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# Ten Years of “Q-Squared”: Implications for Understanding and Explaining Poverty

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**Summary.** — Over the past decade, there have been a number of initiatives to promote a more systematic integration of “quantitative” and “qualitative,” or “Q-Squared,” approaches to poverty analysis in the Global South, and a large body of literature had emerged. The objective of the article is to present a (selective) review of this empirical work with a view to demonstrate the value it has added for understanding and explaining poverty. The evidence strongly suggests that Q-Squared approaches have aided our understanding of the characteristics of the poor and the causes of poverty.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The past decade has seen a flourishing of mixed method research across the social sciences. This trend is evidenced by the emergence of journals specializing in mixed methods including the *Journal of Mixed Method Research* and the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches*, the publication of first and second editions of the *SAGE Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social and Behavioral Research* (Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003a, 2010), the convening of (seven) annual international conferences on mixed methods (<http://www.healthcareconferences.leeds.ac.uk/conferences/>), and so forth. According to Brannen’s (2005, p. 4) review paper, over the past decade “mixed methods [have been] in the ascendancy.”

The renewed focus on mixed method inquiry has been equally evident in development studies, and in particular, poverty analysis. It should be recognized that there is a long history of mixed method research in development studies. A classic case for such research was provided by Michael Lipton in his seminal article in the *Journal of Development Studies*, entitled “Interdisciplinary Studies in Less Development Countries” (Lipton, 1970). Further, a significant body of work within this tradition has arisen over the years, with many important contributions.<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the recent decade has been marked by a significant increase in the quantity of mixed method materials produced on poverty, along with greater experimentation with a wider range of analytical techniques.

Specifically, there have been a number of recent initiatives to promote a more systematic integration of “quantitative” and “qualitative,” or “Q-Squared,” approaches to poverty analysis in the Global South. Examples include research programs or activities of the *BASIS Collaborative Research Support Program* ([www.basis.wisc.edu](http://www.basis.wisc.edu/)), the *Chronic Poverty Research Centre* led by the University of Manchester and the Overseas Development Institute (<http://www.chronicpoverty.org/>), the *Global Poverty Research Group* at the Universities of Oxford and Manchester (<http://www.gprg.org/>), the International Food Policy Research Institute, the *Livelihoods and Diversification Directions Explored by Research (LADDER)* research project at the University of East Anglia, the *Wellbeing Research in Developing Countries (WED)* project at the University of Bath (<http://www.welldev.org.uk/>), the World Bank, in particular their *Moving out of Poverty* studies, the

*Young Lives* project led by the University of Oxford, (<http://www.younglives.org.uk/>), the *Stages of Progress approach* pioneered by Duke University’s Anirudh Krishna and colleagues (<http://sanford.duke.edu/krishna/>), among others.

Another initiative in this same tradition was the “Q-Squared” research program which led to conferences at Cornell University (2001), the University of Toronto (2004), and the Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences (2007), resulting in an edited monograph (Kanbur, 2003a) and Special Issues of *World Development* (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007a) and the *International Journal of Multiple Research Approaches* (Shaffer, Kanbur, Thang, & Bortei-Doku Aryeetey, 2008). With support from Canada’s International Development Research Council (IDRC), the Q-Squared project developed a training program and a website which housed the *Q-Squared Working Paper Series* (presently on-line at [www.trentu.ca/ids/qsquared.php](http://www.trentu.ca/ids/qsquared.php)). Close to a decade ago, Ravi Kanbur, who founded the Q-Squared initiative, issued the following challenge: “the pragmatic answer, to how to get cross-disciplinarity going . . . is to advance through the analysis of concrete issues and problems . . . demonstrating how two disciplines are better than one” (Kanbur, 2002, p. 484). While the language of “disciplines” is somewhat misleading, in that the qualitative/quantitative distinction is not the same as the disciplinary divide, as discussed below, the underlying challenge remains relevant. Ten years on, there is now a sizeable body of empirical literature on Q-Squared poverty analysis. The time is ripe to revisit Kanbur’s challenge and assess whether, in fact, Q-Squared analyses have added value to understanding and explain poverty.

The objective of the present article is to present a (selective) review of the empirical literature on work completed in the Q-Squared tradition over the past decade. There is no attempt to provide an exhaustive treatment of this body of work. The focus is on examples of value-added, for understanding and explaining poverty, of the use of multiple methods in poverty analysis. Specifically, examples are chosen which represent

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innovative attempts to better determine who are the poor and why they are poor.

In terms of selection criteria, five main considerations guided the choice of materials covered. There is a focus on: (i) the Global South; (ii) poverty; (iii) published sources; (iv) empirical findings; (v) recent results, i.e. within the past decade. Accordingly, the following contributions, with relevance to Q-Squared, but not meeting the selection criteria, are not covered: (i) the large literatures on happiness (Layard, 2005) and human well-being (McGillivray, 2007); (ii) theoretical/methodological debates concerning structure/agency and methodological individualism in poverty analysis (e.g. du Toit, 2009; Green, 2009; Harris, 2009)<sup>2</sup>; (iii) analyses of philosophical foundations<sup>3</sup> (Kanbur & Shaffer, 2007b; Shaffer, 2005), theoretical underpinnings (Ruggeri Laderchi, Saith, & Stewart, 2003; Stewart, Saith, & Harris-White, 2007; Stewart *et al.*, 2007) or conceptual foundations (Grusky & Kanbur, 2006) of approaches to poverty; (iii) mixed method studies dealing with related, but distinct, issues such as the Commons (Poteete, Janssen, & Ostrom, 2010), social capital (Grootaert & Narayan, 2004), microfinance (Collins, Morduch, Rutherford, & Ruthven, 2009), HIV/AIDS (Seeley *et al.*, 2008), and diverse issues in the “new” economic sociology (Granovetter, 2005).

