

*Q- Methodology* as an innovative means of engaging social workers in research on organisational policy and practice.

**Johanna O' Shea**  
**Maynooth University**

# The Plan

Context to Research

What is Q  
Methodology

The Research Process

Why use it in public service  
research with social workers



# Background Research

Research into Probation  
Practice in NI



Unique situation of PBNI



Previous Experience of  
undertaking research



Search for optimal  
research method



# What is Q Methodology

Study of human subjectivity

Systematic method to investigate the perspectives of participants –  
Operant Subjectivity (Stephenson 1953)

Uses Abductive Reasoning (or  
Inference to the Best Explanation)

Qualitative, but relies on statistical  
analysis, so mixed method

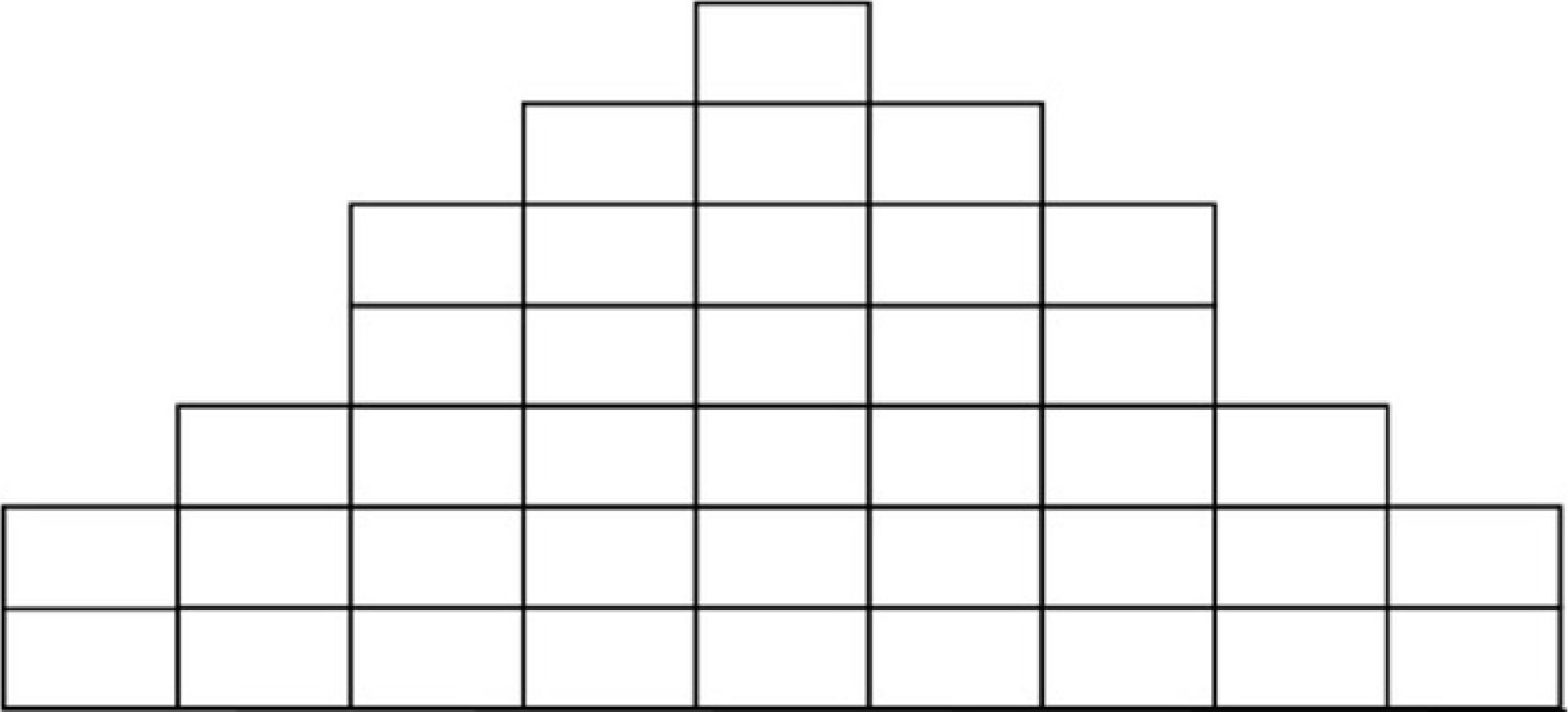
# The Research Process

1st stage is development of a series of statements

Participants rank the **statements**

Forced distribution v free distribution

Can be purely ranking exercise or combined with conversation during and after process



