

## **Towards an ontological politics of drug policy: Intervening through policy, evidence and method**

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### *Abstract*

Increasing attention has been paid to matters of *ontology*, and its accompanying *politics*, in the drug policy field. In this commentary, we consider what an 'ontological politics' might mean for how we think about what drug policy is and what it might become, as well as for how we think about (and do) research in drug policy. Thinking ontopolitically questions the tacitly accepted status of 'drug problems', calls into question the realist presumptions which underpin much drug policy analysis, and provokes thinking about what counts as 'evidence' and the 'evidence-based policy' paradigm itself. We call attention to the inventive possibilities of method when grappling with the challenges thrown forth by the ontological turn, with a renewed focus on practice and relations. An ontological politics disrupts consensual claims and draws critical attention to objects that might otherwise appear 'finished' or 'ready-made', not least the things we call 'drugs' and 'drug policy'. Working with 'drug policy multiples' invites new thinking and dialogue to provoke an ethico-political mode of intervention in the field of drug policy and drugs research.

### *Key words*

Ontological politics, performativity, evidence, method, Annemarie Mol, John Law, Carol Bacchi.

## **Towards an ontological politics of drug policy: Intervening through policy, evidence and method**

In the field of drug policy research, and in the emerging field of critical drug studies in particular, there has been increasing attention paid to matters of *ontology* and its accompanying *politics* (Duff, 2013, 2020; Fraser, 2020; Fraser et al., 2014; Vitellone, 2017). But as Isabelle Stengers (2018b, p.83) notes, “ontology has many meanings, as does politics”. So, what is meant by ‘ontological politics’?

In her seminal piece, ‘Ontological politics. A word and some questions’, Annemarie Mol argues:

*Ontological politics* is a composite term. It talks of *ontology*—which in standard philosophical parlance defines what belongs to the real, the conditions of possibility we live with. If the term ‘ontology’ is combined with that of ‘politics’ then this suggests that the conditions of possibility are not given. That reality does not precede the mundane practices in which we interact with it, but is rather shaped within these practices. So the term *politics* works to underline this active mode, this process of shaping, and the fact that its character is both open and contested. (Mol, 1999, pp.74-75, emphasis original)

Crucial here are three things: the conditions of possibility we live with are not immutable; that which we take as the real is not anterior to, but rather made in, practices; and because realities are enacted in a variety of practices, realities are multiple, continually in-the-making, and might also be made otherwise (Law, 2004; Mol, 1999, 2002).

In the field of public policy, and drug policy, it is relatively uncontested that ‘reality’ might be alterable. Technological developments, policy and practice interventions, advocacy and community initiatives, and drug law reform efforts are all premised on the *possibility of interference*, working on the assumption “that the world might be mastered, changed, controlled” to some degree (Mol, 1999, p.75). We are fairly comfortable with the notion that reality is not destiny and that the future might be shaped, acted upon and made to be different from the present. Indeed, in a field so often characterised by morality politics and experiences of stigma, injustice and ill-health, we are motivated

by the possibility of other drug policy futures. But the challenge posed by the notion of an ontological politics is somewhat different. As Mol (1999, p.75) notes, the prevailing acceptance that reality is open to be being made otherwise by acting in the present to alter the future is usually accompanied by the underlying assumption that “the building blocks of reality [are] permanent: they [can] be uncovered by means of sound scientific investigation”; that reality is *out there* waiting to be discovered, acted upon and altered. Moreover, it is generally assumed that reality is not only out there, but also *singular*. The proposal of an ontological politics challenges the often unexamined assumption that we are conjoined in an effort to change *the* (singular, pre-existing) reality with which we live, and draws attention to the political implications of taking realities as continually *done* and *enacted* rather than complete and observed (Mol, 1999). Doing away with the assumption of singularity opens up the possibility that “different constellations of practice and their hinterlands might make it possible to enact realities in different ways” (Law, 2004, p.66).

