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A critical explanation of uses of Carol Bacchi's WPR approach

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we build on the focus of our edited collection to consider what the WPR approach brings to the analytic field, in contrast to other critical takes on policy analysis. How does its particular epistemological and methodological perspective illuminate policy and governance in a critical manner beyond somewhat narrower, descriptive interrogations? What are the potential extensions and elaborations of the approach? Our ambition is to discuss what we regard as the characteristics of the WPR approach in relation to other ways of doing critical policy studies – its affordances but also any drawbacks, as well as to consider the potential for the approach in the future. Our discussion is informed both by our shared feminist position and by our locations within post-structuralism, where Malin is a longstanding WPR researcher, while Rosalind is drawn more toward the end of the spectrum of post-structuralism that builds links with structuralism and constructivism.

KEYWORDS

WPR; post-structuralist; epistemology; methodology

Introduction

How is the WPR approach (or ‘What is the problem represented to be?’, to give it its full title) situated within critical policy studies? This has generally become a pertinent question for critical policy studies. In this field, critical policy studies challenge traditional rationalist interpretations of policy and governance that address taken-for-granted politically and administratively troublesome situations. Instead, the field adopts an illuminating analytic focus on power and discourse. The Foucauldian-inspired WPR approach was first introduced in Bacchi (1999) book *Women, Policy and Politics* as a series of six-question pathways guiding the analysis of policy to illuminate and examine how policy problematics are constructed and represented (later adding a further, seventh question). It is not our intention to describe the method here; for an accessible and coherent presentation of the approach, please turn to Carol Bacchi's homepage: <https://carolbacchi.com>. Rather, we are concerned in this paper with providing an informative viewpoint for those researchers who are adopting the analytic method for critical policy studies. We urge movement away from WPR as a formula.

Since the early 2000s, the WPR approach has increasingly become a major methodological feature of critical policy research, with the method garnering around 19,000 citations, half of them since 2020. Narrowing the scope to this journal, at the time of writing a simple search on the website of Critical Policy Studies, entering ‘WPR’ or ‘Bacchi’ in the search field, receives 58 hits since 2007, more than half of them published since 2020. Although a quick search like this of course could include articles that just mention the approach without actually using it, among the 10 most read articles we find discussion pieces that compare different forms of critical policy analysis. In this vein, the most read as well as the most cited is Fairclough's (2013) (vol.7, issue 2). We also find applications of this approach per se, such as an article by Pham and Davies from 2025 asking what problems EU policy on AI are supposed to solve. Browsing through the abstracts of the 58 articles, we also notice several contributions that are in some way inspired by the WPR approach, although not fully employing it, something we will come back to later. There also seems to be an ongoing interest among scholars publishing in CPS in relating the WPR approach to other ways of doing critical policy analysis, not least frame analysis (see, for example, van Hulst et al. 2024; Walsh 2024).

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How the WPR approach is situated within critical policy studies also becomes a germane issue for us as critical policy researchers more specifically as we finalized the edited collection *Innovations in Critical Policy Analysis: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* (Rönnblom and Edwards 2026). In this volume, together with other scholars using the WPR approach, we elaborate on the potential to expand and extend WPR as an established methodology for post-structural analysis. In this short paper, we take the focus of our edited collection in a different direction, specifically to consider what the WPR approach brings to the analytic field, in contrast to other critical takes on policy analysis. Here, we ask the question: how does WPR's particular epistemological and methodological perspective illuminate policy and governance in a critical manner beyond somewhat narrower, descriptive interrogations? We also consider: what are the potential extensions and elaborations of the approach? Our ambition is to discuss what we regard as the characteristics of the WPR approach in relation to other ways of doing critical policy studies – its affordances but also any drawbacks, as well as to consider the potential for the approach in the future. Our discussion is informed both by our shared feminist position and by the debates engendered by our distinct locations within post-structuralism, where Malin is a longstanding and skilled WPR researcher, while Rosalind is drawn more toward the end of the spectrum of post-structuralism that builds links with structuralism and constructivism. We elaborate on the spectrum below.