-4      -3      -2      -1      0      +1      +2      +3      +4

**TEND TO DISAGREE**

**TEND TO AGREE**

# My Research Project

33 Q sort interviews  
combined with  
conversation

39 statements related to risk  
of harm (dangerousness)  
policy and how this area was  
shaping probation practice

**Development of relevant  
statements and piloting  
these was critical to  
process**





# Data Analysis

Factor Analysis (Persons are factors – not items)

Analysis of Variance using PQ Method software

Produces Prototypes / Composite individuals / Typical PO A; Typical PO B; Typical PO C

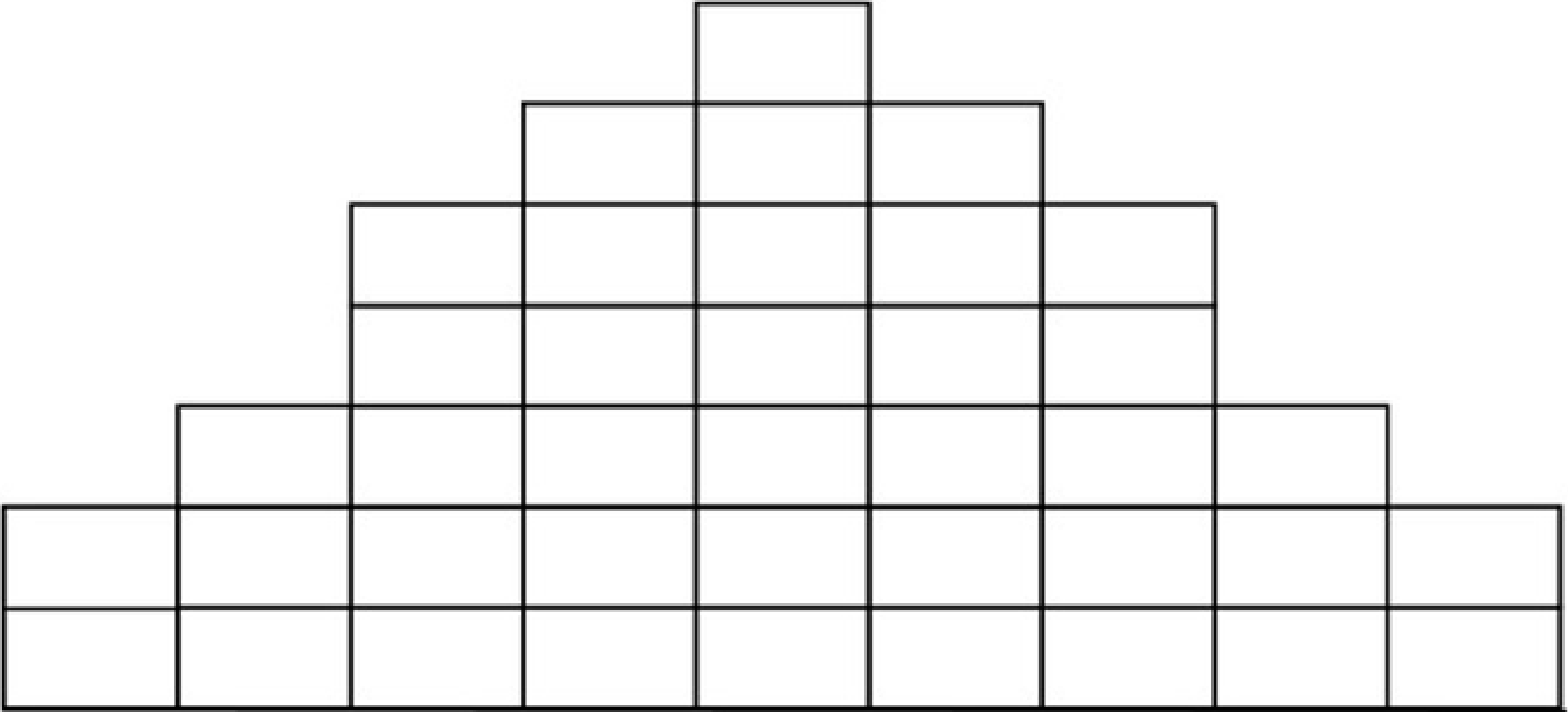
Complemented with qualitative comments sorted 1. by prototype A, B or C and 2. by statement number within each cluster (using NVivo)

