

Gender mainstreaming, affirmative action and diversity: Politics and meaning in gender equality policies

Carol Bacchi

University of Adelaide, Australia

Abstract

This paper addresses two questions. First, how is it that gender mainstreaming at times comes to replace women-specific policies (affirmative action) and Women's Policy units (focal points) when prominent spokespeople associated with its development state explicitly that this should not happen (Hannan 2008: 37)? Second, how do concerns for cross-cutting processes of social subordination, captured in the shorthand terms 'diversity' or 'intersectionality', come, at times, to mean a reduction in attention to 'women's issues' when that was never the objective? A third underlying question is - what can those committed to egalitarian politics do about these unexpected and untoward developments?

The paper makes the case that it is important to pay attention to the meanings imparted to key concepts, including gender mainstreaming, affirmative action and diversity. It offers a methodology for analysing concepts called 'what's the problem represented to be?' (Bacchi 1999; 2009), which encourages the identification of underlying presuppositions in concepts and their accompanying effects. As an example, returning to the questions posed at the outset, conceptualising affirmative action as 'special assistance' or 'preferential treatment' for 'disadvantaged' women, which is the dominant representation of the reform, helps explain how gender mainstreaming, in some incarnations, comes to displace it. So too particular versions of 'diversity', e.g. as something located *within* individuals or groups, produces the discursive practice of 'commatation' (O'Brien 1984). With commatation, the policy emphasis goes onto the 'disadvantages' of 'women (comma) blacks (comma) gays (comma) . . .' etc., etc. and leaves the advantages available to the unspoken norm (white, male, straight, etc) hidden from view (Eveline, 1994). The paper uses these examples, among others, to illustrate that how 'problems' are conceptualised matters in terms of political outcomes and to reflect on the political repercussions of this observation - what to do when concepts 'let us down'.

Key words : gender mainstreaming, affirmative action, diversity

The paper takes as its target the need for further reflection on the meanings of concepts in reform initiatives. At first, this kind of discussion might appear to be a bit abstract and de-

tached from the world of on-the-ground policy making. However, the case is made that *politics necessarily involves competition over meaning*. If this is the case, it behoves us to pay more attention to the meanings imparted to key concepts, including ‘gender mainstreaming’, ‘affirmative action’, ‘diversity’ and even ‘genderequality’ (Magnussen *et al.* 2008), terms that are often treated as if they have clear and fixed meanings. In other words the paper challenges the common conception that we ‘know’ what these terms mean.

The perspective developed here is that none of these concepts refers to any fixed state of affairs or even to any *anticipated* fixed state of affairs. Rather, the meanings of these terms are generated in and through political debate and political action. This becomes clear when we examine developments in specific political sites (i.e. specific times and places), as I proceed to do below. A particular difficulty or challenge occurs with the realization that at times we ourselves may adopt dominant understandings of key concepts that can undermine declared political objectives. To subvert this occurrence a kind of reflexive scrutiny of key concepts is advocated, achieved through application of a methodology called ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ (Bacchi 1999a; 2009).

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, I outline the theoretical perspective underlying the argument I make about politics and meaning. Second, in three brief sections, I examine some specific developments in the elaboration of affirmative action, gender mainstreaming and diversity agendas, in order to illustrate how contestation over meaning is intrinsic to politics. In these sections I apply the ‘what’s the problem represented to be?’ analytic perspective to reveal the underlying presuppositions in dominant representations of the selected concepts, and the possible deleterious (negative) effects accompanying those perspectives. Finally, in the concluding section, I consider how this proposition - that it is important to reflect on the meanings imparted to key concepts - affects reformers ‘in the field’ and how to facilitate a process of reflexive policy practice. In this last section I also want to consider briefly the proposal that reformers ought to shape their reforms to fit and hence to capitalize on dominant paradigms like neo-liberalism (Walby 2008 in Kim 2008), a proposal I wish to challenge.

