**How is this feminist again? Q as a feminist methodology**

**Abstract**

In this paper we consider what it is that makes research feminist and relate this to Q methodology. Whilst acknowledging the multiplicity of feminist thought and approaches, we suggest that Q is an epistemologically versatile technique that can be usefully interwoven with diverse feminist concerns. Wediscuss four features of Q which we argue fit particularly comfortably into a broad feminist agenda: (1) the engagement with marginality, (2) the process of interpretation, (3) the role of reflexivity and (4) accessibility for novice researchers. We conclude that Q methodology, with its interest in and sensitivity to difference in perspectives, experiences and social realities, is compatible with feminist ideals and is an appropriate tool for producing psychological knowledge which can be used in the service of feminist principles.

**Introduction**

What constitutes a feminist methodology? What is it that makes research ‘feminist’? We are, of course, not the first to ask these questions. However, in this paper we relate the questions to a methodology we have all found useful in our own research. As we hope to convey, Q methodology is an appealing technique in the panoply of methods available for a number of reasons, not least of which is its unique blend of quantitative and qualitative analytics applied to the study of subjectivity. In view of the history of some forms of quantification which have tended to produce knowledge in a way that has devalued women’s experiences, it is perhaps easy to dismiss Q methodology as another “atomising numerology” (Stenner & Stainton Rogers 2004, p.101). Indeed, as we trace a path through our own engagement with both Q methodology and feminism, one of the authors recalls precisely this sort of dismissal when first reading about Q methodology: Surely the process of quantifying experience runs the risk of ‘averaging out’ what may well be important to more marginalised ways of understanding the world? How can such a technique be interwoven with feminist concerns? For some of the authors, the process of working through these questions alongside our own political concerns has allowed us to explore ways in which Q methodology can be located in the terrain of feminist methodology, offering a distinct contribution to the production of knowledge.

Whilst enthusiastic about the feminist potential of Q, we are not unaware of the possible pitfalls. Many authors have pointed out that treating specific methodologies as distinctively feminist is potentially problematic (e.g. Marecek, 1989, Harding, 1989; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Ussher, 1999). In the context of therapy, Dankoski (2000) cautions against drawing the boundaries around feminist research too tightly. Within social work, Gringeri and colleagues (2010) encourage feminist researchers to work toward destabilising binary thinking and foregrounding intersectionality. Yet, while feminists might differ with respect to the aims and emphases of methodological inquiry, they become, according to DeVault “bound together not by an agreement about answers but by shared commitment to questions” (1996, p. 27). In a broad sense, feminist methodology is concerned with a questioning of the ways in which knowledge produced about our social world engages with the social realities of those living in contexts of inequality, particularly women.

While feminist thought may arguably be generally described as highlighting, questioning and challenging gender-related inequities, there are many challenges to a unitary definition, arising from the variety of experiences, social realities, values and goals (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002). Thus, the question of a “feminist” methodology is complicated by the array of concerns brought to bear on methodological issues by differing approaches to feminism. Reflecting the diversity in feminist thought, feminist methodologies have been the subject of queries and contestations. As Unger (1981) pointed out some time ago, methodological issues are conceptual issues. When Wilkinson (1997) describes five feminist challenges to mainstream psychology it is clear that each conceptualises methodology differently. Rutherford (2011), informed by her historical approach, has more recently claimed that whilst feminists may vary in methodological focus (e.g. around reflexivity, power dynamics, social change), methodology remains informed by epistemology. Ramazanoglu and Holland (2002), in their discussion of methodology in social research, argue that any methodological decisions need to consider matters of ontology, epistemology, ethics, as well as issues around the production of knowledge and its consequences, such as accountability and power.

Broadly speaking, such decisions are grounded in understandings of methodological issues arising from feminist critique which aims to problematize and transform gender inequalities. The starting point for these discussions was grounded in the observation that rather than producing politically neutral knowledge, mainstream psychology's use of the scientific method contained gender bias. As was particularly the case in early psychological research, women’s perspectives were routinely minimised, side lined or ignored. Thus, in psychology feminist questioning has, from the beginning, challenged mainstream empirical approaches to the discipline (e.g. Calkins, 1896; Hollingsworth, 1914; Weisstein, 1968; Unger, 1978). Whilst not formulated in line with feminist critique, the rationale underpinning the development of Q shares some of these broad concerns about psychology’s use of scientific method and this, we suggest, is one way in which Q resonates with feminist methodological concerns. To contextualise this point, we will briefly describe Q and the background to its development.

