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# Perceptions of Poverty and Policy Preferences: The Contribution of Q Methodology

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## ABSTRACT

The nature, causes and consequences of poverty have been debated for many years and remain controversial. However, some degree of consensus is a pre-requisite for feasible, sustainable and effective policy responses to poverty. Research methods which can improve understanding of public attitudes towards poverty and identify potential areas of consensus are particularly valuable. Q methodology is a research tool which has the potential to identify points of consensus and contention in relation to poverty. This article introduces the main features of Q and illustrates its potential value by outlining how it was applied to inform the policy recommendations of a Poverty Commission in a city in Britain. The project identified a number of significant points of consensus and controversy in participants' perceptions of the consequences of poverty and preferences regarding responses to it. These findings are related to ideas about how the poverty discourse can be framed to cultivate a more supportive narrative of how poverty is understood and addressed.

## 1 | Introduction

Poverty remains a contentious issue with divergent views on its nature, causes and appropriate responses (Veit-Wilson 2014; Benson et al. 2021). According to one recent study, 'we know far less about public opinion on the specific policy solutions' to reduce poverty than we know about general dispositions (Save the Children 2024). It is a cliché but truism that politics is the 'art of the possible'. However, it is not possible to develop policy based only on general dispositions; insight is required into how the public will respond to particular proposals. To build support for effective policy reforms it is therefore necessary to understand how people think and feel, and what they will respond to positively (Stanley 2021). Consequently, there is a need to identify policy options to address poverty which are compatible with public opinion and acceptable to polarised views.

This article outlines the potential contribution of Q methodology to this task. Q methodology ('Q' for short) is a mixed

method research approach for exploring subjectivity which can be used to identify shared opinions (Watts and Stenner 2012; Simon 2013). This article illustrates the distinctive contribution of Q in researching perceptions of poverty; in particular, its capacity to identify potential areas of convergence and divergence in perceptions of and policy preferences relating to poverty. Identifying potential points of consensus and division could inform how to frame discussions of poverty and generate support for viable policy options.

The project in which this article is based sought to identify and examine the range of views on poverty among citizens living or working in a British city. The principal research questions the project addressed were: what were residents' views on the causes and consequences of poverty in the city, and how did they feel about selected potential responses to tackle poverty? In order to identify actionable policy options rather than document general sentiments about poverty the research focused on local conditions and issues in the city. The project used Q methodology, and

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this article aims to illustrate the potential of this tool as a means to identify consensual anti-poverty policies. Reflecting this, the article concentrates on how Q highlighted issues of convergence and divergence among the views identified.

Following a brief overview of the main findings of existing studies of public attitudes towards poverty, the principal features of Q are introduced, contrasting it with other approaches which have been used to explore public perceptions. This is followed by a more detailed account of how Q was applied in a research project undertaken on behalf of a Poverty Commission in a British city. Some of the key findings from this study are used to illustrate the capacity of Q to identify convergent and divergent views on poverty. The article concludes by considering how these findings relate to analyses of how policy addressing poverty may be more effectively framed, particularly in the British context.

## 2 | Researching Perceptions of Poverty: Approaches and Findings

Ideas of and debates about poverty are contentious, complicated and confused. 'It often seems that if you put five academics (or policy makers) in a room you would get at least six different definitions of poverty' (Gordon 2006, 32). Some of the contested and controversial issues raised over the measurement, scale and trends in global poverty, are illustrated by the heated debate which flared between Max Roser—founder of 'Our World in Data'—and the Anthropologist Jason Hickel and their respective commentators (Mathews 2019; Milankovic 2019). This dispute rehearsed long-standing disagreements over the conceptualisation of poverty, how best to capture living standards and the suitability and reliability of income measures (e.g., Pogge and Reddy 2005). Opinion surveys have been used to try to circumvent the subjectivity involved in determining what should count as essential unmet needs and how to define poverty (Mack and Lansley 1985). Although such a consensual approach by no means resolves every controversy in poverty debates, it highlights the value of capturing of public perceptions on this subject (Veit-Wilson 1987).

Most studies documenting public attitudes towards poverty also use opinion surveys. Public perceptions of and attitudes towards poverty partly reflect the cultural particularities of different welfare regimes, such as the tendency towards more individualistic moralising judgements in 'liberal' political traditions (Toikko and Rantanen 2020). However, there are also some more widespread cross-cultural tendencies in welfare attitudes. A substantial body of survey evidence, undertaken in different countries and over a considerable period of time, has identified several recurring themes in relation to public views on poverty. Among the most well established common features of public views on poverty is a consistent hierarchy of perceived relative deservingness (Gugushvili, Lukac, and van Oorschot 2021; Yeboah et al. 2016). There is a perennial suspicion of the 'undeserving' poor in several countries, particularly directed towards those deemed responsible for their condition (Cook 1979; Coughlin 1980). Individualistic interpretations and conservative views of the causes of poverty correlate with higher income and also the belief that much income inequality

is fair and 'meritocratic' (Finseraas 2012; Gugushvili 2016; Chakelian 2020). However, those who have experience of poverty favour more structural explanations of its causes (Simpson et al. 2018). Partly related to this, women are more likely than men to regard poverty as a structural rather than behavioural issue (Bergmann and Todd 2019; Habibov 2011). People experiencing poverty are often reluctant to acknowledge their situation due to the feelings of shame and stigma associated with this status (Walker et al. 2013). Hostile political discourses and negative representations of 'the poor' both influence and reflect how poverty is perceived, and limit the capacity to develop more positive interpretations and responses (Pemberton et al. 2016). This tendency is enflamed by amplified media coverage of welfare fraud and negative portrayals of 'underserving' groups (Sippett and Tranchese 2015; McKendrick et al. 2008; Golding and Middleton 1982). These representations and discourses can weaken the sense of shared identity and solidarity with people experiencing poverty, which is important in underpinning effective social protection (Finseraas 2012; van Oorschot 2000). However, despite evidence of long-standing disregard or outright hostility in the UK towards some groups experiencing poverty, there remains some measure of a collectivist culture (Abe and Pantazis 2014).

