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## Introducing the ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be?’ approach

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The ‘WPR’ approach is a resource, or tool, intended to facilitate critical interrogation of public policies. It starts from the premise that what one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic (needs to change). Following this thinking, policies and policy proposals contain *implicit* representations of what is considered to be the ‘problem’ (‘problem representations’). For example, if forms of training are recommended to improve women’s status and promotion opportunities, the implication is that *their lack of training* is the ‘problem’, responsible for ‘holding them back’. The task in a ‘WPR’ analysis is to read policies with an eye to discerning how the ‘problem’ is represented within them and to subject this problem representation to critical scrutiny. This task is accomplished through a set of six questions and an accompanying undertaking to apply the questions to one’s own proposals for change:

1. What’s the ‘problem’ (for example, of ‘problem gamblers’, ‘drug use/abuse’, ‘gender inequality’, ‘domestic violence’, ‘global warming’, ‘sexual harassment’, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been (or could it be) questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.

Question 1 assists in clarifying the implicit problem representation within a specific policy or policy proposal. Subsequent questions encourage:

- reflection on the underlying premises in this representation of the ‘problem’ (Question 2)
- consideration of the contingent practices and processes through which this understanding of the ‘problem’ has emerged (Question 3)
- careful scrutiny of possible gaps or limitations in this representation of the ‘problem’, accompanied by inventive imagining of potential alternatives (Question 4)
- considered assessment of how identified problem representations limit what can be talked about as relevant, shape people’s understandings of themselves and the issues, and impact materially on people’s lives (Question 5)
- a sharpened awareness of the contestation surrounding representation of the ‘problem’ (Question 6).

The undertaking to apply the six questions to one’s own proposals signals a commitment to include oneself and one’s thinking as part of the ‘material’ to be analysed. The argument here is that the ways in which ‘problems’ are constituted elicit particular forms of subjectivity, influencing how we see ourselves and others. Hence, self-problematisation (‘reflexivity’) forms a crucial part of the analysis.

In this account policy is not the government’s best effort to *solve* ‘problems’; rather, policies *produce* ‘problems’ with particular meanings that affect what gets done or not done, and how people live their lives. However, the focus is not on intentional issue manipulation or strategic framing. Instead, the aim is to understand policy better than policy makers by probing the unexamined assumptions and deep-seated conceptual logics within implicit problem representations. This focus means paying attention to the forms of knowledge that underpin public policies, such as psychological or biomedical premises, producing a broad conception of governing that encompasses the place of experts and professionals.

In this view the ‘public’, of which we are members, is governed, not through policies, but through problematisations—how ‘problems’ are constituted. To be clear, this claim does not ignore the host of troubling conditions in people’s (and peoples’) lives; nor does it suggest that we are simply talking about competing interpretations of those conditions. To the contrary the proposition is that lives are lived in specific ways *due to* the shaping impact of proposals that create particular understandings of ‘problems’. Hence the analysis counters a relativist assumption that any one ‘truth’ is as good as any other.

The ‘WPR’ approach has a broad field of application. Specific pieces of legislation or policy pronouncements provide the most obvious starting points for analysis. However, more general government documents also contain implicit problem representations. For example, a stated commitment to ‘community cohesion’ in a government report implies that there is *a lack of* this presumably desirable state or condition in the community (i.e. lack of community cohesion is constituted as a ‘problem’). Governmental instruments, such as censuses or activity regimes for the unemployed, can also be analysed to reveal underlying assumptions about what is problematic and what needs to change. In addition, the ‘WPR’ approach facilitates a

form of critical thinking that extends well beyond the study of government and public policy. For example, the six questions prove useful in identifying the underlying presuppositions and forms of problematisation in theoretical and methodological propositions, which are in effect postulated 'solutions'.

Initially the approach to policy analysis outlined above was described as the '*What's the Problem?*' approach (Bacchi 1999). It became clear that amplification was needed due to the tendency for some readers to interpret this question to mean a determination to seek out the 'real problem' in order to develop 'appropriate' 'solutions'. The '*WPR*' acronym, shorthand for '*What's the Problem Represented to be?*' (for which I thank Angelique Bletsas), is intended to make it clear that the point of the analysis is to begin with postulated 'solutions', such as policies, in order to tease out and critically examine their implicit problem representations. At the same time, Question 4 opens up a space to imagine different futures but always with a commitment to examine proposals for their modes of problematising.

The most recent incarnation of the '*WPR*' approach (Bacchi 2009) includes two questions (Questions 3 and 6) that did not appear in its initial formulation. The goal in these questions is to develop a sharpened awareness of the forms of power involved in the shaping of problem representations. A genealogical tracing of the emergence of particular forms of problematisation, prompted by Question 3, also highlights the spaces for challenge and change.

These elaborations signal that the '*WPR*' approach ought to be conceived as an open-ended mode of critical engagement, rather than as a formula. In light of this understanding I have recently:

- asked some 'hard questions' concerning the notion of reflexivity (Bacchi 2011)
- probed the analytic potential of the concept 'discursive practices' (Bacchi and Bonham 2011)
- considered more fully the political implications of different analytical paradigms (Bacchi and Rönnblom 2011).

In an era when a problem-*solving* motif is near hegemonic—think here of evidence-based policy and contemporary western eagerness to produce students as 'problem solvers'—the '*WPR*' approach serves as a much needed interruption to the presumption that 'problems' are fixed and uncontroversial starting points for policy development. It reminds us that the banal and vague notion of 'the problem' and its partner 'the solution' are heavily laden with meaning. To probe this meaning the '*WPR*' approach recommends 'problem'-*questioning* as a form of critical practice.

## References

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