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TITLE: INTRODUCING WPR: A WORK IN PROGRESS

ABSTRACT:

The WPR ("What's the Problem Represented to be?") approach to policy analysis has been taken up in numerous fields and around the world. Articles, theses, book chapters and government reports have drawn upon its analytic propositions to produce thoughtful criticism on many topics (see Select Reference List and Supplementary List on Symposium website). I never cease to be amazed at the ingenuity and imagination with which it has been applied. Specific contributions have impelled me to reflect on developments in my explanations of how to deploy WPR since its inception in *Women, Policy and Politics: The construction of policy problems* (Sage 1999). I consider WPR to be a "work-in-progress", as is clear in the changing number and wording of the questions in the approach. My goal today is to clarify what has changed in WPR, what has stayed the same and some contentious issues to do with its use, specifically how "subjects" are conceived, the reliance on "texts", and the challenge to the formulation/implementation dichotomy in policy making. The larger purpose will be to contribute to contemporary speculation about the nature of critique and the rethinking of politics in the time of climate change and COVID-19.

OUTLINE:

INTRODUCTION:

Why do I refer to WPR as a "work in progress"? This description fits the ethos of the approach – that is, there is no claim to "truth" or to know how to find "truth". Instead, a dynamic of exchange is encouraged – exchanging views and propositions. The story I tell today is a result of those exchanges. I will occasionally refer you to entries on my website (https://carolbacchi.com) to elaborate points that may interest you.

DISCOVERING PROBLEMATIZATIONS

The WPR questions – now consisting of *seven* forms of questioning and analysis (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 20; see Chart) – appear to be deceptively simple. This characteristic of the approach explains both its popularity and the diversity of applications. The key term in the approach is

problematization, a term with diverse heritages and adaptations (Bacchi 2015a). In WPR its usage takes inspiration from Foucault. Foucault took a distinctly nominalist approach to objects and concepts, including "problematization" (Alasuuarti 2010; Flynn 1989; Veyne 1997). Concepts in Foucault have no fixed meaning; rather, they are "tactical weapons" or tools for political change. Such a stance is tremendously liberating – it frees us to use categories and concepts for a range of political projects.

Foucault deploys problematization in two distinct ways. One usage adopts "problematization" in a verb form – to problematize – in order to refer to the mode of critical analysis Foucault calls "thinking problematically" (Foucault 1978 [1970]: 185-6). The second usage, a noun form, is tied to the "historical process of producing objects for thought". These "objects for thought" stand in contrast to the "objects" of natural realism. They do not simply exist ("*exister*") as essences; rather, they come to be something ("*devenir quelque chose*") in practices (Oksala 2012: 28). Foucault describes them as "the forms of problematization themselves" (Foucault 1990: 11-12).

WPR as a mode of critical analysis combines these two adaptations of problematization. It engages in "thinking problematically" *about* "the objects for thought", "the forms of problematization themselves" produced in practices. In WPR I call these "objects for thought", or "forms of problematization", *problem representations*. Importantly, these problematizations lodge in governmental texts, understood broadly, and not in the heads of individuals. A

critical task involves tracing how these problem representations have come to be something ("*devenir quelque chose*") (Questions 3 and 6 on Chart), indicating an ontology of becoming.

The goal of the analysis is to de-naturalize "objects" assumed simply to "exist" on the grounds that such de-naturalization is politically useful. Seeing "things" simply as "existing" (a realist stance) tends to install them as "truth" and as fixed entities, making it difficult to instigate change. By contrast, in an ontology of *becoming* (a nominalist stance), one draws attention to the practices and processes that shape or produce "subjects", "objects", "places" and "problems", opening up opportunities for challenge and modification (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016; Bacchi 2018).

DEPLOYING PROBLEMATIZATIONS

To "think problematically" WPR makes two innovative analytic interventions:
1. using what I describe as "proposals" or "proposed solutions" as starting points for thinking about problematizations (the forms themselves); and
2. insisting that we as political subjects are governed through problematizations (the forms themselves), rather than through policies.