Well-designed surveys are generalisable and can uncover associations between opinions and key socio-demographic factors (e.g., income, gender, age, etc.). However, surveys have several familiar limitations and have recently failed to anticipate some high-profile votes, such as the result of the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the 2024 US Presidential election. This is in part due to 'plummeting response rates' and sampling frames which under-recruited lower income respondents and those reluctant to voice controversial some opinions (Earle 2024, 37; Leeper 2019; Eggleston 2024). Indeed, concerns about the reliance of consensual approaches to defining poverty on surveys built into have led some to advocate alternative deliberate research methods to explore views on this complex and contentious issue (Walker 1987; Taylor-Gooby, Chung, and Leruth 2018).

Deliberative processes, such as citizen's juries, democratic forums and citizens' assemblies allow research participants to reflect on complex issues (O'Flynn 2022). However, there are also risks and limitations with some deliberative methods (Sunstein 2002). These include group polarisation (where group discussion results in individual beliefs becoming more extreme), or groupthink (where members conform to the views of the most assertive members). Furthermore, the moralising effect of public debate means that it can be difficult to gather participants' genuine perceptions and preferences, particularly unfavourable or unpopular opinions (Dryzek 1987; Johnson 1998). And due to the small numbers involved in some deliberative research (or the prohibitive expense of recruiting sufficient participants), there are issues of representativeness and capturing the diversity of viewpoints that might exist on a subject (Parkinson 2003).

Q methodology is an increasingly popular research tool which can be used to identify patterns of common thinking and public priorities without some of the limitations of deliberative methods (Niemeyer 2019). Its distinctive qualities mean that Q has the potential to contribute interesting insights into perceptions of poverty and policy preferences.

### 3 | The Approach and Contribution of Q Methodology

Q methodology is used to study subjectivity, that is, views, opinions and values (Stephenson 1953; Watts and Stenner 2012). The underpinning principle of Q is that subjectivity is amenable to systematic analysis and can 'be shown to have structure and form' (Brown 1980, 58). Q reveals this through integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to identify and describe participants' views on a topic.

Q methodology involves two main stages. Firstly, a card-sort exercise which generates data; secondly, factor analysis which identifies patterns within these sorts. In stage one, research participants (generally 20–40 in total) are purposively selected to ensure that a wide range of viewpoints on the topic of interest is represented. Participants are asked to rank-order a set of statements (typically 30–50) onto a quasi-normal bell-shaped grid in relation to the strength to which they favour or oppose each. These statements are usually opinions but could be any relevant material, for example, pictures, sounds or even smells. Statements are generated from sources where the 'conversational possibilities' on a particular topic may be identified (Stephenson 1986, 44); for example, from qualitative interviews, (social) media sources, consultation responses, research reports, academic articles, etc. A representative sample of these statements are selected for the card-sort, ensuring appropriate coverage and balance of the range of positions. Providing these stimuli means that participants do not need to have existing and readily articulated views on an issue. Factor analysis is used as a data reduction technique to identify a smaller number of shared points of view (factors). Unlike R factor analysis, Q factor analysis is by-person, that is, the variables are the participants who are sorting and ordering the card statements, while the statements are observations. Both statistical criteria and qualitative insights (typically from interviews with participants after they have sorted and ordered the statements) are used to select the factor solution. The factors are represented by corresponding factor arrays—a distinctive ranking of the original statement set for each factor. Factor arrays are interpreted and described in combination with post-sort qualitative data.

Q methodology provides a robust framework for participants to explore their opinions while opening these perspectives up to statistical scrutiny and analysis (Gower 2011). Q does not determine the extent to which different views are held within a population. Rather the purpose is to explore the nature of shared perspectives. Q does this in a much richer way than conventional surveys, while providing more structure and greater replicability than purely qualitative approaches, such as focus groups or ethnographic observation (Davis and Michelle 2011). A further benefit of using Q to identify public perceptions is that it requires comparatively few participants (and Q-sorts). The patterns formed are unlikely to deviate when tested on a wider population, meaning that public opinion can be gauged relatively cheaply and efficiently compared to deliberative research techniques (Liston, Harris, and O'Toole 2013, 473; Dryzek and Braithwaite 2000, 247).

Although Q methodology does not necessarily seek to identify a consensus position, it can be used to identify points of

compatibility, that is, positions which are mutually acceptable and over which there is some agreement. Q is also well suited to exploring issues of diverse perspectives, contested options and varied discourses. After identifying the diverse views that exist on a topic, Q can also be used to select individuals holding particular views for participation in further deliberative research (Cuppen et al. 2010).

