‘WHAT’S THE PROBLEM REPRESENTED TO BE?’

A New Thinking Paradigm

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INTRODUCTION

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INTRODUCTION

A new thinking paradigm—beyond problem-solving

Contemporary thinking across a range of fields displays a problem-solving motif. As a key example, evidence-based policy, the popular mantra in social policy, medicine, social welfare and many other disciplines, advances the proposition that what is needed in terms of research is 'evidence' about 'what works' in relation to targeted 'problems'. The goal is to *solve* 'problems that exist'.

This book starts from the proposition that a problem-solving approach to thinking and living has significant limitations. Treating 'problems' as self-evident referents managed by 'experts', I argue, oversimplifies understandings of social interaction among human and other-than-human actors (see Chapter 12). To challenge this restricted and ubiquitous mindset, the book elaborates and defends a new thinking paradigm, described through the question 'What's the problem represented to be?' As elaborated below, this analytic strategy provokes a 'problem'-*questioning* orientation to the common ways in which life is organised and the parameters that guide our behaviours. It does this through focusing on how governmental proposals, understood broadly, produce 'problems' as particular sorts of problem. I argue that governing takes place through these problematisations (see Glossary).

Borrowing from Foucault (1991) and the concept of governmentality (Chapter 7), asking 'What's the problem represented to be?' expands the understanding of what to include in studies of governing practices. Governing, in this understanding, encompasses not only the practices of conventional political institutions but also the wide array of groups and agencies, of experts, professionals and researchers (myself included) and the knowledges (discourses) (see Glossary) on which they rely. Developing this broad approach

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to governing practices creates the opportunity to interrogate critically taken-for-granted rules and regulations that influence our everyday lives and that are seldom examined as involved in governing. Practices such as selecting food brands or streaming services, deciding on approaches to child-rearing, drinking a glass of unfiltered water – all become grist for the mill of a WPR (What's the problem represented to be?) mode of critical analysis.

The question – 'What's the problem represented to be?' – was first introduced to offer a new poststructuralist approach to policy analysis (Bacchi 2009). The approach, commonly referred to as the WPR approach, consists of seven interconnected forms of questioning and analysis, introduced and updated in Chapter 1. Through addressing these questions, it becomes possible to better understand the practices through which governing takes place.

The WPR approach is a work in progress. It has changed over the years and continues to evolve. I first developed the approach in 1999 in *Women, Policy and Politics: The Construction of Policy Problems* (Bacchi 1999). At that stage it was referred to as the 'What's the problem?' approach. In 2009 I wrote a textbook providing a guide to application of the approach. Called *Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi 2009), it continued to focus on the policy domain. In 2016, with Susan Goodwin, I wrote *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice* (Bacchi & Goodwin 2016). In this publication the scope of the approach expands beyond 'policy', understood as the 'doings' of government, to governing practices more broadly. For example, disciplines such as psychology (also economics, neuroscience, epidemiology etc.) are treated as governing practices. Increased attention is directed to how 'subjects' are constituted in governing practices, and to how 'objects' are produced as problematisations. In psychology, for example, both the characterisation of 'subjects' as 'addicts' and the production of 'addiction' as an object for thought are approached as modes of governing rather than as truths about the human condition.

Since the 2016 publication, it has become clear that WPR is being embraced across many fields. While it remains a popular approach in policy studies, there are applications that bypass 'policy' and examine a wide array of 'texts' (e.g. court decisions, media texts) and other 'entities' (e.g. maps, public washrooms). Researchers from many disciplines and many countries have taken up the approach and applied it in innovative ways and to new sites.

Given these developments, I propose in this book that WPR offers more than a strategy for policy analysis. I claim that it involves a way of thinking differently that can fruitfully be applied in diverse settings. To be clear, 'thinking', as used here, refers not to some assumed cognitive capacity but to the operation of WPR as an analytic strategy, a technique for studying, researching and analysing socio-political relations. The new thinking paradigm that it offers displaces concepts foundational to much Western philosophy and

social theory – specifically the concepts of 'problem' and 'solution', and their pairing as 'problem solving'. This problem-solving motif is described in the next section, with subsequent sections elaborating what WPR does differently and the purposes it serves.

The prevalence of problem-solving

To better grasp the need for a challenge to problem-solving as a way of thinking, it is important to recognise its commonness and pervasiveness. We all talk about 'solving problems'. It has become taken for granted as our starting point for *everything* – from working on ourselves, to our relationships, to our politics.