What does the WPR approach bring to the post-structuralist field?

The WPR approach sits beside a range of post-structuralist ways of analyzing how power plays out in society, from different forms of discourse analysis to constructivist and interpretative modes of analysis, as well as assemblage analysis and governmentality studies. These various post-structuralist approaches each rely on different theoretical conceptualizations of power, as well as present a range of 'analytical tools' to put to work in analyzing empirical phenomena. Nonetheless, as a core, they are bound together by their ontological and epistemological positionings in relation to behaviorist and positivist ways of doing research and viewing how the social world works. Instead of providing 'the right solutions' to pre-defined and accepted societal problems, post-structuralist approaches concentrate on providing answers to questions that address how societal problems as well as other phenomena come about, that is, how they come to be identified, explained, and/or understood in the way that they are.

Critical post-structuralist approaches to public policy then share a critique of traditional policy studies as positivistic and limited to the supposedly evident. Critical post-structuralist approaches thus stand in sharp contrast to an empiricist analytic viewpoint where 'the best solution to problems' is regarded as something that can and should be achieved merely through evidence gathering, which in turn is regarded as a sign of good research. Beyond this, however, within the post-structuralist field itself, there are debates about value stances. On one end of the post-structural spectrum of ideas, power is regarded as operating through politically located sets of value understandings and political alternatives, such as feminism and decoloniality (themselves each involving different versions within a shared core). At the other end of the spectrum are post-structuralist analyses that, while they acknowledge power and politics, largely eschew normative responses and specific ideas about alternative political solutions. The WPR approach is located toward this latter end of the field.

A further set of distinctions within this spectrum is related to ontological and epistemological stances, where, e.g. interpretivists have a firmer position on 'the real' as being produced as stable, while, e.g. constructionists emphasize constant contingency. Again, we find that the WPR approach is at the constructionist end, or as Carol Bacchi stated in her blog some years ago: "I linked WPR to *constructionist* premises, emphasizing the role of socio-political processes in shaping forms of knowledge" (Blog post, 26 October 2022). Toward the constructionist end, we may also find some more fine-tuned distinctions, between social constructivism and constructionism. In some versions, there are distinctions between these two closely related epistemologies that provide different positions on 'problems.' Although both may regard problems as produced, some social constructivists may treat this production as ascribed to a subject, sometimes also including the intention of the subject, while a constructionist analysis understands both 'problems' and 'subject' as produced.

By considering what the WPR approach brings to the field of post-structuralist analysis, we argue that there are at least four distinguishing aspects. *Firstly*, as we noted above, the approach stems from an initiated

critique of traditional policy studies – and it also has a specific focus on analyzing policy. The initial part of Bacchi's innovative book consists of a thorough discussion on the assumptions and presuppositions that characterize what could be called traditional policy analysis, not least pointing to how these approaches take policies for granted, as something that exists 'out there.' Against this backdrop, Bacchi introduces her view of policies as produced, showing how policy could be regarded and analyzed as a place where problems are not 'solved' but are constituted. This is a view that is largely shared with other post-structuralist approaches, but where Bacchi's WPR approach is distinguished is in making use of a Foucauldian understanding of power, knowledge, and discourse that moves beyond structure and agency (rather than in their interplay).

This brings us to the *second* aspect that singles out the WPR approach and that is the focus on 'problems.' Although the WPR approach has a focus on discourses that is partly similar to discourse theory, the analysis for the approach revolves around a specific understanding of 'problems.' This is in some contrast to post-structural approaches that start from group interests and the unequal distribution of resources and leverage. It is also distinct from the traditional preoccupation with taking a problem or set of problems for granted, as a situation that exists and is evident in the world outside of policy, and which policy is supposed to solve. Rather, the WPR approach reveals how 'problems' are inherently political and produced within and through policy and also point to problematizations in terms of their power implications and political effects. By introducing the analytical concept 'problem representations,' the analytical thrust of the WPR approach is about analyzing how problems are brought into being and constituted in policy; hence, 'what is the problem represented to be?' Focusing on the solutions in a policy makes it possible to see what are the 'problems' or rather problem representations that are produced and how these have discursive as well as material implications.

