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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Unburdening care: Exploring modes of care through post-productivist thought and Australian parliamentary inquiry representations

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Abstract

Research on care increasingly emphasises the "careless" or "uncaring" nature of state-coordinated interventions imposed on marginalised communities. However, these perspectives tend to eliminate discussions about *modes of care* (Fox, *Critical Social Policy*, **15**, 1995, 107) or the ways in which care is differentially experienced and performed. This paper argues for scholars to think multimodally about care, proposing a typology of four different modes of care: care-as-gift, -burden, -control and -cure. The paper makes a case for locating these modes of care within a post-capitalist political horizon to respond to the demand to "unburden care." That is, the political demand to provide the economic and social conditions that best enable caregiving and reduce gendered pressures on caregivers. The paper develops these arguments through the post-productivist thought of Kathi Weeks (2011, *The problem with work: feminism, marxism, antiwork politics, and postwork imaginaries*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press) and a critical discursive examination of care representations made by submitters to two parliamentary inquiries into the Australian "pre-employment" programme ParentsNext—a labour market activation programme that targets single-parent caregivers "at risk of welfare dependency." The paper contributes a critical and

multimodal approach to better conceptualise competing framings of care's value and the ways in which the state can (un)burden caregiving.

KEYWORDS
care, critical discourse analysis, ParentsNext, post-productivism, single parents

1 | INTRODUCTION

Conceptualising care and how it shapes social welfare has become a growing area of interest in policy research. Researchers and practitioners have emphasised the importance of care, increasingly gesturing to the "care-less" or "uncaring" nature of state-coordinated interventions imposed on marginalised communities (Considine, 2022; Hart & Field-Pimm, 2022). These contributions call for more care, highlighting how services and supports can be reformed to provide additional care. Other scholars have similarly described levels of care as "in crisis," portraying services and policies responsible for care coordination as infiltrated by marketisation and privatisation (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Dowling, 2021). However, these "carelessness" perspectives on service and policy settings tend to eliminate discussion about *modes of care* (Fox, 1995) or the ways in which care is differentially experienced and performed. Instead, they define care through its (relative) absence and the attendant neglect of marginalised communities (e.g., Hart & Field-Pimm, 2022).

This paper aims to shift the focus from conceptualising care through its (relative) absence to recognising the "multiple ways of caring for others" in society (Gómez et al., 2023, p. 166). In particular, how some "ways of caring" can reinforce patriarchal and racialised oppression of marginalised communities, such as the "state care" imposed on Indigenous communities through compulsory income management schemes (Klein, 2021; Moreton-Robinson, 2021). Accordingly, this paper develops a critical approach to care that better captures this multimodal presence rather than (relative) absence in Australian policy and service settings.

The paper first outlines a typology of care modes from a growing body of social science literature and critical-theoretical developments to support its aims (Dowling, 2021; Fox, 1995; Fraser, 2022; Lynch, 2021). The typology introduces four different modes of care: care-as-gift, -burden, -control and -cure. Briefly stated as follows: *Care-as-gift* refers to care that is given without the expectation of reciprocity and embraces otherness (Fox, 1995). *Care-as-burden* is used to designate how giving care can generate (often gendered) obligations and pressures ("care burden") on caregivers (Dean et al., 2021). As will be demonstrated, care-as-burden is strongly associated with the political demand to provide the social and economic conditions that best enable caregiving and reduce gendered pressures on carers (Fraser, 2022), which this paper describes as the demand to "*unburden care*." *Care-as-control* refers to how care can exert controlling force on the cared-for. And finally, *care-as-cure* is used to denote controlling care that operates through classed, gendered and racialised pathologies.

