

# The Greek Review of Social Research

Vol 117 (2005)

117 B' Special Issue: Differences in the framing of gender inequality as a policy problem across Europe. Editors: Mieke Verloo and Maro Pantelidou Maloutas



## The MAGEEQ project: identifying contesting meanings of «gender equality»

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doi: [10.12681/grsr.9564](https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9564)

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### To cite this article:

Bacchi, C. (2016). The MAGEEQ project: identifying contesting meanings of «gender equality». *The Greek Review of Social Research*, 117, 221–234. <https://doi.org/10.12681/grsr.9564>

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THE MAGEEQ PROJECT:  
IDENTIFYING CONTESTING MEANINGS  
OF «GENDER EQUALITY»

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ABSTRACT

In this article I engage with MAGEEQ methodology and theoretical assumptions to raise questions around the following themes: intentionality in political practice, meanings of discourse, and understandings of political subjectivity. I make the case that these topics need to be addressed in order to provide insights into the reasons social change is so difficult to achieve. Specifically, I suggest that feminists adopt a practice of «reflexive framing», examining how they represent social «problems», and broaden feminist constituencies through coalition to reduce the possibility of representing «problems» in ways that exclude or harm «others».

There is currently growing concern among feminist researchers that government commitments to gender equality do not necessarily deliver on their promises. At one level this is unsurprising as feminists have often felt disappointment with legislative attempts to address the causes of women's subordination. What is surprising is the coincidence of this view with expressed moves by governments in Europe and in some other countries to adopt a new wide-ranging approach to improving the position of women—gender mainstreaming.

By definition (Council of Europe, 1998) gender mainstreaming is the (re)organization, improvement, development and evaluation of policy processes, so that a gender equality perspective is incorporated in all

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policies at all levels and at all stages, by the actors normally involved in policy-making. Theoretically the intention is to institutionalise gender equality concerns throughout the organization, instead of leaving these matters to specialist «equal opportunity» units, which tend to be marginalised from decision-making. The argument here is that isolating gender equality from the «mainstream» business of an organization has meant that women have been encouraged to adopt existing organizational norms and practices, instead of making organizations women-friendly. According to Teresa Rees (1998, p. 41) a shift to mainstreaming means that «the transformation of institutions becomes the agenda, rather than the continuing attempt to improve women's access and performance within organizations and their hierarchies as they are».

However, there is increasing disquiet about the effects of mainstreaming. In some cases those very units dedicated to pursuing «equal opportunity» have been disbanded on the grounds that they are no longer needed, since «gender» is now «mainstreamed». This same rationale has been used in some cases to attack women-specific measures, including positive/affirmative action (Stratigaki, 2005). The MAGEEQ Project is a product of this disquiet.

#### THE MAGEEQ PROJECT: THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

The MAGEEQ Project rests on the presumption that a key element connected to disappointments with implementation of mainstreaming is the very different ways in which «gender equality» is framed as a problem in different places—that is, the way in which the «problem» of «gender inequality» is discursively constructed. The view is expressed that there is not a general understanding of the concept «mainstreaming» and that this means that, in some locations, there is just a «continuation of previous policies which focus on fitting women into the status quo rather than transforming the status quo» (Verloo, 2004, p. 2). To move forward in considering the usefulness (or lack of usefulness) of mainstreaming programs the project recommends explicit consideration of the diverse meanings of the term «gender equality» and its intended goals or objectives in specific contexts. So far the project has examined these issues in Austria, Greece, Hungary, The Netherlands, Slovenia, Spain and at the level of the European Union. The ultimate goal is «upwards» conceptual elaboration of «how gender inequality is reproduced in society» (Verloo, 2004, p. 3).

To assist in the task of identifying divergences in policy frames around gender equality, the project offers a methodology that produces an empirical

mapping of key «dimensions» within gender equality programs (Verloo, 2004, p. 8). It employs grounded theory methods, supplemented with a computer program (Kwalitan), to identify key concepts, ways of talking about «gender equality» and normative values within government policy texts concerning gender equality and gender mainstreaming. The analysis generates a «super-text», an explicit elaboration of «hidden» textual understandings. The overall task is to clarify competing ideas about what the problem of «gender inequality» is, about who is portrayed as responsible for the problem, about what are represented to be the causes and effects of the «problem», and about what are put forward as «solutions».