### **Towards an ontological politics of policy**

In this commentary, we consider what is at issue for drug policy in light of this proposal of an ontological politics. There is an established body of thinking for us to draw on as we undertake this task. Scholars working in the field of science and technology studies have, for many decades now, destabilised the assumption of a fixed, stable and anterior reality, arguing instead that reality is “historically, culturally, materially located” (Mol, 1999, p.75). Mol (1999, p.75) states that this is a crucial move, for “if reality is *done*, if it is historically, culturally and materially *located*, then it is also *multiple*.” An “alternative metaphysics” (Law, 2004, p.67) has been put forward in which *multiple* practices – including the knowledge-making practices of science and social science – are said to work *relationally* to enact *multiple*, emergent and contingent situated realities (see Barad, 2007; Latour, 1987; Latour & Woolgar, 2013; Law, 2004; Law & Urry, 2004; Mol, 2002). To talk of *doing multiple realities* pushes us, as John Law (2012, p.156) notes, “outside the comfortable envelope of Euro-American common-sense realism”. It destabilises the assumption that there is a single, coherent

reality of definite form 'out there', independent of our actions, preceding our attempts to know it (Law, 2012).

But to talk of enactment of multiple realities *does not deny the real*; nor does it deny, as some have presumed, the "very possibility of knowledge" (Stevens, 2020). Far from it. It means that "*ontology* is not given in the order of things, but that instead, *ontologies* are brought into being, sustained, or allowed to wither away in common, day-to-day, sociomaterial practices" (Mol, 2002, p.6). To be clear, this is not an epistemological argument about there being multiple perspectives of a single reality but rather an *ontological claim* about the world as "multiply produced" in practices and relations (Law & Urry, 2004, p.397). This claim is "neither relativist nor realist" (Law & Urry, 2004, p.395), as some have sought to argue in relation to drug policy (Stevens, 2020). Rather, the crucial move is to say that "*reality is a relational effect*" (Law & Urry, 2004, p.395, emphasis original); entities are no less real, but they are nonetheless *made*.

Thus, to talk of realities as *enacted* is to highlight the *performativity* of everyday practices and the "*accomplished ontology of entities*" (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013, p.333, emphasis original), and especially the forms of coordination work required to accomplish the appearance of singular-multiple objects in practice (Mol, 2002). It shifts our analytic focus from "presumed objects to the *relations* involved in their becoming" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p.33, emphasis original). It prompts us to explore patterns of relations and how they are assembled in particular sites (Law, 2012), observing how objects, things, and that which we take as the real are done differently by unravelling the practices in which they figure (Law & Mol, 2008). How an object is enacted into being, then, is a question that is "inseparable from the knowledge practices and technical infrastructures that apprehend and mediate it" (Race, 2018, p.85). A myriad of everyday practices and assemblages of relations help perform different (but related) objects and realities which co-exist in the present, and which in turn have constitutive effects, interfering with each other and working to make some realities "present or absent, visible or invisible, dominant or marginal, more real or less real" (Law, 2004, 2012;

Moser, 2008, p.109). Thus, by interfering with assumptions about a fixed, singular and prior world, the notion of an ontological politics attunes us to the productive capacity and constitutive effects of practices, and how a multiplicity of realities are being done in complex relations, opening up questions about these various enactments, and, importantly, drawing attention to *how* they are being performed (and hold together) in one way or another (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019).

This thinking has profound *political* implications, including for policy. If realities – the ontologies of entities – are not singular and given but situated accomplishments, then we can think about not only how worlds are being made but also the worlds we want to “*help to make*” (Law & Urry, 2004, p.391; Mol, 2013). To say that realities are enacted is also to imply that there might be various political reasons for enacting different realities, and that these might be opened up for critical interrogation and debate (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016; Law, 2004). While the field of science and technology studies has tended to focus on the performativity of scientific and other knowledge-making practices, our emphasis here is on the constitutive effects of *policy*, seen here as a productive network of relations and material-discursive practices, thus conceptualising policy as a distinct form of evidence-making and thus an ontological intervention. In this way, the proposition of ontological multiplicity prompts a particular kind of political questioning for policy: “*Where are the options? What is at stake? Are there really options? How should we choose?*” (Mol, 1999, p.79, emphasis original). The profound challenge posed by an ontological politics of policy is how we might *interfere* (Law, 2004). We therefore hone our attention in relation to the hinterlands which make up ‘policy assemblages’ (Fox & Alldred, 2020) and how these afford policies their capacities to intervene as well as govern in particular ways. In considering this challenge in relation to the field of drug policy, we draw attention to some ontological questions for policy, evidence and method.