The paper turns to the post-productivist thinking of Kathi Weeks (2011) to demonstrate one pathway to expand a critical platform from which to better locate these modes of care and the demand to "unburden care." Here, the paper echoes Weeks' (2011) post-capitalist view that to properly "unburden care" requires that caregiving be decoupled from *productivism*. That is, broadly conceived, the ideology that one's value and "deservingness" of economic security derives from being productive or cultivating a work ethic (i.e., work). Instead, it is argued that caregiving is best valued and supported based on its inherent social worth (Tronto & Fisher, 1990).

Finally, the paper uses the four typologised care modes and Weeks' (2011) post-productivism to examine how caregivers and their advocates framed the value and the burdens imposed on caregiving in two Australian parliamentary inquiries into ParentsNext (2016–present), a labour market activation programme that targets single-parent families. The study finds that submitters' expressions of the inherent social value of caregiving were seemingly constrained by the state's productivist approach to value, necessitating the (re)framing of caregiving as "care work" or as part of productive labour. Additionally, the study reveals how submitters expanded the notion of the "care burden" to include the pressures intrinsic to caregiving as well as the controlling and punitive "care" imposed through programme like ParentsNext. Through its conceptual interventions and discursive findings, the paper contributes a critical and multimodal approach to better conceptualise competing framings of care's value and the ways in which the state can (un)burden caregiving.

2 | TYPOLOGISING MODES OF CARE AND LOCATING BURDEN

2.1 | Care-as-control, -gift, -burden and -cure

Concepts of care remain a central part of a growing body of social science literature, ranging from "postmodern" understandings to "activist" accounts that chart both meanings and practices of care in a diversity of communities (Fox, 1995; Lynch, 2021; Thomas, 1993). Fox (1995) argues that concepts of care can be said to gesture to two broad and overlapping modes of care. On the one hand, care can be part of a "vigil" or the disciplinary and possessive surveillance of the cared-for or *care-as-control*. Care-as-control is about maintaining strict borders of exchange, reinforcing the practices and (self-)relations of "the patient," "the client" or the caregiver/care recipient dyad. On the other hand, care can also be understood as the "gift" of extending love and attentiveness to others or otherness (*care-as-gift*) (Fox, 1995).

Drawing on the work of Cixous (1986), care-as-gift rejects treating the cared-for as an object of possession to be controlled and disciplined. Rather than taking possession of the cared-for, care-as-gift supports the multiplicity of expressions and resistances of the receiver of care. As Fox (1995, p. 122) summarises, care-as-gift is a process of "generosity towards otherness" that offers possibility, multiplicity and difference in place of certainty, repetition and identity. Crucially, in contrast to care-as-control, care-as-gift is given without the expectation of reciprocity or exchange.

Tracing the etymology of the word *care*, Dowling (2021) provides different insights into its meaning. She writes:

> the origins of the word care are not related to the Latin *cura* (to look after something or someone, to ensure their well-being). The word care stems from the Old English *caru*, which means sorrow, grief and even anxiety, or 'burdens of the mind'. […] For sure, having to do the work of caring might weigh us down. Care can be burdensome.
>
> (Dowling, 2021, p. 21)

Dowling's (2021) analysis of care referring to being extended beyond cognitive and emotional capacity coheres with a growing body of work from the "affective" and "cognitive" turns that positions care as connected to a "mental load"—or *over*load—which renders women disproportionately responsible for "the production and exchange of affective energies" (Dean et al., 2021; Lynch, 2021, p. 74). On these critical accounts, care-as-gift opens the possibilities of *care-as-burden* in which the gift of care can border into indebtedness to others to the detriment of the (feminised)

self (Dean et al., 2021). In these perspectives, the (feminised) "costs" of care-as-burden are often made intelligible through the proxies of financial hardship and limited workforce participation (Ganley, 2009) and as part of what has been described as the care/paid work tension (Maker, 2017) or the social reproduction/production antagonism (Fraser, 2022). These discussions associated with care-as-burden are prominent in contemporary feminist arguments for flexible childcare and parental leave policies to reduce feminised precarity (Craig & Churchill, 2021). Moreover, these discussions are part of a broader political demand to provide the social and economic conditions that best enable caregiving and reduce gendered pressures on caregivers (Fraser, 2022), a process this paper describes as "unburdening care."

