How People Think about a TV Program:
A Q-methodology Approach

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This paper identifies four viewpoints about a TV program by making use of Q-method. Based on a factor analysis, 35 participants of this study are classified into four groups that each one creates a viewpoint towards the TV program. Each viewpoint is interpreted carefully by using 48 statements representing possible opinions about the TV program. The paper emphasizes that usual research methods like surveys are not as effective as the Q-method for this purpose. This method can help researchers to understand those angles of people's opinions that remain hidden by using a questionnaire or scale. Key Words: Concourse, Factor Analysis, Television, Questionnaire, Subjectivity, and Survey

It is essential for TV programs producers to know their audience as carefully and deeply as possible in order to produce and broadcast successful TV programs for them. It is customary to use surveys to explore not only audience's needs, interests and favorite programs, but also their opinions and attitudes towards programs. A typical survey helps producers to collect information from people through a "questionnaire" consisting of questions or items related to the topics of interest. However, this way is useful as long as they restrict their knowledge of people to the percent of viewers, the titles of audience's favorite programs and things like that, or as long as they want to measure people's attitudes by requesting them to rate a scale.

A questionnaire or scale has a "structure" in the sense that it is known in advance what it can measure or show. In other words, a researcher first states his objectives and questions and then designs his research instrument (questionnaire or scale) to achieve the objectives and answer the questions. Therefore, the approach or theoretical framework chosen by the researcher is imposed on the instrument when he is designing it. This means that his survey respondents have to regard the subject of survey through the window that the researcher opens for them inflexibly.

Now, let's consider a TV program which you would like to know how viewers think about it. You may design a questionnaire in the form of a Likert scale by choosing various items addressing different aspects and characteristics of the TV program. Since each item has purposely been included in the questionnaire and plays a particular role, you are well aware of the thoughts this questionnaire can potentially reveal to you in advance. Indeed, you first collect different thoughts and the very thoughts determine the "structure" of your questionnaire and ascertain which items have to be included in the questionnaire. Hence, such a questionnaire can merely show those "pre-specified" thoughts which a researcher has already considered, and cannot provide proper situations for respondents to describe their "own" thoughts thoroughly and freely.

This limitation of questionnaire-based surveys is serious when a researcher is interested in exploring people's subjectivity. Because of the nature of subjectivity, the questionnaire structure can influence it and orient it to something different. Therefore,

the questionnaire does not measure or show what a respondent really thinks, but it measures or shows whatever its structure (researcher's approach or theoretical framework) allows it to measure or show. This leads to an essential question about how a researcher can understand people's subjectivity, for example, towards a TV program without influencing them. In other words, how can a researcher reduce the effects of observer and observation tool to a minimum in his studies when the subjects under observation may deviate from their right situations by these two factors?

Q-method is a powerful research tool for subjectivity exploration. It is free from standards and norms used in questionnaires and scales. By taking advantage of Q-method, researcher does not interfere in detection of people's subjectivity and viewpoints due to imposing his approach, but people themselves present their subjectivity and viewpoints to him. It is noteworthy that Q-methodology was invented by William Stephenson (1902-1989) in 1935 and can be categorized as a qualiquantological method. I will review this methodology in the next section and then offer one of its applications in the field of media research. I will pursue my discussion on differences between Q-method studies and questionnaire-based surveys later in the last section.

A Short Review of Q-methodology

I am a researcher in the research center of IRIB which is an Iranian leading organization in the field of media research. My colleagues are interested in people's attitudes towards TV or radio programs and social or political events, and my work generally focuses on the methodological aspects of their studies. Survey data, the data coming from applying quantitative methods indeed, are the main resources of these studies. Since TV or radio programs have a wide variety of audience all over the country, my colleagues are also interested in exploring the indirect or unintended messages and effects of broadcasted programs which are unattainable through traditional survey studies because surveys do not go deep and do not gain details.

