‘WHAT’S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE?’

A New Thinking Paradigm

Carol Bacchi

First published 2026

ISBN: 978-1-032-67837-5 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-67836-8 (pbk)
ISBN: 978-1-032-67838-2 (ebk)

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Key premises

DOI: 10.4324/9781032678382-3

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

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INITIATING A WPR ANALYSIS

Key premises

To start thinking differently requires some work. I ask you to imagine that you have just encountered the WPR approach for the first time, and you are wondering how it can be of use to you in your selected field or with the specific topic that has attracted your interest.

To begin, it is necessary to reflect on whether WPR is suited to the project you have in mind. What kind of analysis is WPR (What's the Problem Represented to be?) intended to undertake? And does this kind of project fit your goals?

WPR interrogates how governing takes place. It provides a way of identifying techniques of governance. It targets, not individual actions or beliefs, but the 'space being governed', or the 'problem-space' (Walters 2004, p. 247). This 'space' embraces more than conventional political institutions. It includes a wide gamut of agencies, experts and professionals, along with their knowledges (see below). 'Governing' is interpreted to encompass the many forms of intervention, public and private, that aim to shape behaviours in specific ways. This widening of the canvas of 'governing' is associated with the term 'governmentality', which develops a fine-grained picture of the complex and intermingled factors and forces that shape lives and worlds (Chapter 7).

In this form of analysis, particular emphasis is placed on the 'knowledges' ('discourses') associated with aspects of expertise. Consequently, it becomes important to think about the ways in which premises from psychology and other 'knowledges' (e.g. social work, epidemiology, anthropology) function as governing practices. As examples, the place of behavioural economics in 'nudge theory' (Thaler & Sunstein 2008) and psychology in gambling policy (Bacchi 2009, pp. 78–96) illustrate how 'knowledges', as 'discursive practices', are involved in shaping worlds and lives (Chapter 16).

DOI: 10.4324/9781032678382-3

In WPR the goal is to identify and interrogate the governmental rationales (rationalities: see Glossary) that shape these governing practices, and the governmental technologies and mechanisms through which they operate (Chapter 5). 'Rationales' refers to the reasons put forward for a particular style of intervention. Technologies and mechanisms include the many forms that governing practices take, including reports, guidelines, directives and calculative practices, such as budget papers and censuses. To study this broad terrain, WPR explores governmental problematisations.

Governing through problematisations

In the WPR approach 'government', broadly understood, is approached as a 'problematizing activity' (Rose & Miller 1992, p. 181). For something to be governed, or imagined as governable, it needs to be problematised (Packer 2003, p. 136). Problematisations therefore provide a useful starting place to reflect on how governing takes place.

Using policy as an example, the fact that something is the target of legislation – think for example of the Australian National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy 1995/97 – means that the situation or condition is under scrutiny as some form of 'problem'. The approach to youth suicide as a 'problem' in the prevention strategy encompasses psychologists, parents and researchers, illustrating the broad canvas of 'politics' embraced in WPR analyses (Bacchi 2009, pp. 4–6). Considering this broad view of governing practices, one can initiate the WPR analysis, asking what kind of 'problem' your selected area of investigation (e.g. 'youth suicide') is represented to be. The answer to this question produces a *problem representation*, which provides the analytic target in the WPR template of questions and analysis.

Problem representations allow access to the 'thinking' in 'government'. 'Thinking' refers, not to individual thought processes, but to the *rationales* in governmental practices. These rationales, described as rationalities, reflect *styles of problematisation*, patterns in forms of governmental problematisation. As an example, Alexander and Coveney (2013, p. 359) highlight how proposals to increase children's activity to combat so-called 'childhood obesity', in early twentieth-century Canadian and Australian healthcare policy, problematise the role of parents who are held responsible for creating opportunities for active play. This case indicates a 'responsibilisation' (see Glossary) style of problematisation that targets individuals as responsible for health care (Nettleton 1997).

