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## Journal Review on Q Methodology

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### ABSTRACT

*This is a conceptual paper issued in a journal called 'International Journal of Social Research Methodology' published on 11 Dec 2009 from the University of Southampton, UK and the impact factor of the journal is 2.110 in 2017. This article was written by three authors, they are Ingunn T. Ellingsen, Ingunn Størksen and Paul Stephens. This article is taken for the article review consideration. This journal is telling about the use of Q methodology in social work.*

Keywords: *Q Methodology, Social Work*

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## 1. Introduction

### About Authors

Firstly, Ingunn T. Ellingsen is a qualified social worker and a lecturer in Social Work. She is a PhD student in the Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger, Norway. Her current research focuses on how children in long term foster placement perceive their family. Secondly, Ingunn Størksen has a PhD in Psychology from 2006. Her thesis is entitled *Parental Divorce: Psychological Distress and Adjustment in Adolescent and Adult Offspring*. She works at the Centre for Behavioural Research at the University of Stavanger, where she leads a research and development project that focuses on young children and parental divorce and the children's adjustment in day-care. Finally, Paul Stephens is Professor of Social Pedagogy in the Department of Social Studies, University of Stavanger, Norway. His current research interests include the nature of social pedagogy, quantitative and qualitative aspects of local poverty and a "social pedagogy of the oppressed".

### Target group of the Article

The article is focused on mixed audience of researchers within academic and other research organizations as well as practitioners especially in the field of Social Work.

### Summary of the Article

Q methodology was introduced by a British Physicist and Psychologist; William Stephenson in 1935 which is an alternative to traditional quantitative and qualitative method. It is an approach for studying subjectivity and aim of this paper to describe and critique the theory and application of Q methodology in Social Work.

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## 2. Research in Social Work

The objective of research in social science is to understand problem and assessing the impact of social policies and professional interventions. There are two methodological approaches in social researches, quantitative and qualitative. The first one is hypothetic –deductive which is dealing with numbers; the latter is inductive and dealing with words. Both research traditions have distinct goals. Both quantitative and qualitative researches have their own limitations because both of them cannot be applied to all situations. The goal of Q methodology is to uncover different patterns of thoughts, perceptions, opinions, attitudes and beliefs using a systematic and rigorous quantitative procedure. Thus it is a way of understanding subjective phenomena in a quantitative way

## 3. An Overview of the Q Research Process

It is a way of understanding subjective phenomena or behaviours by using objective procedure. Subjectivity refers to ideas that are based on personal opinions, life experiences and feelings. Participant responses are analysed in Q methodology and these can provide rich qualitative data to enhance the findings. Q methodology allows us to identify, understand, and categorize individual perceptions and opinions, and then cluster groups of these categorizations. This research approach also emphasizes the qualitative how and why peoples think the way they do, but not how many people think a certain way. Studies using Q methodology typically employ small sample sizes, and results of these studies are less influenced by low response rates compared with the results of survey studies. Moreover, Q methodology allows us to identify groups of participants having similar and alternate viewpoints and in turn to ascertain similarities and differences between groups, because the idea behind Q methodology is that only a limited number of distinct opinions exist about any topic. Instead of generalizing the phenomenon being studied back to a population, Q methodology seeks to capture and interpret the various points of view held by populations

## 4. Five Steps in Q Methodology

1. Identifying a concourse on the topic of interest
2. Developing a representative set of statements (Q sample)
3. Specifying the respondents for the study (P-set) and conditions of instructions
4. Administering the Q sort (rank ordering of statements)
5. Factor analysing and interpretation

### 1. *Identifying a concourse on the topic of interest*

A concourse is ordinary conversation, commentary and discourse about everyday life and includes all communication about a specific topic. A concourse is not restricted to words, but might include collections of paintings, pieces of art, photographs and even musical selections). A concourse may be obtained from both primary and/or secondary sources. Primary sources include interviews, group discussions and talk shows. Secondary sources include photographs, newspaper clippings, literature and editorials. It is better to include umbrella questions to get multiple possible answers from a person interviewed and it is not advisable to use fully structured interviews because it may override the rich qualitative nuances.

