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SYMPOSIUM: ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

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Administrative Burden Symposium: Introduction – Are we 'administering inequality' through our welfare systems?

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Abstract

Over the past three decades social inequality has risen in almost all OECD countries, reaching historical highs. Social inequality is created and maintained not just by the specific focus or goals of particular policies, but by the norms, values and processes of our government institutions. This special issue looks at how administrative burden is constructed in a range of Australian social policy areas.

KEYWORDS
administrative burden, social services, welfare reform

Over the past three decades, social inequality has risen in almost all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, reaching historical highs (OECD, 2015). There has been much debate, both in the scholarly literature and broader media, about the role of politics and policy in creating and entrenching inequality – often positioning inequality as a product of neoliberal policies and toxic politics. Yet social inequality is created and maintained not just by the specific focus or goals of particular policies, but by the norms, values and processes of our government institutions. Moreover, the administrative processes through which policies are implemented may in fact be deliberately constructed in ways that maintain the power and authority of some groups at the expense of others. Largely obscured from public view, the construction of administrative processes and related burdens can become an insidious means by which to exercise social power.

In their recent book 'Administrative Burden', Herd and Moynihan (2018) explore the construction and distribution of administrative burden across a range of U.S. case studies. They demonstrate that burden is unequally distributed, with low-income, socially marginalised or disenfranchised groups bearing the brunt. In the U.S. context, administrative burden has been used to

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manipulate the reach and effectiveness of government programs, from what government entitlements are accessed by which citizens, through to who can become a citizen, and who can utilize political rights.

Although social inequality has long been a point of interest in public administration, it has tended to sit at the periphery of the field. Issues of inequality have emerged in research into street-level bureaucrats (Brodkin, 2003; Considine & Lewis, 2012), the intersection of politics and policy (Bacchi, 2016) and in studies exploring institutional change (Béland, 2007; Mahoney & Thelan, 2010) to name a few. This work sits alongside a long running frame in social policy regarding the redistributive nature of the welfare state. However, recent work on the distribution of administrative burden, such as that by Herd and Moynihan (Christensen et al., 2020; Herd & Moynihan, 2019; Moynihan et al., 2015), focuses on the relationships between public administration and the creation of social inequality in a way not previously seen.

The concept of administrative burden has been widely studied in a variety of settings beyond the United States, but with curiously little attention in Australia. This Symposium takes theories of administrative burden and applies them to the Australian context – elucidating how 'policy making by other means' has excluded and marginalised particular social groups deemed 'undeserving'. It also aims to progress Herd and Moynihan's theoretical contribution through the application of their ideas to a new context and particular policy applications. Exploring a theoretical framework in new settings allows us both to better understand these settings through the insights that the framework reveals, and also establish boundary conditions to the theory: what fits, and what aspects of the framework need to be expanded or adjusted.

The Symposium comprises theoretical and empirical articles exploring administrative burden across child support, cashless welfare cards, disability support and the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). It also explores burdens at both the macro level (i.e., an accumulation of burdens across a system) and micro level (how burdens can manifest in a single form).

In this introduction, we provide a brief overview of the articles in the symposium and reflect on how – as a collection – they progress our understanding of administrative burden in Australia.

In their contribution, Carey, Malbon and Blackwell undertake a systematic review of burdens within the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in order to both draw attention to their unequal distribution, and to further advance the theory of administrative burden. Within the systematic review they find that, amongst the published literature to date, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and Indigenous communities are finding the NDIS more burdensome than other groups. Using concepts of *habitus* from Bourdieu (1986), they flesh out one component of Herd and Moynihan's theory: how state-constructed burdens create poor individual experiences. Habitus, they argue, helps us understand that systems are the product of the social class (or forms of capital) held by the individuals who design them, which creates a misalignment with those who use them should they come from a greatly different habitus. To address this, they argue that greater cultural diversity needs to be built into government bureaucracies. The article provides an example of how drawing in an existing, alternative theoretical approach enriches our understanding of how administrative burdens operate, even as it reinforces a key claim of the framework: that burdens hurt some groups more than others.

