

# T10P12 / Using post-structural policy analysis to disrupt knowledge and power hierarchies

**Topic :** T10 / POLICY DISCOURSE, CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

**Chair :** Rebecca Muir (Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London)

**Second Chair :** Merissa Elizabeth Hickman (University of Leicester)

**Third Chair :** Laura Bea (University of Southampton)

## GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

WPR, or 'Whats the Problem Represented to be' is an approach developed by Carol Bacchi that aims to challenge the conventional view that public policies are responses or reactions to problems that sit outside the policy process, waiting to be discovered and solved. Public policy decisions are assumed to be part of larger societal discourse that construct reality in particular ways. These discourses thus help maintain certain power structures by legitimizing some knowledges and marginalizing others.

The key question Bacchi asks is: "What's the problem represented to be?". Central to this question is unpacking the ways solutions and problems are framed. By limiting the range of possible solutions, and constraining possible evidence bases, traditional policy approaches can encourage a policymaking space that may end up reproducing the same problems it seeks to 'solve'. By questioning 'taken for granted' assumptions and mapping the history of the present, WPR aids in the examination of policy 'problems' and offers alternative ways of thinking.

Grounded in ideas of governmentality and knowledge-power systems, in particular discussed by poststructuralist and feminist thinkers such as Foucault, Latour and Haraway, WPR conceptualizes power as not merely a repressive force held by a sovereign or state. Rather, it is a productive and diffuse network of relations that operates through institutions, practices, and discourses. Power and knowledge are closely linked, and policies can reproduce and subjugate knowledges.

This panel aims to surface the ways in which WPR can be used and actioned to disrupt these hierarchies and surface these conversations.

WPR can be described as a collective project, or "work-in-progress"; this panel aims to explore this concept in more depth and unpack its complexity, as well as explore how it could work in varying policy contexts.

## CALL FOR PAPERS

Papers are welcome on any topic within post-structural policy analysis, as long as WPR is a central or significant feature. This could involve research taking a WPR approach to understanding a policy problem, work that develops and expands on such approaches, or practical examples of WPR in policymaking settings. We are particularly interested in research conducted in non-traditional settings, and keen to hear from early career researchers.

Some relevant questions considered in this panel might include:

How can the WPR framework expand and develop to include more diverse perspectives in policy?

How can 'WPR-thinking' be used in policymaking settings and open up political discourse on key policy issues of our time?

How do conceptions of knowledge equity entangle with ideals on governing, in both historically colonial and decolonial settings, and how can we embed subjugated knowledge?

What are the limitations of this post-structuralist approach for policy analysis?

How does WPR reveal the ways that policy constrains and legitimizes certain knowledge discourses?

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## Session 1 Questioning Knowledge and Evidence Using WPR

Thursday, July 3rd 10:15 to 12:15 (D1)

### Discussants

Laura Bea (University of Southampton)

Rebecca Muir (Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London)

### WPR: A short history

Carol Bacchi (University of Adelaide)

Theoretical stances are not static entities. They are the product of the cross-fertilization of conceptual stances and perspectives. WPR is one such theoretical proposition. In this paper I wish to comment on the stages in its development from my 1999 book *Women, Policy and Politics: The construction of policy problems* (Sage) to more recent iterations (e.g. Bacchi and Goodwin, *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan 2016). The question of possible hybrids with other theoretical approaches, including CFA (Critical Frame Analysis) and RTA (Reflexive Thematic Analysis), forms part of this analysis. I pay particular attention to the shift in my thinking from social constructionism to performativity and the implications that follow for doing (performing) WPR.

### Epistemic hierarchies and silenced voices: A WPR analysis of lived experience knowledge exclusion in welfare and unemployment policy in Australia

Gabrielle Lawrence (Australian National University)

There is a growing recognition across academic and policy circles of the benefits of lived experience knowledge for policy-making, from improving design and implementation (McIntosh & Wright 2019; Stewart et al 2020) to addressing democratic imperatives and principles of fairness and justice (Fung 2015; Blomkamp 2018; Krick 2021). Despite these acknowledged benefits, its inclusion varies significantly across policy domains (Speed & Reeves 2024). For example, while the Australian Government has established mechanisms for lived experience engagement in mental health and disability policy processes, this has not been the case in welfare and unemployment policy.