# The Benefits of Using Q in public service research

Allows time to build rapport

Participant has maximum control to prioritise their answers

**Participants reported enjoying the process**



-4      -3      -2      -1      0      +1      +2      +3      +4

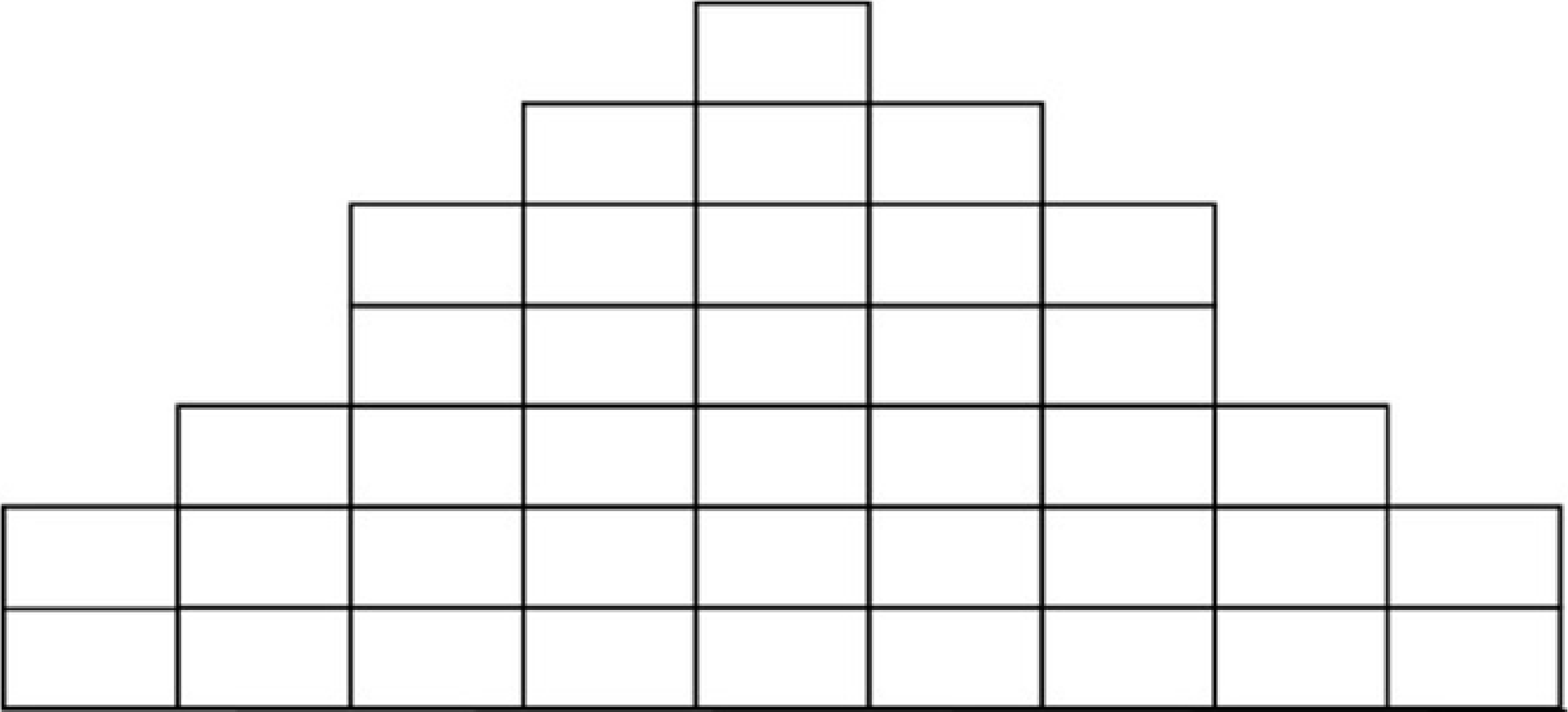
**TEND TO DISAGREE**

**TEND TO AGREE**

# The Benefits of Using Q in public service research

**Participants can  
choose moderate  
rather than  
absolute  
viewpoints**

**The outer  
extremes of  
the curve  
generated a lot  
of discussion**



-4      -3      -2      -1      0      +1      +2      +3      +4

**TEND TO DISAGREE**

**TEND TO AGREE**

Thank you for listening!



Any questions?