### 2. *Developing a representative set of statements (Q sample)*

Smaller set of statements are developed which represent different facets of concourse and in a limited number is called Q sample. It is necessary to reduce the statements in order to make the concourse manageable. Generating Q sample is the most challenging part of the of the method. The statements should be self-referent, allowing subjective viewpoint to be disclosed. Factual statements are not applicable. Yes or No and True or False are the normal answers to factual statements. Such statements do not have the scalability that is needed in a Q study. Finally Q sample is printed into individual cards for Q sorting.

### 3. *Specifying the respondents for the study (P-set) and conditions of instructions*

The P-set refers to the respondents participating in the Q study. The aim of the study is to obtain subjectivity by revealing the number and nature of the different points of view. It is rare to have more than 50 persons in a P-set. At this level it is necessary to define the instructions that are to be given to the respondents for the Q sorting process.

### 4. *Administering the Q sort (rank ordering of statements)*

Q sorting procedure is the main activity in this stage. The statements in the Q samples are presented to the respondents on separate cards, which is randomly numbered. The Q sort procedure involves ranking the statements into a distribution grid. For example -4 to+4 in which +4 indicates the

statement that the respondent is most agree with and -4 represents the statements that the respondents is most disagree with.

### 5. *Factor analysing and interpretation*

Analysis and interpretation is the final step in the process. PQ Method software programme is by researchers when conducting Q studies. Q sorts are entered into the programme and the Q sorts are analysed using a by-person factor analysis. The by-person factor analysis reveals how subjects are kind of statements are typically rated positively or typically rated positively or typically rated negatively by individuals. Factor loadings are essential for defining and interpretation of factors. The factor scores represent the average of the scores given by individuals.

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## 5. The Advantage of Q Methodology in Social Work Research

Social work is a broad field that involves dealing with children, youth, adults and families, and especially with marginalized groups affected by poverty, unemployment, disability, substance misuse and so on. Participation and empowerment, of the above mentioned people are central features in social work.

### a) *Participation*

User participation empowers service users and enables them to take an active part in their own emancipation. In Q, the participants are given an active role as the concourse derives from the participants' communication. A beneficial consequence of this may be that biases related to the researcher's preconceptions are minimized. Conventional qualitative research methods based on in-depth interviews usually require that the participants have relatively good verbal skills. Not everyone has the verbal skills that are required in order to participate in such research. Even small children can participate in the research and letting children have their say. Individuals and groups who find it difficult to participate in more comprehensive quantitative or qualitative research may therefore be able to participate and illuminate their points of view in a Q study. Example: children with learning disabilities, Elderly, Patients etc. Because in Q methodology, pictures and images, as well as phrases or single words or more wide ranging verbal statements can be used.

### b) *A method combining strengths from quantitative and qualitative research*

While Q uses quantitative instruments, its field of study is human subjectivity. The use of interviews in order to validate the interpretation of the factors that emerge and to provide a deeper understanding of the research topic emphasizes the qualitative character of the method. Therefore the qualitative and quantitative aspects are intermingled at almost every point in a Q study.

### c) *Inclusion*

Social workers encounter individuals from a wide range of backgrounds, many of whom are excluded in one form or another. Q method is well-suited to research that involves such individuals because it can offer a non-threatening and easy-to-use means of obtaining *their story*, especially because the participants do not necessarily have to verbalize or go into extensive details about possible sensitive issues. When it comes to studying social problems and marginalized groups, Q may be a particularly valuable research method.

## Limitations

- If the aim of the research is to identify the distribution of views across a population given in percentages and numbers, other methods are more suitable.
- It is difficult to determine definitive cause of a problem by using Q methodology because the aim of Q is to study subjectivity, and to give reasonable explanations to the participants' points of view.

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## 6. Critical Appraisal

It has the relevance in the field of social work because many aspects of social work deal with issues that do not lend themselves easily to quantification, often because of the multi-layered realities arise in the field. Q provides a technique to study systematically qualitative aspects of human subjectivity in a way that reduces the interference of the researcher's preconceptions. The article was well structured because it starts with abstract where its relevance has clearly explained, proceeds with different steps in Q methodology and concluded with its application. The historical overview of the methodology depicts its gradual development and authenticity. The language used here is rather simple and easy to understand especially those who are already in the academic field. If the explanation was depended on certain Q methodology examples especially a topic based on qualitative methodology, then the readers could easily apply the knowledge to their academic area. One of the limitations of the Q methodology is that, it is not widely used in the social work field. So this methodology must be introduced widely in the academic desks.

**REFERENCES**

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