

## Same Problem, Different Policies: A Framework for Examining Social Problem Constructions Over Time

Marietta Anne Barrett

**Abstract:** *Educators teaching policy analysis can choose from many available frameworks, varying in purpose and approach. These frameworks typically advise students to view policies as transient and context-sensitive, but to view the problems activating the policies as objective and static conditions. How problems are variably framed in policy relative to how students are advised to analyze them has not captured the profession's interest. This article presents 1) an overview of policy analysis frameworks; 2) a summary of findings from a recent study investigating how social policy texts advise students to analyze problems and; 3) a social constructionist framework (matrix) that provides an historical and contextual view of social problems and policy responses. This Problem-to-Policy framework corrects the omissions in most frameworks by including the forces that contributed to a problem's discovery and construction, while also identifying periods of silence when the problem endured yet faded from view. The author argues that this framework bolsters policy practice by 1) emphasizing those problem frames and contexts that historically led to progressive policies and 2) underscores the urgency for social workers to engage with affected populations in the initial (re)claiming and (re)framing of problems, rather than during the later policy-making stages when constructions have already presaged policy responses.*

*Keywords:* Social problem analysis; policy analysis; social constructionism

Social work educators faced with the daunting task of teaching policy analysis can choose from many readily available policy analysis frameworks. These frameworks reflect varying purposes and approaches (Popple & Leighninger, 2015), posing a challenge for educators to assess their comparative utility. Although many frameworks advise students to view policies as transient, context-sensitive, and shaped by a multitude of interests, they largely instruct students to view the social problems activating policies as fixed and objective conditions, impervious to political influences and social context (Barretti, 2016). While scholars agree that the first critical step in policy analysis (Pal, 2006) and in most frameworks (Popple & Leighninger, 2015) is defining the problem, how problems are variably framed in policy relative to how students are advised to analyze them in policy analysis frameworks has not captured the interest of social work scholars and educators (Barretti, 2016).

This article presents 1) a descriptive overview of policy analysis frameworks, 2) a summary of findings from a recent study (Barretti, 2016) that investigated how social policy texts advise students to analyze problems in policy analysis frameworks, and 3) an alternative social constructionist framework (or matrix) that provides a historical and contextual view of social problems and strengthens their connection to resultant policies. Developed by the author and taught to successive classes of undergraduate social work policy students for almost two decades, the matrix and broader midterm assignment

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augment current frameworks by providing a longitudinal view of social problems in their respective environments. This approach deviates from the traditional approach of treating problem definitions separately from the policy under analysis, instead examining the problem-to-policy from the vantage point of the period in which it emerged and was consequently framed and addressed. This approach challenges the prevailing view in most policy analysis frameworks that problems are objective, static conditions that should be analyzed using expert, rational methods that isolate and decontextualize them (Barretti, 2016), positing instead that problem-making is as organic, discursive, and contextually messy as policy-making (Chapin, 2014).

Perhaps most critically, when completed, the Problem-to-Policy matrix reveals not only the ideological and contextual forces that contribute to a problem's construction, but also exposes periods of policy silence when the problem objectively endured yet faded from view. It includes the role of claimsmakers (Best, 1995) and social movements (stakeholders that draw attention to and frame the problem), and how policies generate new problem constructions that become the subject of renewed claims (Spector & Kituse, 2001). Finally, the author argues that using a social constructionist perspective in policy analysis bolsters the timing and efficacy of policy practice by 1) emphasizing those problem frames and contexts that historically led to progressive policies; and, 2) underscoring the urgency for social workers to engage with affected populations in the initial (re)claiming and (re)framing of problems, rather than during the later policy-making stages when established constructions have already presaged policy responses. Further, adopting a discursive view of problem construction as a negotiated process empowers affected populations to more fully participate in calling attention to their needs and interests, in their own voice and language.

### **The Social Constructionist Perspective**

Relegating social phenomena to the status of social problems is a complex process with a sturdy social science literature. The traditional rationalist view of social problems suggests that problems are objective social conditions that are found to be harmful to individuals or society and that affect large numbers of people (Blumer, 1971). Alternatively, social constructionism argues that social problems are not conditions or products, but instead interpretive and dynamic processes. Accordingly, social problems are defined as "the activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" (Spector & Kituse, 2001, p. 75), where problems remain inseparable from their constructions (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). This view accounts for the fact that phenomena are not inherently problematic or troublesome, but come to be defined as such through an interactive, discursive process entailing a complex series of activities called *typification*, in which interested individuals and groups, known as *claimsmakers* engage and interact (Best, 1995). Creating an issue, dramatizing it, calling attention to it, and pressuring policymakers to address it are all tactics used by claimsmakers to construct a problem.

As opposed to a rationalist perspective that interrogates the objective aspects of the problem such as its extent and origin and how many people it affects and how, social constructionists ask how and why some conditions obtain the status of a social problem

and others do not, and why a particular problem emerges or reemerges at a particular point and place in time. Constructionists note that what is collectively considered a social problem and what should be done about it shifts over time (Spector & Kituse, 2001) as troubling societal conditions are not always defined as problems and thus never get on the agenda of policymakers. Additionally, social constructionism assumes a continually dynamic social context where perceptions, frames, and explanations of a given social problem change over time (Best, 1995; Conrad & Schneider, 1980) and in turn, trigger varying and oftentimes conflicting policies. For example, Best (1995) makes the case that the problem of “unwed motherhood” may be viewed and constructed as a moral problem, an educational problem, as a young woman’s lost chances, a problem stemming from a patriarchal society, baby as victim, or, in terms of exacting social costs. A scan of the policy history addressing unwed motherhood over time would arguably find policy responses corresponding with many of these varied interpretations.