Why do I suggest the need to start our analyses of problematizations (the forms themselves) from a focus on "proposals" or "proposed solutions"? I identify as a key premise in WPR that what one proposes to do about

something indicates what one "thinks" needs to change and hence what is produced as problematic – i.e., the "problem". For example, if you propose (advocate) that women require training courses in order to gain access to positions of influence and better pay, this proposal produces the "problem" as women's *lack* of training. I put forward this form of argument, or way of thinking, as a "template" for applying WPR.

Foucault captured this form of thinking in his references to the "conduct of conduct" (Gordon 1991: 2). He argued that we need to think about how we are governed in a wide range of practices that attempt to shape our behaviours. Government, here, is understood to embrace the activities and practices of a diverse range of agencies and professionals involved in conducting conduct.

In WPR, *proposals* or proposed solutions provide access to governmental guides to conduct. WPR adds the crucial point that we can best understand how this governing (understood broadly) takes place by looking at how specific proposals (or proposed solutions) problematize an issue and hence produce "problems" as particular sorts of problems.

This argument is captured in the claim that *proposals* (or proposed solutions) contain *implicit* problem representations. The goal of a WPR analysis is to explore these problem representations (or "problematizations"; see Research Hub 11 June 2018), considering their presuppositions, limits and effects.

Where are we to find "proposals" that are involved in shaping "conduct"? Some WPR researchers have encountered a methodological sticking point around the need to identify "proposals" in their chosen policies. That is, policy documents do not always cooperate by spelling out their "proposals" or recommendations for "appropriate" conduct. I suggest the need to be intuitive in the application of this key analytic point, noting for example that, if a report or piece of legislation speaks about the usefulness of *increasing* "social cohesion", this statement forms a kind of proposal in which it is *implied* that *lack* of social cohesion is a problem. So, the "problem" of lack of social cohesion is implicit in the proposal to increase social cohesion. Given that "government" in WPR extends to embrace the wide variety of agencies involved in "conducting conduct", WPR can also be applied to the proposals produced by a wide variety of governing bodies (discussed shortly).

FROM CONSTRUCTIONISM TO PERFORMATIVITY

WPR's *second* major analytic intervention – the claim that we are governed *through problematizations* rather than through policies – first appears in the 2009 textbook, *Analysing Policy* (Bacchi 2009). This proposition captures the key point to emerge from my thinking over the ten years from the initial appearance of something I then called a "What's the Problem?" approach in *Women, Policy and Politics: The construction of policy problems* (Bacchi 1999). As signalled in the sub-title of the 1999 book, at that stage I engaged primarily with constructionist scholars such as Edelman

(1988), Gusfield (1989) and Stone (1988). As a result, I tended to refer to representations of "problems" as competing "interpretations" (Bacchi 1999: 9).

From 1999 there has been a shift in my theoretical elaboration of the WPR approach from a constructionist to a performative emphasis, influenced by the work of Actor-Network theorists, John Law (2004) and Annemarie Mol (1999, 2002). In a performative understanding, problem representations are not (simply) competing *conceptions* or *understandings* of a "problem"; rather, they form the "realities" through which we are governed (see Bacchi 2012a). The analytic task, therefore, does not involve looking into *people's heads* to see what is going on – i.e., how they *conceive* a "problem"; rather, it involves examining the policy itself and how that policy *produces* (or *creates*, or *enacts*) "problems" as particular sorts of problems through its proposals. The focus shifts from individual to governmental problematizations.

WPR: A WIDENING AMBIT

This shift from constructionism to performativity has greatly expanded the analytic territory available to WPR scrutiny. In the 2016 book with Susan Goodwin, I emphasize the application of WPR to governmental technologies – *the means by which governing becomes practicable* (Bacchi 2020: 90). Think, for example, of censuses (Rowse 2009), unemployment forms, birth registers, COVID modelling, etc. WPR can also be applied to the proposals and technologies

produced by the wide variety of agencies involved in "conducting conduct". Reports, programs and instruments (such as training regimes or induction exercises) developed by educational institutions or other professional bodies, for example, are readily analysed through the WPR questions.