Politics and meaning in gender equality policies

Almost all people involved in the development and implementation of gender equality policies recognise that there are often profound disagreements about the ways in which specific policies are understood. Hence, when I say that the meaning of reforms like gender mainstreaming and affirmative action is *contested*, I may appear to be stating the obvious. However, describing policies and their conceptual underpinnings as contested opens up new ways to think about public policy and about concepts (conceptual categories), ways that have important political implications. At a very basic level the kind of analysis I am putting forward asks us to put in question the meanings attached to *all* conceptual categories, including equality

and gender quality. The argument is that this kind of conceptual scrutiny may prevent the endorsement of meanings that undermine declared political objectives.

This idea of 'essentially contested concepts' has a long history - W. B. Gallie (1955-56) first used the phrase. Moreover, different kinds of claims are attached to the phrase (Swanton 1985). In my work I use the notion to challenge the suggestion that terms such as equality, for example, have any core or essential meaning. Rather, I put the emphasis on the *work* that key terms *do* in political processes. Here I take my lead from Tanesini(1994:207) who argues that concepts are not descriptive of anything; rather, they are 'proposals about how we ought to proceed from here'. The purpose of concepts or categories, therefore, is 'to influence the evolution of on going practices'. To this end, they can be defined to certain purposes and redefined to other purposes. In this form of analysis the focus therefore shifts from seeking 'true' meaning of specific terms to *interrogating the emergence of competing meanings* of those terms, and to examining how these competing meanings function in shaping political possibilities. Attention is directed to the uneven power relations involved in shaping the meaning of concepts - 'the struggle for control of discourse' (Foucault1991:6)- and to the effects that accompany the ways in which specific meanings become embedded in government practices. In this understanding 'language is not secondary to government; it is constitutive of it'(Rose2000:28).

What we are dealing with here is something other than *intentional* political manipulation, though such behaviour clearly occurs. More important for our purposes is coming to understand how key concepts acquire *taken-for-granted* meanings that can subvert espoused political objectives. The point here is not to suggest that somehow reformers are 'taken in' or duped by those with more influence into accepting meanings of concepts that subvert their goals. Instead emphasis is directed to the socially produced forms of knowledge, or discourses, that set limits upon what it is possible to think, write or speak about a 'given social object or practice' (McHoul and Grace1993:31). For example, the ways in which 'globalisation', 'human capital', 'social capital' and 'life long learning' are 'spoken' about creates them as forms of social knowledge that make it difficult to speak outside of the terms of reference they establish for thinking about people and social relations. The same I argue is the case with 'gender mainstreaming', 'affirmative action' and 'diversity'.

Because this is the case, we require a methodology for opening up key political concepts to critical interrogation. In other work (Bacchi 2009) I have developed a methodology for analysing policy called 'what's the problem represented to be?' (a WPR approach). The methodology consists of six questions plus a directive to apply the questions to our own policy proposals (see Chart below). The underlying premise in a WPR approach to policy analysis is that, because policies are proposals for change, they necessarily contain an impression of what needs to change - what is seen to be problematic - which I call a 'problem representation'. For

example, the suggestion that training programs for women will help address the ‘problem’ of women’s under-representation in positions of influence represents the ‘problem’ to be women’s *lack* of training. The WPR methodology is designed to open up questions about particular representations of a ‘problem’, such as this one, asking what common understandings it relies upon, how subjects are constituted with in it (what subject positions it makes available) and what it fails to recognise (silences). Pursuing our example, representing the ‘problem’ to be women’s lack of training presumes that women need training because they are behind or out of touch in certain ways. Women, in other words, are constituted *as the ‘problem’*, silencing consideration of the social rules that determine them eaning of ‘success’ and of ‘successful’.

**What’s the problem represented to be?:
An approach to policy analysis**

1. What’s the ‘problem’ (e.g. of ‘problem gamblers’, domestic violence, pay inequity, health inequalities, etc.) represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’? Consider three kinds of interconnected effects: discursive effects, subjectification effects, lived effects.
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Apply this list of questions to your own problem representations.
(adapted from Bacchi 2009: 2)

In this paper I am making the case that this methodology provides a useful tool to analyse *political concepts*. Accepting Tanesini’s (1994: 207) position that concepts are *proposals* ‘about how we ought to proceed from here’, concepts can be treated roughly as analogous to *policy proposals* and consequently can be interrogated using the same methodology (i.e. a WPR approach). That is, as proposals, concepts necessarily contain problem representations that rely upon deep-seated presuppositions, which need to be interrogated for their possibly deleterious effects. Hence, we can ask, for example:

What’s the problem of ‘gender inequality’ represented to be in dominant conceptions of affirmative action? What presuppositions underpin this representation of the ‘problem’? How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about? What is left unproblematic in this repre-

sensation of the 'problem'? What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'? How has this representation of the 'problem' been produced and disseminated? Where and how has it been contested?