Sociologists have analyzed various social problems and their policy responses using a social constructionist perspective, integrating the effect of historical, theoretical, and ideological forces on the ways in which social problems are understood and framed. Schneider (1978) and Conrad and Schneider (1980) traced the construction of “drunken excess” as a sin in the Puritan period through the present-day typification of “alcoholism” as a disease. They argued that although the objective nature of drunkenness has not changed much over time; this deviant behavior, once defined as immoral, sinful, and criminal now assumes medical meaning, symbolizing the decline of religious authority and the rise of the therapeutic state. Edelman (1988) too points out that a range of troubling social conditions fail to achieve the status of a social problem or only achieve this status at particular times. “(S)egregated restaurants, hotels, schools and toilets in the South existed for many years without being constituted as social problems” (pp. 13-14). Though not an exhaustive list, a social constructionist analysis has been applied to alcoholism (Levine, 2012; McVinney, 2004; Schneider, 1978), battered women (Davis, 1987), child abuse (Olafson, Corwin, & Summit, 1993; Pfohl, 1977), crime (Rafter, 1990), illness and disability (Brown, 1995; Brzuzy, 1997; Erchak & Rosenfeld, 1989), delinquency (Empey, Hay, & Stafford, 1999), homelessness (Cronley, 2010; Loseke, 1995), and hunger (Poppendeick, 1995). Though the social constructionist view has been embraced by some social work scholars (e.g., Chapin, 2014; Danto, 2008; Dean, 1993; Dybicz, 2011; Laird, 1993; Mildred, 2003; Sahin, 2006; Weick, 1992, 1993) over time, albeit unevenly, in other sectors of the professional curriculum (see Barretti, 2016 for a more in-depth discussion), it has not been vigorously or consistently championed in social policy.

Public policy more readily embraces aspects of social constructionism and boasts an established history in the concept of framing and frame analysis (van Hulst & Yanow, 2016). McBeth, Jones, and Shanahan (2014) identify the social construction of public policy processes as the first core assumption of their *Narrative Policy Framework*, asserting that “socially constructed realities are captured within policy narratives, which are at least partially strategic and/ or rooted in belief systems” (p. 249). Schneider and Ingram (1993) argue that how target populations are socially constructed profoundly influences the “policy agenda, the selection of policy tools as well as the rationales that legitimate policy choices” (p. 334). Schneider, Ingram, and deLeon (2014) further examine

how these constructions “interact with political power resources to create a typology of target populations, and how policymakers respond to these different ‘types’ of target populations in their allocation of benefits and burdens” (p. 109). Pierce et al. (2014) found a significant body of empirical literature incorporating Schneider et al.’s (2014) propositions.

Though Schneider and Ingram’s (1993) work on the social construction of target populations is sporadically cited in social work publications (e.g., Segal, 2013), social work journals were not well-represented in an extensive list of policy areas where Schneider et al.’s (2014) framework was applied in scholarly works from 1993-2013. In a reference list of 5 pages and 103 peer-reviewed publications compiled by Pierce et al. (2014), only one article was cited in a social work journal, *Administration and Social Work* (Hasenfeld, 2010), and two in an allied journal, the *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* (Kissane, 2003; Patterson & Keefe, 2008), despite a comprehensive inclusion of policy areas of interest to social work: children, criminal justice, disability, disasters, drugs, economic reform, education, elderly, environment, health, homelessness, housing, hunger, immigration, mental illness, non-profits, poverty, race, affirmative action, welfare and women (Pierce et al., 2014, pp. 132-136). Judging by the paucity of social work journals represented in the authors’ reference list, social work has not yet extensively applied Schneider et al.’s (2014) social constructionist framework. The exchange between social work and theoretical developments in public policy appears limited (Almog-Bar, Weiss-Gal, & Gal, 2015).

Although this article is concerned with how social problems are constructed over time in policy analysis frameworks, the author qualifies that the construction of social problems cannot be disentangled from (the constructions of) the target populations affected by them. Chapin (2014) alludes to the inability to separate the two when advising students to examine “the definitions of problems that laid the foundation for policy” in order to “uncover the assumptions that were made about the people the policy is designed to serve” (p. 175). A cursory scan of the social work literature over the past several years indicates some initial attention to the significance of problem framing for vulnerable populations including: the “child at risk” in social work reports (Roets, Roose, DeWilde, & Vanobbergen, 2017), child health inequality (Hernandez, Montana, & Clarke, 2010), immigrant communities (Valtonen, 2016), and citizens returning to the community after incarceration (Van Sluytman, Torres, McLeod, & Coleman, 2018).

### **Overview of Policy Analysis Frameworks in Social Work**

Pal (2006) defines policy analysis as “the disciplined application of intellect to the study of collective responses to public problems” (p. 14), and as such, a policy framework typically serves as “one of the major tools used by the policy researcher...a systematic model for examining a specific social welfare policy or a series of policies” while also guiding the analysis and evaluation of policy proposals (Karger & Stoesz, 2014, p. 26). Many policy analysis frameworks exist both within and outside of social work. Despite the fact that policy analysis is one of six major content areas frequently included in social policy-related syllabi in social work (Pawar, 2004), currently, there is no agreement in social work on what a policy analysis framework should accomplish (O’Connor & Netting,

2008) or on a correct (Barusch, 2015) or “best” way to analyze policies (Ginsburg & Miller-Cribs, 2005; Haynes & Mickelson, 2010). Some authors contend that one framework cannot do it all, and a framework should be selected depending on the purpose of the analysis (e.g., Karger & Stoesz, 2014; O’Connor & Netting, 2008) and sometimes, the ideological orientation of the analyst (Barusch, 2015).