Two recent investigations—the *Royal Commission into the Robodebt Scheme* and the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Workforce Australia Employment Services*—documented systemic failures across Australia's welfare system. These reports highlighted the absence of lived experience in policy-making, echoing persistent advocacy for welfare recipients to be included in policy processes. Yet welfare and unemployment policy-making in Australia has remained notably resistant to such calls. In other policy domains, failure to engage affected individuals would be considered unacceptable (O'Shea et al 2017), so what makes welfare and unemployment policy different? This research grapples with this question.

Carol Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach provides a valuable tool for exploring how policies and policy systems legitimise some knowledges while marginalising others, making it a useful method for examining the absence of lived experience in Australia's welfare and unemployment policy processes. Through applying the WPR's six analytical questions to policy material spanning three decades of welfare reform, this paper discusses how successive policy choices have constructed

unemployment and welfare receipt as 'problems' to be 'fixed', positioning welfare recipients as the 'objects' of policy interventions rather than potential knowledge partners in policy design. Initial findings from this analysis suggest that welfare policies are based in certain representations of the unemployment 'problem', resulting in deficit-based social imaginaries of the welfare recipient. This paper argues that these representations and the identities they construct, have been used to privilege technocratic expertise and justify top-down policy interventions, while marginalising the strategic knowledge of those navigating the welfare system.

This paper presents the methodological application of WPR in this policy case study, demonstrating its value for exposing and challenging knowledge hierarchies in policy-making. Drawing on my position as a practitioner-researcher, I discuss both the transformative potential of using WPR as a tool for revealing and challenging harmful assumptions and reflect on the challenges of pursuing critical research in bureaucratic contexts – particularly when regarded as a 'trusted insider'.

This paper contributes to theoretical understanding of epistemic exclusion in welfare and unemployment policy-making while advancing practical knowledge about WPR's utility as a tool for institutional reflexivity and transforming policy practice. As this study is being undertaken as part of a broader research project, this paper also proposes future directions for empirical research with welfare recipients, advocacy organisations and policy actors to identify real-world pathways for disrupting knowledge hierarchies in welfare policy-making.

### **(Virtual) Questioning statistical knowledges' dominance: What violence against women and children is represented to be in the Indonesian government's official data?**

Ayu Siantoro (University of Sydney)

Data is the current "primadona" of governance discourses in Indonesia. Propelled by the spirit of evidence-based policy, demands for every governmental decision-making to be data-driven are surging. This includes the use of data in developing policies and governing of violence against women and children. In this case, most accounts suggest that statistical data is of the utmost importance, and hence, legitimising it to be the dominant knowledge influencing policy-making; despite arguments that stories of violence should not be reduced to mere statistics. By publishing official statistical data, the government makes a policy that produces certain knowledges as "in the truth", and governs our way of thinking about violence against women and children as a particular kind of "problem".

This paper employs "What's the Problem Represented to be?" or the WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) to analyse how Indonesian government official data are categorising, labelling, and thus, creating what acts constitute as violence against women and children, who victims and perpetrators of such violence are, as well as places where the violence is possible to happen. It is a part of a larger doctoral research which utilises poststructural policy analysis to understand the governing of adolescent girls' sexuality through anti-sexual-violence activism and policy reforms in Indonesia. However, the scope of this paper is limited to using three WPR questions, which are Question 1: What's the problem represented to be in a specific policy?; Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the "problem" be conceptualized differently?; and Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the "problem"?

WPR is used to analyse three Indonesian government's publications containing statistical data of violence against women and children. The first is CATAHU *Komnas Perempuan*, which is annual records of gender-based violence cases published by the National Commission on Anti-Violence Against Women (an independent government agency who oversees women's rights enforcement). The second is *Survei Pengalaman Hidup Perempuan Nasional* (SPHPN) or national survey on women's life experiences conducted by the National Statistics Agency (BPS). The third is SIMFONI-PPA or online information system for the protection of women and children, which contains violence against women and children case reports, which is managed by the Ministry of Women Empowerment and Child Protection (KPPPA).

