

The WPR approach: Key premises and new developments

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Keynote address

**WPR SYMPOSIUM ON CRITICAL POLICY STUDIES – EXPLORING THE PREMISES
AND POLITICS OF CAROL BACCHI’S WPR APPROACH**

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Introductory comments:

In my “kick-off” presentation ([BACCHI KICK-OFF PRESENTATION](#)) I referred to WPR as a work-in-progress. Today I’d like to describe it as a *collective project*, which helps to explain why it is a “work-in-progress”. I wish to thank the many people, some in attendance today, who have shared their ideas on the topics I’ll be addressing: Jian Wu, Lyu Azbel, Angie Bletsas, Anne Wilson and many others with whom I have enjoyed exchanges about their research and aspects of WPR. Special thanks to Jennifer Bonham, who co-authored one of the entries in the Research Hub on my website (<https://carolbacchi.com>), to Sue Goodwin, who co-authored *Poststructural Policy Analysis* (2016), and to Malin Rönnblom and Michaela Padden for making this event happen.

WPR is on a journey. From its first appearance as the “What’s the problem?” approach in *Women, Policy and Politics* (Bacchi 1999), to its christening as WPR (“What’s the Problem Represented to be?”) by Angie Bletsas, it has evolved and it continues to evolve.

The questions in the approach have changed over the years, reflecting my encounters with diverse theoretical literatures. The absence of a question on genealogy in the first incarnation of the approach has since been corrected. However, the topic of genealogy requires more attention, as I will argue today. I have also had difficulty ensuring adequate attention to self-problematization, even by myself, which led to the introduction of Step 7 in the most recent book with Sue Goodwin. Step 7 reads: “Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations”. The current tableau of questions and forms of analysis appears in *Poststructural Policy Analysis* (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 20). My goal in this first part of the presentation is to stress the interconnected aspects of these questions and their underlying rationales or premises.

In the second half of the presentation I intend to pursue some clarifications and modifications to WPR that have emerged due to writing by and to conversations (often digital) with other researchers (used in a broad sense to encompass policy workers, political activists, research students, etc.).

Specifically, I intend to discuss:

- the place of a performative perspective in WPR thinking;
- the key importance of developing a genealogical sensibility;
- the need to pay more attention to practices of objectification/objectivization, which I suggest ought to be added to Question 5 on “effects”;
- how to operationalize Question 6 by adding “subjugated knowledges” to this question;
- how to maintain a “self-problematizing ethic”; and
- some good news stories – “real world” applications of WPR.

Part 1: WPR: key premises

You may wonder why I decided to start by looking at key premises for WPR especially given that so many of you are familiar with its arguments. I find that every time I introduce WPR I discover a new connection, a way of looking at the issues that makes the pieces cohere more meaningfully, illustrated in these opening comments.

WPR relies on four key premises:

1. Policies (and other practices) *produce* (enact or constitute) “problems” as particular sorts of problems.
2. Problem representations (problematizations) are *implicit* in policies and other forms of proposal.
3. WPR thinking needs to be extended to understand the role of policies, and other forms of proposal, in the production of “subjects”, “objects” and “places”.
4. We are governed through the ways in which “problems” are constituted; that is, we are governed through problematizations.

The first WPR premise – that policies (and other practices) *produce* (enact or constitute) “problems” as particular sorts of problems – is most readily understood when set in opposition to conventional views of the achievements of “policy”. Conventionally, policies are described as *reactions* to “problems-that-exist” (as one word) with the intent of *solving* them. To suggest that, on

the contrary, policies *produce* “problems” as particular sorts of problems requires rethinking some basic propositions.

The thinking here relies on a poststructural rejection of the simple existence of purportedly stable things or essences. Rather, attention is directed to the practices and processes involved in a “thing’s” emergence or becoming. Think for example of “nation-states” or “borders”. Instead of treating them as fixed entities, a poststructural perspective draws attention to the factors or “forces” (Farrugia 2016) that contribute to their emergence – or to their coming to be. The plural factors at work have “productive” or “performative” consequences. They contribute to making or enacting realities, e.g. “borders”. As John Law (2004: 56) describes, enactments do not “just present something that has already been made, but also have powerful productive consequences. They (help to) make realities in-here and out-there”.

