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# Administrative Burden: Untangling a Bowl of Conceptual Spaghetti

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## Abstract

Administrative burdens in citizen-state interactions are increasingly gaining attention in both research and practice. However, being a relatively young research field, there is still considerable disagreement about how to conceptualize and measure administrative burdens. In particular, burdens are sometimes equated with what the state does, and other times with what target group members experience. We argue that such disagreement is a barrier for further theoretical development and has removed focus from studying the process in which state actions are converted into individual outcomes. We provide advice on how to conceptually bridge the gap between different conceptualizations of administrative burden and lay out a research agenda covering the next important theoretical and empirical steps based on such a shared understanding. We propose that developing the conceptual and empirical foundation of administrative burden research will help asking new and important research questions and building cumulative knowledge. To illustrate these points, we present a series of new research questions for future research to engage with.

## THE EMERGENCE OF ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN RESEARCH IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Since the adaptation of the concept of administrative burdens to the context of citizen-state interactions in the seminal articles of Burden et al. (2012) and Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015), citizens' experiences when interacting with the state have become a prominent research agenda in public administration. By now, this research agenda has covered a variety of topics. One stream of research has focused on the origins of burdens including, but not limited to, the political construction of burdens (Aarøe et al. 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2020; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2016), the extent to which burdens are supported by the mass public (Keiser and Miller 2020; Nicholson-Crotty, Miller, and Keiser 2021) and street level bureaucrats (Bell et al. 2021; Stanica et al. 2020), and the organizational origins of burdens (Peeters 2020). Others have focused on how citizens and target group members experience interactions with the state (Barnes 2021; Mack et al. 2021; Nisar 2018a), what strategies they use in citizen-state interactions (Nisar 2018b; Nielsen, Nielsen, and Bisgaard 2020), and how burdens are distributed among different groups of target group members (Bisgaard 2020; Christensen et al. 2020; Chudnovsky and Peeters 2021; Döring 2021; Masood and Nisar 2021; Olsen, Kyhse-Andersen, and Moynihan 2020). A third stream of research examines the antecedents and consequences of experiences of burden. This research, for instance, looks at how experiences of burden relate to what the state does and consequently how burdens can be relieved (Baekgaard et al. 2021; Hattke, Hensel, and Kalucza 2020; Linos, Quan, and Kirkman 2020; Tummers et al. 2016), and on the consequences of burden to the take-up of benefits and health of target group members (Fox, Stazyk, and Feng 2020; Heinrich 2016, 2018; Lopoo, Heflin, and Boskovski 2020; Sievert, Vogel, and Feeney 2020).

However, despite the scope and quality of existing research, it is also clear that substantial disagreement about how to conceptualize administrative burdens remains largely unaddressed. Extant research has discussed differences and similarities between the concept of administrative burden and related concepts such as red tape, sludge, and ordeals (Bozeman and Youtie 2020; Madsen, Mikkelsen, and Moynihan 2020). However, in practice the use of several of these concepts is inconsistent (see also Madsen, Mikkelsen, and Moynihan 2020), suggesting that researchers should do more to dissect each of the concepts on their own. We argue that current disagreements have some unfortunate implications: Theoretically, burdens are sometimes defined by what the state does, and other times by the experiences of citizens, making it difficult to compare findings across studies and to further develop theory. Empirically, little quantitative research attempts to measure experiences but rather focus on how state actions relate to outcomes such as take-up of benefits, thus largely treating the process in which state actions are converted to individual outcomes as a black box. Conceptually, the current categorization into learning, compliance, and psychological costs provided in the seminal article by Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) has provided a useful starting point for administrative burden research, but it remains unclear how the cost categories relate to each other. Below, we elaborate on these challenges and what could be done to bridge the gap between studies having different conceptual understandings of administrative burdens and create a more consistent research agenda. We make some propositions about how to further develop administrative burden research in order to create a more cumulative field of research. We furthermore offer suggestions for new important research questions to illustrate the benefits of a stronger conceptual foundation.

## SEPARATING STATE ACTIONS FROM INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCES

According to the definition by Burden et al. (2012: 741) administrative burden can be understood as "an individual's experience of a policy implementation as onerous." The most important aspect of the definition is that administrative burdens are defined as experiences, making them distinct from rules, regulations, and other actions made by the state. The definition is prominent in current administrative burden research and has been heavily cited (Madsen, Mikkelsen, and Moynihan 2020).