Q methodology has been used to research public views on a range of social policy issues, such as health in low-income communities (McHugh et al. 2019), social-ecological vulnerability (Armatas, Venn, and Watson 2016) and policy-making processes (Piddington, MacKillop, and Downe 2024). To see how Q has been applied to study views on poverty, the authors searched for references to 'Q-methodology' OR 'Q methodology' in relation to the following terms: poverty OR Deliberative OR 'Public opinion' OR attitude OR perceptions OR preferences OR beliefs. This search was undertaken in nine of the leading Social Policy and social science journals: *Critical Social Policy*, *Global Social Policy*, *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, *Journal of European Social Policy*, *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy*, *Journal of Poverty & Social Justice*, *Journal of Social Policy*, *Social Policy & Administration* and *Social Policy & Society*. After sifting for relevance only four articles were identified which focused on applying Q to the study of perceptions of poverty per se.

Therefore, although Q remains relatively under-deployed in the analysis of perceptions of poverty, a small number of studies have demonstrated its potential value in this area. For example, Babinčák and Jenčopaľová (2021) used Q to examine the extent to which findings about attitudes to poverty in Slovakia correspond with theories of its causes. In another application of Q to the study of poverty, Vinaya (2020) found that the prevailing view of poverty among Indian middle classes was individualistic and fatalistic; their research participants felt no sense of responsibility for the existence of poverty and no personal stake in measures to address it. Such examples illustrate the potential of Q to reveal rich insights into perception of poverty (Ellingsen, Størksen, and Stephens 2010; Lee and Kim 2019). Q methodology is a potentially powerful tool to enhance understanding of the nuances in attitudes towards poverty as 'it condenses (virtually) infinite positions into clearly identifiable poverty discourses' (Intriago Zambrano, Diehl, and Ertsen 2021, 24). This attribute means that Q has the potential to highlight both common ground and fissures in public opinion and help identify navigation paths through which viable policies might be steered.

### 4 | Q Methodology in Practice: Exploring Perceptions of Poverty in A British City

The application of Q methodology discussed below was undertaken on behalf of a Poverty Commission which examined conditions and developed policy recommendations in a British city. This Commission was an independent group comprising cross-sectoral civil society representatives and citizens with direct experience of poverty. Its declared aim was to 'define the steps we all need to take to end poverty in the city', with 'a clear focus on addressing the root causes of poverty as well as mitigating the consequences'. The Commission focused in

particular on actions that could be taken locally and by the city authorities. The Commission committed to a participatory approach and ‘to listen to and learn from the voices of citizens... who are struggling to get by’. The Commission was launched in November 2018 and published its final recommendations in September 2020. Over the course of its work it published an analysis of *Key Poverty Issues* in the city (November 2019), a study of *Poverty and Coronavirus* (May 2020) and a survey of *Citizens’ Perspectives on Poverty* (September 2020). In its endeavour to identify practical responses to poverty in the city, the Commission believed that feasible policy options had to be grounded in some degree of consensus. This was the distinctive purpose of the Q study reported on here. The research reported in this article was approved by the ethics committee of the university of the principal authors, and conducted to be consistent with the principles of Social Policy Association’s *Guidelines on Research Ethics*.

#### 4.1 | Statement Sets

Respective statement sets were generated for both the consequences of poverty (‘Consequences’), and potential responses to tackling poverty (‘Solutions’) in the city. Statements were derived from a range of sources, including findings from previous research undertaken for the Poverty Commission on the lived experiences of poverty in the city (Robertson et al. 2020), responses to previous consultations conducted by the Poverty Commission, and open-ended responses to a survey of attitudes to poverty in the city previously undertaken by the research team (McKendrick et al. 2020). After piloting, two sets of statements were finalised, comprising 36 ‘Consequence’ statements and 46 ‘Solutions’ statements. Statements sets were designed to form a complete sentence with a standard prefix (see Tables 1 and 2).

#### 4.2 | Recruitment and the Participant Sample

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who matched the profile of four groups of city residents: (1) People living in the city with no direct experience of poverty, (2) People living in poverty but not living in deprived parts of the city, (3) Business leaders and owners of small enterprises, (4) Statutory service providers and third sector organisations. Participants were recruited using two approaches. First, selecting a subset from respondents who had completed a survey on attitudes towards poverty in the city (McKendrick et al. 2020). Second, identifying participants for Group 3 using the contacts and networks of a poverty campaigning organisation who were partners in the research. The Commission concluded that the views of those experiencing poverty and residing in lower income communities were effectively represented by its members, who themselves included poverty experts by experience from low income city neighbourhoods.

#### 4.3 | Data Collection

Each group of participants completed two data collection sessions. The ‘Consequences’ card-sort was undertaken in the

first session and the ‘Solutions’ card-sort in the second. At each session, participants undertook an individual card-sort before completing a questionnaire and engaging in a group discussion. Following an introduction to the study, participants were presented with a randomised statement set (Tables 1 and 2) and asked to consider the statements and place each initially into one of three categories: ‘Like my point of view’, ‘Neutral’ and ‘Unlike my point of view’. Participants were then asked to sort statements from these three piles onto a bell-shaped grid, ranging from ‘Most like my view’ (+5 on the grid) to ‘Least like my view’ (–5 on the grid), working their way column by column from the extreme ends of the grid towards the centre (see Figures 1 and 2). Following each card sort, participants completed a questionnaire which asked them to reflect on why they had chosen to place statements at the extreme ends of their grid (i.e., those most like and least like their viewpoint). Due to the constraints of space and our focus on the distinctive features of the Q method, neither the group discussion nor questionnaire results are reported here.

Eight data collection sessions were conducted in early 2020. In total, 21 participants took part in one or both data collection sessions, 15 participants attended both sessions: 19 and 17 participants respectively completed the ‘Consequences’ and ‘Solutions’ card-sorts (see Table 3).