Qualitative methods like focus group or deep interview first caught my attention, but Q-method turned my attention to its prominent systematic nature. I did a thorough study on Q-method, as a way to realize what has happened to people's mind after watching a TV program, which gave rise to a book published by the research center. My colleagues and I then utilized this method in doing two different researches which this paper is describing the first one.

Q-methodology is introduced briefly via explaining the general process of a Q-method research illustrated in Figure 1. It should be noted that this section offers a mere introduction to Q-methodology, and does not address its underlying philosophy and many details and concepts. Readers can refer to Brown (1980) for a comprehensive discussion on Q-methodology and McKeown and Thomas (1988) for a concise presentation.

Like any other researches, the process begins with the research objectives, that is, what you search for. A clear definition of objectives can help you to decide whether Q-methodology is an appropriate option for your study or not. The next step is to collect the research concourse which consists of whatever people have expressed about the research subject. The sources of concourse may vary from written materials such as an article in a newspaper to a radio interview, from a piece of music to a picture or caricature, from your talk with a person in a bus stop to round-table talks in a university. Everything that

shows an angle of subjectivity pertaining to the research subject can be counted in the concourse.

*Figure 1.* Process of a Q-method Study
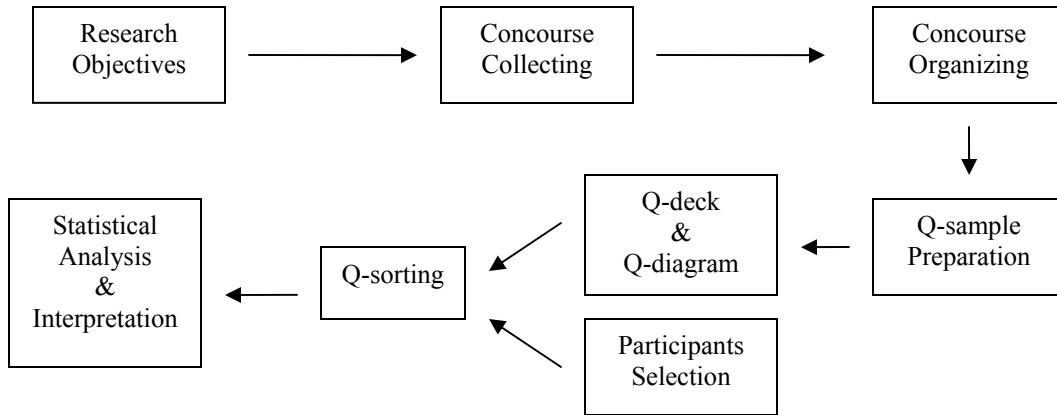
The contents of concourse are usually huge and diverse. In the next step, you need to organize the concourse by excluding repeated or less related things from it, summarizing its contents and classifying them. In a study, I collected my concourse by asking a group of people a question about their jobs. Some people had written down a few sentences and some others had written down one whole page. Amongst, you could find something unrelated to the research subject, for example, their complaints of their boss, or the same things written by different people. After excluding redundant contents, I converted the rest into the statements describing people's viewpoints towards their jobs. Some statements were exactly similar to the sentences written by people; some of them were extracted from the written texts. Therefore, our concourse was converted into a list of statements which was much easier to handle for the next steps.

The forth step is to select a sample of statements, called Q-sample, from the concourse. Q-sample has to be representative of the concourse in the sense that all aspects of the research subject must be found in it. This means that Q-sample is not devoted to a particular viewpoint, but it consists of a wide variety of statements in order to make all viewpoints detectable. Each statement of Q-sample is then written on a separate card (the number of cards is as many as the selected statements) which together make a Q-deck.