### **The ontopolitics of policy**

An ontological politics productively interferes with what drug policy is and what it might become, and has implications for how we think about (and do) research for drug policy. While drug policy might be

routinely concerned with a conventional politics, we suggest that what is distinctively at stake in light of the proposal of an ontological politics is *a politics of the real* (Law, 2012). A body of critical drugs research associated with what has been broadly called the ‘ontological turn’ (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013) has already begun to productively “reimagine” (Law & Urry, 2004, p.390) drug policy worlds, provoking new thinking about drugs and addictions, drug effects, drug consumption events, drug using subjectivities, drug technologies, and drug policies and interventions (e.g. Dennis, 2019a; Dilkes-Frayne & Duff, 2017; Duff, 2013, 2014; Dwyer & Moore, 2013; Farrugia, 2017; Fraser & Moore, 2011b; Fraser et al., 2014; Fraser & Seear, 2011; Fraser & valentine, 2008; Gomart, 2002; Keane, 2002; Lancaster et al., 2017a; Pienaar & Dilkes-Frayne, 2017; Race, 2014, 2018; Rhodes, 2018; Rhodes et al., 2019; Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019; Savic et al., 2018; Seear, 2020; Vitellone, 2017). This work destabilises taken-for-granted assumptions about ‘drugs’ as pre-existing objects of investigation, and instead notices their making and effects as fluid and contingently enacted by empirically attending to the performativity of practices and the relations at play in specific sites, events, and bodily arrangements. The performativity of research methods and evidence-making in relation to drugs and addictions, and science, technology and interventions in relation to these, is also a focus (e.g. Barnett et al., 2018; Fraser, 2015, 2020; Hart & Moore, 2014; Lancaster et al., 2019; Lancaster et al., 2017c; Moore, 2011; Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019, 2020). As Fraser (2020, p.2, emphasis original) notes: “the central shift mapped here traces a path from a fruitful focus on the action of the social in shaping the world to a necessary return to attending to materiality, albeit materiality in a new mode. This path also takes in a shift to the role of research in constituting the objects it studies, *even in their materiality*, and to its associated political implications”. We can see, then, how the notion of an ontological politics is being taken up in various ways to “problematise foundational concepts in alcohol and other drug research” (Seear, 2020) raising a number of issues for further critical consideration for drug policy.

Let us consider how policy assemblages enact *problems*. Generally speaking, it is assumed that policies are governments’ best attempts to respond to societal problems, which are thought to exist outside

the policy process waiting to be identified and solved (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Policy research is often engaged in the activity of describing presumed pre-existing problems, and designing, implementing and evaluating responses to these. In the context of the 'problem-solving' paradigm which dominates contemporary policy rhetoric, there is a *symbiosis* of problems and policy research (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). This 'problem-solving' paradigm assumes that policy problems are recognisable and given conditions, and that by applying the best available 'evidence' to the problem at hand we can know 'what works' and how to respond (Bacchi, 2009, 2018).

The proposal of an ontological politics shifts the ground of our thinking about drug problems. Thinking ontopolitically questions the tacitly accepted status of 'drug problems' to interrogate how these are constituted, in specific practices, in particular ways, with a range of effects, within drug policy proposals, laws and interventions (e.g. Bacchi, 2015; Bacchi, 2018; Fraser & Moore, 2011a; Lancaster et al., 2015a; Lancaster et al., 2015b; Pienaar et al., 2018; Seear, 2020; Seear & Fraser, 2014). This helps notice the political effects that flow from knowing 'drug problems' in different ways, for example with regard to how people who inject drugs are constituted as particular kinds of governable subjects (e.g. Fraser & Seear, 2011; Lancaster et al., 2015b) and for how problematisations mediate what is made thinkable about drugs and their effects (e.g. Fraser & Moore, 2011a). It allows us to see how we are *governed* through problematisations (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). As Fraser and Moore (2011a, p.505) have argued, "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, for investigating and understanding matters of concern as they are made in drug policy".

At issue here, then, is one of the foundational building blocks of drug policy analysis. Rather than seeing drug policy as an attempt to respond to 'problems-that-exist-out-there', we can start by asking what is *being done* in policy practices. Perhaps most obviously, the 'problem' of 'illicit drug use' is one such reality being made and remade over and over again in the work of drug policy. 'Illicit drug use' is



constituted in multiple regulatory practices that continually set ‘drugs’ apart from ‘medicine’; that designate, for instance, the syringe as a criminal object in one person’s hand and as a life-saving device in another’s; that punish the self-administration of a substance in some settings while prescribing it in others; that authorize for pharmaceutical production and normalized consumption substances that are elsewhere produced in clandestine labs or as illicit crops and eradicated from circulation. ‘Illicit drug use’ is not a natural problem for policy governance, but a becoming, an accomplishment.