Taking another branch of disability supports, Collie and Sheehan's article aims to create a scale of administrative burden. They use the case of the Disability Support Pension (DPS), which has undergone a significant period of reform targeted at reducing expenditure. The authors argue that reduced expenditure has been achieved through a program of increased administrative burden for applicants. Since this reform, the Australian DSP has high barriers to entry, imposing substantial burdens on applicants to demonstrate eligibility. There are also additional administrative

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burdens on younger DSP recipients. Consistent with Carey et al.'s article, Collie and Sheehan draw attention to the importance of different forms of capital in negotiating DPS burdens, with those with greater access to capital able to more successfully navigate burdens. Through developing a scale of administrative burden, the authors demonstrate that DSP recipients experience high or very high information, compliance and psychological costs associated with applying for the DSP and interacting with the national social security agency, Centrelink. Moreover, these costs are not evenly distributed. Consistent with the Carey et al.'s (2021) findings, those with lower levels of capital experience greater burdens. These burdens also continue past the point of access to the DSP being granted. Collie and Sheehan argue that in applying their scale to forms and processes, governments can assess burdens from the user perspective and look to minimise them. This would, of course, require political will to reduce administrative burdens given, as Herd and Moynihan's (2018) contend, administrative burdens are choices – they are a way of making policy by other means and reducing the financial burden on state safety nets by creating process complexity.

In her article, Bielefeld looks at the growing use of conditionality within Australian social security through the lens of the cashless debit card. She shows how these conditions, and the use of specific technologies, have been used to both surveil and control 'the poor'. Cashless debit cards quarantine 80% of fortnightly and 100% of lump sum social security payments to an electronic payment card with a personal identification number. The intent of these cards is to directly control spending on alcohol by particular socioeconomic groups. From an administrative burden perspective, Bielefeld demonstrates how those burdened with the card incur 'learning costs', 'compliance costs' and 'psychological costs' in their use. She demonstrates how these costs accumulate to discipline the poor for drawing on government benefits (which, as citizens, they are entitled to access). These administrative processes result in unsatisfactory outcomes for people accessing the program, while profoundly undermining their autonomy and dignity. Bielefeld argues for a move towards 'dignified care' in the design and administration of government supports. Her article raises questions about trade-offs in the use of technology, which might reduce burdens in some domains, but be used to increase burdens in others.

In her article on child support programs, Cook also looks at state compelled processes – that is whereby individuals may not wish to take part in administratively complex programs, but are required to do so. A significant point of difference from other administrative burden research is Cook's analysis is the way in which state support systems can be leveraged by others (in this case aggrieved fathers) to inflict financial and psychological harms on their ex-partners. Typically, we think of burdens as costs imposed on individuals by the state (though they might also arise in non-state interactions, see Madsen et al., 2020). Cook presents a different scenario, where the state operates as a referee, framing a policy and imposing rules, but where the burdens are often driven by individuals, including those who once maintained intimate relationships and often retain ongoing family structures. The state can acquiesce to the imposition of those burdens if they align with other interests (e.g. lowered government welfare costs). Like other contributions, Cook notes that these burdens fall unequally – in this case according to both class and gender. Along with Herd and Moynihan's (2018) examination of access to abortion, the case points to ways that the experience of burdens is gendered, and invites additional work that connects administrative burden to theories of gender.

The final contribution to the Symposium by Brown, Carey and Malbon looks at how administrative burden can be found within a single form, in this case an access form. Although most of the administrative burden literature, and that contained in this Symposium, looks at 'whole of system' burden (i.e. the accumulation of many forms and processes), Brown, J., Carey, G., Malbon, E. show how burdens and exclusion begin at the first point of access, in the first form, by

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which an individual may seek government assistance. In creating a coding framework for how complex an administrative form may be, Brown et al. make two contributions. First, the analysis provides a practical contribution, illustrating that, as with Collie and Sheehan, it is relatively easy for governments to actively monitor the levels of burden by examining forms and surveying clients. Second, they show how marginalised individuals are locked out of the Australian social safety net through the creation of burdens at the point of access. Like Carey et al., they demonstrate how class-based assumptions (or the habitus of those who create forms) manifest in ways that exclude those who do not share the same social class or habitus. Put simply, forms created by middle class administrators fail to consider the complexity of lived experience of those accessing social safety nets.

Together, this collection sheds a light on the many places, and the many ways, that administrative burden exists within the Australian welfare state and how it is used intentionally and unintentionally to gatekeep access to social services. Although by no means exhaustive, the collection offers theoretical, empirical and practical tools to assess and examine administrative burden in Australia.

Although the approach offered may seem critical of government in many respects, it offers a means to bridge scholarship and practice in two ways: (1) providing an intuitive framework to understand the experiences of members of the public in their interactions with the state, and (2) creating practical tools to assess those experiences and identify how they may hurt some groups more than others. In the United States, the federal government has embraced analyses of administrative burdens as a means to reduce inequality (U.S. OMB, 2021). By serving to identify the relevance of the framework to the Australian context, we hope to extend the conversation about how it might be used to not just diagnose government services, but also to improve them.

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