**Q Methodology**

Q methodology was devised by Stephenson (1935) as a means of studying subjectivity. Its point of methodological departure from conventional approaches lies in its inversion of the statistical technique of factor analysis. Whilst, in its conventional form, factor analysis is used to detect associations between variables, Q inverts the procedure to detect associations between the patterns expressed by participants. In a standard Q study, participants are asked to sort a set of statements using a quasi-normal distribution. They do so in relation to the topic under investigation from most to least resonant with their perspective (for example, most agree to least agree). This process is called Q sorting. Factor analysis is then used to identify patterns in the Q sorts produced by the various participants. Representations of the factors identified are then produced through the weighted merging of those Q sorts which correlate highly with that factor. These exemplifying Q sorts describe a perspective or understanding on the issue under consideration. The researcher then interprets these through a thematic or discursive reading of statements and their relative positions. (For a comprehensive discussion of the mechanics of Q methodology see Brown, 1980 or Watts & Stenner, 2012).

As mentioned earlier, Q methodology might appear at first glance to be just another “atomising numerology” (Stenner & Stainton Rogers 2004, p.101). However, its development represented a radical departure from the methods of mainstream quantitative psychology. As Watts and Stenner (2005) note, at the time Stephenson was concerned that the use of hypothetico-deductive measurement and testing was somewhat premature in psychology. This, he attributed to his understanding that the discipline had “by no means achieved a sophisticated theoretical status, with ideal constructs such as physics had fashioned for itself. The situations in psychology, therefore, calls for an attitude of curiosity” (1953, p.151). This “attitude of curiosity” is reflected in the operation of Q methodology as an exploratory method. Unlike psychometrics, the aim of Q methodology is not to test participants, measure variables or support/reject hypotheses but rather to investigate issues. As, in this sense, “the situation in psychology” remains effectively unchanged, we would argue, ‘curiosity’ should retain its critical role in methodology.

To say that Q is exploratory might seem at odds with a procedure that could appear akin to traditional questionnaires or attitude scales. However, because, as implied above, Q sorting involves using a rank ordered scale, this apparent similarity is superficial. Importantly, Q does not fix the meaning of responses *a priori*. Unlike traditional rating scales which work with absolute responses to statements, Q works with relative agreement and disagreement produced through their positioning in the Q sorting procedure. It is by design subjective and statements only become meaningful with respect to their positioning in relation to all other statements. Thus it is the gestalt patterning of statements that is of central importance (Good, 2000).

As Febbraro (1995) points out, Q’s departure from hypothetico-deductivism coupled with its focus on subjective life has appealed to a number of feminist scholars. This is because it represents a problematisation of the scientific method that is compatible with some existing feminist critiques. Q has been attractive to feminist empiricists because it offers a procedure for the empirical investigation of subjectivity. This feature of Q fits with the aims of objective empirical quantitative analysis but does not preclude a critique of gender bias inherent within much traditional mainstream work. Q’s use of both quantitative and qualitative analytics also mean that it can be used strategically to legitimise the feminist political agenda to mainstream psychology or to trouble false dichotomies that have been used to undermine qualitative feminist work (e.g. feminine, soft, qualitative vs. hard quantitative, masculine and so on) (Lazard, 2009). In addition to this, Q’s theoretical flexibility allows for its accommodation within differing feminist epistemologies such as standpoint or poststructuralist approaches. More specifically, Q’s ability to tap into perspectives could allow a standpoint researcher to hear a diversity of women’s voices or a social constructionist to capture multiplicity without having to specify criteria for any one ‘truth’. Thus, this methodological tool has the potential to facilitate the pursuit of a diverse set of feminist aims and goals (Febbraro, 1995).

In the context of its epistemological versatility, we would like to discuss four features of Q which we would argue fit particularly comfortably into a broad feminist agenda: (1) the engagement with marginality, (2) the process of interpretation, (3) the role of reflexivity and (4) accessibility for novice researchers. We will address these points in turn.

