The O.J. Simpson Papers: A Commentary

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The presentation together of these three studies of public perceptions of the celebrated O.J. Simpson criminal trial, all applying Q methodology, affords two rare and significant opportunities: to draw conclusions about this particular case from an exceptionally rich bank of data; and—no doubt of greater interest here—to test the efficacy of the methodology for the study of public opinion, and particularly to assess its reliability, always an important methodological matter.

It is worth noting that these studies were completed before the entire public spectacle was repeated in the Simpson civil trial, with the media doing their best to revive the "media circus" atmosphere of the first trial, and perhaps putting to the test the public's attention capacity. Nevertheless, comparison of public reactions to the second trial no doubt extends the opportunity to study a notable example of public attention and public opinion formation, although somewhat contaminated by the facts that the stakes were somewhat lower, and it was, after all, a repetition (raising, incidentally, some uninformed public concerns about double jeopardy, also a potential contaminant in comparisons to public reactions to the first trial).

Let us look first at possible conclusions concerning this particular case of public spectacle/media circus that can be drawn from considering the three studies together.

The main thrust in all three studies was descriptive rather than theoretical. All were aimed at dissecting, mapping and otherwise analyzing public opinion toward the Simpson trial, which was chosen for attention because of the extraordinary attention it attracted from the news media and the public. No attempt is made in any of the studies to determine to what extent the massive coverage was cause for, rather than effect of, public attention. Ketterer *et al.*, professed also to seek

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than effect of, public attention. Ketterer *et al.*, professed also to seek information on how media performance affected public perceptions of them, how it might have affected chances that "a black man can get a fair trial," and how news-people perceive their audiences. Their objectives—except for having journalists sort as they supposed news audiences would—could only be dealt with as matters of supposition, since sorting out these effects from other influences was an impossibility. All found evidence that public perceptions were polarized to a degree, depending on the racial identity of individual audience members. This much was evident immediately following announcement of the jury's verdict of Not Guilty, but analysis of the Q-data permits uniquely detailed insights into the perceptual dynamics that led to this result, including—although not identified as such by any of the authors—the exposition of the role of social control ("subserved," Stephenson said (1967, p. 35,65), "by deeply internalized beliefs which are difficult, if not impossible, to change") vs. the role of convergent selectivity, which concerns "trivial matters in comparison," and "a heightened self-awareness, a greater receptivity in the person." With regard to the difference, Stephenson said, "One is a free man in front of a television set, or with a newspaper in one's hands, to a degree not achieved before by man in his long history. The same is not true in his concern with public opinion" (p. 35). Individuals are socialized to respond according to social controls, even though they may not be aware of doing so, while in convergent selectivity individuals perceive and formulate opinions and attitudes purely for their own gratification, making these perceptions and formulations self-enhancing. Both of these dynamics appear to have been at work in determining individuals' favorable or unfavorable responses to the verdict in the Simpson trial.

Rankings of statements across the studies also appear to show the influence of stereotypes and perhaps of prevailing folk tales. Does O.J. Simpson fit the current image of a "hero"? To the extent that he does, this could account for his continuing favorable regard among other African Americans, but it could also account to some extent for willingness to assign guilt to the "fallen hero."

Private vs. Publicly-Expressed Views?

This author once directed a study of public opinion concerning the long-standing controversy between newspeople and the judiciary concerning their conflict on the question of free press vs. fair trial. The most noteworthy finding in that study was that the two sides held

significantly less extreme views about the controversy than they expressed in public (Greene, 1967). That study also employed Q methodology. The views came from professional role-playing rather than from the more personal roles involved in the systematically different perceptions in conflict here—between African Americans and others—but the findings of the press/bar study do lead to speculation about whether the same difference might exist here in the strength of private vs. publicly-expressed views.