The paper makes at least four contributions to the academic literature and to development practice. First, it is the first published work to synthesize results of a major decade-long research initiative, addressing two themes which lie at the heart of development studies, namely poverty and mixed methods. Second, it categorizes and documents the diverse ways that mixed method approaches have value-added for understanding and explaining poverty, a matter of interest to both academics and practitioners. Third, mixed method poverty analysis remains marginal in many quarters and is often not taken seriously by policy-makers and academics, in particular by economists. Further, most country-level poverty analysis in the Global South is still dominated by the methods which appear in the standard toolbox of the applied tradition of micro-economics. In fact, one of the major motivations behind the Q-Squared initiatives was to redress this imbalance. Accordingly, it is useful to clearly document the value-added of such approaches for those who might be inclined to dismiss them summarily otherwise. Fourth, in the context of methodological faddism, it is important to maintain the momentum generated by mixed method approaches so they do not succumb to new fashion trends and fall out of favor.

The format of the paper is as follows: Section 2 addresses conceptual and definitional issues about the qualitative/quantitative distinction and mixed method research designs. Section 3 reviews empirical studies relating to the Identification Stage of poverty analysis, which asks who are the poor and what are their characteristics. Empirical work on the Causal Stage of poverty analysis, which addresses the determinants of poverty, is reviewed in Section 4. Section 5 concludes.<sup>4</sup>

## 2. THE QUAL/QUANT DISTINCTION & MIXED METHOD DESIGNS

There are a number of competing definitions of the terms “qualitative” and “quantitative” with emphasis placed on data, methods, or broad traditions of inquiry (Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003b). One such typology was proposed by Ravi Kanbur (2003b) at the initial Q-Squared Conference at Cornell University, and distinguished between types of: population information; population coverage: population involvement; inference methodology, and disciplinary framework.<sup>5</sup> The typology is

useful in that it is explicit about dimensions of difference. The problem, however, is that the categorical distinctions in such typologies are often hard to sustain in light of empirical counter examples (see Shaffer, 2005). For example, in the case of population coverage, fixed response household surveys may be conducted in one village only, while some participatory poverty assessments have national scope (e.g. Rwanda, discussed in Section 3). Likewise, the disciplinary distinction between neo-classical economics and the rest, tends to understate important “quantitative” traditions within various social science disciplines including political science, sociology, and history (Abbott, 2011).

Accordingly, in the present article, the qualitative/quantitative terminology is largely eschewed in favor of discussion of the actual methods or data that are being mixed. Typically, however, a core axis of differentiation is between poverty analysis in the applied micro-economic tradition grounded on consumption expenditure, fixed response household surveys, and statistical analysis on the one hand, and poverty analysis in the traditions of applied social anthropology or participatory rural appraisal, which rely heavily on dialogical techniques such as focus group discussions or semi-structured interviews, on the other.

As with the qual/quant distinctions there are many typologies of mixed method research design which focus, *inter alia*, on the sequencing of methods, the priority afforded either or both, the purpose of study and/or the underlying theoretical perspective (Creswell, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson 2003; Tashakkori & Teddle, 2003b). Such typologies are useful for certain purposes, such as clarification of research methodology and organization of subject materials. Nevertheless, as above, we refrain from using such typologies in favor of an organizing framework based on specific issues and challenges found within the Identification and Causal Stages of poverty analysis.

## 3. IDENTIFICATION: POVERTY MEANINGS AND CORRELATES

As mentioned above, the Identification Stage addresses two main questions: “who are the poor” and “what are their characteristics.” It entails: (a) specifying dimensions of poverty; (b) outlining their relative weights (if more than one dimension are selected), and (c) determining an appropriate poverty cut-off or threshold.<sup>6</sup> Q-Squared has made contributions to all three of these issues by addressing four key challenges for the analysis of poverty in the Identification Stage.

The first challenge concerns the imperative of using “locally meaningful” categories of poverty. Otherwise stated, conceptions of poverty should correspond to people’s understanding of the term. There are at least three key arguments in support of this proposition. First, from a philosophical perspective, some argue that social phenomena are “intrinsically meaningful,” in the sense that their significance and/or existence depends on the meanings ascribed to them.<sup>7</sup> Understanding a concept such as “poverty,” entails a “double hermeneutic” of interpreting a concept which is pre-interpreted by social actors (Giddens, 1976, p. 162). Failure to do so may lead to analytical biases and blind spots: “we interpret all other societies in the categories of our own” (Taylor, 1985, p.42). A second, related argument, from social anthropology, is that concepts such as poverty, should bear a close relationship to local categories of social differentiation (Green, 2006, 2009). Otherwise, “we” are imposing analytical categories with little local relevance.<sup>8</sup> Third, modern (neo-classical) economics rests on a “subjective” conception of value in that is based on individual preferences, as opposed to its

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