The official statistics grouped various forms of violence against women and children mostly based on how the act is performed, and sometimes, what kind of harm it inflicts. Victims are mainly segregated according to demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, place of origin). Perpetrators are commonly categorised based on their relationship with the victim (e.g., intimate partner, stranger, power-holder). Interestingly, the violence itself is almost always labelled according to who the victims are (e.g., gender-based violence, child sexual abuse), rarely based on who the perpetrators are (e.g., men's violence). This paper will further discuss what such categorisations and labelling mean in terms of "problem" representation; what "subjects", "objects", and "places" they produce; and what knowledges they subjugate.

## **Studying the biopolitical governing of unruly bodies: Lessons learnt from a critical policy analysis of IVF access policies in the United Kingdom**

Rebecca Muir (Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London)

Through the United Kingdom's National Health Service (NHS), people can access state funding for In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) treatment if certain criteria are met. However, in an underfunded healthcare system, access can be challenging for those with 'unruly' bodies outside the clinical norm. BMI, age and ovarian reserve levels are common clinical criteria used to restrict access, and contain troubling conceptual logics reflecting neoliberal ideas of health, treatment deservingness, and the 'assigned female at birth' body.

To examine the governing of IVF access, I have analysed key policy documents and interviewed participants who have a stake in IVF access policies, including clinicians, local government, national activists and people subject to clinical restrictions.

In my presentation, I will reflect on my journey using WPR as a PhD student, and discuss how I have approached different challenges (practical, epistemological and ethical) as my project has developed. I will show how I utilised social theory and Foucault's work (particularly Foucault's biopolitical concepts) to provide depth to this critical health policy study. I will also explain how co-analysis through a patient advisory group embedded from the beginning of my PhD project helped shape and enrich the work.

## **What's the Problem Represented to Be? A Post-Structural Critical Analysis of the UK Armed Forces Occupational Maternity Scheme**

Kirsten Morris (Anglia Ruskin University)

Lauren Godier-McBard (Anglia Ruskin University)

Claire Hooks (Anglia Ruskin University)

In 1990, the UK Armed Forces (UKAF) took a major step toward gender integration by allowing service women to remain in the military during pregnancy. Service women, by law, are not entitled to statutory maternity leave and maternity provisions are made at the discretion of the Ministry of Defence (MoD). Over the last 35 years, maternity policy in the UKAF has evolved, incorporating protections like post-delivery deployment exemptions and workplace breastfeeding guidance. This paper will examine the construction of policy problems in the current MoD Joint Service Policy 760, Chapter 24, Pregnancy and the Armed Forces Occupational Maternity Scheme (AFOMS) (October 2024). The policy analysis utilises Carol Bacchi's Foucault-inspired 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach and signals a critical examination of how the policy constructs pregnancy and maternity as a 'problem' within the military context. It discusses the implicit assumptions, power dynamics, and gendered subjectifications embedded in the scheme. Working through the six questions opens up the theoretical space that shows the problematisations through which pregnant and postpartum service women are governed in the UKAF. Deep-seated problem representations in the policy reiterate vulnerability of pregnant service women from physical and discriminatory harm with a focus on legal protections safeguarding women. Tensions exist between the central tenets of providing 'supportive arrangements' to permit women to accommodate pregnancy within their 'service careers' alongside presuppositions suggesting an incompatibility issue. Question three of the WPR process offers a route into the genealogical mapping of the discursive practices involved in the production of problematisations in UKAF maternity policy. Notably, the MoD remained exempt from the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and continued dismissing pregnant servicewomen, even after the 1978 European Community Directive, which would have otherwise prohibited such dismissals. Pregnant service women were illegally dismissed from the UKAF between 1978 and 1990 until legal challenge overturned these procedures. Implied problems within the policy suggest stratified power structures where service women are protected, by the law, from the institution itself. Applying the WPR approach, this policy highlights several discursive effects related to power dynamics, accountability, and the framing of subjects and the institution, notably a demand for rational, predictable and disciplined subjects. A discursive landscape is created that centres institutional authority and procedural compliance with effects that could marginalise subject agency and structural critiques. The policy requires service women to prove pregnancy and seek permission for medical appointments which may reinforce their subjectification as untrustworthy and manipulative within military structures. These measures imply that women might exploit pregnancy to avoid duties, framing them as needing oversight and validation. By embedding suspicion into policy, the institution may be subtly disciplining service women's bodies, reinforcing a perception that their reproductive choices are a potential liability rather than a legitimate aspect of military life. Overall, application of the WPR approach to the