At first glance, this move from addressing existing problems to their construction through policy might seem to be a small or easy analytical shift. Our experience of teaching and supervising students including PhDs, as well as reviewing articles, has shown us that this can be a difficult shift, however. Reorienting from regarding problems as palpably evident to a view that addresses problems as produced seems to be easier said than done. Despite stating that an analysis is focusing on finding problem representations, scholars adopting WPR often seem to be looking for articulated problems in the policy. Even with the clear WPR direction of 'reading the policy backwards,' there seems to be some kind of longing to discuss how the 'actual problems' also are articulated. To give a concrete example, while gender equality policies mainly provide solutions that concern 'fixing the women,' articulated 'problems' on the privilege of men could also be seen as 'problem representations' in an analysis.

There might be different reasons underlying why applying the WPR approach is a challenge. One explanation lies with an overly strong focus on the pragmatics of applying the analytical questions that the approach lays out as a method. This focus is at the expense of recognizing and taking into account the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of the approach itself. What is then left aside is that following the WPR approach also means that the production of problems is a production or construction of 'reality.' In other words that WPR carries a non-foundational ontology. A further and related explanation for this phenomenon could be a drive to be 'fair' to the policy, to bring up the 'intentions' of the policy-makers. Again, without taking the ontology of the WPR approach into account, it seems to be easy to 'slip' into an analysis where policy problems 'exist.' Here, we also see ontological and epistemological distinction between social constitutionalism and social constructivism, pointed to earlier as food for thought.

This brings us to the *third* aspect that distinguishes the WPR approach, and maybe what it is most recognized for: the methodological 'tool box' for application. In contrast to most other post-structuralist analytical approaches, the WPR approach introduces a set of analytical steps that are ready to be used (see <https://carolbacchi.com> for the steps involved). Following the questions in analyzing a policy includes focusing on how a specific problem representation came about, as well as the presuppositions and assumptions that come with it. There are questions concerning silences within the policy under scrutiny, as well as on different forms of effects. The approach also includes questions about how the problem representation could be disrupted or challenged. Originally comprising six questions concerning the above issues, the approach now includes a seventh question on the reflexivity of the researcher that has been added, asking the researcher to apply the methodology to their own problem representation.

As others have stated (e.g. Tawell and McCluskey 2022), applying all the analytical questions is a time-consuming and vast endeavor. As Carol Bacchi herself mentions in her FAQ page on her website (<https://>

carolbacchi.com/faq/), using all the questions is not necessarily a requirement. Nonetheless, irrespective of the number of questions applied in a WPR analysis, the questions are still there, which makes the approach stand out in relation to other post-structural analytical approaches. Of course, all approaches carry different kinds of analytical tools, often concepts to be applied in the analysis. For example, versions of critical discourse analysis (CDA) carry a range of analytical concepts, such as ‘empty significant’ and ‘chains of equivalence,’ while frame analysis relies on conceptualizing ‘frames’ as the basic entry point for analytical understanding. For the WPR approach, the analytical questions are the key tool. Clearly, the WPR question set makes the approach appear very accessible, given that analytical questions are an integral and central part of all research endeavors. Being user-friendly is of course a great strength but also partly explains the difficulties in using the approach, as we just mentioned. In the case of all methodological recipes, it may well be easier to leave aside or forget the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of the undertaking when you are able to turn to a set of analytical questions. Some familiarization with the underlying epistemology and how we can understand how the social world works surely needs to be in place in using the WPR questions as a means of analysis if the process is to avoid falling into the comfortable trap of understanding problems as being evidently ‘out there.’