In this understanding of “things” as enactments we are operating with an ontology of *becoming* rather than an ontology of *being*. An ontology of becoming is a *relational* ontology in which “all phenomena are co-constituted in their particular assemblings” (Farrugia 2016: 40). Consider for example the long list of interconnected factors Walters (2002: 575) identifies as making up the entity “Europe”. He describes how the Schengen border is “no longer reducible to fixed control posts and sites of inspection and observation”. Instead, it is “networked, an articulation of social security and health data systems, employment registers”, “making entry quick and efficient for some, and difficult for others”.

In this account, power relations have a directly productive role. They make “things” come into existence. Quoting Foucault,

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes,” it “represses,” it “censors,” it “abstracts,” it “masks,” it “conceals.” In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him (sic) belong to this production. (Foucault 1984b: 204–205)

There is no suggestion of conspiracy in this making of “reality”; nor is there talk of “vested interests”. Rather, Foucault (1979: 26) refers to a “micro-physics of power”, to ensure recognition of the plural and diverse practices involved in the production of “things”.

What is accomplished by challenging the simple existence of “things” and drawing attention to the plural and diverse practices involved in their emergence and co-constitution? If you do this, says Shapiro (1992: 12), you can “lessen the grip of their present facticity” and imagine the world otherwise. For example, questioning the fixity of “nation-states” provides a step towards problematizing sovereignty in world politics (Rowse 2009: 45). John Lennon’s “Imagine” – “imagine there’s no countries, it isn’t hard to do” – becomes imaginable (Solt *et al.*, 1988).

Going further, since the plurality of factors at work produces multiple realities, we are impelled to ask why some realities become “the real” and how they come to appear so natural (Rose 2000: 58). Instead of taking the “real” for granted as how things must be, the analytic task becomes *exposing* the means of its creation, making it possible to question its authority and influence.

How does this poststructural perspective translate to the field of “policy” and its assumed “problems”? First, it disrupts the view of “problems” as stable entities that simply exist. Next, it highlights the need to pay attention to the constellation of factors involved in a “problem’s” emergence. Finally, it requires attention to the shapes acquired by specific “problems” – the particular kinds of “problems” that are produced.

Importantly, in this way of thinking, the analysis does not focus on people’s competing conceptions of “the problem” but on how policies, as governmental mechanisms, create “problems” as particular sorts of problems. The analysis therefore stands at a distance from much frame theory that tends to direct attention to how political actors “frame” or understand “problems”. Nor is the focus on ideology, which contends that we are trapped by false beliefs foisted upon us (Owen 2002: 217). Rather, attention is directed to the multiple factors or forces at work in producing “problems” of certain types.

With this starting point, it is possible to move to the second WPR premise: *problem representations (problematizations) are implicit in policy and other proposals.*

If, as I’ve argued, policies produce “problems” as particular sorts of problems, how are we to grasp or come to know what sorts of “problems” have been produced? I have suggested starting from what I call “proposals” (or proposed solutions) and “working backwards” to see how the “problem” is represented within them. The argument here is that what is proposed as an intervention

reveals a target for change and hence the way the “problem” is conceptualized. For example, a policy that introduces an activity regime for children as a response to so-called “childhood obesity” produces the “problem” as children’s *lack of activity*. That is, children’s “obesity” is problematized in terms of children’s lack of activity. This problematization becomes what I call a “problem representation”. It provides the starting point for the remaining WPR questions that target underlying presuppositions, genealogy and effects (see Alexander & Coveney 2013; Alexander et al. 2014).

The objective in this analytic strategy is to displace any sense of a fixed “problem”. Rather, “problems” are treated as ontologically fluid, indicated by the use of quotation marks around the term. In this form of analysis, “problems” and “solutions” are best described as mutually co-constitutive. Neither can be adequately explained without reference to the other. Basically, I am saying there is no such thing as a “problem” pure and simple, a stance that would annoy generations of philosophers committed to defining “a problem”.

Proposals or proposed solutions, which convey a sense of doing (what we propose *to do*), can be seen as a form of performative. They are in a sense analogous to Austin’s (1962) illocutionary performatives that do not *describe* “reality” but that (help to) make worlds (Jackson 2004: 2). Through their proposals policies produce “problems” as particular sorts of problems and hence play a critical part in shaping our realities. In line with this performative perspective problem representations are “the practices through which things take on meaning and value” (Shapiro 1988: xi).