To say that governing takes place through problematisations does not mean that these ways of conceptualising issues are automatically adopted and/or effective. Miller and Rose (1990, p. 10) describe 'government' as a 'congenitally failing operation', requiring continuous and repeated efforts to shape citizen behaviours. It is important, therefore, not to enshrine a particular mode or

pattern of rule, such as neo-liberalism, as some sort of ideal type or determining influence (see Brown et al. 2023; Larner 2000).

At the same time, attention is directed to the effects problem representations have on people and practices (see Bacchi & Goodwin 2016, p. 20). For example, we can reflect on the influence of 'nudge theory' on specific policy areas and how 'nudges' may shape people's behaviours (they are certainly aimed at this outcome). We could also consider how targeting children's low activity levels as 'causes' of so-called 'obesity' can encourage an 'unhealthy' concentration on body size (Alexander & Coveney 2013, p. 357). This study of 'effects' retains space for both resistance and contestation (Chapter 9).

While applications of WPR often start from a piece of legislation or government report, as in the examples of youth suicide and childhood obesity, my argument in this book is that it is possible to extend a WPR form of analysis to a wide array of 'things'. These 'things', including buildings, maps and washrooms, can be thought of as involved at some level in regulating behaviour or conduct. It follows that WPR is useful in areas of interest that extend far beyond public policy or practices associated with conventional views of government. We pursue the widening ambit of WPR analysis in Chapter 2.

Once you determine that your area/topic of interest is usefully approached through the lens of problematisation, you face three tasks: firstly, expanding your understanding of the history, background and context of the selected area of interest; secondly, identifying specific proposals to gain access to the problematisations at work; and thirdly, applying the WPR forms of questioning and analysis (see Box 1.1) to identified problem representations.

Exploring context

The task of exploring context involves at least two areas. In the policy field, it is useful to develop a 'web of policies', and allied texts, to show how your selected text fits into a larger picture or pictures. For example, in my application of WPR to the UK's National Plan for Music Education (Gov.UK 2022b), it became necessary to explore relevant and related texts, including the report of the Henley Review (Gov.UK 2011), the *Levelling Up* White Paper (Gov.UK 2022a), the Ofsted (2021) *Research review series* and many others (Bacchi 2023a). More broadly, one needs to ensure adequate understanding of the array of practices, such as student testing and school inspections in music education, that lead to the proposal/s selected for examination.

It is also helpful to reflect on connections between aspects of your selected topic and wide-ranging philosophical perspectives. Invariably stances on political issues involve views on a range of related topics – e.g. the usefulness or not of education, the goals of migration and the meaning of equity. These topics – which are offered as examples – are grounded in competing pedagogical philosophies, conceptions of justice and meanings of equality.

In *Analysing Policy* (Bacchi 2009, pp. 21, 56), I suggest that the concept of 'nesting' may assist you in dealing with these complex connections. The point here is to recognise that any policy or other proposal will necessarily intersect with related philosophical issues. As a result of these interconnections, it is often necessary to apply the WPR questions to more than one problem representation in any specific research project. For example, in a recent WPR analysis of the concept 'underlying health conditions', it became necessary to ask what kind of a 'problem' 'health' is represented to be (Bacchi & Wilson 2026).

Dealing with 'context' is not a descriptive exercise (Woolgar & Lezaun 2013; Chapter 13). Contexts can be disputed. There is also a danger of imposing patterns on the collected material. In WPR the focus is not on path dependence but on contingency and heterogeneity (see Chapter 8 on genealogy).

Identifying proposals

As an analytic strategy WPR starts from the premise that *what one proposes to do about something indicates what is targeted as needing to change and hence what is rendered problematic, or 'the problem'* (Bacchi 2009, pp. 2–3). Based on this proposition, 'proposals' (or proposed 'solutions') provide researchers with entry points to selected text/s. But what are *proposals*? And how are we to identify them?