Many social work scholars have categorized policy analysis frameworks. Cummins, Byers, and Pedrick (2011, p. 229) reviewed the many policy analysis frameworks in social work and explained that they vary by the depth and breadth of their emphasis on *products* (the policy and its contents that result from the policy process), *processes* (the sociopolitical dynamics of policy formulation), *outcomes* or *performance* (the evaluation of the outcomes of an implemented policy; Gilbert & Terrell, 2005) and; *choices* and *values*. Kanenberg (2013) instead divided them by: the *rational or behavioral approach* (e.g., DiNitto, 2011; Jansson, 2008; Karger & Stoesz, 2006), *incremental policy analysis* (e.g., van Wormer, 2004), *choice analysis* (e.g., Gilbert & Terrell, 2005), *the cause and consequence* approach (e.g., McInnis-Dittrich, 1994), *criteria or value-based* analyses (e.g., Chambers & Wedel, 2005; Gil, 1998) and *feminist policy* analysis (e.g., Hyde, 2000; McPhail, 2003). Additionally, Ginsburg and Miller-Cribbs (2005) divided social work policy analysis frameworks into *descriptive*, *process*, *evaluation*, and *hybrid* models.

Policy analysis frameworks were also categorized on the basis of their conflicting ideological assumptions and worldviews (O’Connor & Netting, 2008). O’Connor and Netting (2008) divided policy analysis frameworks into three categories: *rational*, *interpretive*, and *progressive (radical)*. The authors discovered that the rationalist view espousing that policies should be addressed by predetermined goals is so dominant that the developers of rational frameworks “have little need to explain the position on which the framework is based” (O’Connor & Netting, 2008, p. 169). The rationalist orientation adheres to the view that there is one objective reality that can be measured, described and analyzed (Blumer, 1971), and when applied to policy-making, can be ordered into clear-cut stages of formulation, implementation, and evaluation. Another assumption inherent in this view is that when a readily identifiable problem emerges, policy makers will converge to address the problem rationally and come up with a “best” solution in terms of any of a number of contextual constraints (Lindblom, 1980).

Alternatively, interpretive frameworks entail taking a political approach to the policy process. Guided by metaphors and images, and focusing on context and subjective meanings, these frameworks examine pluralistic forces, such as interest groups, that compete over discourse and policy proposals (Barusch, 2015). Finally, radical or critical frameworks focus on the critique of social policy in serving the existing social order, using analysis as a tool for accomplishing fundamental social change; a framework for which O’Connor and Netting (2008) could not find evidence in the social work literature. In sum, as mentioned earlier, the researchers found that most of the frameworks investigated were rationalist, and some interpretive in their orientation. However, none of the interpretive frameworks cited in O’Connor and Netting’s (2008) article were located in social work texts, arguably making them less accessible to educators and students.

The findings of a review (Barretti, 2016) of seven of the most frequently used social work policy texts (based on largest quantity textbook orders as collected by the MBS Textbook Exchange, Inc. from roughly 3600 bookstores across the country and in Canada) (Faculty Center Network, 2015), concurred with the previous reviews that the policy analysis frameworks found in social work policy textbooks vary in their self-identified theoretical orientation. With the exception of a small cluster of rationalist frameworks, there was otherwise no uniformity in theoretical orientation among the seven texts examined and no justification offered explaining why one author's preferred theoretical orientation was more effective or useful than another. For example, Barusch (2015) advises students to choose their own approach to policy analysis based on O'Connor and Netting's (2008) typology of rational, interpretive, and critical frameworks described above. Blau and Abramovitz (2014) propose a *social change* approach based on evolutionism, cyclical theories, and historical materialism. Chapin's (2014) framework is based on the *strengths* perspective, reflecting a social constructionist approach. Popple and Leighninger (2015) identify their framework as *practitioner policy analysis* which may apply to specific policies or policy areas. Segal (2013) offers a *critical analysis* model which combines deconstruction, self-reflection, and praxis or social action. Also, as O'Connor and Netting found (2008), many frameworks explicitly urge a *rational* or scientific approach to policy analysis (e.g., DiNitto & Johnson, 2012; Jansson, 2008; Karger & Stoesz, 2014), which views policy principally as a process of problem-solving.

Barretti (2016) also found that despite the many assertions by social work authors in the narrative of their textbooks that social problems are invented or constructed (Barusch, 2015; Popple & Leighninger, 2015; Segal, 2013), the majority of the authors did not transfer this perspective of the problem into the problem analysis sections of their policy analysis frameworks. Problems were instead treated and analyzed as objective phenomena whose definitions do not change over time or in the policies that address them. Questions comprising the objective aspects of the problem (e.g., what is the nature or cause of the problem; how widespread is it, how many people are affected by it and how, and what are the causes or theoretical explanations of the problem) were found in five of the seven frameworks (Barusch, 2015; DiNitto & Johnson, 2012; Karger & Stoesz, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2015; Segal, 2013). These "problem analysis" subsections within the five policy analysis frameworks above were frequently limited to a battery of questions usually placed at the beginning of the framework (e.g., DiNitto & Johnson, 2012; Karger & Stoesz, 2014) and then forgotten about until the latter stages of analysis (e.g., Segal, 2013), or if sequestered in separate chapters (e.g., Barusch, 2015), were fractured historically, socially, and politically from the policies that succeeded them. In short, Barretti (2016) could not find evidence in the above frameworks that the problem was inextricably linked to the policy under analysis, concluding that when the framework was completed, it rendered the false impression that 1) the problem remains disparate from the resulting policy, and 2) an ideologically-driven policy is the response to an objectively-defined problem.