It follows that policies do not need to wait on implementation to have effects. They are already involved in enacting worlds and lives through the shapes given to “problems”. Here we need to remember that because “‘government’ is a congenitally failing operation” (Miller and Rose 1990: 10), these “problems”, or rather problematizations, are provisional and open to challenge. They may nevertheless “acquire the aura of permanence and stability by means of what Judith Butler calls the ‘ritualized repetition of norms’ (1993: x)” (Glass and Rose-Redmond 2015: 2).

To capture some of the complexity involved in identifying problem representations, I describe them as *nested* within each other. For example, a particular problem representation may well involve concepts and binaries that themselves need to be subjected to the WPR questions (Bacchi 2009: 21).

Therefore, asking “What’s the problem represented to be?” should not be seen as a one-off exercise. Rather, we need to be prepared to open up problem representations to repeated questioning and analysis.

We can now turn to the third WPR premise: *WPR thinking needs to be extended to understand the role of policies, and other forms of proposal, in the production of “subjects”, “objects” and “places”.*

The argument here is that problematizations (or problem representations) play important roles in the making of “subjects” and “objects”, including “places”. In relation to “subjects” policies make available certain positions for subjects to take up, referred to as “subject positions”. Think of some obvious categories, “youth”, “problem gambler”, “drug addict”, “welfare recipient”, “refugee”. The character and content of the subject positions made available is directly related to the ways in which specific policies problematize certain behaviours and roles. Often “dividing practices” (Foucault 1982: 208) set some groups in opposition to others – e.g., “problem gamblers” versus “recreational gamblers”. Race (2005) describes how such a practice penalizes the first group (“problem gamblers”) thereby motivating the second group (“recreational gamblers”) to avoid the behaviours that are punished. Hence, through the delineation of “subject positions”, problem representations set in train certain processes of subjectification, making “subjects” of specific kinds, and helping to make the population “governable”.

Importantly, because discourses are plural, complex, and inconsistent practices, “subject positions” are neither mandatory nor determinative. While governmental practices might elicit specific types of subjects, refusal is commonplace (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 50). As Inda (2005: 10-11) remarks, “Individuals can and do negotiate the processes to which they are subjected”.

As with “problems” and “subjects”, an ontology of becoming puts in question the existence of presumably fixed “objects”. And, as seen above in relation to this ontology, the focus shifts from the ostensibly stable entity to the multitudes of factors involved in its emergence. As an example, Nielsen and Bonham (2015: 234) describe the plethora of relations which operated, in the early-to-mid-twentieth century, to “forge ‘traffic’ as an object for thought out of a multitude of street activities”:

interactions between people in public space; materials such as road surfaces and hawkers’ carts; behaviours like standing about, or alighting from a tram; parliamentary speeches about gambling in the street;

engineering discussions regarding the weight of vehicles; regulations relating to loitering and furious driving; newspaper reports on “hit and run” fatalities; contestations over how to conduct oneself in public . . .

(Nielsen and Bonham 2015: 234; see also Bonham 2006)

“Traffic” therefore is an emergent, rather than a fixed, entity and how it is problematized affects its shape and meaning.

In relation to “spaces” I have already mentioned the multitude of practices involved in producing “Europe”. This thinking can be applied to a wide variety of sites. Think for example of the distinction drawn between “developed” and “undeveloped” or “underdeveloped” countries, and how each category is problematized. In this view, there is a need to disrupt taken-for-granted “objects” and “places” that act to firm up the social and political status quo.

With this background we can move to WPR premise number four: *We are governed through the ways in which “problems” are constituted; that is, we are governed through problematizations.*

Accepting that problematizations play an active role in shaping lives and worlds clearly has implications for the ways in which we think about governing practices. Policies can no longer be evaluated *without* including analysis of the implicit problem representations they contain. It is also important to broaden our conception of governing/government beyond conventional political institutions. Governmentality thinking, following Foucault (1991), allows us to extend our understanding of “government” to embrace the many groups and agencies, and their knowledges, involved in shaping and guiding behaviours. Foucault refers to this governmental role as “the conduct of conduct” (Gordon 1991). As an example, the DSM-5 (the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), which offers a changing list of diagnosed psychological disorders, plays a key role in the governing of gambling practices, now classified as an “addiction” (American Psychiatric Association 2013). In other words, gambling is now problematized in ways that emphasize a psychological “diagnosis”, and we are governed through this problematization.