A Q-deck is given to a participant to sort its cards. Sorting is done on a Q-diagram illustrated in Figure 2 by putting each card on a cell. On top of the Q-diagram, there is a scale whose positive and negative degrees show agreement and disagreement with the statement respectively. Participant agrees with the card on the cell under +4 more strongly than those under +3 and so forth. Also, He disagrees with the card on the cell under -4 more strongly than those under -3 and so forth. Zero is for cards that participant is neutral or undecided about them (neither agrees nor disagrees). Q-diagram in Figure 2 has 25 cells and is for a Q-deck of 25 cards with a nine-point scale and forced distribution expressed as -4(1) -3(2) -2(3) -1(4) 0(5) +1(4) +2(3) +3(2) +4(1). It means that participants are permitted to choose only one card for -4 and +4, only two cards for -3 and +3 and so forth. Therefore, he needs to compare cards with each other carefully to

sort them. In our experience, it took 30 to 45 minutes for participants to sort a Q-deck of 48 cards.

Figure 2. Q-diagram

Strongly disagree				← →			Strongly agree	
-4	-3	-2	-1	0	+1	+2	+3	+4
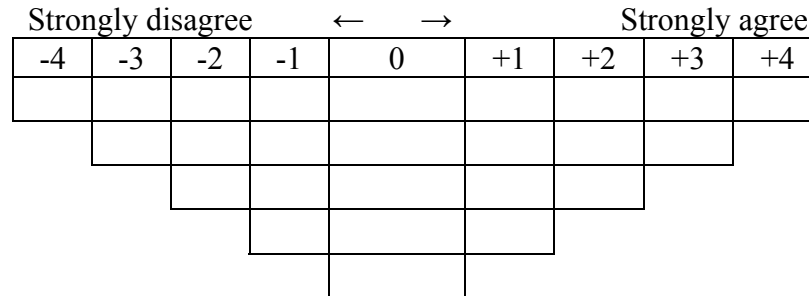
A Q-method research does not require a large random sample of people as participants. Participants are usually selected intentionally in such a way that people with different opinions are invited for participation. You can select people based on characteristics related to the research subject through an experimental design. For example, a combination of sex (male/female), age (young/middle/old) and political orientation (A/B/C) gives rise to a $2 \times 3 \times 3$ classification. You then need to 36 participants if you select two participants for each combination. However, it is better to select the people you know or have their backgrounds.

Now, it is time to carry out Q-sorting among participants. Each participant is given a Q-deck and a Q-diagram along with instructions demonstrating to them how to sort cards on the diagram. It is generally a good idea to run a pilot Q-sorting among a few people so as to find out whether it is a difficult, frustrating and time-consuming process to participants or not. It is helpful to see them sorting the cards and listen to their suggestions or complaints. They can be provided with a paper to write down their comments about statements and why they give a particular score to a given statement. The most important problems which you may encounter are ambiguous statements, confusing instructions and large number of statements. You do not need to gather all participants at the same time and in the same place. In our experience, some participants sorted cards in their own rooms in their workplaces; others received packages containing a Q-deck, a Q-diagram and instructions at their homes.

The final step is to analyze data statistically. First, you must enter each Q-sort into a data matrix by devoting each column to a participant and each row to a statement. The main statistical method applied for the data matrix analysis is factor analysis which results in a classification of participants. It should be noted that the nature of data matrix implies a factor analysis based on correlations between Q-sorts (participants). Each extracted factor created by those participants having large factor loadings on it, indicates to one type of subjectivity (if that factor is not bipolar). In other words, the participants on the same factor are those that have more and less similar subjectivity.

Unlike the traditional factor analysis, factors cannot be interpreted directly from factor loadings because factor loadings show the correlations between participants and factors, not statements and factors. Therefore, factor scores are used to connect factors

with statements. Factor scores help you to find out the role of each statement in each factor, and you can thus understand the interpretation of factors (different types of subjectivity). It is easier to utilize factor arrays instead of factor scores for interpretation because they are similar to the pattern of sorting. It is quite straightforward to find factor arrays. You first sort statements according to their factor scores, for example, in descending order. Then, you allocate +4 to the first statement, +3 to the second and third statements and so forth if the pattern of sorting is -4(1) -3(2) -2(3) -1(4) 0(5) +1(4) +2(3) +3(2) +4(1). Now, you can find easily which statements are agreed or disagreed more strongly than the other statements for each factor (subjectivity).