#### 4.4 | Data Analysis

The ‘Consequences’ and ‘Solutions’ datasets produced by the sort were analysed independently using a dedicated Q methodology software package—KADE (Banasick, 2019). Principal Component Analysis was followed by Varimax rotation to identify shared viewpoints (factors) (Watts and Stenner 2012). A factor solution was selected using quantitative and qualitative criteria: a factor had at least two *defining* card-sorts (as described in the note to Table 4 below), and the factors represent interpretable and coherent points of view.

### 5 | Q Methodology Findings

The interpretation of the results was aided by identifying ‘Characterising’, ‘Distinguishing’ and ‘Consensus’ statements. Characterising statements were those at the extreme ends of each grid, that is, positions –5, –4, +4 and +5. Distinguishing statements were those placed in a statistically significantly different way to all other factors. In contrast, Consensus statements were those not placed statistically significantly differently between any pairs of factors. Three factor solutions were statistically supported and yielded interpretable accounts (Table 4). ‘Consequences’ factors were defined (identified by an ‘X’ in Table 4) by card-sorts 11, 4 and 3, and ‘Solutions’ factors were defined by card-sorts 9, 3 and 4. For example, Participant G3-P2 defines ‘Consequences’ Factor 1.

No participant from Group 3 aligned with ‘Consequences’ Factor 2, and none from Group 4 aligned with Factor 3. No participants from Groups 1 and 2 aligned with ‘Solutions’ Factor 2, nor did any participants from Groups 3 and 4 align with ‘Solutions’ Factor 3.



**TABLE 1** | 'Consequences' statement set and factor scores.

Statement	As a result of poverty in [city name]...	Factors		
		F1	F2	F3
1	... better off citizens are more likely to do something to tackle poverty	-4	-4	0*
2	... those in poverty are labelled, stereotyped, humiliated and not treated with respect	4	0*	4
3	... those in poverty feel like they are excluded from the rest of society	3*	-1	1
4	<i>... those in poverty are less motivated to improve their situation</i>	-4	-5	-5
5	... those in poverty develop support networks to tackle problems caused by poverty	-1	-2	0
6	... those in poverty focus on short-term issues rather than thinking about the future	0*	4*	-4*
7	... those in poverty are more likely to have more children	-5	-1	-3
8	... those in poverty become disconnected from their families	-1	-3	-3
9	... those in poverty become more reliant on others for support	0	-2	-1
10	... it makes it harder for the next generation to escape poverty	5	1*	5
11	... the city becomes a more dangerous place	-3*	0	0
12	... money goes to people who do not deserve it	-5	-3	-3
13	... only the problems of the worst-off in society are focused on	-4	-2	-2
14	... the lives of those in poverty are more stressful	5	3	-1*
15	... poverty becomes more visible in the city centre	-1*	-4*	2*
16	<i>... poverty comes to dominate life in poorer parts of the city</i>	1	1	3
17	... poorer communities tend to be dirty, polluted, lack greenspace or in poor condition	-2	4*	-4
18	... a culture of dependency grows in communities where the worst-off in society live	-2	1*	-1
19	... the city becomes more divided between rich and poor	1	4	5
20	... charities lack the resources to meet demand	0	0	4
21	... council cuts hit the worst-off communities hardest	2*	-1	0
22	... employers have no incentive to improve pay or working conditions	-3*	2	3
23	... more people do not want to pay tax, as they think their money will be wasted on the poor	-3*	-5	-5
24	<i>... those in poverty find it difficult to make ends meet</i>	4	5	3
25	... those in poverty have fewer opportunities	3	2	1
26	... those in poverty are more likely to accept poorer pay and working conditions	0	3*	-1
27	... those in poverty do not have savings or resources	2*	0*	-2*
28	... the quality and range of public services in poorer areas gets worse	0	2	0
29	<i>... it becomes more difficult to support groups with specialist needs</i>	0	1	1
30	<i>... there is more demand for temporary accommodation</i>	1	0	0
31	<i>... people in poverty are doing without basic necessities</i>	4	3	4
32	... people in poverty are not able to afford things that make life more enjoyable	2	-1	2
33	... people in poverty become dependent on drugs, alcohol or other addictive substances/habits	-2	0*	-4
34	... the lives of those in poverty are strongly shaped by what is available in their neighbourhood	1*	-4*	-2
35	... those in poverty do not achieve their full potential	3	5	2
36	... businesses find it difficult to make money in poorer parts of the city	-1	-3	1

Note: Italics indicate consensus statements non-significant at  $p > 0.05$ .

\*Indicates distinguishing statements at  $p < 0.01$ .

TABLE 2 | 'Solutions' statement set and factor Scores.