Two frameworks in Barretti's (2016) study self-identified as espousing a social constructionist perspective in the analysis of problems. The questions posed by Blau and Abramovitz (2014) stand in sharp contrast to the questions posed in the five other frameworks. 1) "How do social problems get constructed? 2) Who gets to construct them?"

3) How does the construction of a social problem help to create a social policy that shapes what social workers do? 4) How do social policies change over time?” The authors cite specific examples where “a new definition of the problem changed both the social policy and the social work practice that it embodied” (p. 5). Probably the strongest carryover of social constructionism to policy analysis was found in Chapin (2014) who, early on in the narrative, establishes social constructionism’s place in the strengths perspective (p. 170) and clearly stipulates that the values, ideologies, and self-interests that shape problem definitions transfer directly into policy responses (pp. 179-182). Unlike other policy textbooks, Chapin (2014) makes explicit references to claimsmaking, which “connects the social problem or needs assessment and the resulting social policy” (p. 182). Though the formal definition conceptualizes claimsmaking as a largely policy-making rather than problem-making activity (p. I-6), Chapin’s consistent reinforcement of the need for social workers to draw attention to needs/ problems and to be claimsmakers for strengths-based policies is a significant contribution to a constructionist approach in policy analysis and policy practice.

Most of the seven authors in Barretti’s (2016) study also advised that the expert and/or the expert literature defines social problems (e.g., Barusch, 2015; DiNitto & Johnson, 2012; Karger & Stoesz, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2015; Segal, 2013), despite the fact that experts are rarely responsible for discovering social problems or for calling attention to them in such a compelling way that they garner policy attention (Blumer, 1971). Also, though policy text authors may advise students in the narrative of their texts to consider how the problem was defined at the point of time in which the policy was developed (e.g., Barusch, 2015), to deconstruct language to understand what it means to different people (e.g., Segal, 2013), and to view policies as a consequence of historical and economic events (e.g., Karger & Stoesz, 2014; Popple & Leighninger, 2015), the problem analysis sections of their policy analysis frameworks often did not incorporate these considerations.

### **An Alternative Social Constructionist Problem Analysis**

The Problem-to-Policy matrix and attending midterm assignment questions presented in Figure 1 of this article were designed by the author to address the limitations of an objectivist problem analysis found within policy analysis frameworks in social work policy texts (Barretti, 2016). The assignment 1) strengthens the connection between problem construction and resultant policy, 2) avoids expert, objectivist problem definitions, 3) includes the role of context and claimsmakers in problem-making, and 4) provides a continuing historical thread between the periods when problem constructions and policy responses changed. The assignment was heuristically designed to allow students to explore the forces that contribute to changing problem frames over time and then consider the efficacy of those frames for policy. The assignment is theoretically guided and inspired by Berger and Luckman’s (1967) work on social constructionism and the policy models of Bacchi (2007) and Stone (1988). Bacchi (2007) contends that every problem definition is both an “interpretation and an intervention, as definitions invariably predict and predestine policy responses by how they represent what is problematic (and unproblematic through gaps and omissions) in the representation of the problem” (p. 153.) Both authors contend that policy analysts must pay closer attention to *problem representations* (Bacchi, 2007, p.

21), and the “*strategic representation* of situations...constructed to win the most people to one side and the most leverage over one’s opponents” (Stone as cited in Bacchi, 2007, pp. 106-107). No mention of Bacchi’s (2007) or Stone’s (1988) work was evidenced in Barretti’s (2016) analysis of social work policy frameworks.

Based on the social constructionist orientation guiding the Problem-to-Policy matrix and assignment in Figure 1, the following questions were crafted to replace the objectivist questions found in most policy analysis frameworks:

- Why did the problem emerge or re-emerge at this point in time?
- Why did it fade at others?
- How was the problem represented/ constructed at various times?
- What person or group brought the problem to the public’s attention or made a claim about the issue at each point in time?
- Did this issue [or claimmaker] occupy a privileged position in society or in the process?
- What were the implications of the varying claims for policy in each period?

### **Strengths and Limitations of the Problem-to-Policy Matrix**

The reader will note the characteristics and categories of the matrix that were, as noted above, designed to address the omissions and limitations found in the objectivist problem analysis sections of many policy analysis frameworks. First, and most importantly, the matrix maintains a connection between problem frames and resultant policies. As Schwartz (1969) argued for social work to adopt interventions that incorporated a case-to-cause model, integrating micro and macro so as to make them inseparable, the author similarly argues for a policy model that inextricably links problem to policy, contending that there can be no choice or division between one and the other or in this case, between problem and policy.

Second, unlike an objectivist problem analysis that assumes that problems are impervious to context, the matrix critically incorporates contextual forces that influence how the problem is viewed and defined. When completed, the matrix underscores at a glance that social problem constructions change in different contexts during different periods and that, upon further examination, problems assume different shapes with respect to the target population under analysis. A contextual view elucidates, for example, why the confluence of social, political, and economic forces were advantageous for the successful passage of the Social Security Act in the 1930s, but not the 1920s, or the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, but not the 1950s. It may also account for why an issue may be problematized in one setting but not in another or why one version of a problem appears in one place or among one population and may either be absent or take on other forms elsewhere or among other populations (Bacchi, 2007).

Third, instead of ignoring time frames and viewing problems statically, the matrix provides a longitudinal view that underscores when a problem fades from policy attention and how and when a change in typification results in a change in policy. Using time periods allows students to quickly ascertain when changes in frames result in changes in policy, and enables them to identify periods when the problem persisted but there was no formal

attention to addressing it. Though dividing history into general periods may lead to some bias, “the creation of generalities and to the reification of time segments” (McVinney, 2004, p. 7), many disciplines, including social work, frequently use broad periodization when comparing competing trends or patterns in problem and policy constructions over time (e.g., Davis, 1987; Poppendeick, 1995).

