



## Research paper

## Examining the construction and representation of drugs as a policy problem in Australia's National Drug Strategy documents 1985–2010



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** National drug policies are often regarded as inconsequential, rhetorical documents, however this belies the subtlety with which such documents generate discourse and produce (and re-produce) policy issues over time. Critically analysing the ways in which policy language *constructs* and *represents* policy problems is important as these discursive constructions have implications for how we are invoked to think about (and justify) possible policy responses.

**Methods:** Taking the case of Australia's National Drug Strategies, this paper used an approach informed by critical discourse analysis theory and aspects of Bacchi's (2009) 'What's the Problem Represented to be' framework to critically explore how drug policy problems are constructed and represented through the language of drug policy documents over time.

**Results:** Our analysis demonstrated shifts in the ways that drugs have been 'problematised' in Australia's National Drug Strategies. Central to these evolving constructions was the increasing reliance on evidence as a way of 'knowing the problem'. Furthermore, by analysing the stated aims of the policies, this case demonstrates how constructing drug problems in terms of 'drug-related harms' or alternately 'drug use' can affect what is perceived to be an appropriate set of policy responses. The gradual shift to constructing drug *use* as the policy problem altered the concept of harm minimisation and influenced the development of the concepts of demand- and harm-reduction over time.

**Conclusions:** These findings have implications for how we understand policy development, and challenge us to critically consider how the construction and representation of drug problems serve to justify what are perceived to be acceptable responses to policy problems. These constructions are produced subtly, and become embedded slowly over decades of policy development. National drug policies should not merely be taken at face value; appreciation of the construction and representation of drug problems, and of how these 'problematisations' are produced, is essential.

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## Introduction

Approaches to drug policy vary across nations, and are reflective of unique social, cultural and political contexts (Babor et al., 2010). The formal documentation of national drug strategies has become ubiquitous. Tools such as the International Drug Policy Consortium's (2012) 'Drug Policy Guide' have even been published to assist their development. National drug policies are often regarded as inconsequential, rhetorical documents, especially when they are seen to maintain the status quo. However this belies the subtlety with which such documents generate discourse and produce (and re-produce) policy issues over time. Sometimes a shift

away from previous approaches is made explicit by policy-makers. For example the Obama Administration's inaugural National Drug Control Strategy emphasised a "new direction in drug policy – one based on common sense, sound science, and practical experience" (Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2010, p. iii). The UK's 2010 Drug Strategy similarly emphasised a departure from "those that have gone before" by shifting focus from drug related-harms to promoting 'recovery' (HM Government, 2010, p. 2). Rarely are such discursive shifts (or their implications) made so explicit. More often, shifts are produced over time through subtle, but powerful, underlying assumptions and conceptual logics.

It has been suggested that explaining the development of drug policy should be a central concern for drug policy researchers. Such understanding can help researchers (and advocates) recognise that future change is possible and that drug policy is situated within a wider social and political context (Seddon, 2011). Furthermore, we contend that critically analysing the ways in which policy language *constructs* and *represents* policy problems over time is important

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as these discursive constructions have implications for how we are invoked to think about (and justify) possible policy responses (Bacchi, 2009). Fundamentally, “policies are constrained by the ways in which they represent the problem” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 13). By critically analysing the ways that ‘problematizations’ are produced (and re-produced) through the language of drug policy, we also begin to see how policy problems can be reframed and thought about differently, because policy problems are not fixed, objective ideas. As Fraser and Moore (2011, p. 505) argue, “once we recognise that policy produces problems rather than merely addressing them, and that these acts of production are subtle, complex and sometimes paradoxical, we find before us a new, compelling agenda for drug policy research”.

Taking the case of Australia’s National Drug Strategies, in this study we aim to delve beyond the surface of national drug policy documents. In doing so, we seek to develop better understandings of how drug policy problems are constructed and represented through the language of drug policy over time.

### *The Australian context*

The multiple iterations of Australia’s National Drug Strategy have for over twenty-five years provided an overarching framework (and a shared language) for alcohol, tobacco and other drugs policy in Australia. Attempts have been made to characterise an ‘Australian approach’ to drug policy, which has been said to be underpinned by principles such as harm minimisation, balance, partnerships, and a commitment to evidence-informed policy (Fitzgerald & Sowards, 2002; Single & Rohl, 1997). By the Australian Government’s (2012) own account, the National Drug Strategy has been operating since 1985 as a “cooperative venture” with “bipartisan political support”. Notably, throughout the process of evaluation and renewal of the National Drug Strategies, there has been a desire for the ‘Australian approach’ to be understood as comprehensive and consistent since its inception.