Dowling's (2021) reorientation of care as care-as-burden is perhaps best understood as a strategic reading of care to enhance a feminist economist perspective. That is, the concept of care-as-burden is easily translated into critical economic analyses of care. This type of analysis includes the "balancing" of costs with benefits or remuneration as *work* (returned to below). It is unsurprising, then, that care-as-burden has dominated Australian advocacy and policy debates for decades, providing a partially effective platform to argue for increased income support rates and the expansion of funding for home-based services and programmes to assist carers (re)enter the workforce (Cass & Yeandle, 2009; Maker, 2017). Scholars also note that care-as-burden can act as a lens for carers to make sense of their own struggles while performing care that is systemically undervalued (Cass & Yeandle, 2009; Maker, 2017).

Despite these possible uses of care-as-burden, the representation of care as burdensome cannot be neatly divorced from its impacts on and relation to receivers of care. As Maker (2017, p. 47) highlights within the literature specific to people with disabilities, care-as-burden frequently renders the cared-for "as objects of care who are dependent on both their carers and the state, and are incapable of contributing meaningfully to society." Maker (2017) therefore depicts the possible deficit and paternalistic dimensions of care-as-burden, in which care becomes bound to narratives of personal tragedy, individual impairment and essentialised dependency. Principally, within these paternalistic and deficit framings of care, there can come to exist an overlap between *caru* and *cura* in which the "burden" of care (*caru*) can become the grounds for the introduction of the so-called curative interventions (*cura*). Maker's (2017, p. 49) review of research on people with disabilities and care-as-burden indirectly points to the presence of this pathologising undercurrent of *cura* or what she terms the "medical model" of care. Maker (2017) cites Morris (2001) to develop this understanding of care:

> If impairment determines our experiences, then the only things that can be offered are treatments and cures, and services (residential care, segregated schooling, etc.) which prevent us from doing the kinds of things that non-disabled people do because we are not recognised as full human beings. It is this approach which leads to segregation and exclusion—and ultimately to the assumption that our lives are not worth living[.]
>
> (Morris, 2001, p. 3 cited in Maker, 2017)

Within this perspective, pathologising practices can be traced in the controlling care often imposed on people with disabilities. In particular, the lives of the cared-for with disabilities are often enveloped in the techniques of pathologisation and positioned as having inherent disposability or as "lives not worth living." When care for people is framed as part of social and personal burdens, as is often the case for people with disabilities, care can also idealise the non-disabled and productive White capitalist subject (Puar, 2017).

Similarly idealised framings of the productive White capitalist subject also pervade neoliberal policy approaches toward low-income families (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2016). In Australia, the racialised and gendered discourses of "intergenerational welfare dependency" and "vulnerability" are used to mark out predominantly Indigenous and single

parents as antithetical to this idealised subject and impose control through punitive and paternalistic schemes such as compulsory income management (Klein, 2021; Peterie et al., 2022). Dowling's (2021) account of care as separable from *cura* omits these classed, gendered and racialised pathologies that can operate within state-based forms of care-as-control (Moreton-Robinson, 2021). *Care-as-cure* is used in this paper to refer to these pathological dimensions of controlling "care." It is also used alongside the three other modes of care typologised in this section to analyse ParentsNext inquiry materials. The next section provides a critical pathway for thinking about the demand to "unburden care" and the typologised modes of care.

2.2 | Unburdening care(giving) and setting a post-productivist agenda

The above modes of care can be thought to displace the prominence of feminist perspectives of care-as-burden (*caru*), which engage deeply in the day-to-day struggles of many women (e.g., Federici, 2012). Indeed, these additional conceptual groupings could be charged with not properly considering the burden of giving care (often denoted as *caregiving*, coalescing elements of the care-as-gift and care-as-burden). Similarly, it could be argued that recognising the burden of caregiving is foundational to progress toward gender equality. Therefore, to be critical of a care-as-burden framing can be construed as either attenuating or outright precluding a "proper" political engagement with care.

