Administering Individualisation:
competing logics of social service delivery in Australian welfare reform

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Individualisation and welfare reform

- The demise of traditional constraints and supports in individuals’ lives.
- New freedoms, responsibilities and risks.
- Increasing dependence on institutions: labour markets, education and welfare systems.
- Institutions are central to the process of individualisation.
- Two aspects of individualisation: compulsory choice and democratic relationships.
Compulsory choice

- Ulrich Beck and Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002): individualisation means people are forced to choose between different life options.
- Institutions supply and structure choices, but we are responsible for choosing and the consequences of our choices.
- The Mutual Obligation (MO) Initiative: participants are compelled to choose from a list of predefined ‘options’- no ‘default’ option.
- Policy rules are detailed and most administrative functions are automated.
Democratic relationships

- Anthony Giddens (1992): individualisation implies that personal relationships are democratic – voice and negotiation.

- Relationships are shaped by internal factors, parties are ‘equals.’

- Centrelink’s **One to One Service** initiative: recipients were supposed to develop a relationship with a frontline officer. Officers allegedly enjoyed professional autonomy.

- Negotiated agreements.
The administrative context

- Separation of policy and service delivery.
- Simultaneous implementation of Mutual Obligation and One-to-One.

Questions:

- How did Mutual Obligation and One-to-One interact?
- Why was the democratic relationship model crowded out?
Findings

- The desire to compel users in MO undermined the development of democratic relationships.
  - Staff were given little discretion and training – what difference can an individual staff member make?
  - Highly structured interview format and limited time: need to “stay on the ball.”
  - Infrequent contact: staff can’t get to know users.
  - Deadlines can’t be altered – users must see whoever is next available.
Conclusions

- Australian social administration illustrates the impact of individualization on institutional processes.
- The role of social administrators in compelling choice has crowded out the democratic relationship model.
- Lack of voice for **both** staff and clients.
- Service delivery cannot be developed in isolation from policy content.