Contrary to this narrative of the ‘Australian approach’, it has been suggested by several commentators that Australia’s drug policy has changed significantly over time as a result of political and ideological contestation. It has been argued that the social conservatism of the ‘Howard Years’ in Australian politics led to a shift in drug policy from the late 1990s onwards, away from harm minimisation and towards zero tolerance (Bessant, 2008; Macintosh, 2006; Mendes, 2001, 2007; Rowe & Mendes, 2004). Commentators have focused on the successive ‘Tough on Drugs’ statements (e.g. Howard, 1997, 1998; Liberal Party, 2001) made throughout the Howard Liberal-National Coalition’s four terms in government (from 1996 to 2007) as evidence of this shift (Bessant, 2008; Mendes, 2001; Penington, 2010; Rowe & Mendes, 2004). They argue that ‘Tough on Drugs’ “overturned” (Bessant, 2008, p. 212) the harm minimisation framework which had previously characterised Australian drug policy. Bessant’s (2008) analysis of the use of metaphor and moralising discourse in Australian drug policy compares the zero tolerance rhetoric used by the Howard Government, with the language of harm minimisation. Bessant (2008, p. 212) concludes that the Liberal Party’s zero tolerance position “became official in the late 1990s”, thereby ‘replacing’ harm minimisation. However, the consistency with which formal National Drug Strategy documents continued to reiterate harm minimisation as the overarching framework for Australia’s drug policy throughout this period (and subsequently) sits uneasily with this assessment. Bessant’s study focuses on the political rhetoric of the Howard Government, but does not include analysis of the ‘formal’ National Drug Strategy documents generated throughout this period. Mendes (2001, pp. 11–12) notes that despite the political statements put forward, the government paid “lip service to the notion of harm minimisation” and did not seek to overturn

its “formal commitment to harm minimisation goals and objectives”. While Bessant (2008), Mendes (2001, 2007, 2004), Fraser and Moore (2011), Bacchi (2009), Keane (2009) and others have examined the discursive construction of Australian drug policy by focusing on particular aspects of Australia’s drug strategy, during specific stages of development, comprehensive analysis of the Australian National Drug Strategy documents from 1985 to the present has not been undertaken.

### **Methods**

This paper explores the hypothesis that there has been a discursive shift in the way that drug policy problems have been constructed and represented through Australia’s National Drug Strategy documents over time. We analyse each iteration of the National Drug Strategy since 1985, using an approach informed by critical discourse analysis theory and aspects of Bacchi’s (2009) ‘What’s the Problem Represented to be’ framework (an approach which focuses on problematisation).

### *Approach*

The notion that “language has meaning beyond mere words” (Aldrich, Zwi, & Short, 2007, p. 125) and fundamentally shapes and constructs the very nature of social life has been the subject of an extensive literature. The language of public policy is no exception. In recent years, the study of public policy discourse has emerged as an important research area in policy studies (see Fischer, 2003; Marston, 2004). This approach to policy analysis takes the view that “public policy is not only expressed in words, it is literally ‘constructed’ through the language(s) in which it is described” (Fischer, 2003, p. 43). That is, “public policy is *made* of language” (Majone, 1989, p. 1, emphasis added). From this perspective, the role of the policy analyst is to scrutinise the way policy problems themselves are constructed and represented (‘problematized’) (Bacchi, 2009), rather than regarding policy as a logical response to an empirically-known, predefined problem.

Critical discourse analysis (see Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993) has emerged from critical theory as a multidisciplinary, socio-political approach to discourse analysis, concerned primarily with “pressing social issues” (van Dijk, 1993, p. 252). The critical discourse analysis approach is a useful tool for policy analysis because, at its core, it aims to examine (and question) the underlying assumptions which are treated as accepted or normal within established discourses (Teo, 2000). By going beyond mere description of language and content, this approach seeks to “drill down into the ordinary use of language to derive meaning from the possibly incidental use of words or expressions” (Aldrich et al., 2007, p. 134). A critical approach to discourse analysis takes the position that policy documents, for example, are not simply objective government publications (Young & McGrath, 2011) but rather texts which contain contested meanings and values, privileging certain positions, whilst silencing others. The critical discourse analysis approach has been used previously to examine policy documents and political discourse (e.g. Aldrich et al., 2007; Smith et al., 2009; Taylor, 2007; Young & McGrath, 2011), whilst aspects of Bacchi’s approach have recently been applied to drug policy in an examination of amphetamine-type stimulant policy in Australia (Fraser & Moore, 2011).

Our approach was informed by critical discourse analysis theory and the first two of Bacchi’s (2009) six questions for policy analysis: (i) what’s the problem represented to be in a specific policy and (ii) what presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the problem? Using these analytic tools, following Smith et al. (2009, p. 220), we asked two questions to frame our analysis: (i)

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