

Epistemology, Normative Theory and Poverty Analysis: Implications for Q-Squared in Practice

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Summary – The turn to the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative (Q-Squared) methods in the analysis of poverty is a welcome development with large potential payoffs. While the benefits of mixing are not in doubt, the tensions involved in so doing have not received adequate attention. The aim of this paper is to address this gap in the “Q-Squared” literature. It argues that there are important differences between approaches to poverty which operate at the levels of epistemology and normative theory. These differences have implications for the numerical transformation of data, the selection of validity criteria, the conception/dimension of poverty adopted and interpersonal comparisons of well-being.

Key words - poverty, methods, philosophy, ethics, social welfare, welfare measures

Epistemology, Normative Theory and Poverty Analysis: Implications for Q-Squared in Practice*

Ravi Kanbur and Paul Shaffer

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increasing attention has focused on using mixed qualitative and quantitative (Q-Squared) methods in the analysis of poverty. A number of conferences¹ have been devoted to this issue and a growing body of work has accumulated². The articles in this Symposium are examples. They were among a dozen or so empirical examples of *Best Practice* in combining approaches to poverty analysis selected for a conference held at the University of Toronto in May 2004 entitled “Q-Squared in Practice: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Poverty Analysis”. The conference is the second in a series of the “Q-Squared initiative”, which aims to promote a better integration of “qualitative” and “quantitative” approaches to the analysis of poverty.

This recent rediscovery of mixed methods in poverty analysis is a welcome development with large potential payoffs in terms of understanding and explaining poverty. There are many examples of value-added associated with mixing found in the contributions to this Symposium, such as the use of “qualitative” information to: improve household survey design (Kozel and

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Parker, Jha et. al.); interpret counterintuitive or surprising findings from household surveys (Kozel and Parker, Sharp); explain the reasons behind observed outcomes (London et. al., Adato et. al.); probe motivations underlying observed behavior (Place et. al., Rew et. al.); suggest the direction of causality (Place et. al.); assess the validity of quantitative results (Barahona and Levy); better understand conceptual categories such as labor, the household etc. (Adato et. al.); facilitate analysis of locally meaningful categories of social differentiation (Howe and Mckay, Hargreaves et. al., Rew et. al.); provide a dynamic dimension to one-off household survey data (Howe and McKay), etc.

In our view, the benefits of mixing are not in doubt. It does seem however, that the tensions involved in so doing have not received adequate attention. There is a tendency to underplay differences between approaches and consequent difficulties in fruitfully combining them.³ As Appadurai (1989) argued in the context of a similar debate fifteen years ago, a certain “ecumenism” has characterized the Q-Squared debate with differences between approaches viewed in technical terms, amenable to technical solutions.

The aim of this paper is to address this gap in the “Q-Squared” literature. It argues that there are important differences between approaches to poverty which operate at the levels of epistemology and normative theory.⁴ These differences have implications for the numerical transformation of data, the selection of validity criteria, the conception/dimension of poverty adopted and interpersonal comparisons of well-being. The Q-Squared initiative ends up embroiled in these issues because the quest of broadening the methodological framework tends to bring out contrasting perspectives which go well beyond differences of method.

The format of the paper is as follows: Section 2 presents a critical assessment of an initial attempt to unpack the qualitative/quantitative distinction into five dimensions of difference. Section 3 directs attention to epistemological differences between approaches to poverty with implications for numerical transformation of data and validity criteria. Section 4 addresses contrasting traditions of normative theory with implications for the conception of poverty

adopted. Throughout, the contributions in this Symposium, as well as other materials, are used to illustrate the above issues.⁵

2. A TYPOLOGY

At the first Q-Squared Conference at Cornell University in 2002, entitled *Qualitative and Quantitative Poverty Appraisal: Complementarities, Tensions and the Way Forward*, considerable attention was devoted to definitional and conceptual issues relating the qualitative/quantitative distinction. Conference participants had different views on how the “qual/quant” divide should be conceptualised though all agreed that a finer set of categories was required to capture its many dimensions. One such typology of differences was proposed by Kanbur (2003) building upon, and adding to, a number of the schemas presented. It is based on the following five dimensions:

1. Type of Information on Population: Non-Numerical to Numerical.
2. Type of Population Coverage: Specific to General.
3. Type of Population Involvement: Active to Passive.
4. Type of Inference Methodology: Inductive to Deductive.
5. Type of Disciplinary Framework: Broad Social Sciences to Neo-classical Economics.

This typology helps by clarifying terminology and spelling out exactly what is being distinguished. As such, it has served the purpose for which it was developed. Nevertheless, the schema does raise a number of issues concerning both the distinctions themselves as well as their derivation from foundational categories. A review of the five distinctions illustrates the point.

First, the numerical/non-numerical distinction has cutting power. While it is possible to numerically transform almost any type of information by counting, scaling, ranking, etc., there are important differences in the numerical transformation process between types of data (see Section 3 below). Further, as discussed below, the distinction between data-types is likely related to epistemological differences between traditions of inquiry in the social sciences.

