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ROUNDTABLE

Interrogating problem representation – are we solving the right problems?



What happens when a program appears to work, but the change we hoped for doesn't follow? This roundtable asks whether evaluators should look beyond program performance to question how the problem itself has been understood — and what we should do if we do.

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My approach

- I'm approaching this as a practitioner.
- Over the last few years, working across evaluation and international development, I've found myself repeatedly coming back to a problem I haven't been able to resolve.
- We can evaluate whether a program has achieved what it set out to achieve. But **what happens when we begin to question the way the problem that gave rise to the program was represented in the first place?**
- I don't have an answer to that. And given the expertise in this room, that's what I'd like us to explore together.
- Full disclosure, it’s a topic I’m interested in exploring in a PhD!



What we'll do together

Start with experience
When have we seen programs succeed on their own terms but struggle to produce meaningful or sustained change?

Interrogate the problem
What happens when we look upstream and question how the problem itself was represented?

Try a different lens
I'll briefly introduce WPR and why I've found it useful.

Explore the dilemma
If an evaluator questions the problem representation, what should they do with that?

See where we land
Where might this inquiry belong in evaluative practice, what are its limits, and where do we disagree?

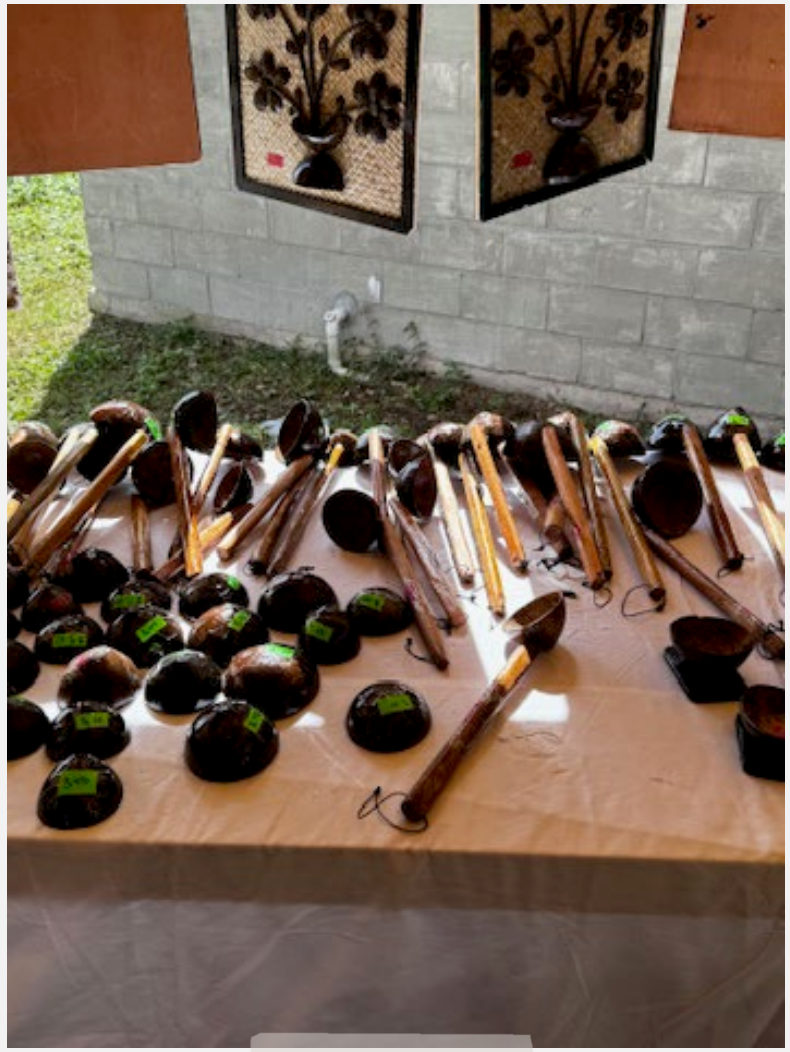
Where this question came from

- Rural Training Centre, Fiji — Single Women's Course
- **The program** A six-month semi-residential course supporting young indigenous (iTaukei) women through personal development, practical skills, agriculture and preparation for their future lives.
- **What the evaluation revealed.** The course was valued and participants were learning — but some of the changes staff hoped would follow after participants returned home were not happening as expected.
- **The initial question.** Why wasn't the program producing the change we anticipated?



- *“What if the issue wasn’t simply the program — but how we had understood the problem it was responding to?”*





Think of a program you know……that did not produce the meaningful or sustained change people expected.