Statement	Poverty in [city name] should be tackled by...	Factors		
		F1	F2	F3
1	... making it possible for people in need to access affordable, flexible loans when they need them	-2	-1	-5*
2	... ensuring that free meals are available to children during the holidays	2	-1	0
3	... expanding access to community gardens and allotments to allow people to grow their own foods	-3	-4	-1*
4	... providing food and clothes banks for people in need	-2	0	-4*
5	... reducing the cost of healthy food	-1	-2	4*
6	... <i>cutting the cost of fuel to heat homes</i>	0	0	0
7	... making it more affordable for low income households to buy or rent housing	4	0*	4
8	... providing shelter or housing to people sleeping rough on the streets	3	3	-3*
9	... making city festivals more accessible to low-income households	-3	-5	-1*
10	... providing affordable and accessible childcare	2	1	5*
11	... increasing the availability of public transport and making it more affordable	0	-3*	0
12	... asking more people to volunteer to help those living in poverty	-4	-2	-5
13	... <i>challenging negative stereotypes towards people living in poverty</i>	2	0	0
14	... convincing more people of the need to tackle poverty	1	0	-3*
15	... cracking down on people pretending to be in poverty	-5	-2*	-4
16	... using the benefits system to encourage people to work and/or study	-4*	1*	-2*
17	... shifting resources away from migrants and asylum seekers to support British citizens	-5	-5	-4
18	... encouraging people living in poverty to feel better about themselves	-2	1	-1
19	... helping people living in poverty to take personal responsibility for themselves	-4*	3	2
20	... increasing the level of benefits	4*	-3	-4
21	... tackling the culture of dependency on benefits	-4*	-1	-2
22	... teaching parents and children essential life skills, such as how to cook affordable meals or manage a budget	-2*	2	3
23	... <i>improving support for vulnerable individuals, such as disabled people, ex-offenders or people with poor mental health</i>	2	2	1
24	... making more funding available for good primary health care, such as GP surgeries or community pharmacists, in poor areas	0	0	4
25	... increasing the availability of, and access to, social care services in poor areas	1	4*	-1
26	... increasing the availability of, and access to, mental health services in poor areas	1	4	1
27	... banning zero hours contracts	1	-4*	3
28	... making sure that everyone who wants a job can get a job	0	5*	1
29	... providing more education and training opportunities for people living in poverty	2*	5	4
30	... making sure employers pay a wage that means it's possible to cover basic needs and take part in society	4	2	5
31	... <i>supporting industries, companies or sectors that can provide decent, well-paid jobs</i>	-1	-1	-1
32	... making sure welfare benefits keep up with the rising cost of living	5	4	2
33	... <i>ensuring that everyone who is entitled to benefits receives them</i>	3	3	2

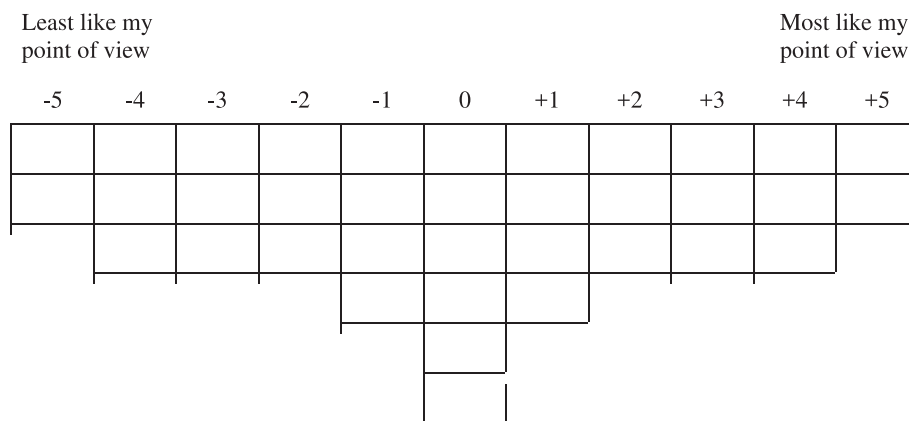
(Continues)

**TABLE 2** | (Continued)

Statement	Poverty in [city name] should be tackled by...	Factors		
		F1	F2	F3
34	... increasing the availability of benefits advice services	0	-2	-2
35	... providing longer-term funding for charities, local groups and community enterprises who support people experiencing poverty	1	2	-2
36	... helping communities to own land, buildings or other assets in their community	-2	-3	-3
37	... ensuring that poorer communities have a say in decisions that will affect them	3*	1	-2
38	... listening to and acting on the concerns of people living in poverty	4	4	0*
39	... increasing government spending to tackle poverty	5*	3	3
40	... raising taxes fairly to generate funds to tackle poverty	3*	-1	0
41	... targeting resources to ensure that only low income households benefit	-3	-3	-3
42	... coordinating anti-poverty initiatives across the public, private and third sectors	0	2	3
43	... creating a single point of contact to signpost those in need to the most appropriate services	-1	1	2
44	... introducing a tourist tax to raise funds to tackle poverty	-1	-4*	1
45	... finding more ways for people from different groups of different communities in society to mix together	-3	-2	2*
46	... making work pay so both parents don't have to work	-1	-4*	1

Note: Italics indicate consensus statements non-significant at  $p > 0.05$ .

\*Indicates distinguishing statements at  $p < 0.01$ .



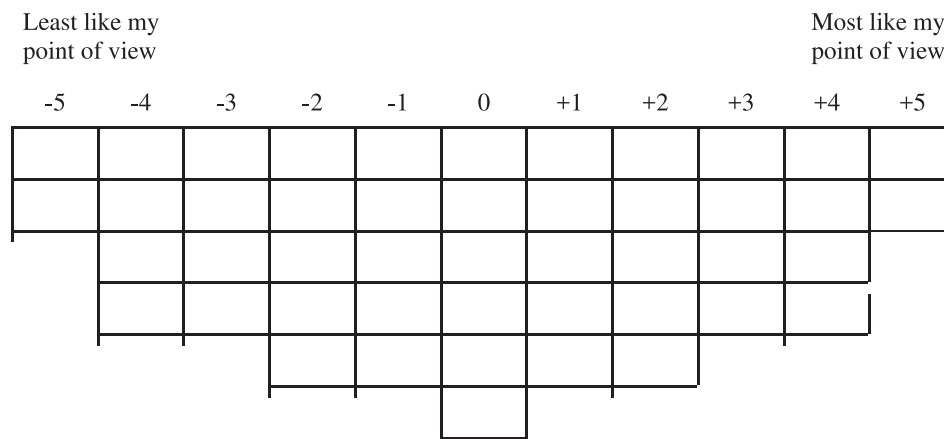
**FIGURE 1** | 'Causes' sorting grid. As a result of poverty in [city name]...