This way of thinking can also be adapted to reflect critically on how *buildings, ceremonies, and organizational culture* partake in the governing project (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 18). *Theoretical propositions* – e.g., a Marxist or feminist form of analysis – also make proposals about how things ought to be, opening them up to a WPR analysis (Primdahl *et al.* 2018; Skovhus and Thomsen 2017).

In three entries on my website, I consider how to apply WPR to media extracts, interview transcripts and legislative debates, alongside official Government pronouncements (30 April 2021; 31 May 2021; 30 June 2021).

ANALYSING PROBLEMATIZATIONS

Meanwhile, the steps recommended to analyze these problematizations (or problem representations) have remained much the same:
• excavate the "forms of problematization themselves" for underlying, deep-seated assumptions or presuppositions (Question 2);
• trace the genealogical emergence of specific problematizations (Question 3);

• reflect on silences in these problematizations and consider alternative problematizations (Question 4);
• focus on how identified problematizations shape what is possible, constitute "subjects" in specific ways, and translate into lives (Question 5);
• examine the practices involved in both supporting and contesting these problematizations (Question 6); and
 • subject one's own proposals to self-problematization (Step 7) (see Chart from Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 20).

My hope is that clarifying that the WPR project has to do with *governmental* rather than *individual* problematizations makes these tasks clearer. For example, the term "assumptions" in Question 2 of the approach does not refer to individual belief systems – to what *people* "assume"; rather, it is meant to capture the epistemological and ontological presuppositions on which (governmental) thought relies.

In relation to Question 3 researchers have sought a precise method for performing a genealogy of a problem representation. Foucault notoriously resisted putting forward strict methodological guidelines. Rather, he offered "method through example", tracing the meticulous, fine-grained developments of specific "themes" over time (see Tamboukou 1999). The objective in such an intervention is to illustrate both continuity and instability with a view to using history to question present practices. Given that genealogies are necessarily detailed, long and difficult to produce, in an article on "alcohol problems", I experimented with the

possibility of an *abbreviated* genealogy (Bacchi 2015b: 139-141).

Question 4 invites reflections on the silences in problematizations and the possibility of alternative problematizations. This WPR question is both popular and dangerous. The danger lies in overly simple characterizations of identified problem representations – seeing them for example as produced by ideological or hegemonic "forces" (Keller 2011).

I am often asked – how can *alternative* problematizations be generated? Where are we to find them? There are several options for pursuing this challenging task: engaging with critical literatures, adopting a critical ethnographic approach to draw on the "discourses of oppositional groups" (Larner 2000: 14); and, comparing problematizations across time, across "cultures", or across geophysical "spaces" (Bacchi 2012b: 6). I look forward to hearing other suggestions.

Question 5 confronts head-on the suggestion that poststructural forms of analysis are nihilistic and/or relativistic – that they do not permit *assessment* of governmental interventions. It offers three interrelated analytic categories to undertake the assessment task: discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived effects. *Discursive effects* highlight how the terms of reference established by particular problem representations place limits on what can be thought or said. *Subjectification effects* involve reflection on how "subjects" are constituted in discourse. *Lived effects* capture the impact of problem

representations in people's lives. This analytic category needs to be treated carefully. As an integral part of the WPR framework, any descriptions of how lives are lived due to specific problem representations remain open-ended and mutable.

Question 6 explores what Foucault describes as the emergence, institutionalization/insertion and functioning of "true" knowledges (Foucault 1972: 163; 1991: 65). With overlaps to Question 3, it examines the precise practices that install and authorize a particular problem representation. At the same time, it retains a space for disruption, resistance and creative reworking of problem representations, a topic pursued in the final section.

Self-problematization is identified as the seventh "step" in the WPR framework (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 20). This undertaking to apply the WPR questions to one's own proposals ensures that researchers resist the temptation to offer their analyses as "truth", promoting instead an "ethic of discomfort" (Foucault 2000a). The importance of this part of a WPR analysis needs to be emphasized, especially as it tends to be ignored in most WPR applications. The goal is to highlight the need to "make 'us' hesitate about our own conditions of thought" (Stengers 2008: 41-42).

