An Introduction to Q methodology

Q Methodology was developed by William Stephenson the early 20th century. Stephenson obtained a PhD in Physics from Durham in 1926 and another in Psychology three years later from University College London, working with the famed statistician, Spearman. This unconventional academic background led him to develop an unusual methodological approach to the study of subjective perspectives. Whereas conventional 'R' type statistical analysis is based on identifying correlations between variables (e.g. age and voting preference) across many individuals, 'Q' type analysis is based on identifying correlations between individuals across many different variables.

In Q Methodology the variables are statements, which participants place into a sorting pattern according to a particular instruction (e.g. the extent to which they believe or disbelieve the statements, or agree or disagree with them). The statements are derived from what Stephenson called the "concourse", a complete set of statements made about the particular topic that is being studied. These statements are intended to come from already existing discourse, such as published texts or transcriptions of meetings and interviews. The results of an individual's Q Sort will then represent the sorter's perspective on the topic, as expressed though common language.

The arrangement of statement numbers within a group of sorts, and the values assigned to them by the participants, are then subjected to factor analysis. This statistical analysis outputs a series of factors which best explain the correlations between the different sorters' perspectives. Thus, individuals who agree with each other to some degree across all variables will be clustered together (to measurable extents) around an imaginary point that represents an "ideal sort" for that factor. The text of the statements that are most important in defining that factor can be used to reconstruct a description of their shared perspective.

Andrew Donaldson, who leads the Making Provisions project, has been involved in the introduction and spread of Q Methodology within human geography and associated social and environmental sciences. Key developments in this field have been the use of Q Methodology to promote reflection and collaboration in large research teams and in helping to generate common understandings within large stakeholder groups involved in participatory research.

Q Methodology in Making Provisions

We are using Q Methodology as a stepping stone between two parts of our research. The statements used in our Q Sort are derived from interviews and observations carried out during the main phase of our data gathering, and from texts collected by the research team. Using Q Methodology will help us to further refine the themes and connections which have emerged from our data analysis so far, and to test whether some of our tentative conclusions stand up. The results of our sorting exercise will also feed through into the development of a self-assessment framework designed to help business and organisations to understand where they stand in relation to current understandings of what constitutes good practice in anticipating problems within the food system.

Both the Q exercise and this framework will form part of the basis for a workshop for stakeholders and policymaking audiences, which the Making Provisions team will be hosting at the British Library on Wednesday the 16th of November. We will also be able to provide individual feedback to each participant by reporting the broad spread of perspectives generated by the exercise, and also explaining where they themselves are located within it.