Introduction to Q Methodology

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Presentation prepared for IGPA Graduate Research Forum, 17th August 2016, University of Canberra

Overview

• What is Q?
• Step-by-step guide to doing a Q-study
• FUN activities
• Questions
What is Q methodology?

- Encompasses a whole methodology; approach to studying human subjectivity
- Interested in identifying shared viewpoints
- Unit of analysis is these perspectives – not individuals
- Enables an in-depth, nuanced understanding
- At its heart is the Q-study and this is what I will focus on today

Essentially...

“Q facilitates the ordering of subjective viewpoints into clusters which, upon interpretation, are revealed to have the structure and form analogous to the structure of a discourse. The transformation from statistical factor to discourse involves close analysis and interpretation of interview material alongside the statistical data” (me, two months ago).
Before we start...

Research Questions (1)

Q is good for:
- Identifying discourses
- Understanding *shared perspectives* on a defined topic
- Understanding meanings behind preferences

Not:
- Generalising
- Large N
- Measuring
Research Questions (2)

My research question:
- What are the current discourses surrounding hunting in the UK?

Other recent examples:
- Unpacking viewpoints on water security in a specific area in Canada
- Assessing the diversity of values and goals amongst Brazilian commercial-scale progressive beef farmers
- School principals’ perceptions on professional development of teachers

Designing the Q-set (1)

- Concourse: the entirety of debate surrounding the question
- Q-set: set of statements drawn from the concourse
- Q-set: try to be representative of the concourse
- Q-set: needs to be unambiguous statements that people can place on the grid
- Q-set: can be taken from literature review, publicity material, interviews – anything really

I've included excerpts from my interview transcripts in the handouts. Highlight statements you think would make good statements for the Q-set
Designing the Q-set (2)

What makes a good statement?

- “it's a sort of a natural way of predator control; it removes the sick and the old and the infirm”
- “I'm not 100% disapproving of fox hunters”
- “the argument that they take only the old and infirm foxes is actually not the case”
- “there is no place for hunting in a modern civilised society”

Selecting your P-set

- P-set: number of participants
- P-set: be strategic; choose people who have an interesting and relevant viewpoint
- P-set: not a random sample; not your average joe – people who are interested in the topic and have something to say about it
- P-set: not a massive sample; typically less participants than no. of statement
Administering the Q-sort

• Q-sort: the actual sorting bit
• Online tools available; I prefer face to face
• You need to give clear instructions to people and help guide them
• Time taken can vary
• You will need: blank grid; cards; blank recording grid; recorder; camera; pen; consent forms.
• Here’s how I do it....

Factor extraction

• Factors (in Q) = what will become your shared perspectives/discourses
• Statistically, factors are portions of commonality across participants in the study
• Factor extraction takes out these portions from the entireity of relationships in the study
• You can think of factors as hypothetical viewpoints in the study. Factor rotation tries to align clusters of individuals to a factor.
Out of the correlation matrix (all the relationships that exist in the study) I extracted 7 factors (portions of shared meaning). Look at the first two. The higher the number, the closer that Q-sort is associated with that particular portion of commonality. Imagine that factor 1 is a hypothetical Q-sort. Its number would be 1.00.
Factor rotation (1)

Within the sphere are dots – these are the individual Q-sorts

You can insert axis rods into the sphere at 90 degree angles

Turn the sphere in your hands. The dots will align more closely to the rods depending on your perspective.

Turn the sphere in your hands to try and get most of the dots close to the different axes.

Factor rotation (2)
Interpretation

• This is the fun bit
• PQMethod will generate a huge output file
• You will use this as a guide for interpretation
• Along with your interview material
• Interpretation is about bringing statistical factors to life
• Take a holistic approach

Further reading

Q-uestions?

• Q-uestions: the punny way of inviting questions at the end of a talk on Q methodology.