**Resonances and Affinities**

***Marginality***

Like feminist work in psychology, Q methodology has similarly occupied a marginal position in relation to mainstream psychology. By integrating quantitative and qualitative aspects, Q Methodology has a *qualiquantological* heritage (Stenner, Watts & Worrell, 2007). According to Kitzinger (1999), this feature renders Q open to marginalisation by both quantitative and qualitative researchers: the former due to the method’s departure from the theoretical and methodological principles of traditional psychometric testing and, the latter due to the (inaccurate) assumption that the use of statistical procedures involves the translation of meaning into numbers. In common with qualitative approaches more generally, Q has also been rendered ‘unscientific’ which draws on a series of dichotomies (objective/subjective, rational/irrational, science/non-science) that often become interwoven with problematic gendered polarities (soft/feminine as opposed to hard sciences/masculine). However, its position as ‘other’ is not the only way in which Q comes to the issue of marginalisation. Capdevila and Lazard (2009) point to two further ways in which features of Q resonate with feminism(s) engagement with marginality.

Firstly Q enables a multitude of voices to be heard, and so goes beyond polarized viewpoints allowing for the identification of marginal(ised) understandings. As we discussed earlier, various strands of feminist work have attempted to explore and ultimately challenge problematic patterns of marginalisation by, for example, opening up spaces to hear marginalised perspectives. Q, by design, makes all perspectives or narratives in the data set visible (Capdevila & Lazard, 2009). A common criteria for the identification of factors in a Q study requires only that a factor explain more of the study variance than that of a single sort (e.g. that it have an eigenvalue greater than one). This means that a perspective need only to be shared, and need not be dominant, to be recognised. According to Brown (2004) “the mechanics of Q methodology make it difficult for any viewpoint to fall by the wayside unnoticed” (p. 11). Indeed, participant recruitment in Q studies is often concerned with facilitating the manifestation of multiplicity by seeking out finite diversity. This can involve strategies such as targeting representatives of different stakeholder groups to the recruitment of participants with specialised knowledge of the topic, as well as of participants with no particular or direct interest. The former maximises diversity and the latter may bring about “hearing the unexpected; exposing whether certain knowledges are uniquely ‘expert’, and general ‘democratic’ or ‘emancipatory’ ideals” (Stainton Rogers, 1995: 182). According to Capdevila and Lazard (2009), this feature marks Q as distinctive to many other quantitative and qualitative approaches. For example, in quantitative methods such as surveys, marginalised perspectives or understandings tend to disappear through averaging across demographic variables. Similarly, it is possible in qualitative approaches to prioritise dominant discourses or themes. In contrast, Q has no such aims and instead treats all shared perspectives equally, allowing for the identification of both marginalised and dominant narratives.

Secondly Q that allows attention to be focused on marginality because it facilitates the examination of specific issues within a wider narrative. Groups of items can come together consistently across narratives to identify issues of concern. For instance, a study on post pregnancy body image drew attention to constructions of stress and families in new mothers’ experiences of their bodies (Jordan, Capdevila & Johnson, 2005); the quality of the relationships between patients and doctors come to the fore in an exploration of understandings of IBS (Stenner, Dancey & Watts, 2000); meanings ascribed to notions of independence and control in subjective assessments of quality of life have been similarly identified (Stenner, Cooper & Skevington, 2003).

While Q does not claim to exhaustively identify all possible accounts or perspectives available on a given topic, it has been used in feminist research to tap into the complexity as well as diversity of perspectives on many issues. For example, in her classic study on lesbian identities, Kitzinger (1987) used Q methodology to tap into the manifold ways in which lesbian identities might be understood. This study opened up a space for those identities not often discussed in psychological work at the time (e.g. that which is neither simply ‘pathological’ nor irrefutably ‘healthy’) to be expressed.

The ability of Q to allow for the articulation of perspectives that are marginal, multiple, or in some way ‘other’ is reflected in a diverse body of Q methodological work that is explicitly feminist (e.g. Kitzinger, 1987; Senn, 1996; Lazard, Buchanan & Capdevila, 2002; Jordon, Capdevila & Johnson, 2005; Roper & Capdevila, 2010; Cross, 2013).

***Interpretation***

Feminist methods emphasize the importance of context both to the production and the interpretation of accounts, and acknowledge the collaborative character of the research process, in that both participants and researchers bring their concerns, assumptions and expectations into this context (e.g. Nicolson, 1995; Riger, 1992). In Q methodology, in sorting the items, participants establish meaning in relation to their own concerns from specific perspectives and locations. Stenner, Watts & Worrell (2007) highlight the fact that, in Q, the meaning of an item is not necessarily predefined by the researcher; indeed, one of the assumptions that Q operates on is that sorters will draw on various cultural understandings of the topic under investigation, and may themselves have different understandings of the items. According to Stenner et al. (2007), Q-sorters are “genuinely active participants who operate on a set of items from an explicitly self-referential and semantic […] point of view” (p.216).