MAGEEQ methodology borrows from frame analysis as developed in social movement theory, adding dimensions, such as Balance, aimed at capturing tensions and contradictions in representations of the issue. The dimension of «Voice» is also added because, as is explained, policy frames are different from social movement frames «in that they do not always originate in specific actors, but can commence in institutions such as administrations or cabinets, committees or spokespersons» (Verloo, 2004, p. 10). Hence it is important to identify who has «voice» in the genesis of gender equality policies and mainstreaming initiatives. The methodology carefully builds in analysis of the languages or discourses employed in describing the issue. Finally, the methodology is explicit in its intent to link framing to issues of legitimation and exclusion. The task is to understand why some framings of the issue become dominant and with what effects for which social groups. Power is explicitly a part of the analysis.

Importantly, the project acknowledges that feminism is a «cluster of contesting views», due to «different political and cultural histories and ideologies» (Verloo, 2004, p. 6). Hence, the purpose of the exercise is to create a «productive exchange» on understandings of the problem, rather than to suggest that one particular understanding is the correct one for all women in all places.

#### FRAME ANALYSIS AND PROBLEM REPRESENTATION

Central to understanding the methodology of the MAGEEQ Project is the concept of a «frame». A policy frame is defined as «an organising principle that transforms fragmentary or incidental information into a structured and meaningful policy problem, in which a solution is implicitly or explicitly enclosed» (Verloo, 2004, p. 6; emphasis in original). This definition rests upon constructivist assumptions. That is, in this view, there is no objective

policy «problem» that stands outside of interpretation. Of necessity, social problem talk is social problem interpretation. This view does not contest that there are disturbing conditions that can and do damage specific political actors, but that these conditions cannot be discussed without putting a shape or interpretation to them. Most often this interpretation includes views on causality, specifying or at the very least implying who is responsible for the «problem», and hence who or what needs to change.

«Signification», understood as the imputing of interpretation to «social problems», is thus identified as a key element in politics. Since the interpretation of a «problem» will determine what changes and what stays the same, social research is directed to identifying and comparing competing interpretations of «problems». The purpose of the MAGEEQ Project is to identify and analyse competing interpretations of the «problem» of «gender inequality» in diverse mainstreaming programs.

In my own work in this area (Bacchi, 1999) I use the language of «problem representation» rather than «frame» to refer to competing interpretations of «social problems». My method of analysis, called «what's the problem represented to be?», shares the grounding premises of the MAGEEQ approach. That is, I argue that governments, and indeed all of us, give a particular shape to social «problems» in the ways in which we speak about them and in the proposals we advance to «address» them. This is because what we say we will do about something indicates what we think needs to change and hence what we believe to be the «problem». In this view, governments are active in the creation of particular ways of understanding issues. I call competing understandings of social issues «problem representations» and argue that it is crucially important to identify competing problem representations because they constitute a form of political intervention with a range of effects.

When I say that governments are active in the creation of problem representations, I am not necessarily implying intentionality, though there are certainly times when issues are deliberately represented in particular ways to win votes or to advance other political agendas. The processes of problem representation, however, go deeper than intentionality. Rather than attempting to decode how political agents «frame» an issue for political purposes, the goal of a «what's the problem represented to be?» approach is to probe the deep conceptual underpinnings of problem representations.

While the MAGEEQ Project clearly shares this goal, the employment of frame analysis produces some ambiguity about the relationship between political actors and their interpretations of social «problems». As Thomas

König (2004) suggests, in much framework analysis there is an emphasis on deliberate or conscious shaping of interpretations to achieve specific goals. At times, however, it is less clear if the intent is deliberate or if the interpretations lodge deep within the conceptual schema held by specific actors.