As can be seen from this example, once one embraces a broad sense of governing, the terrain for applying WPR expands greatly. It can be applied, for example, to the reports and directives associated with diverse groups and agencies, and their knowledges. For example, in the case of DSM-5 we see how the practice of *psychology* plays a role in governing.

Research practices are singled out as particularly important governmental mechanisms. Annemarie Mol (2002: 155; emphasis in original) makes this point succinctly: “Methods are not a way of opening a window on the world, but a way of interfering with it. They act, they *mediate* between an object and its representations”. With this understanding researchers take on an obligation to consider their interventions in terms of their impact as governing practices. The undertaking in Step 7 to apply the WPR questions to one’s own proposals provides the opportunity to fulfill this obligation.

With this expansive understanding of governing practices, it is possible to apply a WPR analysis to a wide range of phenomena, such as buildings, ceremonies and maps (Lindberg 2019). In each case WPR recommends approaching these phenomena as proposals for shaping conduct and hence as governing practices. These techniques of rule do not reduce readily to ideological positions. What we often find is that a particular form of proposal – think for example of the “active citizen” – is endorsed across ideological lines (Bacchi 2009: 171). The analytic task, therefore, becomes identifying these modes of rule and how they have come to be. In terms of what the approach offers to critical analysis, the point is not to produce firm recommendations for desirable futures but to “sow the seeds of judgement” (Osborne 1998 in Rose 2000: 59), helping to make judgement possible.

Part II: WPR: new developments

From constructionism to performativity

In its original form the “What’s the Problem Represented to be?” approach (called at the time the “What’s the problem approach?”) was linked directly to social constructionism (Bacchi 1999). This theoretical intervention from the 1960s (Berger and Luckman 1967) stressed that “things” taken for granted as “real” were products of social forces. While this position may sound similar to the productive view of policy outlined above, two tendencies set it apart. First, there was a tendency to identify “things” as fixed and immutable; second, in relation to problematization, people’s perceptions of “problems” became the focus of analysis. The turn to performativity, in its various incarnations, can be seen as a reaction to these views.

John Law (2007: 13) describes the “shift” towards performativity in these terms:

Something seismic is happening here. A vital metaphorical and explanatory shift is taking place. We are no longer dealing with construction, social or otherwise: there is no stable prime-mover, social or individual, to construct anything, no builder, no puppeteer. Rather, the analytic focus embraces a “heterogeneous world” where “everything plays its part, relationally”. This view translates into an emphasis on the repeated “performances” of human and non-human actors, reflecting the premise of actor-network theory that all “things” are “actants”: “The new performative approach tries to understand the role of *everything* in a performance, people and objects alike” (Law and Singleton 2000: 771; emphasis in original).

Connections can be drawn here with aspects of Deleuzian assemblage theory. As with a performative perspective, assemblages, or rather assemblings, draw attention to ongoing processes “in which there can be no single stable reality but only specific realities made and unmade in practice” (Farrugia 2016: 39). Mol and Law in the end decide that the term “performative” is too closely associated with the idea of *human* performances and select as an alternative concept the word “enactment”, which suggests that “activities take place but leaves the actors vague” (Mol 2002: 33; see also Law 2004: 159).

The implications of these theoretical developments for WPR are significant. Most importantly, the occasional tendency in early incarnations of the approach to focus the analysis on people’s perceptions or interpretations of “problems” disappears. Problem representations, it is now argued, are not *perceptions* but *performatives*. Through their proposals policies shape “problems” and hence alter the existing order to a certain degree. The analytic task becomes identifying the shapes imposed on “problems”, where these come from and how they affect lives and worlds. To undertake this task we turn to genealogy.

Emphasizing a genealogical sensibility

Analysing Policy (Bacchi 2009) suggests that a researcher can foreground certain WPR questions and bypass others. Genealogy, targeted in Question 3, is singled out as a question that researchers may wish to avoid given the challenge of producing what Foucault (1977a: 139) describes as “gray, meticulous and patiently documentary”.

In contrast I would now want to stress that genealogy provides one of the main tools for seeing differently, with important linkages to Question 4 and the search for “silences” in problem representations. It also provides the necessary theoretical glue to hold together the other forms of questioning and analysis in WPR. While a researcher may not have the space or time to produce a full-blown genealogy of identified problem representations, I now stress the importance of developing a genealogical sensibility.