Despite this possible line of criticism, it is crucial to understand what is specifically meant by the call to "unburden care" and how this impulse can transpose itself into analysis and political action both now and in future. As Fraser (2018) elaborates, contemporary feminisms should be aiming at ending expropriation. Drawing on Fraser (2018), Gonzalez and Mutua (2022, p. 122) define expropriation as "the process of extracting wealth from the unpaid or grossly underpaid labor" in which any wage or payment that may be received is "not enough to cover the cost of workers' social reproduction and replenishment." Crucially, expropriation operates across the "circuits" of colonial dispossession and the heteronormative nuclear family (Klein, 2021, p. 1477). This critical feminist positioning aimed against gendered and racialised expropriation will now be elaborated upon through Weeks' (2011) approach to post-productivism. Doing so inscribes further a post-capitalist impulse to the call to "unburden care," and a vantage point from which to wield the care concepts typologised above to analyse ParentsNext inquiry submissions.

Weeks (2011) contends that many critical positions calling for the so-called unburdening of care fall prey to *productivism*; specifically, the discursive, subjective and/or ethico-political valorisation of economic growth or productivity as an end in and of itself. This contrasts with productivity being linked to radical or progressive social goals (Gorz, 1989). As Fitzpatrick (2004, p. 215) observes, productivism is an ideological obsession with work and productivity that pervades liberal-capitalist societies. Weeks (2011) extends this idea of productivism, writing that:

> Second-wave feminists were particularly interested in […] revaluing feminised forms of not only domestic labor but pink-collar wage labor [such as] caring work and sex work. The proponents of the classic gynocentric ethic of care claimed that caring labor was real work and should be recognised and valued as such. Though more interested in finding in caring labor another model of ethical work than in imposing the model of waged work on the practices of care, some of these second-wave authors nonetheless echo aspects of the ethical discourse of waged labor in making the case for caring labor's significance and worth. Thus the ethic of care could also be construed as an ethic of work.
>
> (Weeks, 2011, pp. 66–67)

In this consideration of the "gynocentric ethic of care," Weeks (2011) contends that calls for recognising care as work can risk reinforcing a productivist work ethic. Weeks (2011, p. 67) elaborates: "efforts to expand conceptions of what counts as work also risk tapping into and expanding the scope of the traditional work ethic." This "traditional" or productivist work ethic demands one to be ceaselessly productive and purblind to post-capitalist or "deeper" social aspirations (Gorz, 1989). As such, Weeks (2011), like others (Baudrillard, 1975; Gorz, 1989), positions this productivist work ethic as a primary driver of exploitation or the commodification and unequal exchange of labour on "free" markets for a "living wage" (i.e., a wage that covers basic needs but is less than the value produced by labour) (Gonzalez & Mutua, 2022).

In Weeks' (2011, p. 82) view, the calls for the recognition of care as part of the wage contract uphold a productivist work ethic, which can be seen as an extension of "Western capitalist social formations." She argues that the failures of truly realising departures from capitalism in the shifts from prostitution to "sex work" or domestic work to "care work" demonstrate this point (Weeks, 2011, pp. 66–67). Notwithstanding reforms and their positive impacts on immediate welfare concerns, exploitation and expropriation continue to operate as part of these "new" forms of (feminised) waged work (Lynch, 2021). Weeks (2011, p. 124) contends that this is encapsulated in the productivist "liberation through work" myth and its inability to disrupt women from retaining the "primary responsibility for unwaged reproductive labor even when they work for wages."