Some of this ambiguity appears in the MAGEEQ Project. For example, in places, the concept of «strategical framing» is employed. This is understood as «strategical efforts to link frames of social movements to those of prospective constituents or adversaries» (Verloo, 2004, p. 5 fn 2). Elaborating the notion of «framing», Verloo specifies a concern «with the (re)construction and negotiation of reality by social/political actors through the use of symbolic tools». She describes «framing» as «the process of constructing, adapting and negotiating frames» (Verloo, 2004, p. 7; emphasis in original). The reference to «frame alignment» in footnote 2 clearly suggests a degree of activist manipulation and intentionality. The language here positions political subjects as active participants in a framing contest.

In her elaboration of frame analysis Verloo acknowledges the research of Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998) on the subject. In places these authors are explicit in endorsing an argument that social actors deliberately «use competing or convergent frames to (re)construct a specific cultural orientation which favours and justifies their own policy position». There is also an implication of conscious intent in the statement that «actors are constrained to adopt realistic viewpoints if they want to stay in the discussion table» of environmental sustainability (Triandafyllidou and Fotiou, 1998, paragraphs 2.11 and 6.6). This argument is similar to the point made by Verloo (2004, pp. 4-5) that in gender mainstreaming «strategical framing refers to a process of linking a feminist goal (such as gender equality) to some major goal of an organization that should engage, or is engaging in gender mainstreaming, thereby securing the allegiance of these organizations to gender mainstreaming». While Triandafyllidou and Fotiou insist that such «framings» are necessary in order to be heard (to «get to the table») Verloo (2004, p. 4) seems to accept the argument of Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2000) that the end result of adopting some frameworks needed to «sell» gender mainstreaming is a limited «integrationist approach». We need more discussion of why this might be the case. Here, attention to the contexts and indeed to the representation of contexts within which mainstreaming has developed requires elaboration.

Triandafyllidou and Fotiou (1998, paragraphs 6.6 and 6.1) make an attempt to broach the issue of the relationship between «frames» as strategic

manoeuvres and as conceptual schema. In one place they state that «frame analysis shows how the discourses of different actors are informed by wider processes of capitalism and modernity». They also explicitly address the need to re-construct the «mental frames» of social actors through «intensive discursive analysis». Refreshingly, the authors spell out exactly how they understand the relationship between «cognitive-discursive frames» and «actors' opinions»: «the actors may perceive selectively and organise their opinions through cognitive-discursive frames that were already present in their minds but, at the same time, they also make use of such frames or construct new ones in order to promote their point of view and channel other people's understanding of it». It would be useful if the MAGEEQ Project explained more clearly its perspective on these issues.

In my view both parts of this analysis –the cognitive-discursive frames and the conscious adaptation of frames for political purposes– require analysis, though I use different language to describe these two aspects of signification. In *The politics of affirmative action: «Women», equality and category politics* (Sage, 1996) I coin the concept of «category politics» to describe the intentional deployment of concepts and categories for political purposes. In *Women, Policy and Politics: the construction of policy problems* (Sage, 1999) I concentrate on «problem representations», which are understandings of problems that lodge deep within social actors' perceptions and have little to do with intentionality. Note, I am not denying that conscious shaping of problem representations takes place at times. We are all acutely aware of political manipulation of issues through representation. However, I believe it is crucial to dig deeper into problem representations in order to understand why social change is so difficult to achieve. Specifically, in my work, I call upon feminist reformers to subject their own problem representations to close scrutiny in order to identify to what extent they may be shaping a proposition out of political necessity or to what extent they may be shaping a proposition in a particular way because they have not examined their own conceptual presuppositions. The next section on discursive representations of affirmative action pursues this point.

#### THE MEANINGS OF «DISCOURSE»

The way in which a focus on problem representations differs from much of frame theory is illustrated through the different understandings of discourse employed in these approaches. I mentioned above that one strength of the MAGEEQ Project is the careful attention to discursive elements of specific

policy frames. The template (Appendix I) provides pointers to the understanding of discourse employed in the project. Under «Form» attention is directed to «what are the conviction techniques that can be found in the text?» I understand this question to refer to rhetorical devices deployed in the shaping of arguments. There is also analysis of texts to identify gendered dichotomies and metaphors.