### 5.1 | Factor Descriptions

Areas of convergence and divergence are apparent within both 'Consequences' and 'Solutions'. Tables 1 and 2 report that three factor solutions were identified for both 'Consequences' and 'Solutions' (see Robertson et al. 2020 for full factor descriptions). In relation to 'Consequences', Factor 1 ('An unfair society') regarded poverty as unfair and having generational effects caused by structural and financial issues that lead to stressful lives and fewer opportunities. Factor 2 ('Diminished by poverty') described how poverty impoverishes lives at both an individual level (due to the difficulties of making ends meet) and community level (due to fewer and lower quality public services and living in polluted and dirty areas with a lack of green space). Factor 3 ('A divided

city') highlighted how poverty leads to division in the city between rich and poor, with poverty dominating all aspects of the lives of those in poorer areas. Interestingly, this resembles concerns expressed by several commentators about the threat inequality poses to social solidarity (e.g., Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Dorling 2018; Pickett, Aini Gauhar, and Wilkinson 2024).

In relation to 'Solutions', Factor 1 ('Income and investment') outlined that tackling poverty requires structural changes—providing enabling and supportive responses and opportunities to people (e.g., through education and training provision) rather than individual punitive measures. For Factor 2 ('Work-led solutions') indicated that people living in poverty should be empowered with education, training and improved access to services



**FIGURE 2** | ‘Solutions’ sorting grid. *Poverty in [city name] should be tackled by...*

**TABLE 3** | Participant Sample.

Group	Participant type	No. of participants	Both sessions	‘Consequences’ session	‘Solutions’ session
1	People living in the city with no direct experience of poverty	7	5	7	5
2	People living in poverty but not living in deprived parts of the city	3	3	3	3
3	Business leaders and small business owners	5	3	4	4
4	Statutory service providers and third sector organisations	6	4	5	5
Total		21	15	19	17

to better their own situation. Factor 3 (‘Introduce long-term measure’) highlighted the need for long-term solutions around, for example, fairer work and conditions, affordable housing and childcare, to make easier to live a healthy life.

## 5.2 | Points of Convergence

Regarding the ‘Consequences’ of poverty, there was broad convergence concerning the difficulties that those in poverty face in meeting basic needs (Table 1, Statements #24 and #31), and that poverty impacts negatively upon a person’s ability to achieve their full potential (#35). The motivation of those in poverty to improve their situation (#4), and the deservingness of those receiving money (#12) was not questioned in any accounts. Likewise, the beliefs that only the worst-off in society are focused on (#13) and that people may not have an appetite for paying more tax as they think their money will be wasted on the poor (#23) were not like any of the three ‘Consequences’ viewpoints.

In terms of ‘Solutions’, there are several points of convergence around both how to tackle to poverty and what not to do. Among the key issues agreed upon were increasing the amount of money those in poverty live on by ensuring welfare benefits

keep up with the rising cost of living (Table 2, Statement #32); that everyone who is entitled to welfare benefits receives them (#33), and making sure that employers pay a wage that covers basic needs and allows people to take part in society (#30). There was also convergence on increasing government spending to tackle poverty (#39), and providing more education and training opportunities for people living in poverty (#29).

Issues which were agreed upon as *not* suitable for tackling poverty included punitive measures, such as cracking down on people pretending to be in poverty (Table 2, Statement #15); redirecting resources from migrants and asylum seekers to support British citizens (#17), and shifting the responsibility to volunteers to help those living in poverty (#12). Neither helping communities to own land, buildings and other community assets (#36), nor targeting resources to ensure that only low income households’ benefit (#41) were supported.

## 5.3 | Points of Divergence

In relation to ‘Consequences’, the placement of three statements differed significantly across all three factors. In Factor 1 the belief was that those in poverty do not have savings nor resources (Table 1, Statement #27); this was less important