Weeks (2011) further argues that productivism is not just a problem for second-wave feminist or related feminist economist arguments. Instead, she draws on the work of Baudrillard (1975) to establish a far-reaching criticism of many revolutionary–workerist projects: what Baudrillard (1975, p. 17) refers to as "the phantom of production" embedded in the "revolutionary imagination," responsible for sustaining "an unbridled romanticism of productivity." As Weeks (2011, pp. 81–82) interprets Baudrillard (1975), neo-Marxist thought can reinforce a "naturalised an ontology of labour," which "subordinate[s] [social practices] to the instrumental and rationalist logic of productivity" and is practically indistinguishable from capitalist productivism.

Like Baudrillard (1975), Weeks (2011) maintains that many ostensible radical agendas fail to meaningfully break from capitalism because of their continued embrace of enervated forms of life in strict service to economic growth. Therefore, to "unburden" care through a more "ethical" workerist–productivist approach only partially moves away from capitalist exploitation, leaving intact a work ethic that sustains capitalism. Hence, Weeks (2011) argues that it is not enough for political demands to remain at the level of reforming care as a productive activity or as *work* to gain access to the wage contract. This is because, in this view, waged work isolated from a post-productivist horizon serves only to re-entangle care into the exploitative and expropriative (self-)relations of capitalism.

With Weeks' (2011) post-productivist analytic, analysis and political agendas can be attuned to how care is enjoined to, and even possibly subsumed by, a capitalist ethic of work. That is, an ethic of work that is impervious to valuing different forms of life and "unproductive" caregiving. This critical manoeuvre provides an avenue for greater reflexivity regarding neo-Marxist and feminist approaches to "unburdening care," with their tendency to either directly or indirectly embrace elements of productivism in their use of work and productivity discourses to describe care's value. Additionally, this shift opens an analytical means to investigate whether carers represent care as beyond the wage contract: toward post-work or other prefigurative political imaginaries that seek alternatives to productivism (e.g., Srnicek & Williams, 2016). As demonstrated in Section 5, many submissions to the ParentsNext inquiries included the demand that the state recognise caregiving's broader social value and ensure the economic security of caregivers rather than enabling ongoing expropriation (Klein, 2021). The degree to which this demand reinforced a productivist work ethic or constituted a post-productivist affinity is also discussed in Section 5.

Perhaps most significantly, Weeks (2011) positions the transformative undertow of post-productivism as its ability to (re)imagine modes of caring for and living life that are in tension with capitalist productivity, competitive individualism and work. Post-productivism recognises caregiving as "a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (*homo curans*) (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40). This broadened vision, in turn, encourages care to become a "capacious notion" (Chatzidakis et al., 2020, p. 41) that can both conceptualise and indict the "care" of liberal-capitalist society through concepts such as care-as-control and care-as-cure. The following section provides context for this paper's case study of ParentsNext, which further refines and demonstrates the merits of a post-productivist and multimodal approach to care.

3 | PARENTSNEXT AND ITS INQUIRIES

The ParentsNext programme (2016–present), a government-funded employment service targeted at female-headed, single-parent households with children under six years, is framed by the Australian Government as assisting families experiencing or "at risk of" so-called intergenerational welfare dependency who receive Parenting Payment (Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE), 2021; Department of Social Services (DSS), 2021). Approximately 95 per cent of the estimated 76,000 parents affected by the programme are women, 80 per cent are single parents and 21 per cent are Indigenous (Minister of Education, Skills, and Employment, 2021). Initially a compulsory programme for many of these parents, mandatory participation and income support payment suspensions for "non-participation" ended on 5 May 2023. ParentsNext is slated for redesign into an ongoing voluntary programme starting 1 July 2024, having been the focus of a national consultation process convened by the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations. Despite these positive steps toward change, ParentsNext's historical operations and surrounding discursive framings provide critical insights into how the Australian Government systemically devalues caregiving (Klein, 2021; Maker, 2017).