The same questions can be asked of the concepts 'gender mainstreaming' and 'diversity'.

The rest of the paper proceeds to show how asking these question helps us understand some disturbing developments in the world of gender equality politics, specifically:

how in some settings gender mainstreaming is put forward as a replacement for affirmative action; and

how an emphasis on 'diversity' among women can lead to a reduction of attention to women as a group.

Politics and meaning in affirmative action

Let us begin with affirmative action, the concept in our trio (affirmative action, gender mainstreaming and diversity) which appeared first chronologically. Here it is important to remember that concepts which are proposals have histories, or more precisely *genealogies*. Genealogy is a historical method that emphasises the twists and turns, the disjunctures or disconnections, in history, and the power dynamics involved in those developments. The goal in genealogy is two-fold: first, to destabilize accounts of the present as natural and inevitable to show that things could be otherwise; and second, to highlight the practices through which particular meanings come to dominate, the practices that legitimate certain speakers and that determine which statements have institutional force.

In other work (Bacchi 2004a: 130-131) I trace the emergence of the current dominant understanding of affirmative action to the 1962 deliberations about the content of Article 2 of The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the role played by the representative from India. In brief, to retain recognition of 'special' measures for the so-called 'backward classes' in India, the United Nations convention retained space for forms of positive action: 'Special measures for the advancement of any socially and educationally backward sections of society shall not be construed as distinction under this article' (Craven 1995: 185).

The debate over the emergence of this clause reveals what was at stake. A key point was that positive action was seen to endorse a form of group representation that sat uneasily with the individualist premises of a commitment to 'equal treatment', fundamental to international human rights instruments. As a result positive action was deemed to be an *exception* to or *exemption* under anti-discrimination law, providing the grounds for labelling affirmative/positive action as itself a form of discrimination, albeit *positive* discrimination.

Applying a WPR methodology, in order for affirmative action to be deemed 'exceptional', a particular understanding of the 'problem' of discrimination is required. Specifically, discrimination is conceptualised as a constraint on individual actualisation, an illegitimate barrier blocking 'normal' equal opportunity processes. A primary objective is to ensure that *group* stereotypes do not block individual actualisation. The law, it is argued, should be 'sex'-blind and 'race'-blind. On these grounds, targeting groups of people for forms of intervention, as in affirmative action, is deemed to be possible *only in exceptional circumstances*.

Usefully, Donald Black (1989) offers a very different analysis of the 'problem'. He challenges the idea that law is primarily an affair of rules and that discrimination is an aberration. He shows that many factors such as the social elevation of each party, the social distance between them, whether they are individual or corporate beings influence who will win and what the punishment will be. If discrimination is *not* an aberration, treating it as such hides (silences) the way in which 'social differentials pervade law'. It follows that attempts, such as affirmative action, to redress these social differentials are *not* discrimination, positive or otherwise, but efforts to do justice. In this argument, therefore, it is incorrect to position affirmative action as an exemption in anti-discrimination law. Thalberg (1980) and Wasserstrom (1976) agree that affirmative action is neither 'assistance' nor 'positive discrimination' but, quite simply, acknowledgement that power and bias are at work in appointments and promotions.

Contestation over the meaning of affirmative action also took place in the development of Article 4.1 of CEDAW, the UN Convention for the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The clause contains both a reference to 'equality of opportunity', put forward by the United States, and a reference to 'equality of outcome', put forward by the then Soviet Union. The collision between these principles is reconciled through producing 'positive action' as a reform *with a particular meaning* as a temporary measure, an *exception* to anti-discrimination law, and a form of 'special' or 'preferential' treatment to assist the 'disadvantaged' to catch up with the 'mainstream'. The characterisation of affirmative action recipients as 'behind' and as needing special forms of 'help' forms part of this understanding (Question 5 in a WPR approach). As Radin (1991: 134-6) explains, 'the dominant ordinary language view is that affirmative action gives benefits to people who are less qualified or less deserving than white men or indeed are wholly unqualified or undeserving'.

