

MIXING METHODOLOGIES: AN AID IN DEVELOPING Q SAMPLES

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ABSTRACT: *Nominal group technique is described as a way to generate concourses and Q samples, and an illustration is provided in terms of issues expected to emerge as focal in a city council election. Speed in the generation of items and comprehensiveness of the resulting Q sample are cited as advantages under conditions of limited time and resources.*

One of the most time consuming and sometimes difficult parts of conducting a Q study is the development of the Q sample. Unless one is using a "ready-made" Q sample (McKeown & Thomas, 1988: 26-28), the researcher generally must embark on the sometimes odious task of collecting the needed stimulus items to represent his topic of investigation. This is painfully evident when examining issues of concern in particular geographic areas or among particular demographic groups.

Interviewing is often used as an extractor of statements of opinion, but the major drawback of interviewing, as McKeown and Thomas (1988: 25) so correctly point out, "...is convenience: Interviews require more time and effort than many subjects are willing to invest." This says nothing about the poor

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researcher who must conduct each of these interviews.

Public sources (i.e., newspapers, television, radio, etc.) as well as private interviews are frequently used to gather the concourse for the topic at hand (Brown, 1986b: 61). But here again, these may not be appropriate, depending on the time available or the demographic/geographic area of concern.

Nominal Group Technique

One technique that can aid the researcher in developing Q samples is nominal group technique (NGT), a relatively new small group process technique which allows a group of people to generate a vast number of ideas in a quick and amicable way. NGT was originally developed for use in business meetings (Delbecq, Van de Ven, & Gustafson, 1975). Since then, it has been expanded for use in public sector decision making (Coke & Moore, 1981; Moore, 1988), and recently the technique has been used by Fishel (1985a, 1985b) to facilitate the planing process for political campaigns.

NGT usually consists of four stages: (1) silent generation of ideas, (2) round-robin recording of the ideas, (3) group discussion of the ideas, and (4) voting. Only the first three steps are relevant to the Q methodologist for developing Q samples, so this paper focuses only on those steps.¹

¹Using a modified version of NGT to develop a population of policy alternatives, Brown (1986a) invited 23 master's and doctoral students to list ideas for improving graduate education in their department. Individuals exchanged their lists with others, stimulating additional ideas for the list. This process continued until all ideas were exhausted, these ideas then serving as the basis for a Q sample of policy alternatives which was administered to graduate students and members of the faculty.

An Illustration: Issues for a City Council Election

The political candidate in question was asked to recruit a diverse group of people for an NGT session to identify issues of concern which would later be placed in a Q sample and administered to the voters. The results from the Q study would then be used to guide the campaign communication strategy. Of the 15 who attended the NGT session, approximately half were male and half female, representing a broad range of ages as well as a diverse spectrum of occupations. Participants were told that they were asked to join because of the unique contributions they were capable of making.

The facilitator began by briefly describing the NGT process, after which the first NGT question was presented to the group: "What five issues do you believe are likely to emerge as the focal point of the 1989 race for City Council?" Participants each received a sheet of paper with the question typed at the top for the purpose of recording their ideas. Everyone completed this process within 15 minutes. Round-robin recording of the ideas allowed the group to eliminate duplicate issues, resulting in a group list of 38 different issues. Ideas were recorded on newsprint so the entire group could view them.

Next, participants were asked, "What other issues do you feel might be of concern to the voters in the City?" This was done to exhaust all ideas and to solicit other issues that may not "emerge as a focal point" of the Council race, but still be of concern to others. The facilitator instructed the group to call out any issues that came to mind. This question produced 11 additional issues. Once all of the ideas were recorded on newsprint, the facilitator read each one out loud. At this point, group members had the opportunity to clarify and discuss the issues, adding any additional information they felt was necessary.

Within two hours, the group had generated 49 different issues of concern. If it were left up to the candidate and/or campaign manager to develop these issue statements, it is unlikely that as many statements would emerge, even after weeks of thought. This is evident by comments made by both the candidate and campaign manager during the NGT ses-

sion. Comments such as "That's a good idea," or "I never would have thought of that," were frequently heard as the list of issues was being generated.

Concluding Remarks

The advantage of using NGT as the first step in developing statements for an issue Q study is the speed at which a broad range of statements can be generated. These statements can then be expanded or edited by the researcher as necessary. As a matter of fact, four additional statements that were not generated by the NGT participants ended up in the final Q sample of 41 items.

Participants in the NGT session should not be viewed as having the last word on what goes into the Q sample. The researchers developing the Q sample must not ignore their instincts or experience; rather, they must review the data from the NGT with an eye for omissions, and feel free to add those statements needed to assure the comprehensiveness of the Q sample.

Nominal group technique may not be appropriate for every research topic; however, on those occasions in which time is a critical factor and public opinion in a specific geographic area or among particular demographic groups is at issue, NGT can get the research started relatively quickly and easily.

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