Comments on this set of studies concerning their implications for applying Q methodology include the following, in no particular order of perceived importance:

1. There *are* important differences in the respective approaches taken by the three sets of authors: Thomas *et al.* employed a longitudinal, pre-trial/post-verdict design, while Ketterer *et al.* gathered data during the trial and Sylvester after the announcement of the verdict. Also, the Ketterer study included second-order cognition data—journalists' perceptions of public opinion—for comparison with the actual views of the public. Results of the second-order cognitions are a separate matter, but it is significant to note that, despite all the other differences, there is still a great deal of reliability in the factors uncovered, i.e., the attitude structures uncovered in the respective studies are quite similar. In fact, it would probably be a worthy exercise to tailor the statement samples for comparability (a relatively simple matter in the case of the Ketterer *et al.* and Sylvester studies because the latter's statements were adapted from the former), and then to factor all the factors together. Significant correlations probably would result, and the emerging "grand factors" would be of considerable interest.

2. The Thomas *et al.* paper states that events in the case were "coalescing into a series of parables serving as a huge mirror to society and, in the process, affording an occasion for earnest soul-searching *vis-a-vis* a litany of unsavory features of the American cultural landscape." They suggest that, for each member of the public, the events of the case were being fitted into a concourse of communication. The concept of concourse, in Q methodology, is a body of material where each individual assigns the *parameters of relevance* for her/himself. Thus, the concourse becomes a filter through which each individual sifts his/her perceptions of the case as conveyed through the news media, and the formation of public opinions depends on some degree of overlap in the result. Assigning importance to *operancy* in Q methodology involves tapping the commonalities in the concourse for statements of opinion that individuals can use to express their attitudes. Stephenson said, "About most events many statements are common to

different persons, and almost every statement will mean something to many others, whether it was collected from one person or many" (p. 35). The reliability of the factors across these three studies becomes, at least in part, a measure of the extent to which the researchers have succeeded in tapping the commonalities in individuals' concourses.

3. In this author's view, the rationale in each of these studies for selecting Q methodology over survey methods would be strengthened if more emphasis were put on the matter of dependency vs. interdependency. That is, for example, if respondents in a survey are asked to indicate agreement/disagreement with a set of relevant statements, the statements usually are ranked on a series of 3 or 5-point scales, where the rankings are presumed to be independent of each other and the assumption that equal agreement is indicated when two statements both get rankings of 5 becomes tenuous. It has been observed that the subject's perceived relevance or lack of relevance for each statement stretches or diminishes the distance between points on that scale. On the other hand, ranking a set of Q statements into a quasi-normal distribution requires that each statement be considered in relation to all the other statements. The result provides a much richer source of information concerning the attitude the subject expresses with her/his rankings.

4. One can speculate that one reason that Q factors usually show reliability across studies, as in this case, or across P samples is that, as Stephenson often claimed, the task of ranking is at least in part *projective*. Theodorson and Theodorson (1969, p. 317) describe a projective technique as:

> a method of studying personality or attitudes in which the subject is asked or encouraged to react to a standardized set of ambiguous or neutral stimuli. The unstructured stimuli allow the subject to project, read into, or interpret the material inadvertently so that his feelings and attitudes are revealed.

That is, with Q the subject cannot be aware, in detail, what his rankings of statements will reveal by way of attitude. If the claim that Q sorts are projective can be sustained, it follows that they are genuine revelations of attitude, and thus more likely to be reliable.

5. All of these studies' claims for the richness of data that results from the choice of Q methodology not withstanding, they appear to this author to shed little light on the question, what is there about such a trial that attracts so much public attention? These studies should not be penalized for not taking up this question, and there is no lack of literature attempting to answer it, but one can still wish for some

insight here. The important question that remains, it seems, is whether the massive media coverage is the instigator of such a high level of interest, or a warranted response to it.

Finally, one might indulge in a bit of speculation about the implications of this set of studies for public policy. For example, is there support here for an argument that legislative action is needed to protect the judicial process from the affects of a "media circus" like the Simpson trial? Hardly. The results indicate that the media's efforts tapped existing stereotypes and confidence—or lack of confidence—in the judicial process, rather than having any significant effect on either. By the same token, neither is there evidence that the coverage had significant effect on public perceptions of the fairness of the verdict? One can, of course, criticize the media circus on other grounds: emphasizing the sensational, giving the trial indefensible priority over a host of other matters with greater actual or potential impact on the public, questionably sustaining hero status for the defendant, etc. But media critics apparently will have to look elsewhere for support for such criticisms.

References

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