A Q study in waiting: three hunting discourses

Lucy Parry, University of Sheffield

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Here I present some tentative findings from my pilot Q study which aims to map out the current discourses that exist around the hunting of wild mammals in the UK. I first provide an overview of Q methodology, before going on to outline how I approached the study. I will then present some initial interpretation of three anti-hunting discourses and return to my original aim of the study - to understand how animals are represented in hunting discourses and to understand the role of scientific knowledge in people’s evaluation of hunting - and query whether it is possible to achieve these or even desirable in the context of Q. Relevant to this is the 'Q community’s' particular approach to using the method which can pose challenges to researchers. Finally, I will ask the audience to inspect my Q statements and there will be an opportunity to participate in a Q sort for those who are interested. As this research is still in the developmental stages, feedback is most welcome and as such I advance an informal, discussion style seminar.
Why am I even bothering to present a pilot study?

Well, several reasons. Firstly, Selen asked me. Second, I thought it was a good idea to get to grips with the statistical element of the study as a dry run: I cannot emphasise enough how much I am NOT a quants or stats person. The last time I actually studied anything vaguely numerical was nigh on 12 years ago. Finally, once I started to actually do the analysis, some interesting results came out of it that started me thinking about additional issues, and this is what I want to focus on today.

What is Q? Why am I using it?

Approaching Q – how I have done it and some challenges so far

The Findings

Factor 1: Social Critical

They are concerned about the cruelty involved in hunting and the pain suffered by an animal is important to them, but they don’t identify strongly with animal welfare. They see it as a class issue. They cautiously agree with drag hunting but they don’t feel strongly about it. They don’t agree that there is a big rural/urban divide and are unsympathetic to the notion of traditional countryside pursuit. They don’t feel passionately about the countryside, or they don’t have much direct experience of it - this is where demographic info comes in.

They favour conservation policies that prioritise the animals' needs, and fox hunting is not that. The social factors are important in their evaluation - they agree with 20 so much because they feel the reasons for hunting are trivial and sadistic. On the other hand, they accept animal sentience unequivocally as a basic principle. Basically sounds like an anti-countryside alliance discourse. The actual details of hunting in practice don’t concern them as much. They are against hunting

Ontology/assumptions: class structure, animal sentience

Natural Relationships: inequal power relations between classes

Agents and motives: hunters, upper classes, working classes, elites – preserving old power relations/hierarchy, aggression

Metaphors/rhetorical devices: class structure, sadism, cruelty, elitist and exclusive, artificial

Factor 2: Animal Rights

Much more concerned with animals, but not necessarily an animal welfare ethic - neutral for welfare as the main concern and the terrier work - welfare is NOT their main concern. Possibly more of an animal rights discourse, given the high score for same moral consideration and priority of animal sentience. They also consider themselves animal lovers. But at the same time, they are NOT what the countryside alliance might call victims of the 'bambi effect' - they don't like anthropomorphising animals.
But interestingly, the person that said this explained they felt strongly it was wrong to compare animals to humans, because they're just different, but he was at pains to emphasise that he didn't think they were just beasts. Not that concerned with class issues, although they agree that the class structure favours hunters, it's not a major concern for them and lowest score out of the 3. Strongly disagree with some of the 'rational' arguments for hunting - they don't think it's effective, or pest control, or natural. All these objections relate to the animals, not the people or social issues, I note.

Basically they completely reject the practical rationale for hunting, and their rationale for doing this is based on an animal rights ethic.

Ontology: animal sentience, animal rights, wildlife

Natural relationships: different human attitudes to animals, animal-focused conservation

Agents and motives: human consideration of animal needs,

Metaphors: anthropomorphising,

Factor 3: The Broader Context

Cynical about pro-hunting arguments, but not anti-hunting per se. Concerned about the welfare of all the animals involved, scoring highest for concern about overall welfare, the dogs and horses, and respecting animal sentience. Don't feel strongly about hunting as cruelty for fun. Unsympathetic to animal rights. Suggests that possibly, more experience or first hand knowledge of hunting - strongly disagree that hunting helps maintain the countryside, and have negative perceptions of the hunting community. Class important to them. There is no one theme that seems to dictate their view - their strongest views incorporate statements on class, animals and the countryside. Only factor where place has featured strongly.

Both people that defined this factor were PhD students who were concerned with broader political context - one mentioned that it was a political issue and tied into his views on animal rights, land exploitation and development discourses. The other talked about how she used to have a more dogmatic view, but having learnt more about the issue now felt she had a more balanced view.

Ontology: complexity, class structure, animal sentience, animal welfare ethic, the countryside

Natural Relationships: Countryside as defined by humans, but not by hunting/

Agents and motives: human demand, arrogant attitude of hunters,

Metaphors: class stereotypes, arrogant attitudes, civilised society

Discussion

Scientific Knowledge – misplaced assumption or too soon to tell?

Something I was initially interested in is how scientific knowledge/evidence can be seen as a ‘value neutral trump card’ in terms of animal representation. In the Q study I wanted to explore how
people used scientific evidence in their evaluation of hunting. However, following the suggested unstructured approach to gathering the concourse, I used semi-structured interviews and open questions to collect my statements. In this, I asked people things like ‘can you explain what has informed your position on hunting?’ eg. Personal experience, gut feeling, research and reading reports etc. What came out of that was that no one mentioned scientific evidence explicitly. However, the Countryside Alliance DOES make significant use of scientific evidence to support its claims, and a number of statements made by interviewees – such as “Hunting with dogs is the most effective method of controlling the fox population” and “the fox population needs to be controlled” are in reports, linked to purported evidence. So what does this mean for me?