Fourth, the matrix highlights what most objectivist problem analyses sections ignore; language is extremely important in establishing initial perceptions and orientations for a specific problem and for those target populations affected by that problem. In the process of interpreting and defining a problem, boundaries are set around what is believed to be the problem’s nature and important aspects, what Stone (2012) refers to as “border wars waiting to happen” (p. 384), that are in turn claimed and housed within a domain of inquiry (e.g., psychology, sociology, science, medicine). Domains of inquiry select the problems and aspects of problems they will own and address while implicitly or explicitly excluding others. Taken together, domain-specific concepts, jargon, conceptual frameworks, and theories contribute to a certain perspective or societal view of the problem at hand. Theories may be descriptive or prescriptive (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocour, 2004) in providing explanations for conditions and behavior, but they not only have strong ideological components, they are ideology (Kuhn, 1970).

Since problems are not only framed differently for different target populations, but also variably experienced by them (e.g., consider the more sympathetic view toward populations addicted to opioids now versus the view of populations addicted to crack cocaine decades earlier), the matrix allows for a specifically-affected population to remain front and center in the analysis. As noted earlier, how target populations are constructed cannot be disentangled from problem construction and policy (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Some examples (provided by former students) include examination of the historical constructions of and policy responses to rape and police brutality in the African American community; child (sexual) abuse in a specific Latino community, bride-burning and dowry murders in rural India; deviant drinking in urban Ireland, and many others. Adopting the standpoint of an affected population yields a richer analysis that may include how that population was portrayed, if it was included or excluded from the claimsmaking and from the political process, and the implications of the aforementioned for resultant policies. One caveat is that literature written about or from the perspective of special populations may be harder to obtain.

Fifth, the assignment accentuates that over time problems are not defined by experts, but through discourse by competing claimsmakers. The attending questions in the assignment underscore the dynamic, fluid role of claimsmakers who compete to control language and problem perception, using theories and theoretical orientations to serve their political ends. Political interests and mixed motives are characteristic of claimsmakers and interest groups who are seldom driven by the needs of the populations most adversely affected by the problem they are claiming and framing. Framing, by its nature, “includes selecting and highlighting some features of reality while omitting others” (Entman, 1991, p. 53). Hence, claimsmakers use framing strategically to fashion policy debates and proposals of benefit to themselves (Heike & Mahoney, 2015). Though the matrix cannot capture, on a micro-analytical level, the entire landscape of rising and ebbing claims and

frames throughout each period, the additional claimsmaking question addresses the political dynamic. This includes how claimsmakers use theories to identify and typify who or what is to blame for the problem. Since problem location implies policy location, the assignment allows students to explore the implications of problems located in the individual, family, or social structure. Ideologically, conservatives prefer policies that locate the causes of social problems in individuals, while liberals and their policies place more emphasis on environmental factors (Jansson, 2014, p. 48). Students may discover that victim-blaming frames and policies may dominate for one period, only for the pendulum to swing back in the following period, revealing an emergence or resurgence of socially empowering frames and policies. However, conservatively oriented claims still abide in the liberally oriented periods and vice versa. The matrix provides an opportunity to consider the implications of evolving individual or structural explanations and how they entangle with ideological policy agendas.

Sixth, the matrix is designed to include new problems that result from policy interventions. It bears mentioning that claims do not just periodically emerge and recede but also evolve and change shape and course through multiple generations of new activities (Spector & Kituse, 2001). This usually occurs after initial responses to claims are deemed inadequate, and solutions then become the basis for renewed claims and demands. For example, when the initial governmental response to the early years of the AIDS epidemic was deemed inadequate, claimsmakers engaged in a second generation of more confrontational activities to gain public attention, research, and resources to address the problem (Shilts, 1987). The final column in the matrix was added to allow for the identification of a second generation of problems (Spector & Kituse, 2001) resulting from the original policy, which then triggers the problem typification process anew.

There are a few limitations and advisories when using the matrix. First, whenever a context is academically deconstructed into its components as in the columns of the matrix, (e.g., claimsmaking activities, theories, social and economic forces), it is not always possible to account for the intersections between components (or columns). Relatedly, although the matrix uses clear dividing lines distinguishing one period's typification from another for academic purposes, in reality there is no clear dividing line in public discourse between the beginning of one frame or public perception of a problem and another.

Second, as an analytical tool, the structure of the matrix imposes a false linearity on the problem-to-policy process, positioning the problem construction as always preceding the policy when history instructs that in "wag the dog" situations, the policy sometimes drives the problem construction. In these situations, stakeholders lead with the desired policy at the forefront of their claimsmaking and then work backwards to the problem construction in order to justify the policy's implementation. For example, during the War on Drugs (1986-1992), the Bush administration depicted crack use as an "epidemic" or "plague" in order to escalate and reinforce law and order policies and deflect attention from the economy, despite the fact that statistics during this period actually indicated declining rates of crack use (Reinarman & Levine, 1995). In such cases, and if the student is so inclined, the *Frame/ Typification* column and *Policy Response* columns in the matrix can be reversed, allowing the policy to drive the analysis and the other aspects of the analysis to remain relevant and intact.

### Figure 1. *The Problem-to-Policy Matrix and Assignment*

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In this assignment, the unit of analysis is a social problem. You may wish to identify a specific affected population or location to focus your analysis. You may choose a domestic or international social problem. It is recommended that you choose a specific population affected by your chosen problem, though it may be more difficult to find specific literature on this. Below are some examples of recognized social problems. The list is not exhaustive. You may wish to choose an issue that is not yet commonly recognized as a problem.