MODES OF CRITIQUE

WPR has been taken up as a *critical* methodology in numerous applications (see Bacchi and Wilson 2020), but there remain disagreements about exactly what this means.

The nature of the critical enterprise has been at the centre of theoretical debate at least since Latour's (2004) seminal article "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern". Several themes deserve comment:

i. the place of "subjects" in the critical enterprise,
ii. the place of "texts", and
iii. the suggested need to consider "implementation" alongside policy "formulation".

A key concern of those wary of Foucauldian forms of analysis, including WPR and governmentality studies, is that positing subjects as subjects of discourse undermines people's "agency". The focus on the ways in which "conduct" is conducted, with an emphasis on subjects' self-regulation, it is argued, can be interpreted as deterministic. However, as Rose and Valverde (1998: 548) describe, practices of subjectification produce subjects who are "mobile, hybrid and shifting". In Foucault's account (2000b: 324), "there is no power without potential refusal or revolt". There is always struggle (Larner 2000: 11).

Some researchers express concern that Foucault's subjects are overly cognitive (Binkley 2011: 272). Reflecting the turn to emotions in policy studies (Durnová 2018; see also Tamboukou 2003), Paterson (2021) recommends adding new questions to WPR to ensure that people's emotional responses are considered. However, in line with Foucault's nominalism, there is a commitment in WPR to place "within a process of development everything considered immortal to

man (sic)", *including* "feelings", "instincts" and "the body" (Foucault 1977: 87).

At the same time, I recognize that governmentality scholars struggle to talk about people's conduct without lapsing into language use that *implies* "emotions". For example, Bigo (2010: 18) refers to a "governmentality of unease" as "transforming reassurance into unease, angst, and even fear by evoking chaos, global insecurity, terror." Given that we are all trapped in language, we need to find ways to historicize and contest the assumed meanings of terms, such as "unease", "fear" and "emotions".

Concern about the lack of attention to people's "emotions" forms part of a wider critique of governmentality studies, including WPR, for the heavy reliance on governmental texts and hence on official discourses (Larner 2000: 14). One argument here is that a purely textual analysis removes from consideration how citizens and policy actors *interact* with these texts (Ball 1993), that the *plan* is privileged over the *practice* (Binkley 2011: 386). Hence, there is the suggestion of the need for more attention to *implementation* (Binkley 2011), "the importance of looking at what happens as policy is enacted" (Clarke 2019).

As mentioned above, the form of interrogation offered by WPR moves beyond texts in the strict sense to include all forms of governing activity (e.g., technologies) and practices (buildings as proposals and as practices). In each case these research "entities" are treated as emergent and changing (i.e., as coming to be something) and as involved in *shaping*

(producing, constituting, enacting), rather than *reflecting*, "realities".

This performative perspective, I suggest, puts in question a formulation/implementation distinction. For example, Rowse (2009) shows how the current Australian census problematizes Indigenous peoples as part of a population binary, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, affecting the sorts of political claims they can make. To study how a census is *implemented*, therefore, necessarily involves attention to the ways in which populations are problematized. The *practice* (or "implementation") of the census necessarily incorporates *the plan*.

How does this perspective translate to "real-life" societal "dilemmas" such as climate change and COVID-19 in a "post-truth" world? Above I mentioned Latour's (2004) seminal article on the nature of critique and "matters of concern". He wrote this article in the wake of the 1990s "science wars" that broke out over the questioning and de-realizing of scientific knowledges in early Actor-Network theory. Putting the legitimacy of scientific knowledge into question came to be seen as a deeply dangerous political project in the light of the claims of climate change deniers who were only too happy to put in question scientific "truths".

In response to the heated debates that ensued, Latour denounced forms of radical critique that, in his view, tended to "totalize" and "demonize" opponents. He targeted a particular style of critique, which he describes as a purely deconstructive and hence "negative" form of criticism (see

Coole 2000). With "matters of concern" Latour intended to "replace excessive critique and the suspicion of socio-political interests with a balanced articulation of the involved concerns" (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011: 91). In his view, researchers need to be involved in *assembling* – i.e., in bringing together collective "concerns" – rather than in (simply) *deconstructing* (or *debunking*).