As we indicated earlier in our discussion about a post-structuralist spectrum, there is also a *fourth* aspect that could be seen as a characteristic of the WPR approach, and that is the refusal of any normative or political position. This provides some contrast to normative post-structural analysis such as discourse theory with a post-Marxist legacy (Laclau and Mouffe) or interpretative analysis that also takes the intentions of subjects into account in the analysis, as well as includes suggestions for political change (c.f. Frank Fisher), or relational approaches concerned with power dynamics and class interests (e.g. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). The WPR approach does not include any normative suggestions for political change and avoids assumptions of intentionality. Instead, it provides fine-tuned tools for analytical reflexivity, including the need for scholars to reflect on their own positions and what they (we) take for granted. Yet we nonetheless acknowledge that while reflexivity chimes strongly with, e.g. a feminist position, the WPR approach does seem to be in some tension with the intellectual, political, and personal normative concerns of feminism. A difficult circle to square!

Taken together, we believe that there are some distinctive characteristics that the WPR approach carries in comparison with other post-structuralist approaches, mainly that it is targeting ‘policy’ and ‘problems’ as well as providing a fine-tuned and ontologically grounded methodological tool-box. This does not make the WPR approach ‘better,’ but it does make its affordances distinct. One result of these distinctive features is that the approach is accessible – and likely far more user-friendly and straightforward than other post-structuralist approaches. The WPR approach thus can be misjudged as an ‘easy’ way to do a post-structuralist analysis by following a recipe. Being instructive and transparent is confused with ‘easy,’ that may well be a reason why analyses may be labeled as WPR while in practice they merely are looking for articulated problems in a policy document.¹

Beyond the approach

As the WPR approach has been with us for 25 years now, extensions, alterations, and deliberations have been employed by both Carol Bacchi and many other scholars who have encountered and used this approach. We provide some of them here as indicative examples of creativity with WPR that can be followed up.

One central extension concerns the understanding of policy. As the approach takes ‘text’ as its empirical material, international, national, and local government policy documents have been regarded as the most self-evident material to analyze. Yet because the approach also points to the analysis of solutions that are put forward in policy, space is also opened up for other forms of data where solutions are presented. One of these other forms of material is interviews. For example, the book *Poststructural Policy Analysis: A Guide to Practice* (Bacchi and Goodwin 2016) introduces interviews as a strategy to collect data for a WPR analysis, also pointing to the need for reflexivity in relation to the interview situation (akin to the radical critique of interviews, e.g. Whitaker and Atkinson 2019). In our own edited collection, chapters identify technologies, notably artificial intelligence systems and crank radio, as solutions amenable to the WPR approach (respectively, Edwards and Ugwudike, and Rahm and Behrendtz, both 2026). Such breaking out of the

confines of a more traditional understanding of what policy ‘is’ also aligns with the analytical focus of the WPR approach – how solutions constitute problems – and not that specific policy documents in themselves should or must be in focus of the analysis.

Moving on to alterations to or extensions of the WPR approach, the most obvious one is how scholars use and combine different analytical questions in relation to specific research questions. For example, a central focus on the effects of a certain policy activates the first question about What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy or policy proposal? in relation to the set of questions in question four concerning What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently? Researchers may, as we noted above, not utilize all the WPR question steps depending on the topic under scrutiny – and not because it is time-consuming. An example from our edited collection is Malin’s chapter on applying the WPR approach to open up critical space for practitioners working in gender equality, adding an extra question to address strategies for change (Rönblom 2026). There are additional examples of scholars who suggest new questions are added to the original set. Tomas Mitander and Andreas Öjehag (2026) propose the inclusion of a new analytical question in order to explicitly integrate spatial power relations into the approach, through inserting a new question: ‘What spaces and spatial relations are assumed and produced as part of the problem representation?’ Another example is Amelia Odida’s (2026) deliberation on the approach for the purpose of decolonizing. Odida articulates and integrates a postcolonial perspective into the WPR approach through two of the standard WPR analytic questions asking whether the problem can be thought of differently, how has it been and/or can it be disrupted and replaced. Other adaptations are the use of WPR as an orienting tool rather than a step-by-step approach (Edwards and Ugwudike 2026; see also Edwards, Gillies, and Gorin 2022) and as pointing to reflexive collaborations (Dahl 2026). There are also scholars who elaborate on specific questions in the WPR approach; one such example Ostling’s (2025) exploration of the construction of subject positions in a way that supplements the subjectification effects in question five of the approach about the effects that are produced by the presentation of the problem.