The second distinction, between specific and general population coverage, is arguably more *incidental* than *essential* to the qual/quant divide. Just about any research technique, qualitative or quantitative, may be conducted in few or many sites. Fixed-response questionnaires may be applied in a single site and detailed ethnographies may be conducted over a range of sites to attempt to draw conclusions over a broader population.⁶ Further, the content of household surveys and focus group or interview guides can be modified to be more or less context specific. This issue of scale depends primarily on three considerations: i) the purpose of the research, i.e. whether results are required to be “representative” of a broader population, say to inform decision making at regional or national levels; ii) the nature of the extrapolation exercise, i.e. whether statistical inference is being used to extrapolate results, which implies some type of probabilistic sampling and a minimum sample size; iii) practical considerations related to cost and standardisation, which tend to favour fixed-response questionnaires for “large *n*” studies.

Third, the active/passive distinction is derivative of a standard distinction in the philosophy of social science between “critical” and “other” traditions of inquiry. Critical traditions of social science argue for an *essential* link between theory and practice and maintain that emancipation, enlightenment or empowerment is a central feature of the research exercise (Fay, 1987). There is wide disagreement, however, about the alleged empowering import of different approaches to poverty, in particular the “participatory poverty approach”. Its claims to empowerment have been vigorously contested (see Rew et. al., this issue). This distinction will not be pursued below.

Fourth, the inductive/deductive dichotomy hinges on what exactly is meant by these terms. All poverty approaches rely heavily on theoretical frameworks whether implicit or explicit. Further, understanding social phenomena is always a process of moving back and forth between theoretical concepts and empirical information. The distinction correctly directs attention to the fact that qualitative approaches tend to be less axiomatic and more reliant on contextually generated categories than quantitative approaches. As such, they are closer to the “grounded

theory” tradition of theory construction advocated by some (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Typically, however, induction is not defined in this way (Miller, 2003).

Fifth, the disciplinary distinction between neo-classical economics and “the rest”, seems to underplay important quantitative traditions within the various social science disciplines. There are arguably greater *methodic* affinities than differences between neo-classical economists and rational choice political scientists, sociologists schooled in the Lazarsfeld tradition of surveying and model-building⁷, “cliometric” historians, etc (Abbott, 2001). It is likely that this disciplinary distinction requires further unpacking.

3. EPISTEMOLOGY

Arguably, some of the elements of the typology put forward by Kanbur (2003), as well as other differences between approaches to poverty analysis, derive from epistemology. Epistemology is the branch of philosophy which studies the nature and claims of knowledge. Differences in epistemological approach underlie a standard distinction in the philosophy of social science between empiricism/positivism, hermeneutics/interpretive approaches and critical theory/critical hermeneutics (Braybrooke, 1987; Fay, 1975).

These programs may be defined in different ways. We define empiricism as a research approach predicated on an observation-based model for determining the truth or validity of knowledge claims in which “brute data” are assigned a special role. The meaning of “brute data” will be explained below. It should be noted that the term empiricism is used in a particular sense which differs from its more general sense of being based on experience or experiential knowledge.

Hermeneutics is generally defined as the interpretative understanding of intersubjective meanings. Critical hermeneutics adds two dimensions to this central thesis: i) first, understanding entails critical assessment of given beliefs and perceptions involving some underlying conception

of truth or validity; ii) second, emancipation, enlightenment or empowerment is an essential part of the process of inquiry. We will define the critical hermeneutic tradition as one predicated on a discourse-based model for establishing the truth or validity of knowledge claims which assigns a special role to “intersubjective meanings”. As discussed above, we omit the emancipatory/empowering component from this definition because the potential “empowering” role of different poverty approaches is widely contested.

We argue that there are important links between empiricism and the consumption poverty approach, the “gold standard” in applied poverty analysis in the developing world (e.g. Ravallion, 1994). This approach is an amalgam of two variants of utility theory, revealed preference theory and money metric utility, and nutrition science. More specifically, poverty is conceived as the non-fulfilment of basic preferences. The “preference” part is due to the fact that consumer preferences over goods and services, known by observing consumer behaviour or asking about consumer choices (*revealed preference theory*) are the building blocks from which levels of well-being and poverty are derived. *Nutrition science* is used to distinguish between “basic” and “non-basic” preferences, as the poverty line is usually anchored on minimal levels of dietary energy, or caloric, intake (Ravallion, 1994). Poverty is given a numeric representation in that preferences are represented by consumption expenditure (*money metric utility*) which facilitates the aggregation of persons or households below the poverty line and comparisons of well-being across persons or households. All of these aspects of consumption poverty are closely related to empiricism.

Important linkages are also found between the critical hermeneutic tradition, as defined above, and those approaches to poverty which rely heavily on dialogic techniques, such as focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews and life histories to come to an understanding of poverty. One example is the participatory approach to poverty, which has been increasingly applied for empirical poverty analysis in the developing world since the mid-nineties through the use of “participatory poverty assessments” (e.g. Narayan et. al., 2002).⁸ Some social anthropological approaches to poverty also exemplify this tradition, though to a lesser extent.⁹ In

both cases, poverty analysis involves interpreting perceptions of the meaning and causes of poverty as revealed by participants in dialogue.