The ubiquity of problem-solving as a way of thinking produces what I call 'problem-solving knowledge' (Bacchi 2020). Knowledge in this usage is adapted from Foucault. It refers to what is 'in the true', not to 'truth' as transcendental (Foucault 1981, p. 61).

Problem-solving knowledge is created as truth. It operates across three interconnected domains: the domain of background knowledge (*savoir*); the domain of disciplines (*connaissances*); and the domain of governmental technologies (Bacchi 2020). Background knowledge is everyday knowledge. As noted, we all talk about 'solving problems'. We hear the phrase on numerous occasions in news reports on diverse topics. To draw attention to the wide-ranging usage of 'problem solving' would seem to be both unnecessary and irrelevant, attesting to its acceptance and influence.

Almost every *discipline* couches its activities in terms relating to problem-solving. A brief visit to websites associated with the following fields supports this claim: mathematics, medicine, public policy, social work, environmental studies, practice research, design thinking, computer science, business and management studies, public health, alcohol and other drug policy, law, psychology, criminology, international relations and education, among others. Again, problem-solving is such a taken-for-granted *way of thinking* that questioning its usefulness appears to be wrongheaded.

In relation to governing practices, the full range of interventions, be they policies or policy instruments, presume a problem-*solving* orientation. The goal and purpose of government is described in relation to the need to remedy or correct societal (social, economic, etc.) problems. It is possible to see this motif of rule operating in specific governing mechanisms, such as censuses, league tables, performance data and case management, and the vast array of programs and policies that shape the conduct of individuals and groups.

For example, the OECD describes problem-solving as both a method – a scientific problem-solving method – and as a cognitive ability. Problem-solving is designated a '21st-century skill' or 'competency' – the type of 'skill' that is increasingly required by employers given the shift from routine (read

automated) to non-routine tasks (OECD 2014, pp. 13, 26, 73). To fulfil this market need, 'subjects' are required to become adaptable and creative. This 'turn to cognition' divides 'citizens' into those who either can or cannot solve 'problems', producing 'more productive' and 'less productive' categories of people. Influential programs such as the OECD's international 'skills'-testing programs, PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) and PIAAC (Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies), endorse and promote 'problem-solving skills' (OECD 2014).

It is important to acknowledge that, within this widespread endorsement, 'problem solving' is not a univocal concept. In education, intense contestation has taken place historically between a student-'friendly' (or child-'friendly') configuration and a more technocratic, top-down version, which depends on 'expert' management. It is the latter that currently dominates the intellectual and policy landscape and that provides the primary focus of our concern (Bacchi 2020).

The technocratic (or expert-led) model of problem-solving (see Glossary) displays an infatuation with science and the experimental method. It incorporates a standard sequence of steps: observation, hypothesis formation, experimentation and analysing results. This scientific method is associated with the physical sciences in the first instance, with the human sciences 'trying hurriedly to bring their methodologies up to' their 'high standards' (Howard 2003, p. 70). Researchers rush to establish their legitimacy 'under the banner of objective science' (p. 70).

In a problem-solving motif, problems are taken as given and closed to contention. Some reformers make children's participation a core element of problem-solving (Richardson, Henriksen & Mishra 2017; Zhao 2017). However, so long as students are expected to memorise and apply an established and generally accepted scientific problem-solving method to 'given' problems, students are constituted as passive. As Popkewitz (2004, p. 25) argues, 'the problem-solving strategies taught in school subjects may actually reduce the spaces that are open for participation and action because scientific expertise is viewed as constituting social realities for children to work on'.

There are continuing efforts to question the authority of the problem-solving paradigm. Some theorists raise serious questions about the implications of a problem-solving paradigm for the human condition. Stanley Cavell (1990, 1998), for example, argues that the emphasis on *solving* problems produces a focus on amelioration, leaving insufficient space for dissensus. His target is Dewey-influenced pragmatism (Chapters 2 and 3). For Cavell, the 'sense of the riven', with 'mourning', 'suffering', 'patience' and 'passion' as representative elements of human experience, is missing in Dewey's 'ameliorative response to the tragic' (Cavell in Saito & Standish 2009, p. 162): 'I don't believe that human existence is just one damn problem

after another. … "Yes, I have a problem: I'm going to die, so let's solve that for me!"'(Cavell in Richardson 2011).

Interpretivists (Chapter 15) also challenge technocratic problem-solving (see Glossary). For example, the contributors to a collection edited by Cruickshank and Sassower (2017) investigate competing framings of 'problems' and promote a dialogue-based, deliberative vision of democracy. However, in most accounts there is a tendency to conceptualise problems as (simply) things that exist, limiting the space for contestation.