**TABLE 4** | Type of participant and factor loadings.<sup>a</sup>

Participant ID <sup>b</sup>	'Consequences'			'Solutions'		
	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
	Unfair society	Diminished by poverty	Divided society	Income and investment	Work-led solutions	Long-term measures
G1-P1	<b>0.7017X</b>	0.2993	0.4144	<b>0.6464X</b>	<b>0.4511</b>	0.0653
G1-P2	<b>0.5106</b>	0.1173	<b>0.5875X</b>			
G1-P3	<b>0.6714X</b>	0.2757	0.1977	<b>0.4613X</b>	-0.0373	0.3481
G1-P4	<b>0.5796X</b>	0.1109	<b>0.5074</b>	<b>0.7294X</b>	0.3798	0.2707
G1-P5	0.2064	<b>0.5894X</b>	0.3846	<b>0.5388</b>	0.0403	<b>0.561X</b>
G1-P6	<b>0.4373</b>	<b>0.5086</b>	0.3586	-0.0043	<b>0.3999</b>	<b>0.6047X</b>
G1-P7	<b>0.4686</b>	<b>0.5965X</b>	0.2814			
G2-P1	<b>0.7164X</b>	0.3052	-0.0617	0.1349	0.0774	<b>0.7628X</b>
G2-P2	-0.0634	0.2106	<b>0.7903X</b>	0.1752	0.1493	<b>0.6333X</b>
G2-P3	-0.0097	<b>0.8683X</b>	0.0794	<b>0.5823X</b>	0.2899	0.1714
G3-P1	<b>0.5709X</b>	<b>0.5179</b>	-0.0009	0.2532	<b>0.6903X</b>	0.2697
G3-P2	<b>0.8396X</b>	-0.0006	0.2043			
G3-P3	<b>0.6945X</b>	0.4236	0.3313	<b>0.79X</b>	0.1512	0.023
G3-P4	<b>0.4904</b>	0.1678	<b>0.613X</b>	<b>0.5475</b>	<b>0.5295</b>	0.1791
G3-P5				0.2568	<b>0.7482X</b>	-0.0748
G4-P1	0.3927	<b>0.4986X</b>	0.2374			
G4-P2	<b>0.7692X</b>	<b>0.5084</b>	0.0707	<b>0.6911X</b>	<b>0.384</b>	0.2832
G4-P3	<b>0.7588X</b>	0.2574	0.3095	<b>0.834X</b>	0.0394	0.1778
G4-P4	<b>0.8021X</b>	0.1648	0.3664	<b>0.7452X</b>	0.0782	0.355
G4-P5	<b>0.5847X</b>	<b>0.5224</b>	0.102	<b>0.7874X</b>	0.1941	-0.0374
G4-P6				0.029	<b>0.7982X</b>	0.2676
% Explained variance	35	18	14	31	16	14

Note: Significant factor loadings are shown in bold.

<sup>a</sup>The factor loadings of *defining* card-sorts are indicated with an X. Defining card-sorts meet two criteria: (i) the loadings are significant ( $p < 0.01$ ). The significance level is calculated as  $2.58*(SE)$ . SE represents standard error that is defined as  $1/\sqrt{N}$  where  $N$  is the number of statements in the statement set. For 'Consequences',  $2.58*(SE) = 2.58 (1/\sqrt{36}) = 0.43$ . For 'Solutions',  $2.58*(SE) = 2.58 (1/\sqrt{46}) = 0.3804$ . (ii) The square of the loading for a factor is larger than the sum of the square loadings for all other factors (i.e. majority common variance).

<sup>b</sup>Participant ID signifies the group (G) each participant attended and their participant (P) number. G1 = People in the city with no direct experience of poverty, G2 = People in poverty but not living in deprived parts of the city, G3 = Business leaders and small business owners and G4 = Statutory service providers and third sector organisations.

to Factor 2 and unlike Factor 3. Factor 2 expresses a strong belief that those in poverty focus on short-term issues rather than thinking about the future (#6), which was less relevant to Factor 1 and very unlike Factor 3. Finally, poverty becoming more visible in the city centre (#15) was like Factor 3 but not like Factor 2 and also less of an issue for Factor 1. Certain statements were also uniquely placed in one of the three Factors. For example, the statement that employers have no incentive to improve pay or working conditions (#22) was important to Factors 2 and 3 but not Factor 1. The point that poorer communities tend to be dirty, polluted, lack greenspace or are in poor condition (#17) was important to Factor 2 but not so for Factors 1 and 3.

Regarding 'Solutions', increasing the level of benefits (Table 2, Statement #20) was important to Factor 1 but not like Factors 2 and 3. The beliefs that helping people living in poverty to take personal responsibility for themselves (#19) and teaching parents and children essential life skills, such as how to cook affordable meals or manage a budget (#22) were not like Factor 1 but were important to Factors 2 and 3. Factor 2 particularly diverged from Factor 3 around the issue of banning 0h contracts (#27). Finally, unlike Factors 1 and 2, reducing the cost of healthy food (#5) and finding ways for people from different groups and communities to mix together (#45) were important to Factor 3, but providing shelter or housing to people sleeping rough on the streets (#8) was not.

## 6 | Discussion: Framing the Poverty Discourse Using Q

Before discussing the implications of these findings, it is important to recognise some limitations of this research. Firstly, the project did not explicitly raise the issues of resource redistribution, over which opinions within the UK are more divided (Benson et al. 2021). There are also some aspects of how participants were recruited which limited the diversity of views represented. For example, Group 1 participants (those without experience of poverty) largely consisted of current or former public and third sector employees. Also some participants in Group 3 (business leaders) commented on the lack of diversity in the views expressed in their discussion, and suggested that other affluent residents may have held different views. Nevertheless, despite these limitations, the study was able to identify a diversity of viewpoints within both of these Groups, as shown in Table 4.

The study identified both a number of shared views and also points of divergence regarding both the consequences of and proposed response to poverty in the city. These findings could be used to highlight issues where bipartisan support is possible and those more likely to be divisive. Identifying what can be agreed upon and how to address controversial issues in this way relates to theories of how the poverty discourse may be more effectively framed. Framing is a form of strategic communication which identifies prevailing beliefs and how to tailor messages accordingly.

Framing is the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. It's what we emphasise, how we explain an issue, and what we leave unsaid. These choices affect how people think, feel and act. Frames are more than key words or phrases. Frames are the ideas and principles that provide a scaffolding for you to build your communications, helping you to tell the same powerful story but in different ways—adapted for your audience and channels. (Frameworks 2023, 4)

As this quote indicates, framing is a scaffold which can be adapted to different circumstances and audiences. According to the proponents of framing, three principles are central to how poverty should be represented in Britain to cultivate consensus: (i) identify common ground and areas of agreement; (ii) widen the lens of interpretation to include structural factors and causes; (iii) show how issues can be resolved to generate hope (McDermott 2023).