The discussion which follows addresses epistemological differences between empiricism and critical hermeneutics which relate to: i) units of knowledge and ii) truth or validity criteria. The first difference, which contrasts “brute data” with “intersubjective meanings,” is applied to the distinction between numerical and non-numerical data and illustrated using the contribution by Hargreaves et. al. in the Symposium. The second distinction, which contrasts observation-based validity criteria and “discursive” validity criteria, is illustrated by views presented in the referee reports on contributions to the Symposium.

Units of Knowledge and Numerical Transformation

Brute data have played a critically important role in both empiricism and the consumption approach to poverty as the bedrock of knowledge and arbiter of validity claims. Originally, they were conceived of as sense data, “the things that are immediately known in sensation: such things as colours, sounds, smells, hardnesses, roughnesses, and so on” (Russell, [1912] 1952, p. 12). Sense-data began to lose its central importance in empiricist circles following the sustained critiques of Popper and some of the twentieth century logical positivists, primarily Neurath and Carnap (Ayer, 1959: 13, pp. 17-21). Three key factors led to their demise: (1) the realization that sense-data were far from infallible or “incorrigible” (Ibid, p. 20); (2) the rejection of the view that all objects could be translated into actual or possible sensations (Nagel, 1961, pp. 121-125); and critically, (3) the recognition that *public*, inter-subjective knowledge claims cannot be based on *private* sensations (Putnam, 1981, p. 181). As a result, intersubjective observability became a defining characteristic of brute data.

Inter-subjective observability meets the last objection to sense data by establishing the subject-invariance of properties or qualities of objects. Harré (1985: 159) paraphrases this

requirement: “many qualities [of objects] vary with the state of the subject, the perceiver, while for scientific purposes we should choose those qualities which are subject invariant”. In this revised sense then, brute data are physical, intersubjectively observable and subject-invariant. An authoritative statement of the new conception of brute data is provided by Popper (1959, p. 103) in his discussion of “basic statements” “... a basic statement must also satisfy a material requirement ... this event must be an ‘*observable*’ event; that is to say, basic statements must be testable, inter-subjectively, by ‘observation”

What are the implications for poverty analysis? A major preoccupation of the consumption approach to poverty has been to base its core elements on intersubjectively observable data. Nutrition science aimed to set a minimal level of basic human needs in an intersubjectively observable way (based on the calorie content of different foods and calorie use in different types of activities by different categories of persons).¹⁰ Revealed preference theory was expressly intended to make preferences intersubjectively observable, whereas money metric utility sought to facilitate intersubjectively observable comparisons of welfare. In other words, the derivation of the poverty line, interpersonal comparisons of well-being, and the revelation of preferences are all conducted in intersubjectively observable fashion.

In the critical hermeneutic tradition, the core unit of knowledge shifts from brute data to intersubjective meanings. We define intersubjective meanings as the core categories, beliefs and values which give sense to social phenomena and meaning to social action. Putnam (1981, pp. 201-202) provides a good example:

Take the sentence ‘the cat is on the mat’. We have the category ‘cat’ because we regard the division of the world into *animals* and *non-animals* as significant, and we are further interested in what *species* a given animal belongs to... We have the category ‘mat’ because we regard the division of inanimate things into *artifacts* and *non-artifacts* as significant, and we are further interested in the *purpose* and *nature* a particular artifact has ... We have the category ‘on’ because

we are interested in *spatial relations* ... Notice what we have: we took the most banal statement imaginable, 'the cat' is on the mat', and we found that the presuppositions which make this statement a relevant [or meaningful] one in certain contexts include the significance of the categories *animate/inanimate*, *purpose* and *space*.

This concept of “intersubjective meanings” is central to the fundamental claim of hermeneutics and critical hermeneutics that social phenomena are “intrinsically meaningful”. That is, social phenomena depend for their existence, and/or significance, on the meanings ascribed to them by members of society. Phenomena such as poverty, are constituted, in part, by the intersubjective meanings given to them and interpreted by social actors, including researchers. Accordingly, explaining the social world is to undertake a “double hermeneutic” analysis, i.e. to interpret a world which is pre-interpreted by social agents (Giddens, 1976, p. 162). Failure to do so imposes severe restrictions on social inquiry: “we interpret all other societies in the categories of our own” (Taylor 1985, p. 42).

For the hermeneutic and critical hermeneutic traditions, accessing this pre-interpreted world “fundamentally requires participation in a process of reaching understanding” (Habermas 1984, p. 112). Participation is necessary because it is the only way to come to an understanding of intersubjective meanings. Interpreting individual responses to say, attitudinal questionnaire surveys, without a prior understanding of their intersubjective meaning referents simply imposes our conceptual categories on everyone else (Sayer 1984, pp. 33-35).

A core objective of the participatory poverty approach and much of applied social anthropological analysis of poverty, is to better understand what is meant by poverty, what categories are considered relevant when thinking about well-being, what types of social relationships are important when analyzing social change, etc. Typically, inquiry of this sort involves dialogic processes such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, etc. These

approaches to poverty are not *only* about intersubjective meanings generated in dialogue but they are predicated on an understanding of such, which is at the core of all subsequent analysis.