I limit myself to this short and probably vague presentation of Q-methodology. The next section can make clear some aspects of the discussion, but readers are recommended to refer to the references mentioned before.

A Q-method Study on a TV Program

In this section, I present the process and results of our research on audience's viewpoints towards a TV program broadcasted every Wednesday night by one of the national channels of IRIB. The program was a 26-part serial with a multidimensional story.

Concourse

The concourse of the research was collected by posting a questionnaire with 4 open-ended questions on our website. These questions asked audience about weaknesses and strengths of the serial, its most important message and respondent's feelings when he was watching the serial. We notified viewers of the questionnaire and invited them to participate in our poll by displaying a message including the website address at the time of serial broadcasting. We collected a few hundred statements from 354 serial viewers who visited our website.

Q-sample and Q-deck

We selected 48 statements reported in Table 2 as our Q-sample from the concourse. The statements cover the entire concourse and different features of the serial such as serial story, its characters, viewer's feelings and his perception of the serial . The statements were numbered and printed separately on pieces of paper with the same size and format to make a Q-deck.

Participants

We invited 50 people to participate in this study but, 35 people accepted our invitation. Participants were consciously selected from the random sample of a survey already conducted among TV audience. We had enough information about the survey respondents including their age, sex, marital status, job, education level, TV preferences and interests. This enabled us to select as diverse participants as possible.

There was a committee in the research center of IRIB that not only reviewed and approved the research proposal and the final research report, but it also appointed an expert as its representative in order to be assured of the protection of human subjects' rights. In addition, each participant was provided with a letter about the purpose of the study and the sponsoring institution. Sorting was done at participants' homes or in a private room at their workplaces. No personal or identifying information was retained and all documents were destroyed after computer data entry. No financial incentives were provided.

Q-sorting

Each participant was given a Q-deck and a Q-diagram along with instructions demonstrating to him how to sort cards on the diagram. Instead of putting cards (the pieces of paper) on the cells of a large Q-diagram, each participant registered the statement numbers on a small Q-diagram printed on an A4 paper. At the bottom of the paper, participant was requested to write down his/her sex, age, education level, marital status and job.

Data Matrix

There was a data matrix with 48 rows and 35 columns to analyze because there were 48 statements and 35 participants in this study. This data matrix is something like that shown in Table 1. This table tells us that the second participant (denoted by P2 in Table 1), for example, had disagreed with the first statement because he had rated this statement on score -1, or he had neither agreed nor disagreed with the statements 4, 5 and 48 because he had rated these statements on score 0.

Table 1. Data matrix for 48 statements and 35 participants

Participants / Statements	P1	P2	…	P35
1	-2	-1	…	0
2	0	+2	…	+4
3	-3	+4	…	+2
4	-2	0	…	-1
5	+1	0	…	+3
6	+4	+1	…	0
.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.
.	.	.	.	.
48	-4	0	.	+3

Factors Extraction

Factors are extracted after computing participants' correlation matrix. Each element of the matrix is the correlation between two participants; we will then have a

35×35 correlation matrix in our study. A high positive correlation indicates that the two participants relatively sorted the statements the same. Factor analysis helps us to classify participants into groups with high positive pairwise correlations by taking advantage of the correlation matrix. Each group of participants makes a factor, and those participants are highly loaded on that factor. In our study, four factors emerged based on a factor analysis with Varimax rotation and principal components extraction method by using SPSS.

Factors Interpretation

The following four factors were interpreted by using factor arrays shown in Table 2. Each factor array is the result of those participants' Q-sorts who are highly loaded on that factor. For example, if three participants are highly loaded on a factor, it means that they sorted the statements rather similarly, and had nearly the same viewpoints towards the subject under study. Therefore, their separate Q-sorts can constitute a new Q-sort (called factor array) which shows their average viewpoint.

Factor I. The serial was not that much satisfactory and interesting for the participants who created the first factor (-3 on statements 6 and 10; -1 on statement 23; 0 on statements 11, 25 and 26). It did not have serious emotional effects on them (-3 on statement 1; -2 on statement 2; +2 on statement 3; -1 on statement 40). Unlike the other factors, they felt good about the environment and people of the war due to the serial, and believed that the serial displayed the war believable (+5 on 44; +4 on 47; -5 on 48).