Approaching drug policy ontopolitically is not to do away with the idea of things, like substances, being made problematic or to dismiss the notion of ‘problems’ from the lexicon of drug policy research. It is not to suggest that there are not troubling conditions deserving of amelioration (Bacchi, 2009). Rather, the aim is to *unsettle* the dominance of ‘problems-that-exist-out-there’ as a framing of policy and of policy research, to critically consider such objects as “within the projects to which they are attached” (Bacchi, 2018, p.4). Too often, the desire to find and test ‘what works’ to ‘solve problems’ forecloses a range of prior questions about the ‘problem’ to be ‘addressed’ and how it is being made inside a policy assemblage. Foreclosing these prior questions delimits possibilities for drug policy to be *made otherwise*, by reproducing it as a particular matter of concern. The rendering of ‘illicit drug use’ might foreclose, for example, drug policy futures affording safer supply, safer consumption spaces, access to injectable and other treatments, as well as access to work, social inclusion and citizenship. Ontopolitical questioning is not an invitation to merely theorise but an invitation to analyse forms of authority and their material effects, thereby accentuating the inherently political nature of policy work (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

We acknowledge that destabilising the foundational assumption that drug problems are exogenous, out there, waiting to be addressed, may be particularly challenging when researchers and practitioners are seeking to ameliorate or ‘solve’ these in relation to their ill health or social effects (even here, we can see ‘the problem of drugs’ being delimited in relation to ‘health’ and ‘social’ effects in particular, and political, ways). The challenge posed by the ontological turn calls into question the

(sometimes seemingly unshakable) realist presumptions which underpin much drug policy analysis. The tendency to hold-on to realist presumptions of an underlying singular reality of a 'drug problem' that is in the process of being discovered and addressed enacts a *denial* of the possibility of multiple situated realities of drugs and of drug problems (Stevens, 2020), which instead emerge as matters of their implementation events (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019). To deny the multiple and coexisting situated realities of drugs is a failure to appreciate the political implications of how drug policy worlds are in-the-making in different terms.

Fundamentally, an ontological politics destabilises "relations of governing that privilege those who get to set the 'problems' to be 'solved'" (Bacchi, 2018). Perhaps most challenging is acknowledging the ways that our own assumptions, and the categories and concepts we unquestionably deploy as starting points for policy analysis, might actually serve to re-produce troubling conditions. Reconfiguring the 'problem-solving paradigm' as an ontological politics actively reconsiders the "operation of frameworks of meaning" to enable us to see that the change we want to see in the world – the ways we propose to 'solve' 'problems' – might actually rely on the same deleterious conceptual logics that underpin the conditions and injustices we seek to ameliorate (Bacchi, 2018, p.10).

When we can see the ways in which assumptions about the realities of drug policy 'problems' might reproduce troubling conditions or close off other ways of thinking and doing, these issues cannot be dismissed as mere matters of rhetoric or disciplinary difference. By holding open the contested nature of 'problems' we can no longer assume that a specific policy – be it in relation to medication-assisted treatment of opioid dependence, cannabis legalisation, the criminalisation of drug trafficking, supervised injecting facilities, or compulsory treatment – is a necessary 'response' (Bacchi, 2009). It also challenges the "policy 'specialism'" (Bacchi, 2009) of drug policy itself, asking us to critically consider the material-discursive consequences of transforming issues of poverty, unemployment, inequality, marginalisation, social disconnection, or desire for pleasure, into 'problems' for 'drug policy'. This mode of thinking puts into question every proposal for change.

## The ontopolitics of evidence

Troubling the foreclosures of the 'problem-solving' paradigm also prompts questioning of what counts as 'evidence' and the 'evidence-based policy' paradigm itself. Evidence-based policy is the catch-cry of the drug policy field. Many scholars working in drug policy research are seeking to generate not only 'gold-star evidence' but better ways of 'translating' that 'evidence' into policy and practice. Given this, Stevens (2020) has suggested that "ontologically oriented questions are not likely to be very useful in creating knowledge that successfully challenges dominant accounts in the evidence-saturated world of policy making." On the contrary, interrogating the ontological matters at stake in relation to evidence takes us even further by usefully rethinking what have hitherto been regarded as 'barriers' to evidence-based policy (Lancaster & Rhodes, 2020), challenging the very premise of the evidence-based policy paradigm and critically considering the implications and effects of this dominant mode of governance for drug policy.