There is a particular affinity between brute data and numeric information. Brute-data *are* quantities of some sort for which there is often a close mapping onto a numeric scale. For example, consumption can be viewed in terms of quantities of goods purchased or consumed, or money, all of which are already represented numerically. In these cases, a close mapping exists between the social phenomenon in question, consumption, and a numeric scale (grams/kilos, kilocalories or money). Intersubjective meanings may be numerically transformed through scaling, ranking or other techniques. The properties of the ensuing numerical data, however, are different as is their policy relevance. An example from the Symposium illustrates this point.

In the consumption poverty approach, “utility” is the chosen dimension of well-being. It is equated with preference fulfillment and rendered observable by restricting preferences to consumer preferences revealed by choice (recorded in consumption modules in household surveys). These are subsequently transformed into consumption expenditure, or money. This process facilitates “subject-invariance” in that any two “competent” persons should be able to rank individuals in the same way once this money metric criterion has been adopted. Money becomes a representation of well-being or poverty which subsequently facilitates the aggregation of those below the poverty line as well as consistent interpersonal comparisons of well-being.¹¹ The key point is that the wellbeing metric *itself*, utility, is transformed into an intersubjectively observable datum, revealed preferences, to which an “empirical” scale, money, is applied.

In the participatory approach, well-being rankings are often used to generate numbers of the poor, which are sometimes compared across sites. An innovative example is the contribution by Hargreaves et. al. in this Symposium. To simplify, the methodology is to assign a numerical score to *characteristics* of poor and non-poor households (“pile statements”), such as lack of clothing, lack of food, etc. and to use this value to rank and compare households. The score itself is calculated by the number of times the pile statements is associated with households in different

well-being categories (poor, non-poor, etc.), determined in the course of prior well-being ranking exercises.

While both of these approaches generate “numbers,” the process of numerical transformation is different, as is the policy relevance of the numerical data produced. The key difference is that the well-being metric is an inter-subjectively observable brute datum in the first case, but not so in the second. Specifically, the ranking of piles is derived from a prior ranking of households into well-being categories based on the *perceptions* of participants in the well-being ranking exercise. Unlike the ranking of households on the basis of consumption expenditure, this household ranking does not satisfy “subject-invariance” in that different persons may rank identical households differently for a variety of reasons. For example, the household ranked “poorest” in an affluent community could very well be ranked “best off” in a richer community. Consequently, scores generated by the Hargreaves techniques will not lead to consistent interpersonal comparisons of well-being unless there is a high degree of homogeneity in the perceived relationship between household characteristics and well-being across the domain of the comparison.¹² To summarize, then, epistemological differences relating to the privileged unit of knowledge, brute data vs. intersubjective meanings, have consequences for the properties of numbers generated in the numerical transformation process, subject-invariant or not, with implications for policy-related applications, i.e. making consistent interpersonal comparisons.

Validity Criteria

The second difference between empiricism and critical hermeneutics concerns truth and validity criteria. Empiricism relies on an observation-based model to establish the truth or validity of statements in which brute data play a special role. The key issue for our purposes concerns the exact nature of this role.

For many of the early empiricists, brute-data represented an external “reality”, whether ideal or real. Many held a metaphysical conception of truth, closely tied to ontological questions

about the nature of “reality”. Central to his conception of truth was a “similitude” theory of reference: "the relationship between the representations in our minds [of brute-data] and the external objects [either ideal or real] that they refer to is literally a similarity" (Putnam 1981, p. 57). The immediacy of sense-data served as guarantor of this similarity: "we are able to have ideas that refer to our own sensations and this is the primary case of reference from an epistemological point of view" (Ibid, p. 64).

The rejection of metaphysics as “meaningless” by many logical positivists and logical empiricists lead to a shift in emphasis to the non-metaphysical truth, or validity, of statements (Ayer 1959, pp. 116, 118-119). The effect was to closely link truth/validity criteria to intersubjectively observability. Truth no longer relied on a mysterious relation of correspondence to an external reality, nor on a subjective sense of certainty about the validity of immediate sense impressions. It was founded on the intersubjectively observable and subject-invariant properties of brute-data themselves: “Since the properties ascribed to things are observable properties, physicalist language thus is intersubjective, and there is no problem in determining the truth [validity] of assertions in physicalist language - one merely observes and sees whether the thing has the claimed property” (Suppe 1974, p. 13).

Accordingly, determination of the validity of theoretical statements became a process of establishing their correspondence to intersubjectively observable, subject-invariant, physical data. The particular correspondence criteria or rules of choice have been the subject of considerable debate over the years (Caldwell, 1984). Proposals include strict verifiability (logical positivists), whereby all theoretical terms had to be defined in terms of an observation vocabulary and individual tested, confirmability (logical empiricists), which allows for partial definition of theoretical terms and testing of theoretical systems as a whole, and falsifiability (Popper), whereby the derivative hypotheses of theories are subject to critical tests set up to falsify them. While these correspondence criteria differ in important respects, they all converge in that brute-data are the referents to which testing is applied.

