

# **SUBJECTIVITY, REPRESENTATION, AND COMMUNICATION: Report of the First British Q Conference**

**Rex Stainton Rogers**  
*University of Reading*

**Wendy Stainton Rogers**  
*The Open University*

*ABSTRACT: Four factors are described based on 13 Q sorts obtained from participants in the first British Q conference: Those whose reaction was positive, those who were critical, those who were frustrated about a perceived politicization in approaches to Q, and a factor which regarded the conference's social process as less successful than the debating dynamics. Additional comments from a questionnaire are also reported.*

## ***Introduction***

Participants in what some have dubbed "the First British Q Conference" (although it was broader than that) included representatives of the fields of communication, English literature, health and social welfare, international relations, market research, political science, psychology, psychiatry, social work, and sociology. The conference events are described in the April/July 1989 issue of *Operant Subjectivity* (pp. 110-114), where it was noted that a 44-item Q sort was mailed to participants as part of

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Authors' addresses: *Rex Stainton Rogers*, Department of Psychology, University of Reading, Bldg 3, Earley Gate, Whiteknights, Reading RG6 2AL, England; *Wendy Stainton Rogers*, Department of Health and Social Welfare, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA, England.

the appraisal process. What follows is a summary of those results.

### *Account I*

Thirteen Q sorts were returned, and these divided into four distinctive accounts of events. Eight of the participants, five of whom were British, defined the first factor, and five of them identified themselves as first and foremost social constructionist in approach. (Other social constructionists appeared on other factors.) The factor contains a majority of Q users; demographically, the mean age of those comprising factor I is higher than that of II and III.

The hallmark of account I is the extent of its treatment of the Workshop as a positive, significant and stimulating event. This is shown in the factor scores reported below (for factors I through IV, respectively) and in the parenthetical comments volunteered by persons giving this account.

I	II	III	IV	Statements
-4	-4	-3	0	The atmosphere was hostile and unwelcoming. ("You did everything possible to welcome and put us at ease.")
+3	+3	-2	-4	I have made contacts I hope to keep up and develop. ("A lot of good people attended.")
-4	-2	-3	-2	I got very little out of it. ("The opposite.")
+3	0	0	+2	I think the Workshop proceedings deserve publishing. ("Yes, but how and in what form?")
+4	+2	+4	+2	I would appreciate the opportunity to participate in some "follow-up" meeting. ("Definitely.")
+4	0	-3	+1	I've talked a lot about the Workshop since it ended. ("That talk has been positive.... Want

to keep up the Anglo-American connection....  
Would love to have a conference in the U.S.  
with this energy.")

+4 +3 +3 +2 It was good to get debate between people  
coming from different  
standpoints/approaches. ("Absolutely, this  
was one of the nicest things about the Reading  
Conference.")

-3 0 -1 -4 The Workshop was *not* a very important event  
in my terms. ("This workshop was very im-  
portant.")

#### Account II

This account was shared between a discourse analyst and a poststructuralist who uses Q, both of whom are U.K.-based. While generally positive about the event, this account was particularly prepared to be critically reflective of some features while, at the same time, placing special stress on its value as an integrative exercise (scores for factors I to IV, respectively):

-2 +2 -4 -3 I felt it was a "public relations exercise" to  
show off how much Q research Reading has  
generated. ("And why not?")

-1 -4 +2 -1 The attempt to link Q to other ideas and  
approaches *didn't* work. ("As a discourse ana-  
lyst, my main interest at the conference was  
how the two approaches could be linked.")

0 +4 0 0 There was a tendency for participants to be  
better talkers than listeners. ("Very true, but  
usual.")

+2 +4 +2 -2 The mix of people and approaches was an ef-  
fective one. ("As a discourse analyst, yes.")

*Account III*

The two persons whose rendered this account were a post-graduate student and a lecturer, both British users of Q and on the liberal wing of social constructionism. Although by no means wholly negative to the Workshop, this account evinces a level of frustration about a perceived politicization of the divergent and conflictual approaches to Q, which unbalanced the program and hampered attempted integrations with other work. The account is marked by a low perception of personal benefits, but this is not attributed to the event itself (scores for factors I to IV).

- +3 +3 -2 +4 I have made contacts I hope to keep up and develop. ("This was more my fault than lack of chance.")
- 1 -4 +2 -1 The attempt to link Q to other ideas and approaches *didn't* work. ("Q dominated everything.")
- +1 -2 +3 0 I came away feeling that there are "right" and "wrong" ways of "doing Q." ("Several different schools of thought and some rather proprietorial/dictatorial positions being adopted re Q.")
- +4 0 -3 +1 I've talked a lot about the Workshop since it ended. ("Not really... Talk a lot about Q anyway.")
- +1 0 +4 -1 Different *languages* rather than different *dialects* is the impression I gained about the uses and understandings of Q voiced at the Workshop. ("Yes, that's why I think more discussion of uses of Q would have been useful. We seemed to be working from totally different images of the person, rather than just for different purposes.")

- 2 -1 +1 -2 The impression was created that Q researchers need to "get their act together." ("Perhaps need to clarify where Q is appropriate, but I think that depends on who is using it!")

*Account IV*

This account was voiced by one person only, an American Q methodologist. Compared to the other accounts, this one reflects a distinctively bifurcated perception of the event as less successful in terms of social process and issue clarification, while at the same time more acceptable in terms of debating dynamics. The account is also unique in evincing a sense of an overloaded program which could have been usefully extended in time.

- +1 -1 +1 +4 I wish the Workshop could have run for longer. ("It would have been nice, in particular, to have gotten more of Stephenson's views.")
- 2 -3 -2 +1 Overall people *didn't* mix well.
- 0 +1 +1 -3 Sometimes the debate got too "personalized" for my taste. ("I'm probably getting used to it; furthermore, I'm getting to like the upset--it forces people to think.")
- 1 -1 0 +3 The program was overloaded. ("Again, endemic to conferences. A longer Q&A period would have been welcome.")
- 1 -2 -1 +2 I came away feeling rather confused.

Responses to an accompanying questionnaire support the conclusion that the event was generally regarded as stimulating:

*What did you most enjoy about the Workshop?* Alternative forms and uses of Q; interesting people and ideas.

*What questions did it raise for you?* Aspects of social constructionism.

*What books or papers would you recommend to the other participants?* Works by William Stephenson.

*What do you think we should do next?* Write a book, run a Q-only event, run a small scale event on Q and social constructionism, be ideological and challenge the constructed order!

This conference followup report was taken from a larger report filed with the sponsoring agency, the Economic and Social Research Council (United Kingdom). Additional details can be obtained from the authors.

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### ***Summary of the 5th Q Conference (26-28 October 1989)***

The final conference program, which participants received upon arrival, contained the following from Maimie (Mrs. William) Stephenson:

Today, October 27th, 1989, is a very special day for a band of scholars who are continuing an exciting quest. Many are here--including some of Will's earliest colleagues--Tom Danbury, "Will's Girls," Steve Brown and the "Circle of Friends"--it too, has widened into a net extending over continents. The spreading and growing awareness of what Q is all about was the great triumph of Will's last spring.

Today, Will would thank you all, with intensity for a special few, for your steadfastness, exploring spirits and inquiring minds, and for your continuing resolve to hold Q's banner high. As Will would say, "March on!"

We thank you deeply,  
*Maimie*