Odida’s proposal also points to other examples of alterations, or maybe deliberations, of WPR analysis that relate to an ambition of bringing in more normative dimensions in the applications of the approach, a topic we will come back to in our final section. Here, the work of Catherine Street et al. (2022) is also an example of a similar attempt. Through a combination of several critical approaches – QuantCrit theory (a combination of critical race studies and quantitative analysis), indigenous standpoint theory and the WPR approach – the authors aim both to analyze policy as produced at the same time as opening up for indigenous standpoints to influence policy. What can be concluded though is that the WPR approach opens up an intellectual space that is vibrant with the potential of ‘thinking with’ in order to develop different aspects of post-structuralist analysis. This seems to provide space both for combinations with other theoretical or methodological frameworks, and for inserting a specific analytical focus or adding an emphasis on a certain dimension of power.

Looking to the future

Researchers are applying the WPR approach to consider the constitution of policies through policy solutions in an increasingly hyper-neoliberalized or illiberalized political context, where authoritarian nationalism and the interests of oligarchs are influential. What does this mean for the future of this particular analytic approach and for post-structuralism generally? The need for critical policy studies to challenge evidence based on empiricist ideas about what constitutes objective and ‘correct’ knowledge seems even more pressing. An important part of this push back involves revealing the normative assumptions of the problematic put forward by those in power, and providing (an)other perspective that reveals that. We need the WPR approach to demonstrate how the proposed policy problems, and thus the evidence collected about them traditionally, are constructed. We also need a post-structuralism that highlights how both the policy solutions and their underpinning evidence reproduce the racialized, classed, gendered, etc., inequalities in society, and in doing so reinforce them.

In the hyper-neoliberalized academy located in an illiberal context, it will be crucially important to advocate for collective efforts to protect and develop critical research as such scholarship comes under threat in the current political climate. Now more than ever, scholars need to put forward the usefulness of post-structuralist

analysis and to advocate for the critical scrutiny of prevailing (and increasing) societal power relations. A struggle over what we know and how we know it is at the core of increasing polarizations within and between countries. Social researchers and universities are drawn into neoliberal forms of governing with an ongoing down-playing, even penalizing, of both academic knowledge and critical journalism (Komljenovic et al. 2024). Governments, notably in the United States and New Zealand are now explicitly ensuring that social inequalities and injustices are not a feature of investigation in the academy (e.g. Universities News Zealand 2024). Indeed, funding for research is increasingly tied into providing useful facts for government, such as through research funding calls and an impact agenda that serve immediate government agendas. In trying to answer these attacks on critical thinking, evidence-based knowledge is often put forward as the best argument. This idea of ‘corrective’ empirical knowledge that will provide the incontrovertible bald facts has the drawbacks we have been discussing above, only able to reproduce governing interests in its agenda. Rather, could it be the case that the WPR approach specifically and post-structuralist research more broadly have a larger role to play in securing knowledge as a central ingredient of democracy?² It is an issue we put before scholars in the critical policy studies field – to consider how the substantial but fine-tuned analysis of power relations that post-structuralist thinking brings might contribute to safeguarding knowledge and thus a democratic society.

Notes

1. We are not pursuing a ‘name-and-shame’ with examples here since that seems both a deeply un-feminist and un-WPR act.
2. See also earlier discussions in this journal on the relationship between critical policy studies and the safeguarding of democracy (c.f., de Freitas Boullosa, Paul and Smith-Carrier 2023; Doge, Elgert and Paul 2022).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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