By a genealogical sensibility I mean a way of thinking that takes seriously Foucault’s (1977a) argument that *everything has a history*. To historicize something is to denaturalize it, to show how it has come to be. As Tamboukou (1999: 214) describes, “a genealogy should start with a major interrogation of what has been accepted as ‘truth’, shattering certainties”. It weaves around a set of questions: “What is happening how? What is this present of ours? How have we become what we are and what are the possibilities of becoming ‘other’”. Genealogies search for “moments of openness”, when “changing social practices are not yet naturalized in discourse and fixed in institutional structures” (de Goede 2005: p. xxvi).

Where Question 2 in WPR looks to Foucauldian *archaeology* to interrogate the embedded knowledges (“unexamined ways of thinking”; Foucault 1994: 456) that underpin contemporary practices, Question 3 uses genealogy to draw attention to the battles that take place over knowledge. Foucault found problematization a useful tool to explore these struggles. For example, in his *History of Sexuality*, he (1980b) asks how different eras have problematized sexuality and thus made sexuality a particular kind of object for thought in different sites. He pays particular attention to the shaping influence of the various modern bodies of knowledge about “sexuality”, including the “sciences of sexuality” such as psychoanalysis.

In the battles over knowledge, Foucault singles out what he calls “subjugated knowledges”, those minor knowledges that challenge the scientific consensus and that survive at the margins (Foucault 1980a: 82). He includes the knowledge of the psychiatric patient, the ill person, the nurse, and the delinquent. These minor knowledges are an important factor to consider in the dissemination and disruption of problem representations, seen in the discussion of Question 6 to follow.

For WPR, developing a genealogical sensibility involves reflection on two aspects of one’s study: the diverse possibilities of specific developments; and

the tentative linkages across these developments. Removing Question 3 from the analysis can lead to an overly simple account of an identified problem representation and/or to a temptation to see what is happening today as, simply, an echo of the past.

The focus in WPR on the production of “subjects”, “objects” and “places” relies upon a genealogical sensibility. How the “subject” is imagined in WPR is directly connected to Foucault’s insistence that, as with everything else, “the subject” *has a history* (Foucault 1990: 23). This proposition encourages researchers to think about the origins of “man” in a historical-genealogical sense rather than in metaphysical terms (Foucault 2001: 894 in Scott 2007: 29). Such a stance provides a useful caution against the temptation to describe “subjects” as particular kinds of being – as rational subjects or as enterprising/entrepreneurial subjects, as desiring subjects or as emotional subjects. O’Leary (2002: 108) describes how this approach to “the subject” opens up opportunities for change:

once the subject is treated as a phenomenon with a history ... then the subject loses its foundational status. As soon as the subject becomes natural, as opposed to a metaphysical or a transcendental, phenomenon, it is not only given a history but – crucially for ethics and politics – it is given a *future*.

Going further, this approach to “the subject” creates the possibility of producing a “critical ontology of ourselves”, which Foucault describes as “an ethos”. Such a project involves studying “the conditions in which human beings ‘problematize’ what they are, what they do and the world in which they live” (Foucault 1986: 10). Step 7 in WPR encourages this practice of self-problematization by stipulating that researchers need to apply the WPR questions to their own proposals.

Thinking about effects: Subjectification and objectification/objectivization

Question 5 in a WPR analysis currently directs attention to three “kinds” of interrelated “effects”: discursive effects, subjectification effects and lived effects. *Analysing Policy* (Bacchi 2009: 15) specifies that “effects” are not “outcomes”. That is, “effects” are not treated as causal or measurable results. The word “implications” better captures the interest here in the complex working out of processual or interconnected factors or influences. Specifically, accepting that policies produce “subjects” and “objects”, including “places”, Question 5 provides the opportunity to explore how this happens and what it

means in terms of how we understand who we are and how we live. There are important links between this topic and earlier discussions of performativity and genealogy.

A useful starting place for examining the production of “subjects”, or subjectification, is Judith Butler’s work on the performance of gender. We can see Austin’s influence in Butler’s analysis of the announcement at birth (in the old days!) that “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!”. By being called a name, Butler (1997: 2) explains, “one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence” (de Goede 2006: 9): “This very speech act is one of thousands of similar acts constituting our gender and thus our self-becoming, or what Butler has called subjectivity” (Breljak & Kersting 2017: 438 fn 1). To quote Butler (1990: 24), “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be”.