Reconfiguring 'evidencing' as a socio-political practice allows us to think more productively about how knowledge comes to bear on policy decision-making, and the contested, relational and highly situated nature of evidence (Lancaster, 2016; Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019). An ontological politics challenges the presupposition that a particular kind of knowledge (the thing we call 'evidence') is fixed, stable, inherently useful and superior for policy decision-making. The thing we call 'evidence' is *enacted* and *performed* as legitimate, authoritative and useful in drug policy processes (Lancaster, 2016; Lancaster et al., 2017b). This enactment takes place and is stabilised within a hinterland of practices which make-up the 'evidence-based policy' world. Scholars have critically examined the conditions under which claims about uniformity, objectivity and universality of 'evidence' are obtained (Timmermans & Berg, 2003), and the ways in which the thing we call 'evidence' is constituted by specific policy practices (which, in turn, make and sustain a set of assumptions about knowledge and rationales for policy action) (Lancaster, 2016). Thus, as the proposition of an ontological politics entails, 'evidence-based policy' is both relational and performative; it is "a network into which ideas, technologies and humans

are ‘enrolled’, but which has to be constantly sustained through continued ‘performance’ of their interrelationships” (Harrison & Checkland, 2009, p.137; Lancaster, 2016). The ‘objective’ and ‘superior’ status of research ‘evidence’ is ground which has yet to be conceded by many who advocate for ‘evidence-based’ drug policy, despite a growing body of research oriented to investigating evidence as performed and performative, and recognizing multiple forms of knowledge as legitimate for informing policy (see Dwyer & Moore, 2013; Fraser et al., 2014; Lancaster, 2014; Lancaster et al., 2019; Lancaster et al., 2017b; Moore, 2011; Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019).

As drug policy researchers working in the dominant ‘evidence-based drug policy’ paradigm, we are often positioned as “discoverers” (or purveyors) of “evidence” (Bacchi, 2012, p.142), put forward as depoliticised, objective and rational brokers of knowledge about ‘what works.’ But, as we are arguing, ‘evidence-based policy’ is a *political* enterprise. If, as Bacchi (2012, p.142, emphasis original) argues, “*research is an active component in the shaping of different realities* and therefore is, at its core, a *political practice*” then “it becomes important *politically* to *contest* the view that research produces disinterested, objective contributions to solving clearly observable societal problems.” In short, it becomes important to contest the depoliticised merit of the ‘evidence-based’ drug policy endeavour and instead approach this set of material-discursive practices as a productive network of relations, bringing into question the realities it makes and interrogating its political effects.

Acknowledging – as the ontological turn would have us do – that the thing we call ‘evidence’ is not fixed, but rather constituted by specific performances and practices, raises questions for drug policy. Borrowing from and reconfiguring Sheila Jasanoff’s (2013, p.16) discussion of democracy, one might say that if we take the object of ‘evidence’ to be “essentially contested,” then the focus of inquiry shifts from ‘how do we achieve this thing called “evidence-based drug policy”?’ to ‘what is this thing called “evidence-based drug policy” that we hope to achieve anyway?’ We can therefore ask, how might we want to *interfere*? This question may provoke us to consider the “wavering” (Callon, 1999, p.82) boundary between science and society, and specialists and non-specialists, thus shedding light

on issues of not only 'evidence' and 'expertise' but also 'participation' and 'deliberation' (Lancaster et al., 2018). One way to reconfigure 'evidence-based drug policy' in ways that brings 'evidence' to bear in new ways, enacted in relation to a broader range of ethico-political concerns, for example, might be to rethink participation in drug policy in more expansive ways that reconfigure the relations between science and democracy, and expertise and publics (see also Chilvers & Kearnes, 2015; Fraser et al., 2018; Lancaster et al., 2018; Ritter et al., 2018). A flatter ontology of 'evidence' and expertise might open up new possibilities for drug policy reform and enable a more responsive drug policy by disrupting consensual claims as to 'what counts' and what does not (Stengers, 2005; Whatmore, 2009).

### **The ontopolitics of method**

For drug policy researchers, this possibility of interference in the making of drug policy worlds also raises questions about method and research practice. At issue here are ontological claims about what method is and does (Latour & Woolgar, 2013; Law, 2004, 2009). If, as we outlined earlier, reality is a relational effect, then the realities of 'drugs' and 'drug problems' are also produced in and stabilised through the extended sets of relations of drug policy research. In this sense, methods are not neutral; they are "never innocent" (Law & Urry, 2004, p.403).