However, while the definition by Burden et al. (2012) has led to a re-orientation of administrative burden research, there still seems to be considerable disagreement about how administrative burdens should be understood. First, other definitions emphasize the factors causing experiences of burden rather than individual experiences (e.g., Heinrich 2018). Such definitions are likely inspired by the related concepts of ordeals, red tape, and sludge which all point to objective factors rather than the subjective experiences of individuals (Madsen, Mikkelsen, and Moynihan 2020). Likewise, while a few studies explicitly focus on and measure individual experiences as suggested in the definition by Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) (e.g., Baekgaard et al. 2021; Hattke, Hensel, and Kalucza 2020; Johnson and Kroll 2021), many studies focus on the actions made by the state such as policies, rules, and street-level bureaucrat behavior rather than the individual experiences as such. This includes the studies focusing on origins of administrative burdens (e.g., Aarøe et al. 2021; Baekgaard, Moynihan, and Thomsen 2020; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2016), where the term "administrative burden" is used to describe state actions rather than experiences. Other examples are studies focusing on how state actions influence citizen outcomes such as health or policy take-up, while the experiences of individuals remain a black box (e.g., Fox, Stazyk, and Feng 2020; Heinrich 2016). Although these studies in many respects are examples of excellent empirical research of relevance to the study of administrative burdens, different uses of the term "administrative burden" constitute a barrier to developing a coherent research agenda. When the same term is used interchangeably but with different meanings, and when only a few studies examine the connection between what the state does and the experiences of citizens, it complicates comparisons of findings across studies and the production of cumulative knowledge. Even more importantly, it removes focus from some important research questions that research could engage more systematically with if it distinguished more clearly between what the state does and individual experiences.

On this basis, we argue that administrative burden research would benefit from more consistent use of key concepts. We propose using the term "state actions" to cover what the state does broadly speaking, including laws, rules, requirements, and how such are implemented by public officials and street-level bureaucrats. Moreover, we suggest using terms such as "experiences of administrative burden" or "burden perceptions" to clearly distinguish state actions from experiences of individuals. Using a more consistent terminology would bring research questions about under what conditions state actions lead to experiences of administrative burden and about the feedback effects of citizen experiences and outcomes on state actions to the forefront of the research agenda.

Second, the definition of Burden et al (2012) leaves the word "implementation" open to interpretation by researchers, thereby creating some ambiguity. Does the definition cover policy content as decided by law makers (i.e., the formal policy design)? Or is it only concerned with how policies and laws are implemented at the frontline (i.e., the informal policy design)? Consequently, it is somewhat unclear which phenomena are included in the definition and which are not. We do not argue that there is a need for a new definition but merely for clarification of existing concepts covered by the current definition by Burden et al. (2012). Indeed, in empirical research, the implementation concept is used as an umbrella term covering very different types of state actions. While some researchers study formal legislation (e.g., Baekgaard et al. 2021; Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey 2016), others focus more on the direct encounters between frontline staff and citizens (e.g., Barnes and Henly 2018; Nisar 2018a; 2018b). A few studies examine both formal and informal aspects (e.g., Masood and Nisar 2021), but important questions about whether formal and informal aspects have different consequences for citizen experiences of administrative burden and how formal and informal aspects of the policy design interact in shaping experiences of administrative burden remain unanswered. As illus-

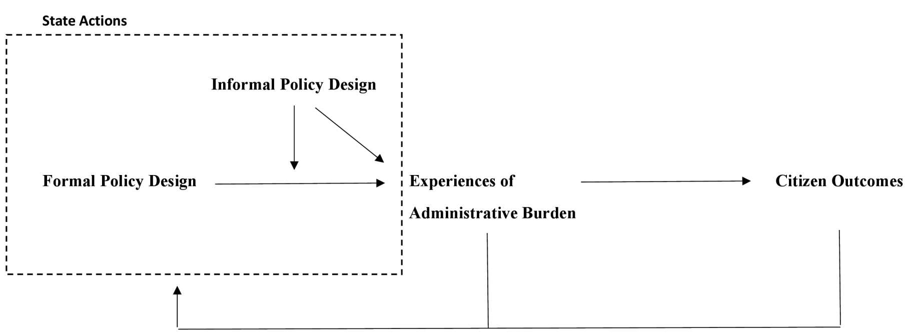


**Figure 1.** Key concepts and their relationships. Inspired by Christensen et al. (2020).

trated in figure 1, we propose an inclusive approach in which state actions is used as an umbrella term for both the formal and informal policy design, where formal and informal policy design independently and together may influence individual experiences of burden, and where formal policies may easily be reshaped through the informal practices of street-level bureaucrats to influence citizens' experiences of burden. We encourage scholars to further develop the categorization of state actions. To this end, they may benefit from insights into the literature on rulemaking and regulatory processes (e.g., Carrigan and Coglianese 2011; Coglianese and Kagan 2007) and the literature on policy designs and policy feedback (e.g., Bruch, Ferree, and Soss 2010; Soss 1999).