To locate proposals, we follow Foucault's (1986, pp. 12–13) advice to examine what he calls 'practical texts' or 'prescriptive texts' as guides to conduct, 'intended to constitute the eventual framework of everyday conduct'. In line with the argument that a WPR way of thinking has a broad application beyond policy, 'practical texts' need to be approached in an expansive sense. Buildings can be seen as such texts, as can a full array of cultural practices (Woolgar & Lezaun 2013).

Proposals appear in 'practical texts' as specific endorsements of desired changes in 'conduct'. They can take several forms. Often a selected text will have *recommendations* within it, which can readily be recognised as *proposals* for change (or *aims*). But the process of problematisation is much more nuanced than these examples suggest. If a text, for example, endorses initiatives aimed at developing (more) social cohesion, you can read this comment as a problematisation, producing the 'problem' as *inadequate* or *underdeveloped* social cohesion. In this way articulated social visions, for example, sociotechnical imaginaries, can be treated as problematisations, with the proviso that 'ideas' are not seen as *drivers* of change (Rahm & Rahm-Skågeby 2023). Problematisations are neither mental perceptions nor attitudes; they are the 'the practices through which things take on meaning and value' (Shapiro 1988, p. xi).

Some key terms assist in identifying proposals. For example, the word *should* heralds a form of prescription. When a text suggests that something

should be done (or *must* or *shall*), it can be read as a proposal to achieve a specific goal. For example, Ofsted (2021, emphasis added) – the UK Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills – proposes, in its research review on music education, that 'curriculum scope *should* be informed by current research on human cognition' (see Bacchi 2023a). This proposal clearly raises questions about diverse forms of governing knowledge, such as psychology.

Proposals, as described here, provide a way into your selected text. I describe them as 'levers' or 'springboards' that open reflections on the forms of governing, and associated effects, instituted through a particular way of constituting a 'problem'. Following WPR thinking, the researcher starts from proposals and works backwards to identify the problem representation or problem representations implicit within them. Another way to describe the analytic strategy at work here is to say that the researcher 'reads off' the implicit problem representation/s from the proposal/s.

There is always and inevitably an interpretive element involved both in identifying 'proposals' and in 'reading' them. Still, proposals provide a useful way to interrogate governmental (read broadly) practices. Identified problem representations are *implicit* in proposals in the sense that they can be linked to identified proposals. WPR operates as an analytic intervention to facilitate this form of analysis.

The example of training programmes for women, raised in the Introduction, illustrates this point. If training programmes for women form the proposal, the *problem representation* can be described as *women's lack of training*. 'Women's lack of training', then, serves as an entry point (or 'lever') for your analysis. It helps to open the topic area or 'problem space' in useful ways. For example, it initiates thinking about the presuppositions that underpin this proposal (Question 2 in WPR; see below). This analytic starting point also encourages researchers to consider the wide-ranging implications of targeting women as in need of 'training' (Question 5 in WPR).

Importantly, to talk about problem representations in this way does not imply a world of impressions or conjecture. The argument, as developed here, is that policies, and other forms of proposal, *produce* 'problems' as particular sorts of problem. Proposals, which convey a sense of doing (what we propose *to do*), do not *describe* 'reality'; they (help to) make worlds (Jackson 2004, p. 2). They play a critical role in shaping our realities (Chapter 15). As 'active interventions in the co-fabrication of worlds', problem representations have an expressive power: they *enact* worlds (Anderson & Harrison 2011, p. 14; Chapter 14).

The objective in starting from 'proposals' and working backwards to identify problem representations is to displace any sense of a fixed 'problem'. 'Problems' are treated as ontologically fluid, indicated by use of quotation marks around the term.[1] 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. In short, there is no such thing as a 'problem' pure and simple, while proposed 'solutions' (proposals) provide entry points for critical analysis. The implications of adopting this stance are discussed in Chapter 3.

Problem representations are involved in producing or enacting worlds and lives through the shapes given to 'problems'. Here we need to remember that, because 'government' is a 'congenitally failing operation' (Miller & Rose 1990, p. 10), these 'problems', or rather problematisations, 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, p. x)' (Rose-Redmond & Glass 2015, p. 2). It is important not to underestimate the political influence exerted through problem representations.

