per se* is well known to Q methodologists (cf. Brown, 1980; Dryzek, 1990) and will not be re-hashed here. However, in and of itself, such a stance is multiply vectored. One trajectory for reformation takes the conceptual-engine from structuralism to phenomenology, which is a possible reading of the power that the term "subjectivity" holds in mainstream Q methodology. Our interests led us along another route, perhaps more revolutionary than reformatory (Bianchi, Stainton Rogers and Stainton Rogers, 1997). Specifically, we were drawn into the wider critique of the Modern Academy and into how that resonates with a wider challenge to the foundations of knowledge: one drawing upon "French Theory," postmodernism, the feminisms, and the sociology of scientific knowledge (cf. Curt, 1994)—i.e., what we are calling here the critical forum.

However, it is not immediately obvious, beyond an attraction to perversion (Stainton Rogers, 1995) and the seemingly weak recourse to alternative status, why analytics of pattern (such as Q methodology) should seem synergetic with criticality. To address that question, we need to approach matters from what may at first sight, seem an oblique angle. Specifically, we wish to examine the textuality and tectonics (cf., Curt 1994) of life in late-Modernism. Much that shapes contemporary experience derives from and is given shape by a particular world-view concerned with progress (cf. Dryzek, 1990). Progress, in a Modernistic sense, tends to mean the detection of challenges requiring specific interventions and the evidencing of resulting changes. However, the fragmentation or dismembering (cf. Brown, 1972) of reality that characterize the *modus operandi* of the Modernistic Project seem now to have become generally perturbing.

One dynamic is fairly self-evident, a broadly-based apperception that "progress" is, at best, unpredictable. On the one hand, generally-heralded advances (such as the fall of the Soviet Empire) come across as stemming from dubious schemes (i.e., the Reaganite arms-race). On

the other hand, once valorized goals and values (e.g., a drive towards "development") now attract concern both as to their benefit and their realizability. In some cases, examples would be the emergence of BSE (the result of modern agri-business) and the re-emergence of tuberculosis (sometimes now resistant to available antibiotics), the efforts of Modernistic programs seem almost to illustrate "negative progress."

The aim here is not to argue over the evidential basis of such elements to the doubting of progress but rather to suggest that they form part of a cultural *Zeitgeist*. It is a *Zeitgeist* which also has a negation to the negation—namely, a turn to the alternative: alternative healing, alternatives to a developmental view of personal aspirations, alternative belief systems, and alternative forms of politics (such as direct action). One of our own current areas of research (and one where Q methodology plays a big part) concerns the values and aspirations of young people (Stainton Rogers et al, 1997) and there the doubting of the Modernist dream and the impact of the *Zeitgeist* are writ large.

We can now see that the cultural romance with alternativity is a bifurcated sentiment. On the one hand, it marks an antipathy, a motivated distancing from a now-compromised object of worship. On the other hand, it also symbolizes a hope, a prospect that there may yet be salvation. This much at least can be taken from the commonplace dubbing of this emergent world-view as Millennial. In its antipathy, it represents a "regression" to earlier foundations—a kind of "back to basics" or New Medievalism driven by insecurity over the viability of the Modernist dream. Without necessarily buying into that story totally, at least one resonance it throws up is both insightful and useful in the current line of argument. The Medieval world-view, like many other alternatives now in favor (e.g., those stemming from Chinese and Ayurvedic medicine and those associated with a Gaia-view of the ecosystem) placed high importance upon pattern. Drawing up dog Latin, I can now pose a useful tension: that between *Humana Exemplans* and *Humana Mensurans* (I am grateful to Michael Stricklin for stimulating the shift away from the gendered prose of *homo*.): by which I mean people-in-cultures as pattern-makers and as measurers respectively.

Humana Exemplans as Opposed to Humana Mensurans

In modal accounts of the evolution of material knowledge, pattern-making is usually presented as the earlier, less "developed" form of

knowing. Thus, contemporary scientific medicine is seen as having evolved from nosological foundations and contemporary biology from taxonomic ones. However, it is also possible to argue that the growth of the human science owed as much to the available state of mathematical technology as it did to any "natural" laws of knowledge development. For example, in our own apprentice discipline, psychology, measurement technologies gave rise to a hegemony because, for its first half century, they were all that was around (which is not to deny that it was exactly such a normalizing and normatizing discipline that fitted the governmental requirements of the Modern States in which psychology flourished!). Alternatives, such as Gestalt psychology, while conceptually interesting lacked an integrated methodology, and so they were unable to compete in the empirical market the mensurative hegemony had established. On this analysis, alternativity could only gain a serious foot-hold in empirical academic circles when it was able to claim an integrated methodology.

Q—and Beyond?

