

## **Response to Dr. Brown's Comments on Quest-Sort**

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Dr. Brown's depth of expertise in Q methodology continues to serve us all well. I am indebted to him and appreciate his comments on my work. I believe that Dr. Brown has succinctly captured the essence and boundaries of the Quest-Sort's contribution in his first two paragraphs. That is, the Quest-Sort apparently provides virtually the same data as a traditional card sort, and potentially provides efficiencies in data collection that might prove valuable under certain conditions. That was my claim, and I am gratified that he concurs.

Dr. Brown is nonetheless reluctant to endorse the Quest-Sort. This is understandable in light of the comments with which he concludes his critique. Dr. Brown has apparently concluded that I proposed the Quest-Sort as an improvement to the traditional card sort and recommended it as a substitute for card sorting in examining all subject matter for which the card sort was invented. Rather, I proposed the Quest-Sort as an alternative to card sorts, perhaps more appropriate in certain data collection conditions for which the card sort is less than ideally suited. This is an important point to which I will return momentarily.

Dr. Brown's reluctance to endorse the Quest-Sort, however, seems overly influenced by historical events. I refer to his citations of previous modifications in technique, the track records of their authors, the "forgotten classic" about methods of impression, and the "deeper methodological considerations which were Stephenson's central concern." Of these, only the latter two can possibly constitute valid criticisms of my work.

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For instance, almost all of the examples Dr. Brown gives of previous "improvements," including his own, do not effectively distinguish between Likert-type ratings and forced-distribution rankings. I purposefully sought to minimize response biases always possible in free-distribution ratings, and to gain some sense of relative meaning among items, a measurement issue that Dr. Brown acknowledges has an important basis in Q methodology. I believe my original report serves testimony to my qualified success.

In addition, Dr. Brown's reticence due to the reputation (or lack thereof) gained by previous attempts at modification seems skeptical. I share Dr. Brown's "fervent" hopes that my research and the Quest-Sort are heard from again. In that regard, it would seem more helpful to register substantive criticism than suspicion.

Dr. Brown implies my lacking familiarity with the literature because I used paired comparisons as a benchmark to contrast with standard Q sorts and Quest-Sorts. I admit to having been unaware of the "forgotten classic" to which he refers, and appreciate his calling my attention to it. I am unconvinced, however, that this work obviates my results, and am left wondering what options or alternatives would have better served my purposes.

Clearly the most significant issue raised by Dr. Brown relates to the fundamental aims of Q research versus the assumptions implicit in the Quest-Sort and my data analyses, which may be inconsistent with those aims. Indeed, Dr. Brown advises me to examine those assumptions before applying my research methods to that subject matter for which Q methodology was invented. The fact is that neither my intent nor my claim was to "improve" methodology to examine the subject matter for which Q methodology was invented. Rather, my intent was to apply the principles of Q methodology in a venue for which *no other appropriate methodology has yet been invented.*

My motivation for developing the Quest-Sort was driven by research conditions for which the traditional card-sorting seemed inefficient or even infeasible. (My motivation for referring to this approach as "Quest-Sort" was also efficiency, i.e., in communicating comparisons between data collection techniques, a distinction is apparently still necessary.) The research question was not focused on gaining familiarity with an individual's subjectivity, the traditional domain of Q research. Rather, I was searching for the subjective meanings shared by members of organizational groups—organizational culture. But if the format for the Quest-Sort was not entirely new, neither was the application of Q methodology to the domain of

measuring organizational cultures.

In particular, recent work by Chatman and her colleagues (Chatman, 1989, 1991a, 1991b; Chatman & Jehn, 1994; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991) had incorporated Q methodology in exploring organizational cultures. This construct has proven especially elusive in the management literature because it inherently crosses levels of analysis. The consensus definition of organizational culture holds that it is the system of relevant beliefs and values shared by members of an organization. The definition implies that understanding an organization's culture requires some mechanism for discerning subjective meaning at the individual level and extrapolating that meaning to the system level of analysis. Perhaps Dr. Brown's suggestion that this logic be questioned will prove to be an important next step, but the argument nonetheless reflects the current status of thinking in the area.

Chatman and her colleagues have used traditional card sorts in at least two separate, multi-rater and multi-organization data collections. Chatman and associates have subjected their data to R-technique analyses, including factor analyses with varimax rotation to orthogonal solutions. This research has been extremely well received in the management academy. If their research lacks viability as a function of their violating key assumptions, it seems to have escaped notice.

Chatman and her colleagues had been provided very generous opportunities for data collection, including as much as two hours per respondent, time paid for by employers. Although I intended to model my research after that of the Chatman group, I was not so fortunate as to have two hours to collect data. I needed a faster way to collect Q data; thus, the Quest-Sort.

My own research in organizational cultures and organizational justice (Howard, 1993; Howard, 1994; Howard & Dougherty, under review; Howard & Miller, 1993; Howard, Siegel, & Scandura, under review) has been taking a decidedly constructivist turn, in part because of my growing appreciation for the theory underlying Q methodology. I still believe that Q methodology offers great promise for helping us to better understand cultural phenomena rooted in intrapersonal interpretation and subjectivity. I most heartily urge Dr. Brown to lend his remarkable insights and knowledge to criticize not only my own research, but that entire body of research. I am honored to have had his attention.

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