As a form of poststructuralist critical analysis, WPR offers a new way of thinking that challenges the assumed givenness of 'problems' in problem-solving accounts. It makes the case that treating 'problems' as self-evident referents is deeply depoliticising since it ignores the full range of factors that govern and control lives. By contrast, it introduces a problem-*questioning* orientation, asking how 'things' are produced as problems. Governing, in this account, takes place through *problematisations* – the shaping of 'problems' as particular sorts of problem – as explained below. Through this new thinking paradigm, researchers are encouraged to reflect on how problem-solving approaches have come to be taken for granted as 'truth' and on how they operate both to limit political debate and to regulate political 'subjects'.

Countering a problem-solving paradigm

A good deal of the distinction between problem-solving and WPR as divergent ways of thinking hinges on the term 'problem'. In a problem-solving mindset, problems are taken for granted as starting points for an analysis. There might be some attempts to gather together actors involved in the problem-solving exercise to get them to come to some shared perspective on 'the problem'. However, 'the problem' continues to operate as an assumed entity. By way of contrast, in WPR, there are no 'problems' per se. Rather 'problems' are created as particular sorts of problem through the proposals that are meant to 'solve' them. This argument is central to what follows, so it requires some elaboration.

A WPR analytic strategy adopts this key premise: *what we propose to do about something indicates what we believe needs to change and hence what is deemed to be problematic ('the problem')*. The argument here is that 'problems' are produced as particular sorts of problem through recommendations (proposals) for change. There are no 'problems' outside of these recommendations, as illustrated in the following examples.

In the policy domain, if there is a recommendation/proposal to offer women training programs to increase their representation in positions of influence, the 'problem' is represented to be women's *lack* of training. As another example, if a policy recommends/proposes introducing an activity regime to counter the 'problem' of 'childhood obesity', the 'problem' is represented

to be children's *lack* of activity. By contrast, if there is a recommendation/proposal to impose limits on fast-food advertising during children's prime time TV viewing, the 'problem' is represented to be something quite different, something to do with advertising standards.

My suggestion in this book is that we need to transpose this alternative way of thinking, which in effect displaces the priority assigned to 'problems' in everyday parlance, beyond the specific domain of policy studies to the vast array of measures, programs and knowledges that shape lives. Approaching these measures, programs and knowledges as proposals or guides to conduct allows us to probe how they represent the 'problems' they purport to address. In this new thinking paradigm, targets for critical analysis expand exponentially to include a wide variety of objects and governmental technologies, conceived as problematisations.

For example, buildings can be treated as recommendations/proposals for change. A specific building, such as a school or a House of Parliament, proposes to organise things in particular ways, ways that constitute 'the problem' – that is, the 'thing' considered to be in need of reorganisation and management. Hence, we can approach buildings as problematisations and subject them to a WPR analysis. Other examples of the widening scope for application of WPR are offered in Chapter 2.

In this analytic strategy there are no 'problems' outside the ways in which they are constituted in recommendations/proposals. When approaching anything deemed to be 'a problem', it becomes necessary, therefore, to look to what is put forward (proposed) as a 'solution' (recommendation) and to 'work backwards' to identify how the 'problem' is constituted/represented within those proposals. 'Problems' are displaced, and the focus of analysis turns to how 'things' are problematised – how they are produced as problematisations or problematised objects. In WPR these problematised objects are described as 'problem representations' (see Glossary), deemed to be implicit within the proposed 'solution/s'.

The language of representation in the WPR approach can be misunderstood. It can be interpreted to mean that we have entered the realm of conjecture and happenstance, where the task is to sort out competing *views* of a 'problem that exists'. However, in WPR, to talk about how a 'problem' is *represented* is to talk about how it is *constituted* or *produced*, how it is *created* or *enacted* as a particular sort of problem, not how different people think about or interpret 'it'.

This point is easiest to grasp if we think about the example of training programs for women, referred to above. 'Lack of training' *becomes* the 'problem', with a range of effects, described as discursive, subjectification, objectification and lived effects (Chapter 1). The programs establish what is considered relevant to increasing women's representation in positions of influence (discursive effects). They further produce 'women' as needing training

(subjectification effects). They enact assumed 'skills' as objects (objectification effects). And they impact on the lives of women specifically through the requirement to undertake training (lived effects). In short, lives are lived in specific ways because they are shaped by proposals that create particular representations of 'problems' (Bacchi 2012, p. 22).