This understanding of discourse lines up with Vivian Burr's (1995) conception of «discourse analysis», a close examination of patterns of speech and linguistic devices. Burr contrasts this understanding of discourse with another tradition she labels «analysis of discourses», which she describes as a political theoretical focus on the ways in which issues are given a particular shape within a particular social setting. This is the tradition within which I would locate a «what's the problem represented to be?» approach. The goal of this exercise is to identify aspects of the «political nature» of systems of thought (Roberts, 2004, p. 34). I am not suggesting that there is one proper definition of discourse (see Bacchi, 2000), nor that one of the two tasks identified above is more important than the other. In fact, I would suggest that both tasks are a necessary part of social analysis. However, the kinds of discourses I concentrate on are those that form part of a social unconscious, not those that are marshalled for political effect.

As an example, in other work (Bacchi, 2004) I explore the deep conceptual roots of current dominant descriptions of affirmative action as «preferential treatment». I show that this understanding of affirmative action is ubiquitous, appearing both among its opponents and among most of its supporters. I explore how this understanding of affirmative action rests upon an assumption that basically equal opportunity works but that, because women face specific disadvantages, they need «special help» or «preferential treatment» to even up the competition. I counterpoise this interpretation of affirmative action with an argument that social differentials pervade the law (Black, 1989), and that power and bias are at work in appointment procedures. With this interpretation affirmative action is social justice, not «preferential treatment».

In this work I also discuss the importance of contesting a «preferential treatment» view of affirmative action. I illustrate how this particular representation of the problem keeps change within limits by allowing those in power to retain control over decisions about how much «preference» anyone deserves and when such «preferential treatment» should cease. I also show how the discursive construction of affirmative action as preferential treatment alienates the «targets» of the reform since no one in Western



industrialized countries likes to be seen to be a supplicant. Because «targets» are alienated, they disassociate themselves from the reform, which fails as a result. Consequently, change is kept within limits. Conceptualising affirmative action as «preferential treatment» therefore shapes the discussion in ways that work toward de-legitimizing the reform and rendering it ineffective. Within this understanding of affirmative action it becomes impossible to question the standards applied to those currently holding positions of power and authority, or which continue to be used in hiring and promoting.

The point here is to try to understand how, if my analysis of the effects of the discursive construction of affirmative action as preferential treatment is correct, this understanding has been taken up by those who claim to support substantive equality. My argument is that equal opportunity premises are deeply entrenched within Western culture. In my terms these premises are discourses, deeply established conceptual schema that influence how problems are understood (problem representations). Vivian Burr (1995, p. 38) makes the point that «prevailing or dominant discourses are often tied to social arrangements and practices which support the status quo and maintain the position of powerful groups». In this understanding discourses «are intimately connected to the way that society is organised and run». Since we live in a market system, equal opportunity is produced as a taken-for-granted «truth».

The way in which equal opportunity discourses operate to produce an understanding of affirmative action as «preferential treatment» is useful in understanding competing understandings of mainstreaming. The MAGEEQ project shows that in some mainstreaming models integration of women into capitalist processes is put forward as the desired goal. This is the integrationist model of mainstreaming, conventionally set against the transformative vision endorsed by Rees (1998). A question arises – why do some women and some declared feminists support the integrationist model? My analysis suggests that one reason this is so is the pervasiveness of equal opportunity discourses and their general acceptance. That is, for many women and indeed for many feminists, integrating women into the labour force constitutes what is meant by «gender equality». Hence, it stands to reason that they would be content with a model of mainstreaming that declares this to be its objective. This level of analysis is necessary, I believe, to avoid falling into the tendency to imply that some feminists simply have got it «wrong».

The purpose behind an analysis of discourse/s as deep conceptual schema is to assist in identifying the processes through which hegemonic meanings are maintained. On the one hand, it could be argued that those in positions of

influence impose their problem representations upon social actors, implying that in this instance some women are dupes of those who have persuaded them to accept a course of action that is detrimental to their interests. However, this description is too instrumental. Rather we need to reflect upon the extent to which we are all «in» discourses that shape and limit the possibilities of «what can be said», without suggesting that discourses are monolithic. A study of discourse/s, in the sense developed here, involves a dual problematic: what the subject is able to say, and what the subject is permitted to say (Bacchi, 1999, p. 41). The first half of this problematic emphasizes the power of discourses to «construct certain possibilities for thought. They order and combine words in particular ways and exclude or displace other combinations. We do not speak the discourse. The discourse speaks us» (Ball, 1990, p. 18). The second half alerts us to the differential access of people to the institutions that produce discourse. Theorists, in my view, need to maintain this dual problematic.