Brute data have played a critical role in establishing validity in the consumption poverty approach. At the level of data collection, consumption expenditure and actual food consumption can be observed and questionnaire responses checked for reporting biases (Scott and Amenuvegbe, 1990).¹³ At the level of analysis, data on consumption expenditure and the poverty line determination may be reviewed and reanalyzed to assess say, the validity of empirical statements about poverty levels and trends.¹⁴ In addition, the validity of theoretical claims about say, the causal importance of different variables may be assessed econometrically through formal hypothesis testing.

The critical hermeneutic tradition generally rejects this central role of intersubjective observability in establishing validity. The main reason is that narrative information generated by dialogic processes plays a much more central role in the analysis. There are a number of attempts to formulate truth or validity criteria within critical hermeneutics in ways which do not rely on the intersubjective observability requirement. For example, one version, propounded by Jürgen Habermas, relies on a consensus theory of truth that rests on the premise that truth is the property of a statement which has been argumentatively, or discursively, validated (Habermas, 1991b). This notion of truth is further discussed in the following section when it is applied in the context of normative theory. The key point for our purposes is that the coexistence of different validity criteria ends up raising tensions for Q-Squared-type work.

A number of the referee reports for this Symposium, and responses by the contributors, serve to illustrate this tension. Much of the controversy hinged on the validity of narrative information generated in focus groups and semi-structured interviews concerning one's own poverty condition and/or that of others. Some were skeptical about the validity of these types of data.¹⁵ For example, on the issue of taboo or difficult subjects one referee maintained: "A second interesting claim is that case studies are able to get honest answers to difficult questions

concerning illegal activities, HIV, anti-social behavior. This, too, is an important advantage if it is true. But is it? (Remember Margaret Mead in Samoa!).”

Another comment of this type concerns the validity of information generated by key informants on the food security situation of households within a given area. The referee maintained that, “there is no good evidence that they [the key informants] are either objective, knowledgeable or capable of making the appropriate judgments and assessments.” The authors counter that the above view “challenges 30 years of work on participation. Do you really want us to go back to basics on this?!!”

Both of these comments relate to issues where there is in principle, an intersubjectively observable and physical referent, e.g. HIV status, anti-social behavior, food security status, etc. The tension becomes more acute where there is no such obvious referent. The point was made clearly by one referee who distinguished between: “differences with respect to fact ...and cases where different perceptions are not necessarily a sign of mis-reporting, e.g. differing judgments ... perceptions or interpretations”. The latter arises in the context of questions about levels or changes in satisfaction or happiness as discussed in the contribution by London et. al.. Many proponents of empiricism express grave concerns with these types of data, on grounds that “psychological states ... are not verifiable even in principle, since states or attitudes exist only in the minds of the individuals” (Bradburn et. al., 2004, p.28).

Epistemology is deeply relevant to Q-Squared poverty analysis because it bears on the types of knowledge which are favored and the types of validity criteria adopted. Beneath the conflicting perspectives on particular contributions to the Symposium lie debates about the relative merits of inter-subjective observability and discourse-based validity criteria. Reconciling these viewpoints entails philosophical not technical analysis.

4. NORMATIVE THEORY

The Q-Squared project cannot avoid addressing normative theory at some point. The reason is that poverty is value-laden in a direct and immediate way. As such, questions arise about the underpinnings of different conceptions of poverty and/or the processes of determining their constituent elements. This is the domain of normative theory.

The consumption and participatory approaches to poverty draw on different traditions of normative theory to arrive at their objects of value, i.e. the conceptions of poverty which they use. There is a *historical* link between consumption poverty and what is known as naturalist normative theory. In addition, there are parallels between the participatory poverty approach and discursive normative theory, also known as the “discourse ethics”. The following discussion presents the two traditions and spells out their links with the two approaches to poverty.

Naturalist normative theory attempts to ground evaluative claims in empirical fact. There are a number of ways to do this, referred to as naturalizing stratagems (Harman, 1977). Following the terminology in Section 3, we refer to the main naturalizing stratagem used in the bodies of theory underlying the consumption poverty approach as the “brute data grounding”.

The brute data grounding aims to derive of the object of moral or prudential value from sensory experience or observation. Historically, there have been two main variants, which correspond to the two conceptions of brute data discussed in Section 3. Originally, the object of value was a “sense” datum, known either by introspection, observation, or everyday experience. Subsequently, it became an intersubjectively observable physical datum.