- AIDS/ HIV
- Crime
- Gambling
- Mental Illness
- Human/ sex trafficking
- Poverty/ Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Alcohol/Substance Abuse
- Incarceration
- Sexual harassment
- Hunger
- Environmental illness
- Immigration
- Intimate partner violence
- Child abuse/ child sexual abuse
- Elder abuse
- Pay equity/discrimination
- Rape

A) The completion of the Problem-to-Policy matrix below will include two to three distinct periods in history (a row for each period) when the problem of your choice (re)emerged in society and was explained and addressed in some way. The matrix answers:

- How was the problem constructed (framed) during each of these periods?
- What claims were made and who was making them?
- What prevailing social, economic and political forces were present at each period?
- How was the problem explained (which theories/ explanations dominated)?
- What policies or interventions were generated to address the problem during each of these periods?
- What new problems did these policies generate?

\*B). Essay on claimsmaking: Choose one time period in your matrix and discuss in greater detail the claimsmakers and/ or social movements that were particularly influential in raising consciousness about the problem or advocating for a specific policy during that time period. You may wish to include some of the following bullets:

- What interest(s) did these groups have in the issue; what did they hope to gain through their claims? Where did they locate the problem and how did they explain it?
- How was the target population depicted? What groups were included or excluded from their claims (either explicitly or implicitly)? That is, did the claimsmakers advocate equally for all sectors of the population experiencing this problem or were they selective with regard to who they represented and how they were depicted?
- What was the ideological orientation of the claimsmakers?
- Did the claimsmakers occupy a powerful or privileged position in society (e.g., celebrities, PACS, or elected officials)?
- Ultimately, how successful were they in reframing the issue and gaining needed policy attention?

Remember that though claimsmakers are not always successful in winning the policy responses they seek, they may succeed in raising or changing public awareness. Finally, as you see it, what gains and losses occurred during the period selected for those populations affected by the problem? What gains and losses were incurred in terms of changing the status of the problem in society (moving it front or back or up or down in importance)?

Table 1. *Problem-to-Policy Matrix*

<p><b>Period:</b> Identify three or more periods in time in which major shifts occurred in the definitions of the problem you are writing about.</p> <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____</p>	<p><b>Frame/ Typification:</b> What was the dominant typification or name assigned to the problem during these 3 periods?</p> <p>1. _____ 2. _____ 3. _____</p> <p><i>Were there variations in the typification for people of color, the poor, immigrants, LGBT, etc.?</i></p>	<p><b>Political, Social &amp; Economic Context:</b> What were the prevailing social, economic and political arrangements in society at the time?</p>	<p><b>*Claimsmakers Policy Activities:</b> What individuals/ groups drew attention to this problem during each period? Were they self-identifiably Conservative, Liberal, Radical, Feminist? What (types of) actions did these claimsmakers take? What social movements were occurring at each time?</p>	<p><b>Ideological Explanations/ Theories:</b> What were the prevailing ideological explanations and/ or sociological/ psychological theories supporting these typifications? Where was the problem located? [Individual, family, society?]</p>	<p><b>Policy response:</b> What types of policies emerged as a response to the (re)constructed definition? How was the problem addressed or not addressed at each time period? [Were they formal policies that had a name?]</p>	<p><b>New problems:</b> What new problems arose out of each of these policies?</p>
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### **Illustration: The Problem-to-Policy Matrix Applied to a Social Problem**

Due to space limitations, Table 2 is an abbreviated version of the matrix presented in Table 1 and is intended as a starting point or thumbnail example of a social problem's history. It provides a broad scan of the temporal nature of competing constructions of the problem and its resultant policies over time. The example lacks the third (*Political, Social and Economic Context*) and final (*New Problems*) columns of Table 1. (The instructor may choose to assign the simplified version of the matrix illustrated in Table 2 or the more detailed option containing all seven columns. The matrix of the problem example with the two additional columns intact is available upon request.) The instructor may also choose to read aloud the narrative below before presenting Table 2 to determine if students can correctly guess the problem so described:

In mid-17<sup>th</sup> century America, *it* was considered a sin, a dishonor to God and self, and referred to as “wicked carriage.” The unofficial yet relatively effective policy for confronting it was “holy watching.” The community was held responsible for the surveillance of immoral behavior and for publicly shaming wrongdoers. In the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *it* was not considered a distinct social problem, but rather one of the evil consequences of alcohol. The Temperance Movement, which included women activists advocating for Prohibition, started to champion women's rights, including the right to divorce on the grounds of drunkenness. During the 1930s, women were held responsible for provoking *it*; as they were regarded as masochistic by the psychiatry movement. Therapy was viewed as the solution and psychiatric social workers, in the hope of elevating their professional status, were complicit in perpetuating victim-blaming theories and therapies that resulted (Pleck, 2004). *It* was framed as a problem of patriarchy though it went relatively unnoticed in the early years of the Women's Movement until “discovered” by grassroots organizations and feminist scholars who documented and publicized the issue (Fagan, 1990). In the 1990s, *it* was framed as a violation of a victim's civil rights, a failure of a coordinated criminal/ community response. As a law and order issue backed by a comprehensive response from the federal government, the legislation to address the problem was deemed successful.