- What was the program trying to change?
- Why did people think it hadn't worked as expected?
- Where did you look for the explanation?

Where did we look for explanations of why the program didn’t produce lasting (or any) change?

- implementation,
- participation,
- context,
- resources,
- assumptions,
- program design,
- external factors, etc.



A well-intentioned cycle that can confirm what it already assumes

Programs often follow a logical and participatory design process. But once a problem representation is established, evidence and learning tend to operate within that frame, rather than questioning it.

The program design and learning cycle

A logical process that can reinforce the initial problem representation

1 Problem definition
"Women lack the skills needed to establish microenterprises."

2 Design
Develop activities, outputs and outcomes to address the problem.

3 Implement
Deliver training, mentoring, equipment etc.

4 Monitor and evaluate
Measure progress against stated outcomes (e.g. skills increased, participants completed training).

5 Learn and improve
Use evidence to refine delivery and increase effectiveness.

6 Continue / scale
Demonstrate success and make the case for continued or expanded funding.

Working within an established understanding of the problem

Community consultation, local knowledge and existing literature often inform this process — and that is valuable.

But the questions asked, and the evidence sought, are often aligned with the initial problem representation and may unintentionally overlook alternative explanations.

The wider reality

Many factors influence whether people can achieve their goals

The missing step?
Are we sufficiently examining what actually constrains the change we hope to see?



These factors may enable change, constrain it, or both. They sit largely outside the program's sphere of control, but they are critical to consider.

To create meaningful and sustained change, we need to look beyond an internally coherent program and ask whether we are addressing the constraints that matter most to the people we aim to support.

What's the problem represented to be (WPR)

Carol Bacchi's WPR approach

Programs don't simply respond to problems; they problematize something which they think is causing the issue and attempt to solve that

The solutions they propose also reveal how the problem has been represented or problematized.

Program: Train young people to become more employable

Problem represented: Young people lack the skills or attributes needed for work

WPR prompts us to ask

- What is the problem represented to be?
- What assumptions underpin that representation?
- How did this representation come about?
- What (or whom) has been left unproblematic or silent?
- How could the problem be represented differently?
- What effects does this representation produce?

Introducing Carol Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR)

A way of asking different questions about the problems we seek to solve

"What one proposes to do about something reveals what one thinks is problematic."
— Carol Bacchi

What is WPR?

Carol Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to be? (WPR) is a framework for critically examining how particular situations come to be understood and represented as problems requiring action.

WPR shifts the focus from "Does this intervention work?" to "How did this understanding of the problem come to be, and what else might be possible?"

It is not a step-by-step method, but a set of guiding questions and ways of thinking that can be applied in program design, evaluation and policy analysis.

Different questions.
More meaningful change.

Key WPR questions

Bacchi proposes six guiding questions to examine any problem representation:

1. **What is the problem represented to be?**
   What is said to be the problem?
   What is presented as needing to change?
2. **How did this representation come about?**
   What discourses, evidence, events or interests have shaped this understanding?
3. **Who is involved — and who is not?**
   Who has the authority to define the problem?
   Whose voices and knowledge are missing?
4. **What assumptions underpin it?**
   What is taken for granted?
   What ways of knowing are privileged?
5. **What has been left unproblematic?**
   What is not questioned?
   What other issues might be more important?
6. **How else might the situation be represented?**
   What alternative framings are possible?
   What different responses might they suggest?

Why is it useful for evaluators and program designers?

Broadens our inquiry
Helps us question the starting point of an intervention, not just whether it achieves its stated outcomes.

Brings power into view
Considers whose interests are served, who gets to define the problem, and whose knowledge counts.

Opens up alternatives
Encourages exploration of different ways of understanding the situation and different possible responses.

Complements existing methods
Can be used alongside participatory approaches, data analysis and program logic to provide a deeper level of reflection.

Supports more relevant and ethical action
Helps avoid well-designed programs that address symptoms rather than the constraints that matter most to the people we aim to support.

By asking different questions about how problems are constructed, WPR can help us design and assess interventions that are more relevant, just and effective.

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Look again at your example

What becomes visible if you ask:

“What is the problem represented to be?”
What assumptions does that representation depend upon?
What might it leave unexplored?
Could the problem reasonably be represented another way?

Is it our problem?

- If an evaluator questions the problem representation, what should they do with that?
- Is this a legitimate part of evaluation?
- What if it sits outside the key evaluation questions or Terms of Reference?
- When in the evaluation process could this inquiry happen?
- What responsibility does the evaluator have once they see it?

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