Q is primarily concerned with understandings, viewpoints, and perspectives, making no *a priori* suppositions about the value or salience of particular accounts. In the relationship between researchers, participants and findings of a study, “it is the participants in the study who determine the lineaments of meaning, salience, connectedness” according to Stainton Rogers (1997/1998, p. 9). This aspect, in fact, is a contributing element to Q’s capacity to identify novel, unexpected or surprising understandings – because of the emphasis on the viewpoints produced by the sorters, not those of the researchers (Snelling, 1999).

This feature constitutes yet another characteristic aligning Q with feminist methodology, through the engagement with the expression of participants’ worldviews (Riger, 1999). The Q sorting process itself can be self-administered so that, although interviews may be used to enhance analysis, Q methodological research can be undertaken without interviews (e.g. Roper & Capdevila, 2010) avoiding some aspects of the inevitable power dynamics that these entail (Wilkinson, 1997). Indeed, Kitzinger (1986) suggested that uses of Q might be made even more ‘democratic’ by extending participants’ contribution and role, and encouraging them to engage not only in the sorting, but also in the construction and interpretation of items. This endeavour, as Riger (1999) points out, would be of interest to feminist researchers because it could facilitate the rebalancing of the inherent power relations between researcher and the researched: participants can exercise greater control over the research, by ensuring the prioritization of issues of relevance to them. Following Kitzinger (1986), this approach was attempted by Billard (1999), in an action research endeavour aimed at examining the aspects facilitating or impeding staff’s participation in organisational decision-making. The approach enabled participants’ ideas and concerns to be reflected in the Q items. However, it was also seen as challenging with regard to analysis and interpretation of results, in terms of time and knowledge required. More recently, a collaborative approach to developing the Q sample was adopted by Capdevila et al (2009) in a Q study evaluating an offender rehabilitation programme. While here participants were not involved in the statistical analysis of findings, they contributed to the piloting and refining of the Q items and were consulted in the factor interpretation. These activities sought to take participants’ interests and concerns into account, by recognizing and acknowledging them both at the design stage and in establishing the study findings.

Through the focus on participants’ perspectives, rather than on the imposition of meaning by the researcher, Q can be more transparent, as well as more empowering, than some other qualitative methods. Kitzinger (1999) has argued that, in traditional discursive methods, the power of the researcher is more prominent, if less visible. In analyzing textual data, the researcher decides what counts as relevant or salient in participants’ accounts. In Q, however, the interpretation is directly guided by the sorters; that is, the latter have an unmediated say in what *they* consider salient and relevant, through the relational, contextual placement of items. Moreover, Q participants can often contribute to the process of interpretation by commenting on the individual items during sorting, in post-sorting interviews or by checking the factor interpretations. Thus, Q illustrates its commitment to feminist values of collaboration and the transformation of the relations of power between the researcher and the researched (DeVault, 1996).

***Reflexivity***

As previously noted, feminist research acknowledges the researcher’s role in the production of knowledge – from the research questions asked, to the study design used through to the process of interpretation. Feminist critique of mainstream methods has often highlighted the lack of reflexivity in traditional psychological research and the way that this makes the researcher appear invisible. This approach leaves power (im)balances unexamined. Although this may be conceptualised and practiced in different ways (see Finlay, 2002), feminist research methods have consequently often involved a commitment to reflexivity (see Wilkinson 1988). Wilkinson (1988) suggests three types of reflexivity. Personal reflexivity relates to the researcher’s own identity. Functional reflexivity, closely linked to personal reflexivity, relates to such things as choice of topic, theory and method. Disciplinary reflexivity acknowledges the positioning of the disciplinary framework within which one is working. However it is conceptualised, a commitment to a feminist, reflexive approach will stress the importance of being aware of and acknowledging the assumptions, values, expectations and interests of the researcher – in other words, who we are and what we bring to the research endeavour, as well as the power relations in the research process (Crawford & Kimmel, 1999; Griffin & Phoenix, 1994; Holland & Ramazanoglu, 2002). Feminist standpoint research emphasizes the need for critical reflexivity, for recognizing the situatedness of perspective and the boundaries of knowledge claims (Griffin & Phoenix, 1994), and for making the researcher ‘visible’ in the research process (DeVault, 1996)