### **Elaboration on the Problem Example in Table 2**

As revealed by the matrix, the “*it*” the author refers to is wife abuse (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). (The author will hereinafter refer to the problem in Table 2 as “wife abuse” following the argument of Dobash and Dobash (1979) that “(i)f the issue being addressed is violence by men against their wives or cohabitants, that should be made clear by naming it wife or woman abuse” (p. 109).) Many different terms have historically been used to describe the brutalization of women by the men with whom they share an intimate relationship. Though its nature and incidence have remained relatively constant from the pre-Victorian era to the age of technology (Gordon, 1988), through time it has changed not just its name but how it has been perceived, explained, and addressed. In colonial times, it was referred to as *wicked carriage*, in the nineteenth century, *wife-beating*, in the 1970s, *battered women* and shortly thereafter, the more generic term, *domestic violence*. Presently, the problem is more commonly referred to as *intimate partner violence*. Other terms

including *spousal abuse*, *marital abuse*, and *family violence* have also been employed over time (Gelles, 1993). Critics have noted how some problem referents such as *spousal abuse* or *domestic violence* depoliticize and gender-neutralize the problem, allowing it to become easily appropriated as a mental health or criminal justice problem, while avoiding addressing the “power dynamics between men and women in a sexist society” (Schechter, as cited in Walker, 1990, p. 85). Interestingly, Gordon (1988) asserts that “the modern history of family violence is not the story of changing responses to a constant problem but, in large part, of redefinition of the problem itself” (pp. 27-28).

Despite its persistence over time, inattention to wife abuse lasted from about 1680 to 1874, and from 1890-1960 (Pleck, 2004). Like any other social problem, the discovery, visibility and urgency of wife abuse as a problem fluctuated depending on the activities and interactions of groups making claims about the issue (Spector & Kituse, 2001) rather than on any objectively documented statistical increase or worsening conditions (Gordon, 1988). Religious institutions played a formidable role in influencing definitions of and responses to wife abuse in the first few periods of the matrix, only to be supplanted by the rising hegemony of psychiatry in the period thereafter. Feminists from the Free Speech, Civil Rights, Antiwar and Gay Rights movements of the 1960s transferred over to the fight for women’s political freedom, and were instrumental in rediscovering, publicizing and documenting the problem of wife abuse in the 1970s (Pleck, 2004). In each period in Table 2, the problem construction and the response to it reflected the predominant forces at work around the issue at that time and the images and explanations adopted by the groups, which in turn, served competing interests for the groups making claims. Puritans were motivated by the desire to divinely protect their settlements from disruptive influences, and the 1870s Temperance Women’s motives included controlling dangerous and violent lower-class men. The Battered Women’s Movement of the 1970s sought to express the importance of feminist ideas in addition to aiding its victims. The desire to deter and prevent crime continues to serve as one rationale for the Violence Against Women Act of 1994 and its many reauthorizations (Pleck, 2004). Three causal models of wife abuse supported these competing views: *Individual models* (Psychological), *Sociological models* (Socio-psychological), or *Social-structural models* (Feminist; Gelles, 1993). Theories that ascribe the problem to individuals can only lead either backward to a consideration of antecedents attributed to the individual or forward to solutions that can only reside in the individual (Dobash & Dobash, 1990). Similarly, theories that locate problems in institutions will find only antecedents and solutions within these boundaries as well. For example, when wife abuse was characterized as a problem of “masochistic women and violent-prone men” in the third period, the only logical policy was therapy. When wife abuse was identified as a sociostructural problem in the 1970s, then the remedy included some institutional changes and social supports that empower women. When the problem was typified as a failure of the criminal justice system in the 1990s, then the resultant policy was to improve the overall institutional response.

Table 2. *The Problem-to-Policy Matrix Applied to a Social Problem*

Period	Frame/Typification	Claims/Claimsmakers	Ideology/ Theory	Policy
Mid 1600s (public matter)	<b>Wicked carriage</b>	A sin, dishonor to God & self, a public concern <i>Puritans &amp; Christianity</i>	The state must punish sin so God could protect community from fires, plagues, disease etc.	Holy watching. 1641 MA Body of Liberties. Community responsible for surveillance, meddling, shaming
Mid to late 19 <sup>th</sup> century	<b>Evil consequence of alcohol/ public harm</b> “Wife-beating” coined in 1856 England.	Violated Christian ideals & seen as destroying female virtue/ purity <i>The Temperance Movement/ First Wave of Feminism</i>	Christian values of obedience, modesty, purity & self-sacrifice must be preserved	Prohibition/ divorce on grounds of drunkenness 1853: some states punished as misdemeanor.
Late 1920s-1940s (private matter)	<b>Masochistic women &amp; violent-prone men</b>	Women have an unconscious need to be subjugated & men have an anger-control problem <i>Freud; Deutsch. Psychiatric social workers seeking elevated status</i>	Women have a disease & men can’t control anger. Individualized & depoliticized problem. Medicalization of batterer & battered.	Therapy (locates problem & solution in individual)
Mid-1960s-1970s (public matter) Rediscovery of problem	<b>Problem of patriarchy</b> “Battered women” “Domestic Violence” coined in 1979.	“We will not be beaten!” Women are not men’s property. <i>Feminist/ Battered Women’s Movement</i>	Feminist. Wife abuse is an extension of male domination/ consequence of patriarchy that permits violence against women.	1976: First state laws were passed. Services established; shelter funding, improved reporting, hotlines, arrest of wife beaters, social services, transportation, legal assistance, employment, child care
Mid 1990s-2013	<b>A violation of a victim’s civil rights.</b> “Intimate partner violence”	“Domestic violence is everybody’s business & there’s no excuse for it.” <i>The Family Violence Prevention Fund, broad coalition of advocacy groups, feminist lawyers, female legislators, male Democratic Senators, Joe Biden</i> became major sponsors of legislation.	A law & order issue. Failure of a system-wide, coordinated criminal/ community response to problem. Problem located in CRJ system response to domestic violence.	Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) of 1994, (2000, 2005, 2013): Provided funding for battered women’s shelters, more prosecutors & training hospital personnel, special police units & judges.