Table 2. Factor Arrays Related to 48 Statements[1]

#	Statements	Factor Arrays			
		I	II	III	IV
1	I feel nervous and disgusting when I watch the serial	-3	1	1	-2
2	I want to pummel Afrasiab*	-2	5	-4	-3
3	I feel neutral when I watch the serial	2	-5	-3	-3
4	I abhor the director, actors and actresses of the serial	-3	-4	-1	3
5	I feel sorry for educated people who are drug addicted	0	4	1	3
6	The serial makes me relaxed	-3	-5	-2	5
7	I waste my time watching the serial	-4	-4	-2	-2
8	The serial is instructive	1	3	0	4
9	The serial is trashy	0	-5	0	-2
10	The serial is attractive and exciting	-3	4	-1	5
11	The serial is boring and lengthy	0	-4	3	-5
12	The serial is rambling with no objectives	0	-5	0	0
13	The serial shows how one person can damage others emotionally	1	0	5	2
14	The serial shows the consequences of lacking parental supervision	2	-1	5	4
15	The serial shows the consequences of making friends with the wicked	4	0	5	2
16	The serial shows rich people are stupid and religious people are gullible	-4	-3	-2	-1
17	The serial shows family as the best place to solve problems	5	-1	2	1
18	The serial shows illiteracy leads to drug addiction	-5	-3	-5	5
19	The serial shows drug addiction threatens everybody	2	3	4	0
20	The serial makes me angry because Sohrab* is too stupid	-3	5	0	-5
21	The story of serial is not new	0	-1	-5	-4

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[1] Asterisks indicate to the characters' names of the serial

| 22	Parts of serial are short	-4	-3	0	4
23	The serial is amazing	-1	-2	3	5
24	The serial has been directed poorly	-1	-2	0	-5
25	The serial has a weak scenario	0	-3	4	-4
26	The slow rhythm of serial makes viewers bored	0	0	2	-3
27	Some events of serial are too unreal and unbelievable	-2	2	5	-4
28	The serial shows the current issues of our society	1	4	2	1
29	The serial tells us "Do not prejudge"	4	-2	4	1
30	The serial tells us "Drug addiction brings people trouble and unhappiness"	3	3	3	0
31	The serial tells youths "Be careful in making friends"	4	2	1	-1
32	The serial tells us "Do not follow people blindly"	5	1	-1	-2
33	The serial shows the consequences of ignoring youth capacity	3	0	-1	-1
34	The serial has negative effects due to displaying drug injection and stuff like that	1	2	-2	0
35	Sometimes, the serial considers its viewers' understanding low	-4	1	3	-5
36	The serial shows the educated people silly	-2	0	-4	-4
37	The serial is annoying and yet instructive	3	4	-3	3
38	The serial tells us "People who addicted to drugs are cheap"	-5	3	4	2
39	The serial makes me pessimistic about our society	-5	5	-4	0
40	I sympathize with Roozbeh[*]	-1	0	-4	3
41	I feel it is hard to live with people addicted to drugs	3	0	2	0
42	The serial offends people's understanding	-2	-4	0	-3
43	I will be succeed if I trust in God	5	1	-3	0
44	I feel the war people are both gallant and helpful in the post-war reconstruction	5	0	-5	1
45	I feel "love" is the most beautiful word in the world	2	-2	-3	4
46	I feel educated people suffer from unemployment	-1	5	0	0
47	I feel the environment of the front was pure and sincere during the war	4	2	-5	-1
48	The war adventures of serial are unrealistic and unbelievable	-5	-1	1	2

Factor II. The participants of this factor agreed with bitter messages much more strongly than the other messages presented to them (+5 on statements 39 and 46; +4 on statement 5; +3 on statement 19). The serial engaged them emotionally (+5 on statements 2 and 20; +4 on statement 37; -5 on statements 3 and 6). However, they liked the serial (+4 on statement 10) because it was instructive and had remarkable objectives (+3 on statement 8; -5 on statements 9 and 12; -4 on statement 11).