#### DISCOURSES AND SUBJECTIVITY

Linked to the above understanding of discourses as deep conceptual schema is a particular theorizing of political subjectivity. In *Women, policy and politics* (1999) I suggest that a key component of studying problem representations is addressing how specific representations constitute the subjects they address, and the effects this produces on subjects' self-perceptions. While the MAGEEQ Project explicitly investigates «attribution of causality/responsibility», the topic of subjectivity does not appear in the matrix. In my view such an analysis is necessary in order to understand how hegemonic discourses achieve their power.

Descriptions/representations of «problems» usually have built into them implications about who or what is responsible for the «problem». It is crucially important to identify this for several reasons. Targeting an individual (eg. a youth, an addict, a «problem gambler», an unemployed person, a «dysfunctional family») as the problem may well mean that the problem continues – that is, that the underlying causes of the problem go unaddressed. It can also focus attention on those targeted members of society in unflattering and stigmatising ways. The following examples illustrate this dynamic. They also show the points made above – that problem representations operate at a non-conscious level. Hence it is crucially important to consider the impact of problem representations on subjects' self-perceptions.

For example, Gillian Fulcher (1989) argues that the discourse surrounding education policy and disability construes disabled children as the «problem», distracting attention from the disabling structures that surround them. Fulcher explains how this representation of the «problem» allows change to be kept within narrow limits, with meliorative rather than transformative policy interventions. She also notes that representing the disabled as the «problem» allows government «responses» to be seen as benevolent, generous and compassionate, reinforcing power relations. If the «problem» were represented differently, acknowledging the institutional and built-environmental privileges accorded the able-bodied, there would no longer be the implication that the disabled are recipients of hand-outs. Rather, their equal citizenship would be affirmed. Fulcher's clear and elaborate explanation of the operation of problem representations does not hinge upon an assumption of intentionality. Rather her analysis highlights the operation of deeply embedded views that «dis»ability is «lesser» and «other». Unsurprisingly, this means that often the «dis»abled disassociate themselves from this status-attribution.

As another example, those who have been involved in girls' education are well aware that many early reform efforts, such as programs to «encourage» them to enrol in non-traditional study areas, implied that girls were the problem, that they were «in deficit», lacked self-esteem or ambition (Bacchi, 1999, Chapter 6). Those programs also implied that non-traditional study areas were more valuable than traditional study areas. Again, this was not an intentional delimiting of the efforts to improve girls' career prospects; rather it indicated the culture-wide privileging of careers and subject-choices associated with «hard» science and «rational» technology. The fact that many girls internalise these values and disassociate themselves from «feminine» pursuits is an important effect of this problem representation. It helps enshrine the hegemony of instrumental and rationalist discourses.

In both the «dis» ability example and the girls' education example, the targets of the policies are constituted as deficient in specific ways. That is, the identified problem representations involve an attribution of responsibility that denigrates the abilities of girls and the «dis»abled. Identifying the ways in which subjects are constituted within problem representations is important because this effect can lead members of targeted groups either to see themselves as the problem, or to disassociate themselves from the reform because they don't want to be seen as the problem. As in the case of affirmative action discussed above the discursive

construction of a «problem» can lead «target» groups to disassociate themselves from the reform, instantiating the social and political status quo.

The insight here is a profoundly important one—policy plays a central role in how people feel about themselves and about social issues. Policy creates subjectivities, and certain problems representations create particular subjectivities with specific political effects. This dynamic needs to be tracked in order to understand the reasons social change is so difficult to achieve.