It follows that policies and other proposals do not *imagine* 'problems' as particular sorts of problems. They *make them such*, and in so doing they shape the parameters of lives. To use other words, governing takes place *through* 'problem representations'. This theoretical position reflects a performative influence. It is important to explore where this influence comes from and how it affects WPR, a topic introduced in the next section.

WPR: recent developments

I mentioned above that the WPR approach is a work in progress and that it has changed over time. The shape of these changes deserves attention since they reflect how contemporary theoretical developments filter through and influence researchers. No theoretical stance should be expected to remain static. This situation clearly creates difficulties if readers are unable to follow the trajectory over time of a particular theoretical approach, such as WPR. This section addresses this need.

In *Women, Policy and Politics* (Bacchi 1999), I describe a five-stage method of analysis as a 'What's the problem?' approach. With assistance and prompting from colleagues and researchers, I began to see how readers (mis)interpreted this question to mean an imperative to search for the 'real' problem. There are places in *Women, Policy and Politics* where I produce the more complete question 'What's the problem represented to be?', leading to the realisation that there was a need to capture this thinking in some shorthand form. My friend and colleague Angie Bletsas suggested WPR and we haven't looked back since.

There was more than a name change involved in the development of the next published version of WPR in *Analysing Policy: What's the problem represented to be?* (Bacchi 2009). At a 2007 conference at Monash University, Mitchell Dean kindly pointed to the absence of genealogy in the initial formulation of the approach. Questions 3 and 6 were added to bring attention to the practices involved in producing *problem representations* (see Box 1.1).

The WPR approach has also undergone a theoretical shift from social constructionism to performativity (Chapter 14; see Glossary). In the 1999 book I talk about WPR as a study of competing *interpretations* of 'problems', a perspective supported in the use of the term 'construction' in the sub-title 'the *construction* of policy problems' (Bacchi 1999, p. 2). The adoption of this term reflects my reliance at that time on social construction theorists, such as Edelman (1988) and Gusfield (1989).

By 2009 my emphasis had shifted to the problematisations *in* policies, the shape and character of 'problems' *within* policies (Bacchi 2009, pp. x, xviii). Instead of approaching representations of 'problems' as competing *interpretations*, they are treated as *governing practices*. Problem representations, in this account, are not *perceptions* but *performatives* or, more precisely, *enactments* (Woolgar & Lezaun 2013, p. 323). Through their proposals, policies and other practices actively *shape* 'problems' and hence alter the existing order to a certain extent. We saw this effect demonstrated in the example of training courses for women (above). The analytic tasks become identifying the shapes imposed on 'problems', where these come from and how they affect lives and worlds.

This shift in focus from social constructionism (competing interpretations of problems) to performativity (the production of 'problems') reflects my engagement with the growing body of governmentality literature and a poststructuralist perspective (Chapter 7). The emphasis in governmentality literature (Rose & Miller 1992) on problematisations establishes a clear link with a WPR mode of analysis. Osborne's (1997, p. 174) argument that 'policy cannot get to work without first problematizing its territory' indicates the need to shift one's analytic focus from assumed 'problems' to problematisations.

Importantly, both in Foucault and in contemporary social theory, the term 'problematisation' assumes two distinct meanings. A first meaning describes problematisation as a form of critical analysis, which Foucault (1977, p. 186) calls 'thinking problematically' (Chapter 2). A second meaning highlights how things are produced as 'problems', 'the forms [of problematization] themselves', their 'formation out of the practices' and their 'modifications' (Foucault 1986, p. 12). To study problematisations ('the forms themselves') Foucault advances two critical approaches: archaeology and genealogy (see Glossary).

As an analytic strategy WPR engages both meanings of problematisation. It offers a way to *problematise* (as a form of critical analysis) the *problematisations* ('the forms themselves') produced in proposals for change. The term *problem representations* is introduced to describe the 'forms of problematisation themselves' (how 'things' are produced as 'problems'), in order to keep these two uses of problematisation clear and distinct. Following Foucault, Question 2 in WPR brings an archaeological focus to the analysis while Question 3 engages a genealogical perspective (see Box 1.1).

The challenge in WPR to 'problems that exist' relies on a poststructuralist rejection of the simple existence of purportedly stable things or essences. As Chia (1996, p. 31) describes, 'the processural becoming of things is given a fundamental role in the explanatory schema'. Attention is directed to the practices and processes involved in a 'thing's' emergence. In this understanding we are operating within an ontology of *becoming* rather than an ontology of *being* (see Glossary). An ontology of becoming can be described as a

relational ontology in which 'all phenomena are co-constituted in their particular assemblings' (Farrugia 2016, p. 40). Since 'things' are not natural or universal (Chapter 13), since they are made to be, they involve politics.