It could mean that people have processed the evidence from these reports and utilise it discreetly and implicitly. Or it could mean that they have just come to the same conclusions through personal experience or gut instinct. So how do I discern this in my Q study? I could ask people during background questions, “what is your main source of information on hunting?”, or I could ask, if people place ‘fact-type’ statements at the extreme ends, “can you explain what has informed this view?” This is what I did in the pilot.

Consider for example, statement 21 “Hunting with dogs is the most effective way of controlling the population”. There were two participants who strongly disagreed with this – one basically said that they disagreed strongly because it was just plain nonsense, and one said it annoyed them because from stories they had heard personally, this was not the case and that hunts don’t actually end up killing that many foxes. Several people cautiously disagreed with the statement, which could mean that they simply don’t feel like they know enough on the topic to make a strong judgement on it. Remember, this is just from my pilot study – in my actual P sample I do not expect this to be the case.

So thus far, no one has referred explicitly to ‘science’ in order to support their positions. What does this mean? Am I wrong in suggesting that scientific evidence is presented as a value-neutral trump card in animal representation? Both my concourse, statements and initial Q sorts seem to suggest that people evaluate hunting as a social and moral issue first and foremost. Did I ask the wrong questions in interview? Do I need to probe more during the Q sort? Or, does the data just say something different to what I expected? Should I include a statement that goes something like, “scientific evidence shows that…”

There is another possibility, that might not become clear until later down the line when I investigate what’s going on in empowered space. It’s just possible that scientific evidence is not so prominent in public space – but it is in evidence-based policy making. In this case, I would expect to see far more references to scientific evidence and reports in communication about hunting. This is seen to some extent in interest groups in public space – both the RSPCA and the Countryside have their own scientific evidence to back their claims, and these claims are included in my Q set. However, I did not explicitly reference this in my statements because, as I mentioned earlier, they came from interviewees who did NOT explicitly reference scientific evidence. That is, all except one interviewee from a leading animal welfare charity who talked about science – BUT the statements he made about it were off the record.

Now, one possible response to all this is that I should have planned my statements more carefully to ensure that I would get the information I want. However, there are two problems with taking this
more structured approach. The first is perhaps one of methodological conservatism when it comes to Q and the ‘Q community’. The leading scholars and proponents of Q are quite particular about how and why Q is used. For example, centroid extraction is the preferred method of factor extraction, and using PCA is somewhat frowned upon. In terms of gathering the material for the statements (known as the concourse), an unstructured, fluid approach is advocated. Theory-led concourses are highly discouraged. This is understandable, given that Q aims to understand subjectivity and is not deductive – it’s not designed to test anything.

In my case, I want to identify and interpret discourses out of the data. Originally, I had planned to follow something akin to Dryzek’s criteria for a discourse, and make sure that my statements fitted into the different categories – ontological assumptions, agents and motives, natural relationships, metaphor. But there’s a possibility that if you do that, you basically come out with what you went in with – I started off with the ingredients for a discourse, and ended up with a discourse. So this unstructured approach made sense to me and in interviews I asked open ended questions and tried to get a more informal approach. And in terms of material, I got some absolute gems. People said some very striking things in interview and many things I was able to use verbatim as statements (others required a lot more work – trying to break down conditional statements, irrelevant ones, etc). I did use some very broad categories to group statements: positions on hunting, animals, people, place, politics.

So basically, what I am asking is this: is it better to stick to the conventional methods of doing Q – and make do with what you get, OR is it better to structure your statements in order to try and guarantee an answer to your research questions? My personal gut instinct is to go with the former, mainly because the whole thing is about subjectivity, and that’s not for me to impose – but the academic and perfectionist in me is all frustrated by this – it makes me doubt my concourse, or my pre-Q assumptions – or both! On the other hand, I do need to bear in mind that I might be speaking too soon. After all, these results are from a tiny, biased sample.

Despite having followed convention and my gut instinct and using an unstructured approach to formulating my statements, it turns out I am not an unstructured person. I found myself getting highly agitated trying to organise all the material I had into a set of Q statements. Everything in me wanted to structure and categorise everything. The reductive process of getting down to 50 (from 248) statements was a good exercise in self-control – in that I had to control myself from trying to control everything! I’d be interested to hear about other’s experiences of sampling, if anyone has used a more structured or theory led approach.

Does anyone actually care what the Q community think of how they use the method? I do care, because I respect the original aims of the method and don’t want to try and use it to do things it can’t tell us – like extrapolate or generalise etc etc. Plus, I actually really like the method and would like to continue using it in my career – and I don’t want my perceived ‘misapplication’ of the method to go against with the Q community.

**Some questions:**

Do I have too many statements?

What are my problem statements that might need changing?
Does anybody want to do my Q sort for me?

Are my statements representative? Broadly I think they are, but what seems to be missing is the extremist, antagonistic views that are perhaps voiced the most loudly – is the language too mild? Should I include strongly worded statements? Or would this be something that would be better teased out of people during the Q sort?

Next steps – how to evaluate the role of activists in the system? I feel like I am spending too much time now on public space and empowered space, where really the most interesting and important part could be transmission?