The main historical figure in the development of naturalist normative theory is David Hume. There is a clear *historical* link between Hume and the consumption poverty approach, which runs through Jeremy Bentham (1823) and some of the founders of utility theory (Shaffer, 2002). Hume attempted to derive the object of moral value (virtue) from sensory experience. In his discussion of virtue and vice Hume (1988, p. 468-9) writes : “ ... see if you can find the

matter of fact or real existence which you call *vice*... you will never find it till you turn your reflexion into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you towards this action. Here is a matter of fact; but “tis the object of feeling, not reason”

Hume’s empiricist epistemology and methodology greatly influenced his normative thinking. Brute data provided the informational base for “the experimental method” that he sought to introduce to the study of ethics: “... we can only expect success by following the experimental method, and deducing general maxims from a comparison of particular instances ... It is full time ... [to] reject every system of ethics, however subtle or ingenious, which is not founded on fact and observation” (Hume 1902, p. 174-5).¹⁶

Bentham paid glowing tribute to Hume as an important intellectual source of his moral theory (Baumgardt 1966, pp. 42-43). Bentham followed Hume in grounding his core evaluative standard, the principle of utility or the Greatest Happiness Principle, in human sentiment. Both sought to construct normative theory without recourse to non-empirical entities. Bentham ([1823] 1948, p. 18) argued in favor of the Greatest Happiness Principle because it “is clearer, as referring more explicitly to pain and pleasure”. Further, he maintained that pleasure and pain are directly measurable so that evaluative judgments could be made according to an intersubjectively observable “felicific calculus” (Ibid, 29).

Modern utility theory drops the mental state of happiness or pleasure in favor of the observable state of preference fulfillment. Paul Samuelson is the central figure. He developed revealed preference theory and was an advocate of money metric utility (Samuelson, 1966). Samuelson (1974, p. 1262), maintained that money metric utility is “objectively measurable” and “defined behaviouristically” by virtue of revealed preference theory. Revealed preference theory rendered preferences intersubjectively observable and money metric utility *allegedly* restored interpersonal comparability to utility following its earlier rejection as unscientific (Robbins, 1962, pp. 138-9).

As discussed in the previous section, the brute data grounding is quite integral to the consumption poverty approach. The derivation of the poverty line, revelation of preferences, and interpersonal comparisons of well-being, are all conducted in intersubjectively observable fashion. In addition, the ensuing framework facilitates intersubjectively observable assessment of the validity of consumption data, simple empirical statements about the level and trends of poverty and theoretical claims about say, the causes of poverty.

Discursive normative theory arose in close association with the works of Jürgen Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel. There is no direct historical link between discursive normative theory and the participatory approach though parallels exist between the two. Specifically, they both require that an actual dialogue be conducted to arrive at normative conclusions, such as the relevant conception of poverty to adopt. Further, there is growing acceptance of the importance of using something akin to the idea of an ideal speech community to validate discursive outcomes.

This tradition of normative theory finds its grounding in discourse, i.e., an actual discussion among participants in dialog. It rejects the “monological” identification of particular objects of value such as happiness or preference fulfillment, which “tend to ontologically favor some particular type of ethical life” (Habermas 1991, p. 121). Instead, it lays out a procedural metanorm about how normative disputes are to be adjudicated without specifying the contents of any ensuing agreements.

There is an elaborate theoretical edifice underpinning Habermas’s version of discursive normative theory.¹⁷ To simplify, it combines the principles of universalization and discourse both of which are supported by a “transcendental pragmatic” theory of argumentation. The central feature of the transcendental pragmatic argument is its attempt to derive the rules of normative discourse from the properties of speech. The universalization principle maintains that for a norm to be valid: “*all* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests” (Habermas 1991a, p. 65). It

requires that an actual dialogue take place, whose idealized referent is the idea of “ideal role taking” or an “ideal speech situation” whereby everyone has the competence, opportunity and freedom to fully participate in dialog. The discourse principle makes the additional claim that dialogue is a necessary means of arriving at normative conclusions: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in practical discourse” (Ibid, p. 66).

The key point is that the discourse ethics has parallels with aspects of the participatory approach to poverty.¹⁸ An actual dialogue is required to determine the dimensions of poverty in which viewpoints are subject to critical review by participants. Further, there has been increasing recognition of the elusiveness of “true” participation given asymmetries of power, knowledge, ability, etc. among participants (Mosse, 1994). As a result, a number of techniques have been developed to facilitate greater participation, i.e. to approximate an ideal speech situation, including improved identification procedures of “invisible” groups, separate and/or smaller discussions with marginal groups, role plays where issues of power are subtly addressed through the exchange of social roles (Brock and McGee, 2002).

What is the relevance for Q-Squared? The reliance on different traditions of normative theory poses tensions for the Q-Squared initiative because different approaches to poverty are likely to favor different dimensions of poverty. One example is Shaffer’s (1998) study from the Republic of Guinea. According to standard national household survey data women are not more likely than men to be consumption poor or to suffer greater consumption poverty. The incidence, intensity, and severity of poverty is lower in female-headed households than male-headed households. Sensitivity analysis using different adult equivalence scales and different poverty lines (stochastic dominance tests) affirms this result. In addition, both women and all females are under-represented, relative to their share in the population, in poor and ultra-poor households. Further, most indicators of intra-household distribution of food or health care (nutritional outcome and mortality indicators, aggregate female-male ratio) reveal that men or boys are worse

off than girls or women.¹⁹ PPA data from the village of Kamatiguia in Upper Guinea, however, suggest that women as a group are worse off than men as a group. In group discussions, a substantial majority of men and women maintained that women were “worse off” than men, and a larger majority held that in a second life they would prefer to be born male than female. Further, in well-being ranking exercises, groups of both men and women separately ranked *all but two* married village women below *all* male household heads in terms of their own criteria of well-/ill-being. According to participants this finding has to do with two dimensions of deprivation that disproportionately affect women, and are not well captured in consumption poverty: excessive work load and restricted decision-making authority.