Note what is not problematized in this representation of the 'problem' (Question 4 in a WPR approach). It is assumed that inclusion in the mainstream is necessarily a good thing, making it difficult to question societal norms. It is also assumed that the 'excluded' (or 'disadvantaged') lack some characteristic or fail to display some behaviour that explains their exclusion. They are the ones who must change. Meanwhile, those who are willing to make 'special' provisions to 'assist' the 'disadvantaged' past the hurdle of their designated 'backwardness' appear to be

benevolent and indeed beneficent. The conditions under which the 'benefactors' come to exert influence and authority, and to maintain such advantaged positions, remain unproblematised.

Located as an exemption to anti-discrimination law in this way, affirmative action is always under scrutiny and open to challenge. One effect of this discursive location is that proposals for change are constrained in their scope. There is a tendency, for example, to endorse what are called 'soft' forms of positive action, such as training schemes and outreach (recruitment) programs, because they are seen as more legitimate (or perhaps as less illegitimate) than more interventionist programs, such as quotas. The point I am making is that reform agendas are often shaped *in terms of dominant conceptual meanings*.

A pressing question is how specific conceptual meanings become hegemonic. In other work (Bacchi 2004a) I describe how, to my surprise, many feminist reformers accept and work with an understanding of affirmative action as 'special' or 'preferential' treatment, some even accepting the term 'positive discrimination' (Rees 1998: 34). I explain that this occurs largely because of the dominance of an equal opportunity discourse, which suggests that the system is generally fair but that some people face prejudicial attitudes or incidental blockages (barriers) which hold them back. Black (1989), as we saw earlier, identifies the limitations in this understanding of the 'problem'.

As steps to subvert an understanding of affirmative action as 'preferential treatment' or 'positive discrimination', understandings that, in my view, paralyse reform efforts, I suggest three interventions:

balance references to women as *disadvantaged* by existing institutional practices, with references to men as *advantaged* (Eveline 1994);

while continuing to demand women-specific measures, delete references to the characterising of these measures as 'special';

challenge the accuracy of the term 'positive discrimination' and the positioning of affirmative action as an exemption from anti-discrimination law.

Invariably questions will be raised about the political feasibility of these suggestions. My first concern, however, is that there may well be work to do on *our own understanding* of the concept of affirmative action. That is, there is little likelihood of prompting a more transformative vision if those who seek such change buy into dominant understandings that invariably support the political and social status quo hence the directive at the bottom of the list of questions in the WPR approach to apply the questions to our own conceptual categories. At the end of the paper I put forward some suggestions for institutionalising this practice.

The urgency of this form of critical self-analysis, I suggest, is illustrated by the way in which

gender mainstreaming in many places is described *as an alternative* to affirmative or positive action (women-specific measures). In the abstract for the paper I put forward as one question: how is it that gender mainstreaming at times comes to replace women-specific policies (affirmative action) and Women's Policy units (focal points) when prominent spokespeople associated with its development state explicitly that this should not happen (Hannan 2008: 37)? Here I am suggesting that *the way in which affirmative action has been de-legitimised, rendered 'exceptional', provides the grounds for its displacement; hence, the need to challenge this understanding*.

Attacks on positive or affirmative action are facilitated through another conceptual battle, this time over the meaning of 'gender mainstreaming', itself a contested concept. This is our next topic.

Politics and meaning in gender mainstreaming

If one were to perform a genealogy of gender mainstreaming, one would look primarily to the development field and to the concerted efforts of feminist reformers to find ways to get more attention paid to women's issues. Notably those efforts reflect a determination to highlight the limitations of simply incorporating more women into existing organizations and institutions, and the need for deep organisational/institutional change (Bacchi 2003: 95). To this end Jahan (1995) drew her well-known distinction between 'integrationist' and 'agenda-setting' mainstreaming.