## FURTHER DEVELOPING THE CATEGORIZATION OF COSTS

Herd et al. (2013) and Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015) provided an important addition to the definition by Burden et al. (2012) by separating the burdens citizens can experience into three types of costs: learning, compliance, and psychological costs. Learning costs were identified as the time and effort that goes into learning about policies, programs or regulations, compliance costs as the effort and financial costs spent on complying with rules or regulations, and psychological costs as stigma, stress, and autonomy loss resulting from interactions with the state (Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey, 2015: 45). The categorization is widely accepted and cited.

While providing useful examples of what experiences of administrative burdens might look like and offering a first categorization, one challenge facing empirical research is that the three costs may not be possible to separate empirically in many instances. Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015: 50) indeed were aware of this as they stated that "although psychological and compliance burdens are conceptually distinct, it is often difficult to practically separate them in empirical studies." We sketch some examples in which the costs are likely to overlap. First, some of the burdens associated with learning might be experienced by an individual as compliance costs since individuals will have to learn about a regulation or rule in order to be able to comply with it. Indeed, the findings in the studies of Linos, Quan, and Kirkman (2020) and Linos and Riesch (2020) suggest that learning and compliance costs are likely to correlate. Likewise, Widlak and Peeters (2020) discuss how a woman in her attempt to correct an administrative error experienced a cascade of costs—learning, compliance, and psychological—that could ultimately not be separated from one another. Second, there is a likely spillover from learning and compliance costs to psychological costs: Individuals who have a hard time learning about a rule or regulation may also experience psychological costs in the form of stress and stigma. Likewise, having to comply with complex rules or strict requirements may lead to experiences of stress and autonomy loss (Baekgaard et al. 2021). These are simple examples, but they demonstrate that in practice the distinction between learning, compliance, and psychological costs may not always be straightforward.

Another challenge is that the categorization of costs, while useful, is crude and most likely incomplete. For instance, psychological costs in principle could involve many other experiences than those suggested by Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015). Individuals might, for instance, experience a feeling of uncertainty about their situation when they do not know if they will receive needed benefits in the future. Another example of a potential indicator of psychological costs is a feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness that individuals might experience when dealing with burdensome rules or procedures where they do not understand the origin or need.

Further development of the cost categories may help researchers become aware of important phenomena not currently included in the cost categories. For instance, the findings in Widlak and Peeters (2020) point to a category of costs distinct from compliance costs in the form of the costs of getting a bureaucracy to act and correct administrative errors. Likewise, Barnes (2021: 2) introduces the concept of redemption costs, which is defined as the challenges citizens experience when redeeming public benefits. Barnes concludes that this cost is a subset of the learning costs introduced by Moynihan, Herd, and Harvey (2015). As this example demonstrates, qualitative case studies may help refining our understanding of what experiences of administrative burdens might be. Further development of the catalogue of costs may not be limited to refining already existing categories. Importantly, the categorization was originally made inductively and remains untested as to its applicability across contexts. This means that costs of particular relevance outside a US and Western European context that do not fall easily into one of the existing categories may have been overlooked. As an example, people in many countries may face widespread costs of having to deal with corruption when being in contact with public officials (Marquette and Peiffer 2018). Building a comparative research agenda on the experiences of administrative burden thus is an important step for future research.

## DEVELOPING AGREED-UPON MEASUREMENT

Experienced administrative burden is at the core of the definition provided by Burden et al. (2012). However, probably due to conceptual and theoretical disagreement, individual experiences are often left out of empirical research. In those cases where individual experiences are actually studied using quantitative methods, the analysis relies on measures developed for the specific purpose rather than validated and commonly agreed-upon measurement. As is always the case in such instances, the lack of a common standard makes findings less comparable across studies. Also, findings in each case may critically depend on the quality of measurement. Overall, there is thus a need for developing validated quantitative measures of how individuals experience administrative burdens. To ensure wide applicability, such measures would have to be general enough to be relevant both to observational research, where researchers study the perceived burdens of being part of some program or of interacting with the state in some other way, as well as experimental research, where participants are exposed to a specific process such as filling out a form. Likewise, a stronger conceptualization could also benefit qualitative studies by helping to identify specific observable phenomena associated with experiences of administrative burden. As an example, waiting times, paperwork, etc., may be used as indicators of compliance costs. While such indicators may not be available in all cases or of relevance to all studies, a stronger conceptualization would still help creating shared understandings of what relevant indicators would look like.