The claim that methods do not merely describe a pre-existing world but enact different realities is *political*: "how we do research has political implications—which of course also have *material consequences*" (Bacchi, 2012; Ronnblom, 2012, p.122, emphasis added). It is imperative, then, to notice *how* methods matter, and the effects they make (Ronnblom, 2012). As Nicole Vitellone (2011, p.204) has noted of drug policy research, what is at issue here "is not a politics of method but method as politics". This is a move away from epistemological concerns (focused on the apparent accuracy of research measures and representations) towards ontological concerns (focused on how objects, subjects and realities come to be through research measures and practices, and the material effects of these) (Mol, 2002; Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013).

This is not without its challenges. Helen Keane (2018, p.67) has commented of the drugs field that “theoretical frameworks are more readily refreshed and renewed than methods are”. Keane suggests, for instance, that “it is not uncommon to read articles which combine a theoretical commitment to new materialism and ontological perspectives with a *standard account* [our emphasis] of qualitative methodology based on interviews, surveys or discourse analysis”. Keane is not suggesting that we ought to simply abandon ‘conventional methods’. Rather, she is suggesting that methods might be “re-used inventively” (Keane, 2018, p.67).

We call attention to the inventive possibilities of method when grappling with the challenges thrown forth by the ontological turn, with a renewed focus on practice and relations. For instance, in her studies of ‘drugged pleasures’ as matters of bodily entanglement in more-than-human worlds, Fay Dennis (2019a) has conceived of method as a “kind of becoming-with”, noticing bodies, in flux, as assemblages that are “done in practice (learning to affect and be affected)”, and deploying arts-based and inventive data generation methods as collaborative and embodied experiments which “intervene with” drug problems (Dennis, 2019b, p.135). Research is not separate to, but rather *inside* these assemblages. Nicole Vitellone too has taken up questions concerning human and non-human relations, developing research methods that seek to explore the complexity of relations between subject and object to question how these come to be known. Following Law and Urry (2004), Vitellone asks what might be made through the relations of investigation, in her case enacting the syringe as an empirical object and generating a methodology of the ‘syringe-in-use’. Vitellone’s (2017, p.115) experimental method of “making social science *with* the syringe” (emphasis added) attends to the material co-production of knowledge, and engages both the object of the syringe and users of those objects as co-participants.

Also addressing these concerns, in his explorations of drug use and urban gay cultures, Kane Race has proposed a science “that seeks out the unexpected, that takes an interest in contingencies, that allows itself to be transformed by the surprises it encounters and strives to realise the creative possibilities

they generate in the process” (Race, 2018, p.10). In proposing *event as method*, Race (2016, p.14) seeks to devise a methodological approach to “counter-effectuate” the problematic materialisation of realities, especially those enacted in the prevailing and delimiting knowledge practices of biomedical and health sciences. Race, for example, situates the anecdote as a ‘research device’, as a way of prompting reflection that is both conditional and speculative. Staging the empirical in this way “as an encounter or an event that is specific, contingent, and open-ended” forces thinking in “‘webbed connection’ with findings from other knowledge practices, including observational studies, behavioural surveillance, more systematic forms of qualitative research, and so forth” and, moreover, “directs attention to the contingencies and more-than-human aspects of the encounters it relates” thus noticing how subjects and objects emerge in relation with each other (Race, 2016, pp.15-16). Here, Race demonstrates an approach to method oriented to opening up questions about ‘what counts’ as knowledge for policy and intervention. This is a mode of evidence-making which disrupts and *intervenes in* given relations of knowledge. This is, as Race (2016, p.25) insists, “a methodological and not simply a conceptual challenge”.

We can see in these examples how an ontopolitics of method seeks to appreciate the role that research methods play in constituting the realities they explore (Law, 2004; Law & Urry, 2004). Just as we emphasise the policy assemblage as an extended set of practices and relations which eventuate drugs and drug problems in particular ways, we highlight the performative effects of methods assemblages in drug policy research. Suzanne Fraser (2020, p.8, emphasis original) has argued that such an approach “leverages the idea that realities are emergent so as to *embrace* (rather than ‘manage’) the action of research in constituting realities”. An “ontopolitically-oriented research” practice recognises the performativity of language, discourse and research, the historical and political assumptions which underpin the constitution of data and objects of study, and actively includes “those whose worlds are the subject of research” (Fraser, 2020, p.8). This is an approach which is processual rather than outcomes driven, and which orientates towards noticing how research and policy interventions operate as sites of ‘evidence-making intervention’ (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019). Treating