Factor III. The participants of this factor agreed with considerable number of messages offered to them especially those warning people about their behaviors and social interactions (+5 on statements 13, 14 and 15; +4 on statements 19 and 29). They were not influenced emotionally by the serial (-4 on statements 2 and 40; -3 on statement 37). Although they believed that the serial was instructive and had a new story (+3 on statement 23; -5 on statement 21), it did not satisfy them (+5 on statement 27; +4 on statement 25; +3 on statement 11).

Factor IV. This factor was created by the serial fans who believed that the serial was exciting, attractive and amazing, and made them calm (+5 on statements 6, 10 and 23). This idea was approved by +4 on statements 8 and 22. Their evaluations of the serial were usually positive, and did not believe that the serial had crucial weak or negative points (-5 on statements 24 and 35; -4 on statements 21, 25 and 27). In comparison with the previous factors, they less agreed with messages offered to them; such statements were usually rated as 0, +1 or +2 except for statements 18 and 14.

It is constructive to take a glance over the correlations between four factors to better distinguish them from one another. Figure 3 shows factors schematically along with their bivariate correlations. Factor IV has highly positive correlations with factors I and II. Conversely, these three factors have negative correlations with factor III. Therefore, factors I, II and IV are close to each other and far from factor III. As seen, the distance between factors I and II are longer than their corresponding distances from factor IV; there is also a gap between factor III and the other factors.

Figure 3. Schematic Plot of Four Factors
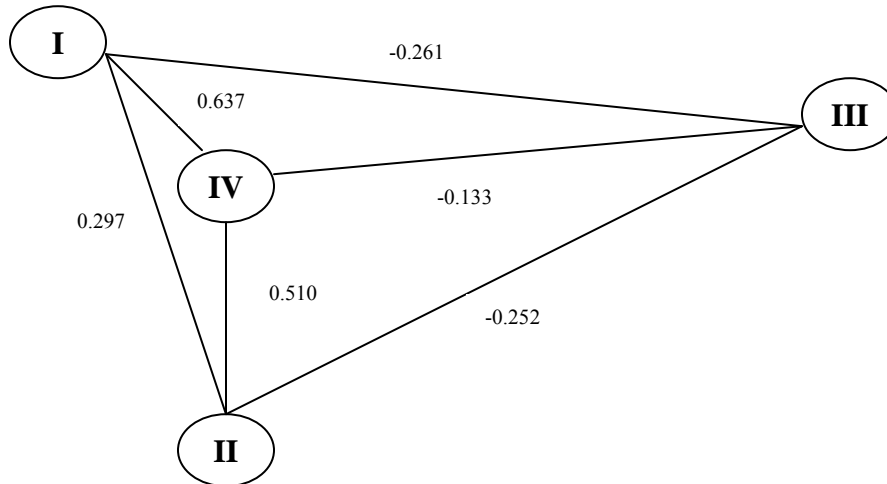
At the first glance, the correlations may suggest contradictions to mind. One may expect a higher correlation between factors I and II owing to their high correlations with factor IV. This is not the case because factors I and IV agree on statements distinct from those which factors II and IV do. In other words, although factor IV is highly correlated with both factors I and II, these correlations do not arise necessarily from similar statements, but factor IV shares some statements with factor I and some other statements with factor II. Table 3 represents the statements rated relatively similarly on each pair of factors.