current AFOMS reveals the taken for granted procedures that govern service women and, through Foucault's biopolitical perspective, shows how an institution regulates and controls its population based on the MoD's economic and social priorities.

## **Responsibilisation in Preconception Health Policy: A WPR Analysis**

Merissa Elizabeth Hickman (University of Leicester)

The WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be?) framework has become a key approach for post-structural policy analysis, offering a way to interrogate how policies construct problems and the implications of these constructions. This research uses WPR to examine preconception health policy in England, a growing area of focus aimed at encouraging individuals to modify behaviours such as diet and exercise before conception. These policies extend health interventions into a life stage traditionally beyond the clinical gaze, reflecting broader trends in anticipatory governance and responsibilisation.

By applying WPR, this study explores how preconception health is framed as a policy issue, identifying the assumptions and norms that underpin its problematisations. Particular attention is paid to the gendered dynamics of these policies, where maternal bodies are often subjected to greater scrutiny and moralisation than paternal counterparts. The analysis reveals how these representations privilege individual responsibility while potentially obscuring broader structural determinants of health, such as poverty, systemic inequities, and environmental exposures.

This research reflects on the potential of WPR to expand political discourse by challenging dominant framings and engaging with diverse perspectives, including subjugated knowledges. While WPR is a powerful tool for exposing constraints and legitimations in policy, the study also considers its limitations in directly influencing policymaking processes and knowledge equity. This work aims to contribute to discussions about how WPR can develop further to engage and open up critical conversations about health, responsibility, and governance in contemporary policy contexts.

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## Session 2 Applying WPR to Public Policy

Thursday, July 3rd 16:00 to 18:00 (D1)

### Discussants

Merissa Elizabeth Hickman (University of Leicester)

### Problematising 'evidence diversity' in public policy decision making

Laura Bea (University of Southampton)

#### Problematising 'evidence diversity' in public policy decision making

Evidence-informed policy practice and theory has been explored through a multitude of critical lenses. Diversity of evidence as a phrase and concept has been slowly emerging, with the Welsh Senedd (Parliament) first discussing it in one of their articles 'Why the Senedd Values Diverse Evidence' (2021), and the Scottish Parliament following after with discussions of intersectionality in evidence-policy processes (2023). UK Government has not explicitly discussed diverse evidence, but points towards a diverse research ecosystem, and signals its importance to evidence informed policy (reference). UK Parliament has made extensive efforts to diversify the people that come through its doors and the evidence it receives, making more accessible its opportunities and widening the scope of what counts as evidence to support select committees and members (POST, 2021). However, there seems to be different understandings and practices of what diversity means in this space.

The wider exploration of how evidence diversity is conceptualised and understood by policymakers forms part of a wider study which interviews n=15 policy actors and n=18 knowledge brokers, exploring and questioning the ways in which diverse or divergent evidence is used within policymaking processes. However, before this study began, WPR was used to 'problematised' what diversity of evidence means as a method for critical reflection during research design and alongside initial critical discourse analysis of policy texts.

This paper presents and outlines the WPR analysis of this problematisation and provides additional critical commentary on what came out of this guided process. Alongside this, this paper discusses the role WPR played as a method in the research design of this study, and the experiences of the author using the framework as an initial reflexive tool.

Overall, the paper will explore the ways in which diversity of evidence is initially problematised, for example, through a deficit model, and how rationalist assumptions of what counts as evidence reinforces knowledge hierarchies and thus, epistemic power dynamics. In addition to this, WPR has been used alongside discourse analysis to understand these problematisations through the politics of language, providing an experimental perspective for using this framework.