In this understanding identity is not something that is given; it is something that is practised: “The pervasive and mundane acts in which this is done make people what they are” (Mol 2002: 39). Nor are identities fixed. The proliferation of practices over time produces openings for challenge and change. In terms of “men” and “women”, attention is directed to diverse and disjointed “gendering” practices and, hence, to the possibility of gender fluidity (see Bacchi 2017).

This theoretical insight applies to “objects” as well as to “subjects”. For example, Aitken (2006) suggests that treating “the economy” as a “thing” that can be measured and manipulated fails to consider the reiteration of practices “in the space of everyday life” that makes capital possible. In this understanding, “objects” do not exist as essences; they emerge as “objects for thought” in practices – as with the emergence of “traffic”, mentioned earlier.

Foucault offers the example of how “madness” became an “object for thought”. He directs attention to the ways in which those called “mad” were treated and to the knowledges “in which the madman (sic) was simultaneously caught and defined” (Foucault 1969 in Eribon 1991: 214). Here, Foucault is not questioning the existence of something “real” that is being regulated; however, this “thing” is not “madness” until it is produced through the practices he describes. As Veyne (1997: 160) explains: “[T]here are no natural objects There are only multiple objectivizations (‘population’, ‘fauna’, ‘subjects under law’), correlatives of heterogeneous practices”.

The field of alcohol and other drug policies has produced numerous important studies of the practice of objectification (or objectivization). Referring to the production of the “object” of “addiction” (mentioned earlier in relation to gambling) Keane *et al.* (2011: 876) explain that “all diagnostic instruments and practices construct their objects rather than describe a pre-existing ‘reality’”. Illustrating this argument Fraser *et al.* (2014: 235) note the trend towards seeing more and more activities in terms of “addiction”, including sex, shopping and eating. As they describe, this objectification of “addiction” serves to pathologize ever larger numbers of people while it individualises complex social issues.

As another example of objectification/objectivization Azbel *et al.* (2021) analyse how methadone is produced as a different object in different sites and contexts in Kyrgyz prisons – as either a medicalized object for the prevention of HIV infection spread, or as a form of formal governance replacing informal prisoner governance mechanisms. In this account, methadone is “not a pre-existing object being described” (Azbel *et al.* 2021: 5). Rather it is produced as a particular kind of object in specific sites through a combination of mechanisms and policy discourses. Given these different possible “objectivizations”, the critical task, argue Azbel *et al.* (2021: 2), becomes deciding which “object” you may wish to encourage.

These examples illustrate the political importance of studying objectification/objectivization practices. As a result, I would like to suggest adding “objectification” to the three existing “effects” listed in Question 5 of WPR. Such a move would function to encourage researchers to put into question the many categories and terms they tend to take for granted in their analyses. It would also serve to mark the distinction between WPR and Critical Realist perspectives (see Research Hub entries 1 Feb 2019, 28 Feb. 2021).

Operationalizing Question 6: Practices of authorization and how to contest them

Question 6 in WPR involves two projects: first, identifying how and where a specific representation of the “problem” has been “produced, disseminated and defended”; and second, investigating how that problem representation could be disrupted or replaced. Remembering that the seven forms of analysis in WPR are interconnected, I describe Question 6 as a supplement to the genealogical perspective developed through Question 3. Its purpose is to examine an array of practices, including discursive practices, that produce a

specific problem representation and that give it authority, indicating links with Question 5 on “discursive effects”.

The first project in Question 6, therefore, is to tackle the question posed earlier about how some realities become “the real”. As Mol (2002: vii-viii) explains, the “singularity of objects” is “an accomplishment”, an act of “coordination”. Hence, we need to identify and interrogate how this coordination takes place. Law (2012) identifies five *coordinating* acts, which he calls “simplification practices”: selection, framing, juxtaposition, ranking and deletion. Within the AOD (alcohol and other drug) field Formiatti *et al.* (2018) demonstrate the usefulness of Law’s typology in their analysis of “reality-making practices” in research on “new recovery”.

Foucault (1977b: 138) provides a list of questions that captures the intent of the analytic exercise initiated by Question 6:

What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where does it come from; how is it circulated? Who controls it? What placements are determined for possible subjects? Who can fulfill these diverse functions of the subject?