Table 3. Statements with Equal or Successive Scores on Two Factors

Pairs of factors	Equally scored	Successively scored	Frequency	
			equal	successive
I and II	7, 26, 30	4, 13, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 34, 37, 40	3	11
I and III	9, 12, 18, 29, 30	5, 6, 8, 15, 24, 28, 39	5	7
I and IV	12, 28, 37	1, 2, 13, 34, 35, 42, 46	3	7
II and III	1, 30	16, 19, 31, 33, 45	2	6
II and IV	41	5, 8, 10, 11, 25, 33, 37, 38, 42, 43, 44	1	11
III and IV	3, 7, 12, 33, 36, 46	2, 14, 16, 17, 21, 28, 32, 48	6	8

Even, factors I, II and IV correlated negatively with factor III have common aspects with it. Statement 7 is a good example because it is ranked negatively on all

factors in such a way that it has the same score on factors I and II as well as factors III and IV. Therefore, you can immediately conclude that the serial was not disappointing.

It is usually worth noticing the characteristics of participants, but generalization is not my purpose. In this study, most participants of the first factor were single and young. Participants of the second factor were females in the middle while participants of the forth factor were married males with low education. Participants of the third factor were married and highly educated.

Discussion

It is helpful to examine a problem or phenomenon by using different research methods to obtain comprehensive information about it. One may apply, for example, both survey and content analysis in the field of media research because each research method can give information distinct from the other method. In other words, researchers can have a perfect picture of reality by putting together pieces of information provided by different research methods.

This study applied Q-method to reveal different viewpoints towards a serial in order to show the potential ability of Q-method in doing media researches as well as many other fields. Its findings essentially differ from those naturally obtained from surveys. In surveys, you can get information about means and percents (statistically, the distributions of variables); a survey typically can tell you what percent of people watch a TV program, or if that TV program satisfies its viewers strongly. Further, you can know, by using surveys, whether people think about a TV program similar to a pre-specified framework or not (I called it "structure" in the first section).

The story is quite different for Q-method studies. In this study, I identified four viewpoints about the serial. The mysterious thing is that it was impossible for these viewpoints to be detected before the end of Q-sorting although there were available 48 statements at the time Q-deck was prepared, i.e., before Q-sorting. In other words, I had in advance the statements by which participants were supposed to describe their viewpoints to me, but I still had no advance idea about how many and what viewpoints would potentially be created by the statements. This is because of the nature of Q-methodology which is free from observer and observation tool (researcher, his perspective and the questionnaire or scale designed by him).

Indeed, I as a researcher only gathered the statements which different people told me about their feelings and thoughts towards the serial. These statements were not necessarily facts and did not come from scientific theories, but they were participants' personal interpretations and evaluations of the serial. Hence, the Q-deck consisted of statements reflecting unintended or indirect messages of the serial as well as statements reflecting exaggerated or unreal opinions about the serial. This means that I had a complicated collection of statements which only participants were able to make them meaningful by Q-sorting. It should be stressed that this process is totally different from scaling in which a researcher has a concept or construct, and searches for statements representing it in detail.

One may argue that it is possible to collect statements in the same way Q-method recommends, that is, free from a particular structure, but, at the next step, put all statements in a questionnaire like a Likert scale. After data collection, traditional factor

analysis is used on the data matrix whose columns and rows are devoted to statements and participants respectively. This does not lead to viewpoints identification because:

- Unlike a scale which each participant usually expresses his opinion about a statement separate from the other statements, Q-sorting has a comparative nature in the sense that each participant has to compare statements with each other in order to rank them. As a result, you have the position of each statement among the other statements.

- If statements as variables are factor analyzed, factor loadings show the correlations between factors and statements. Each factor is then interpreted by those statements that are highly correlated with it, and other statements are neglected. Now, let's consider each factor as a viewpoint. This means that each viewpoint is defined by a subset of statements not all of them. From Q-methodology approach, factor analysis is conducted on participants instead of statements, and participants are classified into groups that each of them consists of people with relatively similar viewpoints. Since each person regardless of the factor he belongs to, sorts all statements, the interpretation of each factor depends on all statements. In other words, all statements play specific roles in all factors with no neglect (remember the factor arrays).

I tried to show the potential of Q-method for doing media research. Readers can also refer to Stephenson (1967, 1976), Williams (1971) and Grosswiller (1997) for more applications of Q-method in media research. I, of course, emphasize that this method is not a rival for traditional methods, but it is a complement to the knowledge obtained by other methods.

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