Extending WPR thinking

This WPR way of thinking produces new approaches to 'subjects', 'objects' and 'places'. In relation to 'subjects', attention is directed to 'subject positions' (see Glossary), the 'spaces' – and the associated characteristics, behaviours and dispositions – made available for people to take up. Public policy categories provide useful examples: 'youth', 'problem gambler', 'drug addict', 'welfare recipient', 'refugee'. These categories influence who can become a legitimate 'subject' in a specific policy field. The character and content of identified 'subject positions' are directly related to the ways in which specific policies and other practices problematise certain behaviours and roles, illustrated in the example of 'childhood obesity' (above). Often 'dividing practices' (Foucault 1982, p. 208; see Glossary) set groups in opposition to each other – e.g. 'youth' versus 'adult', 'refugees' versus 'citizens', 'disabled' versus 'fit', 'responsible' versus 'irresponsible' (Chapters 7 and 11).

Importantly, while governmental practices may elicit specific types of 'subjects', 'subject positions' are neither mandatory nor determinative. Refusal is commonplace (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016, p. 50). In Inda's (2005, p. 11) words, 'Individuals can and do negotiate the processes to which they are subjected' (see Chapter 4 n 1 for elaboration).

WPR thinking also puts in question the existence of presumably fixed 'objects'. The focus shifts from ostensibly stable entities to the multitudes of practices involved in their emergence or production. Chapter 5 offers, as examples of *objectification*, 'madness', 'addiction' and 'methadone'. 'Entities' in this view are politics by other means (Woolgar & Lezaun 2013, p. 334; Question 5 in WPR).

Along related lines WPR thinking puts in question the treatment of 'places' as naturalised 'objects'. Walters (2009, p. 495) cautions against the tendency

to refer to 'places' as self-evident sites or locations. To illustrate the need to shift attention to the plural practices involved in the production of 'places', he (2002, p. 575) describes the long list of interconnected factors making up the entity 'Europe' – 'an articulation of social security and health data systems, employment registers', 'making entry quick and efficient for some, and difficult for others'. In this way, the WPR approach disrupts taken-for-granted 'objects' and 'places' that act to firm up the social and political status quo.

Applying WPR

Starting from *proposals* produces a provisional answer to the **opening WPR question**: 'What's the problem represented to be?' As illustrated in the example of training courses for women, the proposal to offer women training programmes to improve their representation in positions of influence produces the 'problem' as women's *lack* of training. Using other words, the 'problem' *is represented to be* women's lack of training. This problem representation provides an entry point for subsequent analysis, as performed in the remaining WPR questions.

Question 2 looks to Foucauldian archaeology to identify and interrogate the 'embedded knowledges' in identified problem representations. It targets underlying assumptions and presuppositions that are necessary to make identified problem representations intelligible. Foucault (1994, p. 456) describes these 'embedded knowledges' as 'unexamined ways of thinking'. The critical task is to draw attention to these 'knowledges' (e.g. behavioural economics, psychology, economics, education) and their pivotal contribution to governing practices.

To undertake this task, we ask a specific form of question, best described as a 'how possible' question. How, we consider, is/was it possible for this form of problem representation to emerge and function? Upon which 'knowledges' do these problem representations rely? Through these questions, we explore the 'ensemble' of 'institutions, procedures, analysis and reflections, calculations and tactics' (Foucault 2007, p. 108) through which these governing practices take place (Bacchi 2023b; Chapter 7).