In contrast with other government-funded employment services focussed on "job-seeking activities," ParentsNext has historically been an avenue for imposing broader-ranging behavioural compliance activities as part of its under-defined "pre-employment" focus (Community Affairs Reference Committee (CARC), 2019a, 2019b). This included (often mandatory) participation in counselling, health appointments and online modules in topics such as "Body Language" and "Making Decisions" (Henriques-Gomes, 2022). Service providers engaged in "Orwellian surveillance" of parents' caregiving by forcing parents to attend story time library sessions, swimming lessons and play group classes as a condition of receiving income support (Williamson, 2019: n. pag.). The Australian Government continues to claim that the compulsory iteration of ParentsNext assisted many parents, contradicting research finding the programme perpetuated gendered economic insecurity (Klein, 2021) and enacted human rights violations (Goldblatt, 2021a).

The compulsory version of ParentsNext was the focus of two completed parliamentary inquiries, which were convened to hear from affected communities, service providers and the public.[1] The first inquiry progressed through the CARC chaired by Senator Rachel Siewert (Australian Greens Party), and the second through the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights (PJCHR) chaired by Member of Parliament Josh Burns (Australian Labor Party). Both inquiries' terms of reference (ToR) focussed on referral to the programme, the nature of participation and the appropriateness of compliance mechanisms and Parenting Payment suspensions (CARC, 2019a; Parliamentary Joint Committee on Human Rights [PJCHR], 2021). The CARC (2019a, 2019b) inquiry's ToR also included the trials informing ParentsNext's national roll-out. The PJCHR (2021) inquiry's ToR had further scope to review

ParentsNext's human rights compliance, evaluating safeguards for the rights of parents and children affected by compulsory participation and payment suspensions.

As examined in Section 5, submitters across both inquiries highlighted the detrimental impact of ParentsNext on caregiving. However, inquiry reports deemphasised calls for abolishing the programme to respond to these concerns. Instead, the CARC (2019a, 2019b) report recommended changes in the programme's punitive compliance approach (the Targeted Compliance Framework) and service delivery model to avoid unjustified income support suspensions and to better respond to family violence. Key recommendations made in the PJCHR (2021) report included greater assessment of parents' circumstances in the design of "Participation Plans" and before payment reductions or cancellations to ensure the safety of affected children.

Both inquiry reports issued critical appraisals of the programme. However, the reports failed to adequately recognise ParentsNext as engaging in the *state-coordinated expropriation* of women's caregiving (Klein, 2021). This is despite submissions from advocates, researchers and community organisations displaying a near-unanimous demand for the state to appropriately recognise and enable ("unburden") caregiving. The following section outlines the methods used to examine how submitters differentially framed this demand.

4 | METHODS

This paper draws from a larger corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis (CDA) study of representations of single-parent families in Australia (Khan, 2023). The analysed corpus included submission, report and memoranda materials from the two ParentsNext inquiries ($N = 127$) identified as containing representations of care. Critical discourse analysis was informed by the "What is the Problem Represented to be?" (WPR) approach (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), which was translated into a coding protocol in the text analysis software *NVivo*. Coding of care representations focussed on how analysed texts framed care as part of the four modes typologised above. This identification of modes of care was sensitised through consideration of Weeks' (2011, pp. 66–67) post-productivism; specifically, how submissions may "echo aspects of the ethical discourse of waged labor in making the case for caring labor's significance and worth."

The ParentsNext programme is a key case study for examining how caregiving is devalued and expropriated by the Australian state (Klein, 2021). This study's analysis of ParentsNext inquiry materials expands knowledge of care-related policy and service settings; namely, how care and its value are being (re)framed by caregivers and their advocates in response to state-coordinated expropriation. These (re)framings also provide further insights into the political demand to "unburden care," the importance of which was discussed in Section 2.

Selected quotations used in this paper are drawn from the most frequent *NVivo* nodes and associated axial codes (Glaser & Strauss, 2006) emerging from this study's CDA of care representations. Quotations are representative of two dominant discursive strategies used to (re)frame care's modes and value within inquiry materials. Importantly, CDA remains focussed on dominant discursive strategies used to frame and (re)produce policy problems rather than getting "in the heads of social actors" (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016, p. 21).