As framing advocates observe 'We're up against some common beliefs among the British public, and if we trigger these beliefs, our messages can backfire' (Brook 2019, 3). There are three features of attitudes towards poverty in Britain to which framing must give particular attention. The first characteristic is a focus on agency and the belief that individual choices and behaviours are principal causes of poverty. This tendency can lead to blame, stigma and Othering (Lister 2020). To address this, a framing approach recommends emphasising how circumstances beyond

individual control can create traps which push people into poverty. The Covid pandemic is referred to as 'an easily relatable jumping-off point [that] powerfully undermines the belief that 'bad character' is the main driver of poverty by pointing to bad luck' (Arnold 2022, 6).

The second feature of research on attitudes towards poverty in Britain offers ground for more optimism—appeal can be made to shared morality, compassionate sentiments and ideas of justice (Gordon 2023). There are particular shared values and common principles which underlie contrasting political perspectives to which well framed messages can appeal (Brook 2019, 4). Opposing outlooks can be united by making a moral case for tackling poverty, emphasising ideals of fairness, and highlighting injustices.

A third aspect of British opinion partly relates to these shared sentiments—leverage may be acquired by using inclusive language (i.e., 'we', 'us') to 'build a sense of collective (rather than individual) responsibility' for addressing poverty (Frameworks 2023, 13). Emphasising collective capacity also addresses a sense of fatalism which can inhibit anti-poverty actions. Poverty can appear to be an insurmountable problem, but resignation and hopelessness can be countered with examples of practical and effective actions. These demonstrate that poverty is not inevitable but amenable to policy, so that people feel empowered and optimistic about change (Brook 2019, 5).

Some of the findings from our Q study relate to these features of British public attitudes. Firstly, in relation to the focus on individual agency, one point of convergence regarding the consequences of poverty identified in our Q study was the view that people experiencing poverty did not lack motivation. Building on this, support for anti-poverty measures could be cultivated by emphasising the agency of those experiencing poverty. In relation to the recommendation that poverty is framed to evoke shared ideals of fairness, a relevant finding from our Q analysis was a consensus that one consequence of poverty is a negative impact upon the ability to achieve one's full potential. Concern about denied opportunity is an important moral value that could be targeted to general public support.

A third feature highlighted by framing is the importance of countering fatalism by offering positive examples of effective policies. The Q study found several proposed solutions to poverty upon which study participants converged which could be highlighted to generate public support. These include: ensuring that everyone receives the welfare benefits to which they are entitled; making sure that employers pay wages that are sufficient to cover basic needs, and providing more education and training opportunities for people living in poverty.

Addressing these areas of consensus effectively could build trust in policy and generate momentum for further effective reforms. It is interesting to note that support does not coalesce only around short-term policy 'quick wins', which has been a criticism of so-called 'Nudge' policy approaches (Thaler and Sunstein 2009; Mols 2015). In fact, some of the consensus solutions revealed by Q include more progressive policies which might otherwise have been assumed to be too controversial for policy-makers to countenance.

The Q study also identified several divergent views between participants which could be potential points of tension or controversy. Divisions were evident in relation to three proposed consequences of poverty, suggesting that campaigns to address the problem should not focus on an absence of savings and resources within deprived households. Similarly, it should not be suggested that people experiencing poverty focus on short term needs; and it would be best to avoid highlighting poor conditions in deprived areas. Each proposition provoked negative reactions or disagreement in our study. Some suggested solutions to poverty also provoked divisive reactions. These include increasing benefit levels; helping people cultivate life skills; banning Zero Hours contracts, and providing housing for those sleeping rough. The Q study findings suggest that, while these proposals may find support among some groups, others strongly disagree with them.

Finally, there were findings from this application of Q which do not correspond directly to the recommendations of the framing approach. For example, two proposed solutions to poverty which emerged from the Q study do not appear in counts of framing, that is, ensuring that the value of welfare benefits matches rising living costs, and increasing government spending to tackle poverty. An interesting area of further research would be to examine how these issues relate to effectively framing accounts of poverty.

## 7 | Conclusions

This article has highlighted two potential ways in which Q could enrich understanding of attitudes towards poverty and policy preferences. Firstly, Q engages research participants in reflection to produce more considered opinion statements than those typically solicited by conventional surveys. Secondly, as the application of Q outlined in the article has shown, this method can identify both shared and divergent opinions that alternative methods may overlook. Q can highlight common sentiments and points of contention, thereby identifying which issues to focus and avoid in developing viable policy options. Q could therefore help policy makers better understanding how voters feel about this complex issue. Some of the agreed responses to poverty highlighted by this application of Q suggest that there may be more consensus around potentially progressive actions than is otherwise supposed. Q may therefore enable policy makers to explore and expand the scope of the 'art of the possible' in addressing poverty.

To fundamentally reform the economic structures and political conditions which create poverty in the midst of affluence it may ultimately be necessary to challenge opinions and change public attitudes. In a climate of political factionalism, some aspects of public perceptions of poverty may not be readily amenable to short term change. However, we cannot simply wait for attitudes to change before acting to reduce poverty. To ensure that effective policies are sustained, it is essential to identify and appeal to shared values and secure support from 'sections of the public who don't already agree with us' (Arnold 2022, 9) and identify some common principles upon which to build a consensus for anti-poverty measures (Knight 2018). The potential

of Q methodology to enable deliberation, reflection and the development of shared viewpoints is therefore more valuable now than ever.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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