Pursuing the example of training programmes for women, such programmes rely upon a particular understanding of people as able to learn and acquire 'skills'. Conceptions of skill can be linked to psychological theories of development that we currently take for granted as 'truth' or, more precisely, as 'in the true' (Foucault 1981, p. 61). Along similar lines, in the Ofsted example above, the reference to 'research on human cognition' points to the place of psychology as a governing knowledge in the field of music education. In WPR, theories of psychological development and 'human cognition' ('embedded knowledges') require critical analysis rather than simple acceptance. These 'unexamined ways of thinking' are interrogated through examining

their deep-seated ontological and epistemological presuppositions (which made these ways of thinking possible; see Glossary). This mode of analysis facilitates identifying and questioning taken-for-granted concepts and categories in policies and research.

Question 3 invites a genealogy of identified problem representation/s. We ask: How did this representation of the 'problem' come to be? True to its poststructuralist commitments (see Introduction), in WPR there is no search for ultimate causes. Rather, the emphasis is on contingency and heterogeneity, with a particular focus on battles over knowledge (see Glossary). Researchers are encouraged to develop a 'genealogical sensibility', a way of thinking that takes seriously Foucault's (1977) argument that *everything has a history* (Chapter 8). To historicise something is to denaturalise it, to show how it has come to be. As Tamboukou (1999, p. 214) describes, 'a genealogy should start with a major interrogation of what has been accepted as "truth", shattering certainties'.

Question 4 directs attention to what is *not* problematised in identified problem representation/s. The goal here is to highlight aspects of the selected topic that have been ignored or silenced. Through reading the critical literature on the topic of interest, researchers are able to seek out perspectives that deserve reflection. To identify alternative problematisations, it is useful to compare problematisations across time, across 'cultures' or across geophysical 'spaces'. Such comparisons can illustrate that problem representations reflect specific institutional and cultural contexts. Appeals to 'lived experience' may also serve to destabilise accepted problem representations (Chapters 12 and 18).

Question 5 targets effects, or implications. For heuristic purposes, effects are considered under four headings: discursive, subjectification, objectification and lived. These interconnected categories reflect the approaches to 'subjects', 'objects', 'places' and 'context' introduced above.

With a clear connection to Question 4, *discursive effects* highlight how the terms of reference established by particular problem representations, and the knowledges (discourses) on which they rely, place limits on what can be thought or said. *Subjectification effects* refer to how 'subjects' are produced as particular sorts of subject (Chapter 4; see Glossary). *Objectification (or objectivisation) effects* involve how objects are produced in practices. *Lived effects* capture the impact of problem representations in people's lives, raising the possibility of employing critical ethnographic methods in one's research (see Chapter 18). The Introduction indicated the analytical usefulness of these categories of effect in elaborating the problem representation of women's 'lack of training'.

Objectification effects are a new addition to the WPR list of questions, reflecting the work generated in Chapter 6 of *Poststructural Policy Analysis* (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016) and the need to question assumed 'objects'. The field of alcohol and other drug policies has been particularly active in producing studies of the practices of objectification (or objectivisation). Referring to the production of the 'object' of 'addiction', Keane, Moore and Fraser (2011, p. 876)

explain that 'all diagnostic instruments and practices construct their objects rather than describe a pre-existing "reality"'. Illustrating this argument, Fraser, Moore and Keane (2014, p. 235) note the trend towards seeing more and more activities in terms of 'addiction', including sex, shopping, eating and gambling. As they describe, this objectification of 'addiction' serves to pathologise ever larger numbers of people while it individualises complex social issues.

Directing attention to *objectification effects* encourages researchers to put into question the many categories and terms they tend to take for granted as 'truth'. Challenging the tendency in realist sociology and much social policy to treat analytic categories as 'self-evident descriptors of the terrain being analysed', in WPR, categories and concepts are 'denaturalised, made specific and their governmental implications revealed' (Larner 2008, p. 23).

With overlaps with Question 3 (genealogy), **Question 6** examines the precise and plural practices that install and authorise a particular problem representation. The music education example above mentions, as exemplars, practices of student testing and school inspections. Various bodies and agencies can be identified as involved in the production of specific problem representations. At the same time, this analytic prompt retains space for disruption, resistance and creative reworking of problem representations.

