

Phil Strong Prize Report

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I was awarded the Phil Strong Memorial Prize in 2024, during the transition between my first and second year of my PhD. At the time of my application, I was actively grappling with methodological questions around participation, power, and knowledge production in medical sociology and critical policy studies, and the award enabled me to pursue these questions. In this reflection, I outline how I used the prize to support a collaborative project and describe how this experience supported my development as an early career researcher.

Research Background

My PhD focus is preconception health, which describes health before pregnancy. I am particularly interested in the responsabilisation practices in the preconception period. The first year of my PhD research revealed that there are gaps in critically analysing preconception health policy. My doctoral research therefore aims to answer: How is preconception health constructed and problematised in England's health policy? At the time of my application to the Phil Strong Memorial Prize, I knew that I wanted to use the 'What is the problem represented to be?' (WPR) framework to answer this question. WPR is widely used in critical policy studies to interrogate how policy problems are constructed, what assumptions underpin these representations, and what effects they produce. While WPR has been taken up extensively within academic research, it is often treated as a highly specialised or abstract analytical tool.

After meeting Rebecca Muir (QMUL), a fellow PhD student utilising WPR, we decided we wanted to explore how to make WPR less abstract and more situated in lived experience. Consequently, we co-designed a research project to test whether WPR is compatible with co-analysis. The project sought to challenge the use of the framework by asking whether WPR could be opened up as a genuinely collaborative method of analysis, rather than one reserved for academic experts. The Phil Strong Memorial Prize was used to support this research project. The funds were used to reimburse PPIE members for their time as co-analysts. Henceforth, the prize supported an ethical and respectful mode of collaboration that recognised experiential and analytical labour as valuable. Contributors were involved in engaging directly with policy texts, aiding in identifying problem representations, and questioning dominant framings. This allowed us to test, in practice, the limits and possibilities of co-analysis within a post-structural methodological tradition.

Methodological Outcomes and Independent Research

One outcome of this collaborative work was a peer-reviewed paper published in *Critical Policy Studies*, which reflects on the methodological, ethical, and epistemological implications of co-analysis using WPR. The paper documents both the insights generated through collaboration and the tensions encountered when attempting to redistribute analytical authority

(<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19460171.2025.2561142>).

Having the flexibility and support afforded by the prize allowed me to integrate this method within my doctoral research, strengthening my analytical skills and deepening my engagement with critical policy scholarship. Importantly, this also facilitated stronger connections within the critical policy community. Through publishing and discussing this work, I was able to engage with scholars working across medical sociology, policy studies, and post-structural analysis. These connections have been invaluable in shaping my intellectual development and situating my PhD within a broader interdisciplinary field.

Supporting My Development as an ECR

As a second-year PhD student at the time, the Phil Strong Memorial Prize had a significant impact on my development as an early career researcher. Practically, it enabled me to design and lead research that aligned closely with my values around collaboration and critical reflexivity. Intellectually, it encouraged sustained engagement with questions of power, participation, and knowledge production that now sit at the core of my doctoral work.

The prize also supported my confidence and autonomy as a researcher. Being trusted with funding at this stage of my career validated my methodological interests and demonstrated that there is space within medical sociology for experimental and participatory approaches to policy analysis. Working collaboratively helped me develop a sense of scholarly identity grounded in critical inquiry.

Reflections and Looking Forward

The influence of the Prize continues to shape how I approach my research. It has encouraged me to remain attentive to how policy problems are represented, whose interpretations are privileged, and how analytical practices might be made more inclusive without losing critical rigour. It has also reinforced the value of collaborative experimentation within methods that are not traditionally associated with participation.

For other early career researchers considering applying for the prize, I would encourage them to think creatively about how it might support work that is exploratory, collaborative, or methodologically innovative. The flexibility of the prize is one of its greatest strengths, and my experience demonstrates how it can enable projects that might otherwise struggle to find support through conventional funding routes.

I am very grateful to the BSA Medical Sociology Study Group and the Phil Strong Memorial Prize committee for their support. The prize played a meaningful role in my development as an early career researcher, supporting the formation of lasting collaborations, methodological confidence, and a deeper engagement with critical policy studies.