Importantly, in Foucault, discourses refer to “relatively bounded areas of social knowledge” not to language use (Bacchi and Bonham 2014). These “socially produced forms of knowledge” set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a “given social object of practice” (McHoul and Grace 1993: 32).

Leslie Miller (2008: 269) offers the example of the authority ascribed to medical discourse. As she explains, the “doctor’s power over the patient” is conceptualized not as an effect of occupational status per se but instead as tied to the ways doctors can mobilize the privileged discourse of professional medicine in order to enforce their version of the patient’s “problem” in the clinical setting.

The target for analysis therefore is not doctors as social actors but medical discourse as a governing knowledge or knowledge practice. In this form of *analysis of discourses*, as opposed to “discourse analysis” (Bacchi 2005), the focus is on a hierarchical organising of discursive relations: “discourses with strong institutional mechanisms of power (such as medical discourses) are likely to carry more force than those with fewer such mechanisms (such as the home birth movement)” (Eveline and Bacchi 2010b: 157-158).

Importantly, Question 6 identifies a second project – to consider the place of contestatory or resistance practices. It asks how specific problem representations can be, or have been, disrupted or replaced. Weir *et al.* (1997: 513) identify a space within governmentality to recognize a “constitutive role for contestation (among rulers, and between and among those who are ruled)”. I believe that Question 6 needs to bring more attention to questions of resistance. To that end, I suggest adding: “What role is played by ‘subjugated knowledges’?”

Step 7: The centrality of self-problematization

The most recent incarnation of WPR (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 24) emphasises the importance of maintaining a “self-problematizing ethic”. Step 7 (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016: 20) stipulates: “Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations”. However, with some worthy exceptions (see for example the Symposium paper by Bell *et al.*), this proposition attracts little attention among those who take up WPR as an analytic strategy. It would appear that, at least in part, this “step” is dropped from the analysis due to lack of clarification about its purpose and how to apply it.

Elsewhere (Bacchi 2011) I have tried to distinguish self-problematization from reflexivity (or reflectivity), which is commonly endorsed as a research practice. Reflexivity implies an ability to “stand back” from one’s values and commitments to offer a more “objective” understanding of the matters at hand. Such a position, in effect, retains a view of social actors as rational and sovereign subjects, and hence sits uncomfortably with poststructural anti-humanist premises.

In contrast to reflexivity (or reflectivity), self-problematization commits the researcher, not to *standing back*, but to *active engagement* with one’s positioning. In this argument, self-problematization becomes a “practice of the self”, a commitment to work on one’s self. Here I follow Foucault’s (1984a: 39-42) suggestion that “one must take responsibility for inventing or producing one’s own self”.

To engage in working on oneself, Step 7 recommends applying the WPR questions to one’s own proposals. In line with earlier arguments about how performative practices create realities, engaging in such a self-problematizing *practice* stands to create a critical consciousness. Participating in such a project is, I suggest, the *antithesis* of “reflexivity”. To make this point clear, I

recommend changing the wording in Step 7 to read: “Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations *as a practice of the self*”.

As mentioned, very few researchers attend to Step 7 in their use of WPR. Weier and Farrugia (2020) take up the challenge and show us what it can accomplish. In their WPR analysis of the rescheduling of low-dose codeine products by Australia’s therapeutic drug regulator to prescription-only sale, they apply the WPR questions to the “alternative problematisations” that had resulted from their study. This self-problematizing practice produced “a number of important critical questions”, which the initial analysis had failed to address: first, the need to open the notion of chronic pain itself to analysis; second, the need to reconsider the erasure of pleasure from the authors’ analysis; and third, the need to consider which forms of knowledge were privileged in the regulator’s decision, an issue absent in the original study.

Is this practice of self-problematization a self-defeating form of analysis? Does it initiate a circular argument with researchers endlessly seeking out lacunae in their analyses? In the estimation of Weier and Farrugia (2020) such is not the case. Rather, they emphasize how examining their own assumptions brought to the fore important issues that had not occurred to them, issues directly relevant to their research subjects. Working on oneself, thus, proves to be analytically and politically useful. With this heartening finding I turn to new and exciting opportunities to bring WPR to a wider audience.