In this regard, the Q researcher may be made ‘visible’ and may examine their own positioning in relation to the topic investigated (as well as in relation to the participants) by representing their own perspective in a Q sort. This has been a feature of Q methodological work within the ‘British Dialect’ (Stainton Rogers, 1995)(e.g. Kitzinger, 1986; Stainton Rogers and Kitzinger, 1986; Roberts, 2011). This gives Q a particular advantage since the researcher can examine their own position without introspection or intersubjective reflection (although these are not precluded) and may thus avoid the potential dangers of infinite regress or of overshadowing the participant’s account with their own (Finlay, 2002). In addition, unlike most qualitative work where only data extracts selected by the researcher are included, the source data (i.e. the Q items and a tabular portrayal of their positionings in each factor) are always available to the reader of a Q methodological study (Watts & Stenner, 2005). This not only makes the researcher’s interpretation more transparent but also allows an interpretation to be challenged.

Beside openness to academic challenges, facilitated by the transparency of reporting outlined above, Q findings may, as mentioned in the previous section, be opened up for discussion with the research participants. As reflexivity “has to be both collective and contested” (Holland & Ramazanoglu, 2002, p. 119), this practice enables the acknowledgement of and engagement with issues of power in the research process. Such discussions give Q researchers the opportunity to reflect critically on their frame of reference, readings and interpretations, as well as on the implications and consequences of the knowledge produced.

***Accessibility***

Lastly, we would argue that Q methodology is well suited for use by students and inexperienced researchers. Indeed all the authors of this paper first used Q as students, in one case for an undergraduate project. We have also, in our teaching, used Q as a bridge between hypothetico-deductive research techniques in psychology and qualitative approaches (see also, Sell and Brown, 1984).

This suitability is due to the robustness of the approach where as Stainton Rogers (1995) suggests, even a less than ideal Q sort can still produce useful results (unlike a poor questionnaire). Q sorts can be undertaken by participants as a self-completion task without the direct involvement of the researcher and the notion of finite diversity inherent in Q means that participant numbers can be fairly limited. These features make Q economical and straightforward to administer making it useful even for undergraduate projects where time and resources are very limited. Moreover, with the possibility of using thematic or discursive readings of statements and their relative positions, Q is ideal as an introduction to the subjectivity of ‘qualitative methods’ despite its qualiquantological heritage. Just as we have already suggested relative to the inclusion of ‘non-expert’ participants, this suitability of Q for use by students and less experienced researchers can be seen as emancipatory. This not only resonates with the ideals of many feminists, both within and outside the academy, but has particular resonance for POWS where there is a long standing commitment to providing a supportive environment for students and practitioners (Burman,2011). A factor which is particularly important for those less experienced in presenting their work to an audience.

(**In)conclusion**

In this paper we have highlighted the way in which, Q, like many feminist approaches, concerns itself with psychology’s (mis?)use of the scientific method. Like much feminist critique, Q challenges mainstream empirical approaches to the discipline and, in our discussions we have identified a number of resonances and affinities between Q methodology and feminist approaches to knowledge production. Whilst Q does not explicitly theorise power, a critical component of feminist analysis, it is designed to bypass some of the more insidious aspects of issues of power in research. It does this by ‘giving voice to’ or ‘making visible’ marginalised viewpoints. In this way it offers an opportunity to address imbalance by allowing participants, rather than researchers, to determine salience and, to an extent, meaning. It achieves this by facilitating a reflexive engagement with issues of power within the research relationship and through its accessibility to novice researchers.

As discussed earlier, investigative approaches informed by feminist notions have been effective in challenging the representation of gender identities and relations in social research, and in addressing some of the power relations and ensuing implications. However, their theoretical and political underpinnings and concern with emancipation mean that their application need not be defined by or limited to gender-related inquiries. As has been argued throughout this paper, Q methodology was designed for the exploration of subjectivity, and is characterised by an interest in and sensitivity to difference in perspectives, experiences and social realities. Such features render it compatible to feminist notions, and make it an appropriate tool for producing psychological knowledge which can be used in the service of feminist principles.

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