The next stage to the argument should be wonderfully familiar to readers of *Operant Subjectivity*, namely, Stephenson's transformation of the then "gold standard" in mensurative human science (factor analysis) into an alternative methodology. Q methodology was the first pattern analytic and, perhaps, remains the most widely employed. However, sixty years on, it no longer stands in quite such splendid isolation. As a result, it can be read more easily as an event in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Here, I will risk some of my own ideas in that framing.

In generating Q methodology (as technology), Stephenson also created a powerful story of Q methodology and of William Stephenson. Those stories, in turn, have been refined and re-told by those who have taken up Q, either directly through studying with him or his students or, as is the case for the author, by those who have employed it "at a distance." Such stories (and the term is used here analytically not judgementally) are common in the way the history of knowledge is told. There are, for example, Freud/psycho-analysis stories, Einstein/relativity theory stories, and Darwin/evolution stories. They all carry didactic elements and narrative elements, and are often used to illustrate the storied features of knowledge (a small industry in critical work).

To account for, and to warrant, the break-away from old orthodoxy,

the story of the new, "the invented" also invents the old orthodoxy. The same is, of course true of the invention of Modernism (as I have exploited earlier in this paper) by Postmodernism. It is also true, in reduced form, of the "British dialect of Q." This recognition alone makes me wary of reifying here some such entity. I also shall resist the idea of conducting a Q-methodological study into the matter.

The reasons for that resistance may be useful to, perhaps even important to, the issue at hand. For those of us using Q within a "climate of perturbation" framework (as Watts and Stenner's paper in this edition also makes evident), the factors emergent from a Q study are cultural products (as are other patternings by *Humana Exemplans*) and, as such, are part of the representation labor by which culture may reconstitute itself. In other words, they have political possibilities. There are, however, epistemological consequences to an interest in change, in a concern with patterns in a flow, with possible cultural trajectories. To use an analogy, culture is like a movie and a single Q study can only address that by first "freeze-framing," by defining the frame to study. Empirically, some patterns are, of course, relatively stable over time and across concursive domains (we sometimes call them voices: as in a conservative voice or a liberal-humanistic one). Discursive stabilities are, needless to say, important phenomena in and of themselves but, through their mutual tensions and incommensurabilities they also enable the conditions of innovation. It is in the latter that my interests are most strongly located: that is, in the transit through possibilities. Hence, for me, a Q study in 1998 concerned with establishing if there is a "British Dialect of Q" (or even dialects, if we are to speak of the wider "British" network) would be of very local and contingent interest. What may matter more is the flux, the ongoing transit of ideas.

Hence, instead of seeking to "freeze-frame" what we have been up to, I will offer some epidemiological markers that have contributed to any sense of "difference" observable in our work. In that, I would highlight:

- The linking together of Q methodology with other pattern analytics (not necessarily numerically-grounded) such as actor-network theory (e.g. Brown, 1997), cultural analysis (e.g. Owens, 1997), and discourse analysis (e.g. Stenner and Stainton Rogers, 1998).
- The common use of "contingent" Q studies, that is, studies where the focus is on the links and disjunctions between two or more studies employing the same participants (e.g. Stainton Rogers and Stainton

Rogers, 1992).

- A preparedness to Q-pattern analyse R data (cf. Stainton Rogers, W. 1991) and to draw together Q and R analyses where the resultant story merits it (cf. Vřrost, et al. 1997).
- A pragmatism about "finite diversity" which results in readings of ten or more factors—particularly in studies of representation (e.g. Gleeson, 1991).
- Linked to the above, a preparedness to speculate that a concourse is a discursive arena and that discourse may well arise in differing registers (i.e., representation, understanding, and conductual possibilities: Curt, 1994) that may well have differing practices over diversity.

In some sense, this is Q methodology in another context, cast against another field of possibilities. Whether we like it or not, most researchers (whether students or seasoned workers) are not going to pair-bond to a methodology for life. They may settle for serial monogamy or they may not. Research-choices are tending to the practical and the opportunistic. For investigators looking at "alternative approaches" a menu of choices are now on offer (cf. Smith, Langenhove and Harré, 1995). Q-methodological study is now one of a range of candidates amongst pattern analytics some numerically-grounded (e.g., correspondence factor analysis, facet analysis), some employing the researcher themselves as *Humana Exemplans* (perhaps with computer-based assistance) which is generally true of cultural analytics, discourse analytics and ethnographic analytics).

The hallmark of such a dynamic is diversity: something that can be sampled in our organ *Manifold* ISSN [1354-5175]. No doubt there will be those who elect to stay strictly "true to Q," just as there will be "one night stands." We think there is still something special about Q methodology but we also suspect it has its limitations (we have noted that of freeze-framing pattern). Our interests encompass tectonics as well as textuality and to address both we use analytics like tools from a tool-box. With only a hammer, however beautifully crafted and with whatever pedigree, there is always the danger of reducing our interests to nails.

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