research and intervention practices as ‘evidence-making interventions’ accentuates the method and policy assemblage as an ‘event’ of situated ontological intervention (Michael & Rosengarten, 2013; Race, 2014, 2016; Zuiderent-Jerak, 2015). We have accordingly described research processes as an *implementing science*, “a science which is performed as an intervention; a science which participates in the relational materiality of implementing and evidencing; a science that makes interventions that matter” (Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019, p.11). Engaging ontopolitically with research methods as actors of ontological intervention attends to outcomes beyond those anticipated in ‘evidence-based’ approaches (which hold on to the fictions of evidence as separate from practice, and of reality as being discoverable through the right mix of methods).

Taken together, doing drug policy research ontopolitically shares an orientation to *practice* (Fraser, 2020); a keen responsiveness to the processes of world-making, and a recognition that our own methods, communications and actions form a relational part of an assemblage which enacts knowledge and our objects of study in particular ways (Law, 2004; Law & Urry, 2004). Most importantly, this fosters an approach to research which travels with drugs and drug policies as situated multiples. The methods of drug policy research are “caught up in, and help to produce, a ‘pluriverse’” (Law & Urry, 2004, p.399).

### **Working with drug policy multiples**

So, what might working with a multiplicity of emergent realities mean for drug policy? The fundamental contribution of the ontological turn is that it draws “renewed critical attention to objects that might otherwise appear ‘finished’ or ‘ready-made’, to scrutinise those entities that [...] analysis would often consider ‘black-boxed’ and no longer controversial” (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013, p.323). This is a politics which goes beyond conventional questions of power to consider the attributes of an object, its effects, how it is apprehended, how it counts as an object at all, and how its enactment might go hand in hand with the constitution of other objects in relation with it (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013). There are many such ‘black-boxed’ objects in drug policy deserving of this kind of critical



consideration, not least the things we call 'drugs' and 'drug policy' themselves (Fraser, 2006, 2016; Fraser & valentine, 2008; Gomart, 2002; Pienaar & Dilkes-Frayne, 2017; Rhodes, 2018; Rhodes et al., 2019; Rhodes & Lancaster, 2019; Savic et al., 2018; Seear, 2020; valentine, 2007). We are proposing the domains of policy (and other intervention), evidence (including beyond science) and method (both approach and how it is applied) as three modes to materialise an ontological politics in relation to drug policy, and as sites for the kinds of interferences we might "*help make*" (Law & Urry, 2004, p.391).

Importantly, working with a 'drug policy multiple' does not necessarily mean plurality, or *choosing between* alternative realities co-existing side-by-side (Mol, 1999). Realities may clash, but they also may *collaborate* or *depend* on each other in different contexts; to partition them off as if they were a 'plurality of options' is to "skip over the complex interconnections between them" (Mol, 1999, p.86). Thus, the interdependence between different enactments makes 'choosing' an inapt term for describing what needs to be done (Mol, 2002). Mol (2002, p.177, emphasis added) suggests that "for a long time, and in many places, science held (or continues to hold) the promise of *closure* through fact-finding." So too, we argue, have some of the dominant discourses and practices at work in the drug policy field, including the 'what works' catch-cry of the 'evidence-based drug policy' endeavor and the reification of the 'problem-solving' paradigm (Bacchi, 2018; Fraser, 2015; Lancaster, 2014, 2016). One way of disrupting this "promise of closure" is to "call 'what to do?' a political question" so as to maintain openness and indeterminacy (Mol, 2002, p.177). From this perspective 'what to do?' or indeed 'what works?' is not given. By returning *politics* to this question, it cannot be closed; it is a matter of "trying, tinkering, struggling, failing, and trying again" (Mol, 2002, p.177). Grappling with the implications of an ontological politics and a 'drug policy multiple' will require new thinking and dialogue (see Stengers, 2005, 2018a; Whatmore, 2009). An ontological politics asks us "take seriously the *accomplished* ontology of entities" (Woolgar & Lezaun, 2013, p.333) but this requires more than merely noticing the multiplicity of realities achieved in practices and the effects they make. It is also *an act* (Mol, 2002) which provokes a highly ethico-political mode of thinking and doing as interference and intervention.

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