The idea of 'mainstreaming' as a policy approach has another heritage, however. In welfare regimes there is a longstanding debate about whether it is preferable to *target* specific groups or to design reforms so that such targeting, which can lead to those groups being singled out in negative ways, is avoided. The debate here is over whether welfare policies should be *universal* or *targeted*. Reformers often find themselves on both sides of the divide. Minow (1990) describes the situation as a 'difference dilemma' since the specific needs of some groups can be ignored under a universal standard while, if attention is directed to those needs, the targeted groups are often stigmatised. In this context mainstreaming fits the designation of a *universal* schema, with the effect, in some cases, of delegitimising *targeted* women-specific proposals yet again!

Minow, however, makes the case that it is unhelpful to establish a dichotomy between universalism (mainstreaming) and targeted policies (e.g. women-specific measures), and that we need other ways to think about welfare issues (defined broadly). Specifically she suggests that this false dichotomy relies to a considerable extent on a particular understanding of 'difference' that sees specific characteristics as *inhering* in people or groups, as essential parts of

their makeup facilitating stigmatizing. As an alternative, Minow recommends thinking about 'difference' as a *relational* characteristic, either imposed on 'others' or chosen by them to make particular claims. In either case the content of what is described as 'difference', then, is the result of attributional practices. This means that the content of 'difference' is *political* not *natural* (Bacchi 2001a). If this is the case there are times when targeting is necessary and useful, and times when universal schemes are more appropriate depending on the politics of the specific situation.

The way we think about the concept 'difference' therefore has all sorts of political repercussions. For us here today this issue becomes particularly relevant because gender mainstreaming programs, despite their characterisation as forms of universalism, in the main tend to adopt a 'differences' model that focuses either on presumably natural 'differences' between women and men, or on what are described as 'real' 'differences' in their lives, or both. For example, the *Gender Proofing Handbook* in Northern Ireland identifies the first step in the gender analysis of policy, considered essential to mainstreaming, as identifying the 'differences in the lives of women and men, in particular those which contribute to inequalities' (Crawley and O'Meara 2002: 20; emphasis added). As specific instances of what is meant, the *Handbook* mentions: 'Women assume primary responsibility for child rearing' and that 'Women may not have the confidence to set up in business' (Crawley and O'Meara 2002: 24).

Applying the WPR approach, we need to ask how such a 'differences' model represents the 'problem' of 'gender inequality' and what fails to be problematized. Note how the suggestion that women lack confidence represents the 'problem' to be character deficiencies *in women*, making it difficult to raise questions about organisational cultures that favour competitiveness. In addition, the observation that women assume primary responsibility for child rearing, followed by a suggestion for on-site child care 'to make it accessible to women' (Crawley and O'Meara 2002: 25), presumes and reinforces a 'two-sex' model that constitutes 'women' as natural child rearers. In this sort of mainstreaming analysis, which is defended as a universal as opposed to a targeted program, women actually remain the targeted group, the ones who are 'done to' and who, hence, remain stigmatised. Dominant social relations, such as women's primary role in child nurture, moreover, are reinforced, making it difficult to draw attention to deep-seated institutional processes that benefit some groups over others. As Baden and Goetz (1997: 3) point out, 'difference' analyses like this one tend to strip away the political content of information on women's interests and reduce it to a set of needs or gaps, amenable to administrative decisions about the allocation of resources. Women are separated out as the central problem and isolated from the context of social and gender relations.

A focus on 'differences', therefore, excludes from the analysis consideration of how 'differences' come to be. We are left with the impression that the 'problem' is *inherent differences* that need

to be *accommodated*, rather than systemic factors that produce some 'differences' as disadvantages and others as advantages (Eveline 1994). For example, how does primary responsibility for nurture of the young become a 'difference' about women that serves specific advantages for those who are most like the male norm of non-carer?

There is also a tendency with a 'differences' mainstreaming approach to see policy as a *response* to gender 'differences', a sort of mathematical process of 'evening up' 'differences', so that, for example, if more women than men receive single parent support, the policy is called unequal (Kim 2008: 11). By contrast, we need a model that captures the active role of policy in *shaping* gendered beings ('men' and 'women') and gendered lives. To this end, my colleague, Joan Eveline, and I recommend elsewhere (Eveline and Bacchi 2005) that gender be treated as verb (or gerund; i.e. *gendering*) rather than as a noun, with policies described as *gendering practices*. In this understanding gender is 'constructed as a relationship of inequality *by the rules and practices of different institutions*', including the state (Kabeer 1994: 85; emphasis added).