## **(Virtual) Reflections from using 'WPR' to study the politics of 'race' in English policy on Green Social Prescribing**

Laura Mitchell (University of Brighton)

This paper reflects on the use of poststructural policy analysis as it engages with the politics of 'race' in Green Social Prescribing (GSP) policy in England. Health and environmental policy have converged to formally produce GSP as a solution to a range of racialised 'problems', such as inequalities in access to 'nature', and health inequalities. Using Bacchi & Goodwin's (2016) 'What's The Problem Represented to be' (WPR) framework, my research analyses the production of these 'problems' and the role of 'race' in policy-discourse. I offer a novel expansion on the WPR method by bringing perspectives from Critical Race Theory and Science and Technology Studies into the analysis. This convergence enables the making-visible of certain discursive formations that obscure or legitimize how knowledge production is racialised, and in turn how this constitutes practice. By unpacking the ways in which 'problems' are framed, and certain people and spaces become fixed, GSP policy discourse can be seen to re-enact the very 'problems' it claims to solve. I emphasise how WPR has potential to be a tool for intervening in and challenging the reproduction of 'race' and racialised inequalities, while being aware of the tension that a poststructural policy analysis inherently offers a partial view of this issue. At this point, I reflect on the limitations of the WPR method. As a method concerned with the structuring power of language; how is the researcher to engage with materiality? Considering my theoretical grounding, I offer thoughts on the opportunities provided through theoretical enrichment, while also reflecting on the epistemological tensions I have come up against. I offer other reflections on the method, including the non-linear nature of WPR analyses and questions on the appropriate scale for data selection.

## **(Virtual) Uninformed and unethical consumer behaviour: what public policy represents as the 'problem' of modern slavery in global supply chains**

Kyla Raby (University of South Australia)

Australia's Modern Slavery Act (2018) (MSA) takes a decentralised, reflexive, and self-regulatory approach to governing modern slavery in global supply chains, positioning consumers as a key stakeholder responsible for influencing ethical corporate behaviour. This study utilises a Foucault inspired critical policy analysis framework proposed by Bacchi (2009) to question the way in which this approach to governing represents the 'problem' of modern slavery in global supply chains. A critical discourse analysis of the MSA and related materials, informed by Bacchi's 'What's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach, reveals that the MSA represents modern slavery in global supply chains as a problem of uninformed and unethical consumer behaviour. Therefore, through the MSA, modern slavery is presented as an information issue and non-criminal market problem. By introducing the MSA, Australia followed the United Kingdom and the United States of America's lead in choosing to represent modern slavery in this way. This framing subsequently produces businesses as non-offenders, positions businesses, rather than exploited workers, as in need of regulatory intervention, and requires consumers, as opposed to businesses, change their behaviour. It also deflects the capitalist economic system and global systems of labour and production from the problem frame, distorting the issue of modern slavery in global supply chains.

Once a problem representation is visible, the WPR approach necessitates consideration of what deep-seated presuppositions or 'taken for granted knowledge' sit behind it, and the power dynamics informing this. As a form of post-structural critical analysis, the WPR approach adopts Foucault (2019, p. 456) view that this involves analysing what type of 'established, unexamined ways of thinking the accepted practices are based'. This includes 'both general background knowledge, apparent in epistemological and ontological assumptions, and forms of relatively bounded social knowledges, such as disciplines' (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016, p. 21).

This study finds that several deep-seated assumptions associated with neoliberal principles underline the MSA's representation of modern slavery in global supply chains as a problem of uninformed and unethical consumer behaviour. These include non-interventionist and free market principles, the centralisation of the state, and principles of responsibilisation. The dominance of neoliberalism as a political rationality and form of governmentality is evident in the MSA's problem representation, which also assumes a correspondence view of knowledge. This problem representation silences the lived experience of consumers and workers. It also limits alternative or additional government action, deflects responsibility away from businesses and governments, fails to prevent the exploitation of workers and offers the potential for consumers to be deceived. Therefore, this study argues that the MSA's problem representation needs to be disrupted, replaced and alternative problem representations adopted by policy makers in order to truly address the exploitation of workers in global supply chains.