The tension that arises for Q-Squared type analyses is that as more and more dimensions of poverty arise, it becomes increasingly difficult to determine their relative importance for policy-related purposes, such as targeting or resource allocation. While there are statistical techniques to perform multidimensional poverty analysis, such as factorial analysis (Asselin 2002), statistical valuation is different from the normative valuation which underlies well-being rankings. The problem is compounded when dealing with aspects of poverty, such as lack of respect or dignity, which are difficult to operationalise in the same way as say, consumption.

A related set of problems, already alluded to, concerns interpersonal comparisons of well-being and aggregation of persons below the poverty line when using conceptions of poverty generated by participants in dialogue. If different conceptions of poverty are favored in different sites, the basis for interpersonal comparisons and aggregation is not obvious. It is interesting to note how this issue is handled by those contributions in the Symposium which attempted to compare and aggregate people’s perceptions of poverty.

A first approach, adopted by Barahona and Levy, is simply to take one dimension of well-being which figured prominently in previously conducted well-being rankings, food security, standardize its definition and include it in a subsequent community census. While the

authors argue that poverty definitions “should be developed through discussion with communities about how they see poverty”, they opted for a “proxy of poverty” in order to meet requirements of standardization. A second approach, adopted by Sharp, is to impose a multidimensional conception of deprivation, comprising elements such as access to livelihood resources and household independence, and to include this within a self-assessment module with standardized categories in a household survey. As above, the approach is designed to be “as far as possible, comparable across sites rather than a relative ranking with the community”. A third approach by Hargreaves assigns a numerical value to characteristics of the poor generated from well-being rankings and uses this information to construct household wealth and poverty indices and to make interpersonal comparisons. As discussed in Section 3, the Hargreaves approach will only allow for consistent interpersonal comparisons if there is a great deal of homogeneity across sites in the perceived relationship between household characteristics and well-being or wealth. A final approach is that of Howe and McKay who maintain that there is enough homogeneity across well-being rankings to identify certain meaningful characteristics of poverty groups, which can then be mapped onto “standard” household survey data for purposes of aggregation and comparison. As the author’s note, however, the resulting is an approximation in that only some of the characteristics of the poor from the PRA rankings can be used and the categories themselves represent fairly broad generalizations across many different regions and groups.

Normative theory matters for Q-Squared poverty analysis because different theoretical traditions tend to favor different conceptions or dimensions of poverty. While there are ways to deal with this, all involve tradeoffs between retaining the comprehensiveness and richness of people’s perceptions of well-being on the one hand and meeting the requirements of standardization to make consistent interpersonal comparisons of well-being, on the other. The tensions are at root philosophical and not amenable to an easy technical fix.

5. CONCLUSION

The turn toward the use of mixed qualitative and quantitative (Q-Squared) methods in the analysis of poverty is long overdue. We believe that the contributions to this Symposium make a strong case for the value-added in opting for a Q-Squared approach. We also believe that the process of mixing is not seamless but that, at bottom, tensions remain. Two sources of tension, relating to epistemology and normative theory have been identified, with implications for the numerical transformation of data, the selection of validity criteria, the conception/dimension of poverty adopted and interpersonal comparisons of well-being.

The objective here is not simply to make the point that philosophical assumptions “matter” for practice. It is to improve practice by teasing out a number of implications for applied poverty analysis. Two issues seem particularly germane.

First, concerning validity criteria, there is scope to incorporate some of the features of validity criteria based on intersubjective observability into dialogic/qualitative inquiry. To recall, intersubjective observability was an attempt to facilitate “subject-invariance”, so that research results should not depend on whoever happened to be undertaking the research exercise. Otherwise stated, validity is closely linked to concerns of reliability and replicability in the empiricist tradition. One way to bring these same considerations into dialogic analyses is presented in the contribution by Hargreaves et. al. In their study, all well-being rankings were conducted on three occasions by different facilitators and the average score of the three exercises used to rank households. In this way, the undue influence of any one facilitator is reduced and the statistical agreement between the rankings of different facilitators can be assessed using an intra-cluster correlation coefficient.²⁰ The effect is to provide a clearer basis for determining the validity of results by assessing their reliability.

A second related point concerns standardization as a means of ensuring validity. The standardization of questions was already discussed in the previous section as a means of ensuring the comparability of findings across population groups. In the cases of fixed response

questionnaires, considerable attention has also been given to standardizing questionnaire administration so that all questions are asked exactly in the same way. This is near impossible to do in say, focus groups or semistructured interviews because responses are not known in advance. In these cases, it is useful to standardize at the level of the dialogic encounter to enhance validity, relying on some notion of an ideal speech situation. An example, involving an integrated impact assessment of a major anti-poverty program in Vietnam, illustrates the point (Shaffer/IDEA Intl, 2003).