Of course important questions are raised here about the possibility of change within this understanding of discourse/s. Are we left with a closed «discursive» shop, within which it is impossible to move? Here I find the work of poststructuralist psychologists like Bronwyn Davies (1994) useful. Davies is highly sensitive to the constraints imposed by constitutive discourses, the shaping impact on subjects of cultural narratives. She focuses on individuals operating within a society suffused by discourses that define their very being. In this analysis, discourses are not closed systems, however. Rather they «open up or make possible certain subject positions through and in terms of which we interact with the world» (Davies, 1994, p. 23). The goal becomes finding ways to position oneself differently in relation to existing discourses (Davies, 1994, p. 26). In this view there is no outside to discourse, but one can work to identify the discourses within which one is positioned and can use them selectively. With this understanding a subject emerges who is simultaneously made a speaking subject through discourse and who is subjected to those discourses.

Discourse in Davies, as in my own work, is much more than language. It is systems of thought shaping our very self-understanding. The implications for political action are critical. Centrally, political subjects must scrutinize their own discursive positionings. As Davies (1994, pp. 45-46) puts it, «The viewer must catch themselves in the act of seeing in particular ways». «Detailed introspection», «a consciousness turned upon itself», becomes necessary political practice in any, including any feminist, reform agenda. Feminists cannot assume that there is an accessible outside to the deep conceptual schema that affect their diagnoses of social «problems»; rather they need to scrutinize carefully their own preconceptions in order to identify those that may reinforce and those that may challenge practices of subordination. Therefore, any methodology concerned with feminist agendas for change needs to build into it the space to interrogate all, including their own, problem representations. I call this kind of introspection «reflexive framing», and consider in the final section necessary prerequisites to pursue this objective.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR MAGEEQ AND FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING

The MAGEEQ project holds great promise for advancing informed discussion of competing understandings of gender equality. The methodology will assist in identifying the specific ways in which the problem is framed in specific contexts. The matrix (Appendix 1) asks a whole swathe of «sensitizing questions» to identify different diagnoses and prognoses, different positions on the mechanisms responsible for reproducing gender inequality, different understandings of the structures of inequality, and the normative bases of these competing policy frames.

I have identified several areas where I would like to see some theoretical clarification. Specifically I suggest the need to elaborate the form of «discourse analysis» that is employed, explaining in particular the kind of relationship assumed to exist between social actors and discourses. The concept of strategic framing also requires elaboration, so that readers can better understand if the research is intended to suggest that the policy frames outlined are simply the result of intentional framing, or if they have a basis in the conceptual schema of the actors concerned. If the latter, a method of «reflexive framing» needs to become part of the analysis, so that all feminists are encouraged to scrutinize the presuppositions grounding their problem representations.

On this point, Verloo (2004, p. 2) mentions the need for wider and stronger participation of citizens in mainstreaming processes. She bemoans the relative lack of mainstreaming tools that involve consultation and participation. I share this concern and would emphasize that one important reason to increase the numbers of women's voices in any social change agenda is precisely to lessen the chances of adopting taken-for-granted cultural and class-based presuppositions in one's analysis of the «problem» of «gender inequality». In my own work (1999), which examines competing problem representations in some central areas of women's policy, I was often kept «honest» through reading analyses from feminists and women outside my own perspectives. Broadening the feminist constituency through coalition is therefore an essential part of a project for social change. Increasingly feminists are acknowledging the need to find ways to link «understanding of dimensions of gender inequality as related to other structural inequalities» (Verloo, 2004, p. 3); however, this important goal is unlikely to be advanced unless feminists explicitly create the means to expand the numbers of voices heard in deliberations on the «problem» of

«gender inequality». This political intervention is a necessary prerequisite to advancing the «upward» conceptual elaboration of the factors reproducing gender inequality, heralded in the MAGEEQ Project.

I would also like to see more attention paid to the issue of subjectification. As discussed earlier, problem representations constitute subjects in particular ways, and how subjects are constituted produces important political repercussions. For example, there may well be reasons some women will not want to challenge «normative» structures and may well be satisfied with «inclusion». Unless we reflect on processes of subjectification we will be unable to understand and reflect on how this happens and what it means for those pursuing change agendas.

My suggestions do not put in question the obvious value of the MAGEEQ Project as outlined. Rather they put on the agenda areas of analysis that require more discussion and more development further down the track.

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