An example will illustrate what it means to think about policies as *gendering practices* rather than as a response to 'gender differences'. The World Bank's (2002: 4 fn 3) 'Case for Mainstreaming Gender' has as a goal 'a less rigid or extreme gender-based division of labour' in order to increase 'female productive capital, which has important pro-growth effects'. Here, the 'problem' is represented to be the limits imposed on productivity by caring responsibilities. Such a position envisages 'freeing' women from such responsibilities (to an extent) to allow them to engage in paid labour. It says nothing, however, about how caring responsibilities will then be carried out. This implicit devaluing of caring activities has *gendering* effects, leaving in place the assumption that these activities are 'private' and less important than paid work, with the result that women in the main will do them. 'Women' continue, therefore, to be 'created' as primary carers.

The implications of this rethinking are considerable. Gender mainstreaming tools, such as gender analysis, are often described as potentially transformative because they offer a form of *ex ante* analysis, examining the possible *impact* of policies, *prior to their implementation*, on women and men. If, however, policies *shape* 'women' and 'men' as particular sorts of social being rather than simply *impacting* upon them, presuming they somehow exist as essential types of subject prior to the policy process, we need to take *ex ante* analysis to a whole other level examining the presuppositions in policies that generate gendered beings. This objective is served by applying a WPR analysis to policies and policy proposals (Bacchi 2009).

As with the discussion of affirmative action, questions will be raised about the political feasibility of challenging a 'differences' model of gender mainstreaming and introducing an

analysis of gendering processes in its place. As above, it seems to me that a necessary first step is for reformers themselves to recognise the limitations of a 'differences' model. This is no simple task given the predominant focus in popular culture on men and women as 'different'. Still I suggest it is an important prerequisite for rethinking the kind of analysis that is required. No where is this kind of analysis more needed than in the question of how to deal with 'differences among women', a topic to which we now turn.

Politics and meaning in diversity

In the abstract for the paper I identified a second question: how do concerns for cross-cutting processes of social subordination, captured in the shorthand terms 'diversity' or 'intersectionality', come, at times, to mean a reduction in attention to 'women's issues' when that was never the objective? Again, I believe we need to address this question with some urgency especially given the growing tendency in European national organizations and in important international organizations like the World Bank and the United Nations to embrace the language of diversity to describe equality initiatives. The term 'diversity' has become shorthand for describing the full list of groups commonly identified as excluded from the 'mainstream', including women, Blacks, the disabled and gays/lesbians. As one example a five-year, EU-wide campaign, entitled 'For Diversity Against Discrimination', aims to 'promote the positive benefits of diversity for business and for society as a whole' (EC Green Paper 2004: 13 in Squires 2005: 377). In line with this proposal, EU directives 'require member states to promote equality in relation to sexual orientation, age, and religion, in addition to race, gender and disability' (Squires 2005: 367). The UK meanwhile has introduced a Single Equality Act to capture all the groups commonly identified as 'disadvantaged' (Department of Trade and Industry 2004).

If we were to conduct a genealogy of 'diversity' we would need to include developments within western feminist theory. From the 1970s Black American women drew attention to the tendency in such theory to treat all women as if they were white women (Spelman 1988). Since that time many feminist theorists have made a concerted effort to find ways to embrace 'diversity' (Bacchi 2001b: 128). The most recent incarnation of this impulse is the adoption of 'intersectionality' as a 'buzzword' (Davis 2008; Riley 2004). Hankivsky (2005: 996) even suggests that feminist theory has problematized the category 'gender' to a point beyond which it is no longer useful and that, on these grounds, feminist reformers ought to *replace* the concept of 'gender mainstreaming' with that of 'diversity mainstreaming'.

