

**Book review**

**Analysing policy:  
What's the problem represented to be?**

Carol Bacchi, 2014. Frenchs Forrest: Pearson, Australia. 297 pp.,  
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Carol Bacchi is a Professor Emerita of Politics at the University of Adelaide. She researches and writes primarily in feminist political theory, policy theory, mobility studies and citizenship. She has numerous publications, including, and further to the publication under review, *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice*, co-authored with Susan Goodwin; published in 2016 by Palgrave Macmillan, New York. I would also commend this publication to readers.

Bacchi is clear in her reason for the book and in offering what she describes as an “unconventional” methodology for analysing policy to understand the ‘meaning-making’ of policy formation (p.vi). Her methodology shifts the focus from ‘*problem*’ solving to ‘*problem*’ *questioning*’ (p.vii, emphasis in original). This is clear in the Preface and reiterated in the Conclusion:

*... to contribute to an understanding of how we are governed, of how governing takes place. To this end [the book] has two-interrelated objectives:*

- to introduce a methodology for analysing policy (a WPR approach);*
- to challenge the problem-solving paradigm that dominates the current intellectual and policy landscape, most clearly in Western industrialised nations and in the international organisations that are their offspring, e.g., the IMF and the World Bank (p.262).*

This book is designed to introduce the methodology called ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’, abbreviated to WPR approach; however, not to be understood without the last two words – ‘to be’. It is a substantial “how-to guide” to applying the WPR approach to analysing policy. In addition to the Introduction and Conclusion, the book has 10 chapters.

Chapter 1 introduces the WPR approach. Chapter 2 proposes a “rethinking” of the theory and politics of policy analysis. Chapters 3 to 10 focus on different areas of policy and how the WPR approach applies. Readers are invited to apply the WPR approach to their own areas of policy interest and analysis. The chapters include a set of questions to deepen and advance thinking and analysis of issues or policy areas, and Bacchi provides an extensive list of references for readers to continue perusing.

The Introduction spans 14 pages. To begin, Bacchi refers to other authors to identify the contexts – ‘historical and national or international’ – in which policy development occurs and argues that policy is ‘a cultural product’ (p.ix). She provides a detailed discussion of the definition of policy, the purpose of policy-making, and she asserts that ‘Policies give shape to ‘problems’; they do not address them’ (p.x, emphasis in original). The remainder of the Introduction centres on the concept of problematisation as a foundation to the WPR approach.

Chapter 1 takes the reader through each of the six questions integral to the WPR approach. The questions are:

1. What's the 'problem' (e.g. of 'problem gamblers', 'drug use/abuse', domestic violence, global warming, health inequalities, terrorism, etc) represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie 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 could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced? (p.2)

Bacchi explains with clarity the goal, purpose and objectives of each of the six questions, and an overview of the application of each question to real (relevant to the time of publication) policy areas, e.g., childcare, access to reproductive technologies, bikie gangs, binge drinking, among others. The chapter ends with an invitation to the reader to apply the questions to their own problem representation. In addition to a summary of the chapter is a set of practical guidelines focused on text selection, complexity, context and nesting.

Chapter 2 is important. It focuses on three propositions that promote a "rethink" of policy analysis. The poststructural theoretical underpinnings of the WPR approach are elucidated by Bacchi through discussions of governmentality, power, subjectivity and reflexivity.

As noted previously, chapters 3 to 10 involve the application of the WPR approach to various policy contexts and topics. Chapter 3 centres on Welfare, 'youth' and unemployment. Chapter 4 explores Drugs/ alcohol and gambling policy. Crime and justice are the focus of Chapter 5. Health, wellbeing and the social determinants of health feature in Chapter 6. Population, immigration, and citizenship are the focus of Chapter 7. Chapter 8 centres on anti-discrimination. Education: HECS and lifelong learning are explored in Chapter 9, and the last chapter centres on knowledge production, media and research policy.

Bacchi's book is substantial in content and purpose. It underlines the need for critical investigation of policy culture and contexts alongside/within research projects. The mix of contexts and topics used throughout the book, along with the theoretical concepts to reflect on, establishes a basis upon which to learn Bacchi's 'what's the problem represented to be?' (WPR) approach to policy analysis. It is suitable for students, researchers, and practitioners interested in the policy culture and context of their research and practice, and to '*put 'problems' into question*', rather than to '*solve 'problems'*' (p.271, emphasis in original).