In the battles over knowledge considered in genealogy, Foucault (1980, p. 82) emphasises the importance of 'subjugated knowledges' as signs of resistance. 'Subjugated knowledges' consist of those minor knowledges that challenge the scientific consensus and that survive at the margins (see Chapter 9). Foucault includes the knowledge of the psychiatric patient, the ill person, the nurse and the delinquent. These minor knowledges, an important factor to consider in analysing the dissemination and disruption of problem representations, have been added to Question 6 (see Box 1.1).

Process 7[2] directs attention to the key importance of 'self'-problematisation in a WPR analysis (see Glossary). The point here is to recognise that every researcher is embedded in specific knowledge regimes and hence there is every likelihood that they/we buy into assumptions and presuppositions that require interrogation. In contrast to reflexivity (or reflectivity), where researchers are enjoined to 'stand back' or distance themselves from their 'values' and opinions, 'self'-problematisation commits the researcher to *active engagement* with their own belief systems. To achieve this goal, researchers are called upon to apply the WPR questions to their own proposals as a *practice of the self* (see Chapter 6).

Conclusion

Importantly, WPR is not a formula. Moreover, the WPR questions are clearly interconnected. Still, many researchers find it useful to adopt the list of WPR questions to structure an argument (see Box 1.1). PhD and MA students often

find it helpful to list the WPR questions and to deal with each sequentially. As an alternative mode of application, it is possible to allow the questions to operate in the background of an analysis, without addressing each question separately. I refer to this form of application as *an integrated analysis* (Bacchi 2009, p. 101; see also Larsson 2021).

In whatever format WPR is adopted, a new way of thinking is involved. 'Problems' are displaced to bring attention to the ways in which 'things' are problematised. Maintaining that 'problems' do not simply exist waiting to be 'solved', the WPR approach disturbs and disrupts the 'problem-solving' mantra that we encounter on a daily basis, in schools, in the media, in government pronouncements and in everyday exchanges.

Through applying WPR, people choose a different starting place for reflecting on political issues. Instead of assuming 'problems that exist', the analytic target becomes *proposals for change* and their implicit representations of 'problems'. These problem representations provide a target for critical analysis, examining how they represent and produce 'problems' as particular sorts of problem, their underlying presuppositions and their political implications. In this way the simple question 'What's the problem represented to be?' encourages new forms of questioning and novel discussions about political futures.

The next chapter elaborates on the proposition that WPR offers a new paradigm for thinking through exploring its usefulness in diverse fields and with a wide range of phenomena.

BOX 1.1 WHAT'S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE? APPROACH

- Question 1: What's the 'problem' (e.g. of 'gender inequality', 'drug use/abuse', 'economic development', 'global warming', 'childhood obesity', 'irregular migration') represented to be in a specific proposal (or in specific proposals)?
- Question 2: What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem' (problem representation)?
- Question 3: How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
- Question 4: What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? What is silenced? Can the 'problem' be conceptualised differently?
- Question 5: What effects (discursive, subjectification, objectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
- Question 6: How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or can it be disrupted and replaced? Consider the role of 'subjugated knowledges'.
- Process 7: Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations as a practice of the self.

Notes

1 The use of quotation marks is a poststructuralist stratagem for keeping the meaning of selected terms in contention. This practice is adopted for many terms and concepts in the book. Most obviously, quotation marks around 'problem' signal that the meaning of the term is not fixed, and that 'problems' are not entities of any sort. In the book quotation marks are used to signal the fluid status of a 'problem' in a WPR approach. Quotation marks are omitted when the term 'problem' is used to refer to some sort of presumed pre-existing state or entity. The same strategy is applied to different uses of 'subject'.

2 The language of 'Step 7' has been dropped from the WPR framework (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016, p. 20) due to the associations of the term 'step' with sequences and hence separation. Given the interconnected nature of the WPR forms of analysis, the term 'process' has been adopted. See the usage of the language of process in the development of poststructuralist interview analysis (Bacchi & Bonham 2016).

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