One component of the impact assessment was a nationally representative “qualitative” survey which combined open-ended and fixed response questions about project impact. The first draft of the survey guide contained standard instructions about the importance of reading each question exactly as it appeared, in the same sequence, with the same emphasis, etc. It soon became apparent that this would not work for the open-ended questions as it was impossible to predict the follow-up probes in advance. As a result, it was decided to draft lists of “positive” and “negative” probes intended to identify processes leading to positive and negative impact respectively. While it was impossible to specify the exact probes to use, as this would depend on how the discussion evolved, it was possible to ensure a balance of negative and positive probes for all questions. As a practical matter, more attention should focus on the requirements of approximating an ideal speech situation through the standardization and replication of techniques designed to generate balanced and wide ranging dialogue.

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¹ The Q-Squared Conferences at Cornell, March 15-16, 2001 and the University of Toronto, May 15-16, 2004 as well as the Conference on Combining Conference on Combining Quantitative and Qualitative Methods in Development Research, University of Wales, Swansea, July 1-2, 2002.

² Appleton and Booth (2001), Bevan and Joireman (1997), Booth et al. (1998), Carvalho and White (1997), Harriss (2002), White (2002).

³ Exceptions include Booth (2002) and Campbell (2005).

⁴ Some argue that there are important ontological differences, about the nature of reality, between qualitative and quantitative approaches, though linkages between epistemology and ontology are not straight forward. It should be recalled, that one of the most famous ontological idealists, Bishop Berkeley, was also an epistemological empiricist.

⁵ Sections 2-4 of this article draw on Shaffer (2002) and (2005).

⁶ One such example is the Village Studies Program, 1970-75, directed by Michael Lipton at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (Lipton, 1992).

⁷ It should be noted though Lazarsfeld is often associated with the introduction of surveying and statistical analysis in sociology, he was a consistent advocate of the combined use of qualitative and quantitative approaches (see Boudon, 1993)

⁸ The participatory approach to poverty had drawn heavily on the seminal work of Robert Chambers (1983) among others.

⁹ The major difference, for the present purposes, is that social anthropology has emphasized both the observation of behavior (the etic) as well as the understanding of meanings and beliefs (the emic). A major preoccupation is to analyze the often conflicting information coming from each (Booth et. al., 1999 and Rew et. al., this issue). This emphasis on intersubjective observability, through techniques of participant observation, is one reason that some of the founders of anthropology considered the new discipline to be empiricist in the sense used in this paper (Wright and Nelson 1995, pp. 43-51). Other differences between the two traditions are discussed in Green (2004).

¹⁰ The use of techniques of nutrition science was brought into the modern analysis of consumption poverty by Rowntree (1980) who relied upon estimates derived by the nutritionist Atwater to calculate the minimal caloric requirements of male adult equivalents as well as the caloric value of different foodstuffs in order to determine minimal food costs. Nutrition science provides an intersubjectively observable way of defining an adequacy level of well-being, the poverty line, a fact which has been explicitly invoked by its proponents such as Orshansky (1965, p. 5), though it appears that political considerations were quite integral to the latter's choice of methods (Fisher, 1992).

¹¹ There are many technical issues involved here, such as adjusting for price, consumption and household composition differences, which can lead to different results depending on how they are tackled (e.g. Ravallion, 1996). Further, to guarantee consistency across persons a number of assumptions are required which may be violated in practice (Ravallion, 2003).

¹² Hargreaves et. al., acknowledge this point when they note that intercommunity comparability hinges on an "intrinsic link" between wealth/well-being and household characteristics.

¹³ It should be explicitly acknowledged that the reliance on self-reports of consumption from household surveys, rather than observations of actual consumption, marks a departure from the empiricist tradition. This is second best option adopted for practical purposes within an empiricist theoretic framework. As such, it differs from the discussion below.

¹⁴ Though see note 11.

¹⁵ For this critique applied to "subjective" questions in surveys see Sudman et. al. (1996) and Bertrand and Mullainathan (2001) and more generally, Elster (1987).

¹⁶ In practice Hume's "experiments" were really thought exercises that relied heavily on introspective evidence or ordinary experience (Noxon 1973, pp. 116-23)

¹⁷ See Habermas (1991a) and Rehg (1994).

¹⁸ It should be noted that the idea of an idea speech situation rests on many assumptions which are never achieved in practice. Nevertheless, it serves as a regulative ideal or standard against which the validity of discursive outcomes may be assessed (Forester, 1985). In addition, following Benhabib (1992, pp. 30-1,

74-5), the present argument drops Habermas' (1991b, pp. 177-82) insistence that the discourse ethics applies only to moral issues of justice and not to evaluative issues of the good or bad life, i.e. poverty.

¹⁹ The one exception relates to infant mortality indicators when using "relative-difference" or model life table norms.

²⁰ This is analogous to techniques used in anthropology for estimating intercoder reliability and determining if the agreement between coders is due to chance, such as Cohen's *kappa* (Bernard, 2002, pp. 480-483.)