Even in the current climate, it is clear that victim-blaming theories of wife abuse may lie dormant but are never extinct, but will reemerge, recirculate and recycle, gaining traction in policy proposals when the timing and ideological conditions are ripe. A historical view of the problem over time distinguishes those claims that were successful in empowering affected populations from those that (further) victimized them at various points in time. History arguably provides an informed starting point for change and for change agents.

### Discussion

The assignment presented in this article was developed to address the limitations of a widely prescribed objectivist problem analysis found within policy analysis frameworks in the most frequently adopted social work policy texts. Objectivist criteria that fracture and decontextualize problems from the policies under analysis stubbornly prevail despite the fact that they rarely apply when society and policymakers “decide” what is and what is not a problem. If society “worked” according to the rationalist view, and only those conditions that affected significant numbers of the population and caused emotional and economic suffering were considered problems, then surely poverty would be positioned at the top of the policy agenda for attention. If objectivist criteria for problems determined policy attention, then AIDS would have been recognized and addressed during the earliest years of the epidemic when thousands of men died, yet the federal government did essentially nothing (Shilts, 1987). “The actual size and seriousness of a problem does not determine whether public concern rises to the point of action” (Chapin, 2014, p. 168). History continually instructs that the issues that make it to the policy arena are those that are the results of large social movements (Blau & Abramovitz, 2014) or that are constructed by influential claimsmakers (Mildred, 2003) in the hierarchy of credibility (Becker, 1967). When policies change over time, as they continually do, it is usually because the perception and construction of the problem has changed, not the nature of the problem itself.

If not for celebrity claimsmakers with a personal stake in a disease or issue, many social causes would have fallen off the table. For example, the sexual harassment of women has only recently gained traction as a bona fide problem, thanks in part to influential actresses who piggy-backed on a movement started in 2006, but until then lacked critical visibility. Sexual harassment’s emergence as a legitimate issue begs the questions posed earlier regarding what confluence of forces successfully converged at this time, but not in previous years or even in 2006 when #MeToo was first started by Tarana Burke (Garcia, 2017). Thus, defying the rationalist view, the business of problem-making is as dynamic as that of policy-making, ever transitory and fugitive. The matrix and assignment presented here are intended to inspire an analysis of dynamics, where problem-making is more than just a presentation of differing ideas but more often a brutal contest of and for language. Every definition, designation, diagnosis, or paradigm chosen constitutes a political act.

Political dynamics are starkly evident in many current debates where competing typifications lead to competing explanations, locations, and responses to the problem: wife abuse versus domestic violence; vagrancy versus homelessness; prostitution versus sex work; drunkenness versus alcoholism; partial birth abortion versus third trimester abortion; death panels versus end-of-life counseling; tax relief versus tax cuts for the wealthy; hunger

versus food insecurity; grief versus mental illness; gambling versus gaming; enhanced interrogation versus torture; undocumented persons versus illegal aliens; chain migration versus family reunification; voter fraud versus voter suppression; inappropriate contact versus rape.

Since most problems “are rarely solved except in the sense that they are occasionally purged from common discourse or discussed in changed legal, social, or political terms as though they were different problems” (Edelman, 1988, p. 16), social workers are well-positioned to publicize and reframe the unpopular and intractable problems that habitually fade from view. As shoestring claimsmakers advocating for the disenfranchised, the profession’s currency lies in the power of dialogue, the conversation, the democratizing discourse that recrafts, reframes, and creates new meanings. “If indeed all policies are framed by values and beliefs reinforced by dominant groups, then we have the power to change the way issues are viewed and hence change policy” (Segal, 2013, p. 72).

Since discourse contains “multiple and internally contradictory” claims, incorporating “elements of what it opposes and aims to replace” (Cameron, 1990, p. 22), social work and by extension, the expressed power of its value base already possess the tools needed to effectively: 1) address the limits on what can be said and who can say it; and 2) replace oppressive language assigned to target populations by dominant groups with language elected by those populations to better represent their own histories, interests, and needs. The starting point for policy practice must be in meeting affected populations where they live, and engaging, assembling, and educating them in the nuances of discourse and framing so that as future claimsmakers for their own issue, they can most effectively represent their realities in their own voice. Mobilization includes exploring alternative problem frames with clients, arguing their efficacy and capacity for social justice, and then considering the implications (McPhee & Bronstein, 2002), that is, how policy outcomes could be different if problem constructions were different. Thus, in policy practice as in policy analysis, emphasis must be placed not only on evaluating policy outcomes, but on interrogating and influencing the typifications that generated those outcomes.

However, in order for students to effectively mobilize others, they first need to be armed with a range of possible problem constructions, and to distinguish previously successful claims from those that were unsuccessful or harmful. Arguably, an examination of *problem* history positions them far better for this task than merely examining the issue’s *policy* history. Walking policy proposals backward to the problem framing prepares students to join the debate, get out in front of (re)discovered social issues, and compete for the narrative before competitors step in, before the climate recalls and acclimates to historically-entrenched, well-worn frames that serve the status quo and resist change. A more pronounced role for our future policy practitioners in current political discourse is now more critical than ever when lies are contorted, distorted, and framed as truths, when oppressive policies are repackaged and recycled, and when timing is of the essence in gaining public recognition of ever-expanding human rights abuses promoted by those in power. Never in the history of our country or perhaps our world, has it been more imperative to deconstruct and catechize issue typifications and expose insidious policy goals, propped up by pernicious theories and rhetoric that would serve the ends of those exploiting the disenfranchised.

Words are important. What we call things, what we consider problems and how we frame them, ultimately determines our reality and how we intervene in it. If using the Problem-to-Policy matrix and assignment presented in this article only serves to intensify student awareness and stir more thoughtful consideration of the impact of words and frames in our discourse, then it has fulfilled its purpose and justified its place in policy classes.

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