The idea of diversity has another genesis, however, in American organization and human resource theory, where the message is that managers need to learn how to manage a more diverse workforce in order to be effective, efficient and profitable (Bacchi 1999b: 3). In this case

the logic of diversity is market driven, a meaning hinted at in the European Commission's reference to 'the positive benefits of diversity for business' (see above). There are two quite different versions of 'diversity *management*': a dominant individualistic version that emphasizes the multitude of characteristics that mark *each person* as unique, and a second sub-dominant version that recognises the experiences of *diverse groups* of underrepresented people (Miller 1994). The first of these approaches displays the same understanding of 'differences' as attached to *individuals*, that was discussed above in relation to the 'differences' model of gender mainstreaming, and shares its limitations. The latter insists that recognition of social groups is necessary to a social justice agenda.

However, it remains unclear how the simple listing of social groups will translate into real and meaningful change. As I mention in the Abstract, over thirty years ago O'Brien (1984) expressed concern about what she described as the discursive practice of 'commatisation', with the policy emphasis going onto the 'disadvantages' of 'women (comma) blacks (comma) gays (comma) . . .' etc., etc. while leaving the advantages available to the unspoken norm (white, male, straight, etc) hidden from view (Eveline, 1994). More recently Verloo (2006: 211) expresses concern at the tendency in the EU 'to assume an unquestioned similarity of inequalities, to fail to address the structural level and to fuel the political competition between inequalities'.

How are we to work past this challenge, especially given the widespread and legitimate concern to ensure that the needs of specific groups of women are addressed? Echoing the analysis earlier in the paper about the political limitations of a focus on 'differences' as natural and fixed, Duclos (1993: 26) makes the case that the problem is a particular conception of discrimination which 'conceives of difference as an inherent characteristic of the nondominant group rather than a feature arising out of the relationship between groups'. Similar to Minnow (1990), she (here as Iyer 1993: 204-5) suggests that, in order to displace 'the dominant group's hold on the centre', we need 'to generate a self-consciousness about the location of the dominant group, to make visible the invisible norms against which claimants are measured'. To this end, attention needs to be redirected from categories of people that are presumed to be 'fixed' to the *gendering*, *heteronorming*, *classing*, *racializing* and *disabling* effects of policy and other (e.g. legal, medical) practices. In other words, rather than starting with specified social groups and asking what it is *about them* that makes them 'disadvantaged', let us direct our attention to the practices, including policy practices, which constitute some social groups as lesser and others as privileged.

Looking for possible ways forward Duclos insists that the solution is not to eliminate categories, even if this were possible (which it isn't!): 'We can continue to use the categories we have, in this case the grounds for discrimination, but we should strive to make them flexible, dynamic and

relational'. In an article produced on the basis of a large Australian research project on gender analysis, my colleague, Joan Eveline, and I build on this conclusion. Recognising, with Duclos, that concepts and categories will necessarily be used, we ask the questions when should meanings be fixed? When should they be unfixed? And who should be involved in this fixing and unfixing of meanings? Based on our experience we conclude that 'tactical and strategic priorities should be led by those whose needs are judged by the participants of the dialogue to be the most urgent', a position Yuval-Davis (2006: 206) describes as 'transversal politics'.

This conclusion emerges, in part, from the situation in South Australia where senior Aboriginal policy workers expressed concern that the category 'gender' in gender analysis privileged a male-female binary and hence was limited in its usefulness for the social analysis of racializing practices, a priority in the lives of many Aboriginal Australians. Instead of opting for 'diversity mainstreaming', as Hankivsky (2005: 996) recommends, however, they mediated gender analysis with 'race and cultural analysis'. As a result South Australia's draft gender analysis guide, *South Australian Gender Analysis* (SAGA), explains that: 'Race and cultural analysis broadens the gender-based framework to include and reflect the multidimensional experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women' (Government of South Australia 2008: 6).

Note, in this work, Eveline and I are not suggesting that this particular resolution of how to shape gender analysis processes attentive to racial politics is a model to be applied in other circumstances. Rather, we are raising the prospect that the political assessment offered by those women whose needs are judged to be most urgent in specific sites (in this case Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in South Australia) should be the ones who decide the content of gender analysis guidelines and who determine, through dialogue and collaboration, what they are to be called. Indeed, if the Aboriginal spokeswomen had decided that a preferred name for the South Australian guide should be *South Australian Diversity Analysis*, then this name should have been adopted. The general conclusion here is that what is needed *in specific contexts* must be worked out on the ground by those involved in collaborative negotiation (Bacchi and Eveline 2009).