The primacy of politics, in poststructuralism (see Glossary), involves a capacious understanding of the heterogeneous strategic relations that shape who we are and how we live (Bacchi 2012, p. 1). In this account, power relations have a directly *productive* role. They are the relations that produce 'things'. There is no suggestion of conspiracy in this making of 'reality'; nor is there talk of 'vested interests'. Instead of seeking out intentional manipulation of 'problems' and 'solutions', the focus shifts from policy actors and their motivations to governmental technologies and their assumed knowledges. Foucault (1979, p. 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, p. 12), you can 'lessen the grip of their present facticity' and imagine the world otherwise. Instead of taking the 'real' for granted as how things must be, the analytic task becomes *exposing* the means of its production, making it possible to question its authority and influence (Chapter 15). Going further, the plurality of factors at work produces multiple realities (Mol 2002), impelling us to ask how some realities become 'the real' and how they come to appear so natural (Rose 2000, p. 58). In this account the 'real' becomes a political creation, a product of 'ontological politics' (Mol 1999).

A WPR analytic strategy questions 'problems' as assumed *real* 'things' and directs attention to their production as 'problems' of particular kinds. This book recommends applying this logic to a range of 'overarching conditions' that are assumed to drive social change, including 'indeterminate situations', 'difficulties', 'controversies', 'issues' and 'matters of concern'. As with 'problems', WPR poses a challenge to these *reactive* modes of social explanation that presume ready access to unspecified clusters of 'disturbing' conditions. In each case WPR thinking starts from proposals or proposed solutions and interrogates how the assumed 'difficulty' ('issue', 'matter of concern', etc.) is produced as of a particular kind. The landscape of critical analysis is vastly broadened in this new thinking paradigm, as this book illustrates.

Part I of the book introduces the new way of thinking invoked in WPR. Chapter 1 elaborates the seven forms of questioning and analysis that comprise a WPR analytic strategy and the premises upon which they rely. Chapter 2 canvasses the range of research areas and materials that can be analysed through applying a WPR lens. Chapter 3 locates WPR within the extensive literature on problematisation and problem posing to clarify its rationale.

Part II of the book develops the theoretical concepts that underpin WPR thinking. It guides readers through the backgrounds and debates surrounding

these concepts. Chapter 4 examines conceptualisations of 'the subject'. Chapter 5 elaborates the meaning of 'practices' in WPR. Chapter 6 introduces the concept of 'self'-problematisation. Chapter 7 explains the usefulness of adopting a governmentality perspective. Chapter 8 highlights the role of a 'genealogical sensibility' in WPR analyses. Chapter 9 considers the place of 'resistance' in WPR, with particular attention to 'counter-conducts' and 'subjugated knowledges'.

Part III targets five theoretical traditions – feminisms (Chapter 10), a 'differencing practices' approach, including racialising, colonising, disabling, heteronorming, classing and caste-ing practices (Chapter 11), the new materialisms (Chapter 12), ideology critique (Chapter 13) and performativity (Chapter 14). It considers how WPR engages with these traditions, examining productive exchanges and possible tensions.

Part IV of the book considers the possibilities and challenges of 'mixing' or 'blending' the WPR approach and its questions with other theoretical approaches. Key paradigmatic distinctions between WPR and critical realism, and between WPR and critical discourse analysis, are highlighted (Chapters 15 and 16). Chapter 17 looks at the question of how those who adopt a WPR approach could engage with 'data'. Chapter 18 brings this same question to ethnographic research methods and materials.

Part V uses the COVID-19 pandemic to illustrate the kinds of insights that can be generated through a WPR form of analysis. Chapter 19 examines 'experimenting' as a governmental rationality. Chapter 20 compares approaches to using WPR. Chapter 21 applies WPR to the concepts of 'risk', 'crisis' and 'uncertainty'. Chapter 22 brings WPR thinking to death certificates as governmental technologies/mechanisms.

The Conclusion reflects on the political implications of adopting a WPR way of thinking. Many researchers will doubtless be concerned at what may be lost through abandoning 'problems'. These concerns are addressed alongside reflections on what is gained through putting 'problems' into question. While there is widespread agreement that problem-solving is a limited analytic framework with deleterious consequences, there is a desperate need for an alternative way of thinking. WPR offers such an alternative.

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