## **(Virtual) Policy Translation of Smart City to local policies in Hong Kong by the Government**

Man Hei Chu (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

The smart city is gaining popularity in the public field and is being included in policy papers across the world. The term smart city is ambiguous, and its practical implications vary. Popular transnational policy process terms, policy learning, diffusion, and transfer, may not fully explain the variations across cases or capture the complexities of local policy movements and the role of local policymakers, while also reinforcing existing global power hierarchies and Eurocentric narratives. The notion of policy translation, rooted in a constructivist lens, highlights the adaptation by local translators in discourse and actions within their specific settings.

This study, drawing on Hassenteufel and Zeigermann (2021) and Zittoun (2014)'s understanding of policy translation, aims to understand the dynamic changing process of the smart city concept being reinterpreted and reshaped into practical policies in Hong Kong, focusing on the influence from discourse, actors, and institutions. Hong Kong strongly embraces neoliberalism and the free market. Its unique landscape may provide an alternative perspective on the smart city concept and the policy translation process. A qualitative documentary analysis will be conducted on key policy documents, particularly the Hong Kong Smart City Blueprint (2017, 2020) and other government reports. This analysis will trace the processes, such as reframing, negotiation, and public consultation, in developing discourse and action plans by the Hong Kong government based on the smart city concept. A systematic literature review will be carried out to examine how institutional constraints affect the translation process. Policy translators in general include policymakers, policy entrepreneurs, civic organizations and international organizations, however, given the centralized top-down executive-led governance characteristics of Hong Kong, the scope of translators in this study limits to the government. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how global policy concepts are translated within local governance structures and to offer insights into the policy translation process. The findings will highlight the role of the discourse and actors in shaping smart city initiatives in Hong Kong.

## **(Virtual) Applying the WPR Approach to the Spanish CAP: Unveiling Policy Representations of Food Systems**

Maria del Mar Calvet Nogués (INGENIO (CSIC-UPV), Universitat Politècnica de València)

Marta Rivera (CSIC (Spanish national research council))

federica ravera (department of Geography)

The research presented is part of the doctoral thesis titled "A Critical Analysis of the Common Agricultural Policy for an Ecofeminist Agroecological Transition of Spanish Food Systems". The general objective of this study is to contribute to the transition of European food systems toward a more sustainable and healthy model that ensures socio-environmental justice—an issue that requires public policy support.

The CAP (Common Agricultural Policy) is one of the most significant policies of the EU, shaping the agricultural and rural development model promoted in member states. The latest policy reform (CAP 2023-2027) was initially met with optimism in some sectors due to promises of integrating more ambitious agri-environmental measures and specific gender objectives, which could begin to reverse the policy's negative trends. However, this does not seem to be happening in its initial years of implementation.

For this reason, this research aims to scrutinise the Spanish CAP using Carol Bacchi's methodological approach: *What's the problem represented to be?*. Given that the policy encompasses a broad range of measures addressing the diversity of the agricultural sector, our analysis will focus on its general aspects to understand how the CAP represents the food system and food itself. The flexibility of this methodology to take it to practice allows it to be adapted to an extensive document like the Spanish CAP's Strategic National Plan (PEPAC).

To do so, this research has worked extensively on Question 3 of Bacchi's method, which examines the context, identifying historical discourses that have shaped the policy while also conducting a preliminary analysis of the key legal documents outlining the new CAP's strategic direction. Additionally, it has been necessary to deeply reflect on the assumed "problem representation" under analysis (Questions 1 and 2), as food and food systems may not inherently constitute a problem in themselves. This challenge has been addressed by bringing *the New Agrarian Questions* into the debate, allowing for the identification of key issues that must be critically examined.

Finally, the research aims to go beyond the legal PEPAC document by analysing everyday experiences—the policy's effects (Question 5)—on those directly impacted by the policy, interviewing them.

It also seeks to address the policy's silences by incorporating the discourses of social movements and NGOs advocating for an alternative CAP and those from marginalised subjects from the policy.