What to do with this theory? How to proceed?

The argument in the paper is that it is impossible to 'script' reform initiatives like gender mainstreaming or to predict how they will be deployed. Because, as we have seen, the concepts of 'gender mainstreaming', 'affirmative action' and 'diversity' are contested and have multiple possible meanings, reform initiatives may well be taken in unintended directions, or indeed in directions opposite to the intentions of those who put them forward. Because this is the case I make two recommendations: first, that we have some work to do on our concepts, ensuring that they do not undermine declared political objectives because of unexamined

presuppositions; and second, that we have to pay particular attention to the practices and processes associated with developing reform initiatives, such as gender mainstreaming.

To work on our concepts means recognizing that concepts have no fixed meaning and that they can reflect dominant discourses. To assess concepts for their political effects, therefore, requires a kind of critical self-scrutiny, captured in the term *reflexivity*. Reflexivity is a technique through which committed researchers and activists scrutinize the premises that lodge within their own policy proposals, as recommended by the directive at the bottom of the six questions in a WPR approach. To cultivate this self-critical perspective requires active attempts to access the views of others, either through reading counter-narratives that frame 'problems' differently or by engaging in conversation with like-minded others who share common commitments and egalitarian political goals, but who bring to bear different positionings and experience. Parties to this dialogue may have goals that appear at times oppositional, as when the non-Aboriginal researchers on our gender analysis project sought to advance *gender* equity while the Aboriginal policymakers expressed concern about the privileging of *gender* over *cultural/racial* analysis. However, the parties involved must nonetheless understand and care for both goals, which means they are able to include in any revised policy what is essential for that context and what cannot be compromised. To encourage this outcome, efforts must be made to promote such encounters on a basis of reciprocity (Bacchi and Eveline 2009).

This point highlights the importance of the procedures and practices involved in developing reform initiatives such as gender mainstreaming. Our research project highlighted that those who were personally engaged in the work of gender analysis, who tended in the main to be women with lesser institutional authority, were the ones most likely to come to see its relevance. On these grounds we conclude that, if gender analysis is to become a meaningful and useful equality initiative, all policymakers, *especially* those in positions of institutional authority, need to 'do' gender analysis (Eveline and Bacchi 2009). The project also drew attention to the need to ensure meaningful community consultation (Osborne, Bacchi and Mackenzie 2008). Finally the project indicated the need to build into policy deliberations space for reflection on the concepts and categories produced as part of the gender analysis exercise, e.g. 'gender', 'equality', 'difference'. To this end incorporating the questions in a WPR approach into policy planning exercises could well produce useful, if provocative, perspectives.

The approach to politics and meaning elaborated in this paper stands diametrically opposed to the suggestion that, for strategic reasons, feminists ought to frame interventions to *fit* dominant discursive regimes such as neo-liberalism. In opposition to this view I accept Connolly's (1993) proposition that 'to adopt without revision the concepts prevailing in a polity is to accept terms of discourse loaded in favour of established practices'. For example, fitting a pay equity claim to an economic rationalist agenda by arguing that providing resources to

improve women's 'skills' is the first step to getting higher wages (Walby 2008 in Kim 2008: 22), accepts that 'skills' are fixed and readily identifiable entities. Such an argument ignores the large, feminist literature (Steinberg 1990; Armstrong and Armstrong 1990) on the social construction of the concept 'skill', and the poststructuralist challenge to the whole notion of a 'skilled' or 'unskilled' individual (Bacchi 2009: 66; Bastalich 2001). Therefore, buying into established notions of 'skill' may very well act to *reinforce*, rather than *reduce*, asymmetrical power relations among diverse groups of women and men.

None of this analysis is meant to suggest that challenging dominant conceptualisations of key concepts is an easy task, nor that it is always possible. There is no suggestion that particular framings of 'problems' can be dispensed with. Rather, the argument is that reflexive interrogation of particular ways of conceptualising 'problems' can provide a basis for interacting with them, a way of holding them up to scrutiny, so that we can adopt understandings that 'influence the evolution of ongoing practices' (Tanesini 1994: 207) in directions *as close as possible* to those that we deem to be desirable.

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