Above I registered a related disquiet with WPR applications that produce overly simple characterizations of identified problem representations as produced by ideological or hegemonic "forces" and hence as involved in the demonizing Latour condemns. However, I disagree with the way Latour sets "assembling" *against* "deconstructing".
Rather I see them as *complementary* rather than as *antagonistic* forms of analysis. *Assembling* is pivotal to Foucauldian analysis, as seen in Foucault's (1980: 194) nominalist genealogies. In addition, with Puig de la Bellacasa (2011), I am concerned with the way in which Latour's position moderates a critical standpoint – exhibiting "mistrust regarding minoritarian and radical ways of politicizing things that tend to focus on exposing relations of power and exclusion".

Many useful applications of WPR illustrate that such ways of politicizing do not necessarily *totalize* or *demonize* – as Latour speculates – but open up specific assemblages to critical scrutiny and questioning (Puig de la Bellacasa 2011: 96). Rather than focusing on what is held to be "true" or of "concern", they undertake the task of monitoring how *claims to "truth"* function politically.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides a useful example. It has reinstated science as "truth". Indeed, it has become difficult to find space to reflect on the political backdrop to the experience of contagion in a world dominated by curves, graphs and models (see Rhodes and Lancaster 2020).

Lidskog *et al.* (2020) point out that uncertainty operates differently in relation to climate change and COVID-19. In the former, as Latour correctly diagnoses, uncertainty is used to delegitimize scientific proposals on the grounds that we cannot be "certain" that "man" is responsible for environmental degradation. In the case of COVID-19, by contrast, the lack of certainty about how to proceed *legitimates* the full range of regulations and restrictions imposed on populations. In the climate change scenario, uncertainty *delegitimizes* science; in COVID-19 it *installs science* as "truth". In each case then we need to track the practices of emergence, institutionalization and functioning of what is "in the true".

WPR is designed to facilitate this enterprise. It interrogates *all* starting points for analysis – including "matters of concern". As both the science wars and the COVID-19 interventions indicate, *no* "matter of concern" exists outside contestation. Indeed, I would want to ask: "What is the specified matter of concern represented to be?" (see Puig de la Bellacasa 2011: 92). To engage critically with that question, I would apply the WPR analytic "template": start from "proposals", work backwards to problem representations that require interrogation, and ensure that one's own

proposals receive the same treatment through self-problematization

CONCLUSION

There are many who find the form of critical analysis offered in WPR lacking in some ways. On the one hand some researchers wish to identify firm declarations of paths forward and to seek out "enemies". They tend to find WPR too flaccid as a critical tool – i.e., it is too vague, too "post-modern", not critical enough.

On the other hand, WPR is located within a deconstructive tradition that stymies "compromise" and "cooperation" ("assembling") because it puts everything into question (Latour on "debunking"). In this account WPR shares a common ethos with ideology critique, focusing on the negative characteristics of sociopolitical relations (Felski 2011,2015). Hence, it is described as *too* critical.

On the one hand, then, WPR is considered to be too vague (postmodern); on the other it is described as too precise (and condemnatory). I feel like Goldilocks in the "Three Bears" – the porridge is either too cold or too hot.

What is interesting, I suggest, is that it is possible to find examples of WPR applications that fit both these characterizations. And so I ask: Is this a testament to the success of the approach, or to its failure? Is it too open to interpretation or not open enough?

I am content if it accomplishes three things:

i) first, getting people to think again about the meaning of the term "problem" and the way the sociopolitical landscape is dominated by an obsessive endorsement of problem-*solving*;

ii) second, encouraging researchers to question the commonsense categories deployed in their field; and

iii) third, encouraging researchers to question their own assumptions and presuppositions.

WPR embraces a lack of finality. It insists on the need to continue questioning proposals of all forms, including our own. The objective is to prevent our visions for change from falling into patterns that reproduce hierarchy and exploitation. To this end research becomes "a work of problematisation and of perpetual reproblematisation" (Foucault 2001: 1431).

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