Relatedly, probably because administrative burden is defined by its consequences (i.e., as negative experiences), extant research attends little to any positive experiences associated with state actions (see, however, Thomsen, Baekgaard, and Jensen (2020) for an exception). For measurement, this is particularly problematic because it may very well lead to an overestimation of the negative consequences of state actions from the perspective of the individuals facing them. Accordingly, we propose that future measurement should seek to attend to positive as well as negative experiences.

## LAYING OUT A RESEARCH AGENDA

Being still a young field, administrative burden research suffers from some conceptual knots, disagreements, and inconsistencies. While the most prominent definition of administrative burden focuses on individual experiences, many studies either implicitly or explicitly focus on the actions by the state while experiences are not considered empirically. Also, the scope of experiences remains underdeveloped as the learning, compliance, and psychological costs featuring prominently in the literature overlap and at best is a crude list of all relevant experiences. This is not merely a question of semantics. Differentiating more clearly between state actions and experiences of administrative burdens will help us identify the next important questions to study as will a refined understanding of what is included in the concepts of experiences and costs and what is not.

To further develop our understanding of administrative burdens, researchers need to start using the same language. To this end, we propose a research agenda where theory and concepts are further developed in inductive qualitative studies, and where consecutive quantitative tests are used to test causal theories using individual experiences of administrative burden both as an independent and a dependent variable. More specifically, we invite a research agenda with a stronger awareness of the differences between state actions and individual experiences. Specifically, we propose the following: Research should theorize and empirically explore key concepts in administrative burden literature starting with the concept of administrative burden itself. This involves the following:

A. Distinguishing between state actions and individual experiences, developing a typology of state actions, and examining the impact of state actions. This leads to the following questions for future research:

RQ1: To what extent and under what circumstances do different state actions trigger different kinds of costs? For instance, some state actions like filling out standard applications for benefits are impersonal and may merely be a mild hassle involving some level of stress, whereas requirements about physical meetings may be much more stigmatizing to individuals.

RQ 2: Under what conditions do state actions lead to experiences of administrative burden?

RQ 3: What is the relationship between formal and informal policy design in shaping experiences of administrative burden?

RQ 4: What are the feedback effects of citizen experiences and outcomes on state actions?

B. Further clarifying and nuancing the nature and role of individual experiences. This involves further exploration of cost categories and of the full causal chain from state actions through experiences of administrative burdens to individual outcomes. Specifically, we propose the following research questions:

RQ5: What is the relationship between cost categories? To what extent do some costs spill over into other costs? What is the temporal order of experiencing different kinds of costs?

RQ 6: Are experiences of different costs associated with different consequences in terms of different outcomes? To exemplify, are experiences of psychological costs for instance associated with less trust in government than experiences of learning or compliance costs?

RQ 7: Under what conditions do experiences of burden influence individual outcomes such as health, education, policy take-up, and civic and political participation?

RQ 8: To what extent do experiences of administrative burden mediate the impact of state actions on citizen outcomes, policy take-up, civic participation, and political participation? More specifically, we propose designing studies addressing the full causal chain from state actions, over experiences to citizen outcomes.

RQ 9: To what extent are the existing cost categories relevant outside a Western context? To what extent does other cost categories demonstrate relevance outside a Western context?

C. Developing validated measures and empirical indicators of experiences of administrative burdens to be used in empirical studies. This also includes measuring positive experiences, which are currently often neglected in empirical research. This may help answering substantive questions such as:

RQ 10: To what extent do scales measuring learning, compliance, and psychological costs offer a comprehensive view of how citizens experience interactions with the state?

RQ 11: To what extent do positive experiences balance negative ones?

RQ 12: Are there any possible positive side effects associated with the experience of burden (e.g., more motivation to get a job for unemployed people being exposed to compliance demands)?

In extension to this research agenda, we encourage scholars to start thinking more broadly about additional components to the conceptual framework outlined above: For instance, if formal legal requirements serve legitimate purposes but are associated with severe negative experiences for target groups, how can we reduce experiences of burden without changing the requirements per se? Answers to this and related questions may focus on the informal policy design but may also look beyond the formal and informal design by emphasizing for instance how requirements are communicated to the public. Attending to these questions will thus have both substantial practical and theoretical relevance.

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