Good news stories: bringing WPR to wider audiences

In the “kick-off” presentation I spoke about the widening ambit of WPR, how it is being applied beyond policy studies and to materials such as media reports, legislative debates, interview transcripts, architecture, academic analyses and theoretical positions. To conclude today I mention three initiatives that create opportunities to bring WPR to wider audiences: one in Ireland involving citizens’ juries, a second in Australia that brings WPR into classrooms, and a third developed by Joan Eveline and me to introduce a new form of policy evaluation in practice.

In Ireland Pauline Cullen from Maynooth University applied a version of the WPR approach to the analysis of the public submissions to the Citizens’ Assembly on Gender Equality in Ireland (<https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/>). According to Cullen, WPR “was instrumental in supporting the analysis and assisted me in providing it in a

form that enabled citizens to assess the range and diversity of public submissions” (personal communication, 8 October 2021). This interesting and novel use of WPR indicates that the kind of thinking about “problems” that WPR encourages may provide the means to create new experiments in deliberative democracy.

WPR has also entered the classroom in a study of approaches to drug education in schools. Challenging the current presentation of materials as simply “facts” with right or wrong answers, Farrugia *et al.* (2018) propose an approach that includes a “process of open problematisation in which students are invited to consider all aspects of use including the current regulation of drugs”. Engaging young people in “problem questioning”, and here they reference the WPR approach, would, in their view, encourage young people to draw on their local knowledge, personal experiences and relationships of all kinds.

The idea of using WPR in classrooms to encourage debate on topical issues is exciting. The suggestion here is not to mimic Freire’s (2005) initiatives – the goal is not consciousness-raising (*conscientization*). Rather, the hope is to provide a tool to open up spaces for new forms of analysis.

In an initiative to encourage WPR thinking in policy making settings, with Joan Eveline, I developed an approach to policy evaluation called “Deep Evaluation” as part of a linkage-funded research project to develop gender analysis protocols for the SA and WA public sectors. It consists of a series of questions, with rationales provided for each, under two headings: Conceptual Premises and Operational Practices. Under Conceptual Premises I identify three foci for critical analysis in policy development: i) the meanings attached to key concepts; ii) how the problem is represented; iii) the ways in which context is represented. Under Operational Practices, I propose to examine five issues: i) location of responsibility for implementation; ii) methods of analysis; iii) resource allocation; iv) forms of evaluation and v) training (Bacchi and Eveline 2010: 30).

The framework provides a form of *ex ante* policy analysis to encourage putting into question the grounding premises of any proposed or existing policy. It is intended to open up political discussions about policy options, empowering policy activists to do more than engage in a technocratic exercise (Yeatman 1998). David Bell and Johanna Mufic, with several colleagues, are looking at the possible usefulness of WPR in strengthening “reflexive capacities in

academic-policy engagement practice”. I look forward to hearing more about their experiences and proposals.

These attempts to bring poststructural thinking to wider audiences is challenging. Joan Eveline and I worked to develop new terms and concepts that might better accommodate an emphasis on flux, change and contingency, and that might make sense to policy workers. To capture the focus on process and becoming we (2010a: 95; emphasis added) suggested referring to gender as a verb rather than as a noun, making gender an “inescapably *gendering* process” (see Research Hub 11 Feb. 2018; 30 June 2019; 31 July 2019; see also Bacchi 2017). We used the terms “somewhere in the middle” and “unfinished business” to talk about the prospects for systemic change to do with gender equity. The new terms were enthusiastically adopted as meaningful in the experiences of policy workers assigned the task of developing gender analysis protocols. The question “what’s the problem represented to be?” was also readily incorporated into the discussions as a means to challenge established frameworks of meaning (Bacchi and Eveline 2010).

Conclusion

And, so, the WPR journey continues. Its evolution signals a commitment to the non-fixity of meaning (Eveline and Bacchi 2010b: 157). Further, the exchanges among researchers that feed into its development suggest the possibility of considering WPR a *collective* enterprise. These are ideas I intend to explore further.

At this time I suggest three changes to the existing Chart:

- (i) adding objectification effects to Question 5;
- (ii) adding a reference to “subjugated knowledges” in Question 6; and
- (iii) changing the wording in Step 7 to read: “Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations as a practice of the self”.

I look forward to your reactions to the suggested alterations and to your ideas on other possible changes.

Thank you for your kind attention.

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