5 | MODES OF CARE REPRESENTED IN INQUIRIES

5.1 | Care's social value and navigating productivism: The carework ethic

Submitters explicitly and differentially accented caregiving's value. One crucial component of this centring of care's worth was an emphasis on parenting's caregiving as valuable despite its

unpaid status. As the joint statement of Human Rights Legal Centre, Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care and National Family Violence Prevention and Legal Services (HRLC, SNAICC and NFVPLS) (2019) submitted:

> The ParentsNext program further devalues the enormous amount of unpaid labour, undertaken primarily by women, to care for children. It reinforces the perception of paid work as the only valuable form of labour by linking parenting payments to the completion of mandatory vocational "activities", rather than recognising parenting as a challenging but critical form of labour [.]
>
> (HRLC, SNAICC, & NFVPLS, 2019, p. 14)

The submission argued that by situating caregiving as having little value, separate from paid "productive" labour, the government justifies and then imposes "activities" onto single parents. Other submitters echoed elements of this argument, stating that caregiving is an intrinsically and socially valuable form of "unpaid work." As the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) (2019) stated:

> Caring for one's children has both an implicit and explicit value to our society. This unpaid work fosters the next generation of citizens and by socialising and nurturing, helps create people who are resilient, motivated, and confident. Over our fifty-year history, [the CSMC] has seen countless single mothers invest time and energy in their children, raising kids who go on to excel at school, university and in life generally.
>
> (CSMC, 2019, p. 6)

Similarly, a deidentified submitter emphasised the value of caregiving as exceeding the matrix of productivity used by the Australian Government to assign value to caregiving. They identified the government's agenda to enhance workforce participation as being imposed through a regime of vilification, monitoring and the devaluation of parents' caregiving in favour of "unaffordable state care." Anonymous wrote:

> We are not inept, we have valuable skills and experience to contribute to life, but if we choose these skills be devoted to parenting on the home front until schooling years for our children—we are vilified and then monitored through this program until we see the value of functioning in the workforce, because of a society that does not value the investment of mothers/parents […] [.] We are expected to place our children in unaffordable state care so we can fullfill [sic] an ill perceived [sic] notion that we should value the workforce more than our children's young lives.
>
> (Submission 27, 2021, p. 1)

This contestation of what is of core value within caregiving continued, with HRLC, SNAICC and NFVPLS's (2019) submission (quoted above) also challenging the idea that waged work is the only valuable or demanding form of labour. Another submission, describing the contradictions of value immanent to ParentsNext, positioned caregiving as productive labour, the equivalent of a "full-time role":

> The program fails to recognise that women with young children are effectively working to take care of their children and to maintain their households. Typecasting this role and relegating it to the status of being unproductive work—when women are effectively working in full-time roles doing unpaid work taking

> care of their children—disregards the contribution that women of young children are making to Australia's economy.
>
> (Uniting Communities (UC), 2019, p. 3)

Across these submissions' representations, there was an emphasis placed on both the reproductive value of caregiving (Fraser, 2022) and a broader claim about the "value" and "critical" status of caregiving as work within the Australian economy. Moreover, there was a centring of the demandingness of this labour (positioned as "effectively working" in the above submission). These submissions also underlined the "energy" expended or the somatic and affective-cognitive "investment" of caregiving (broadly the *caru* of care-as-burden) (Dean et al., 2021).

This discursive emphasis on caregiving's value as work accords with productivism insofar as it demonstrates caregiving as already a part of "productive society" or contributing to economic growth. However, exceeding a strict adherence to productivism, caregiving was not isolated to the prism of productivity as an *end in itself* (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Gorz, 1989). It was also represented within these submissions as directed toward or in service of *social ends* or what can be understood as a post-productivist affinity: promoting the success of future generations as part of a broader claim of contributing to "society" and reproducing "life generally" (CSMC, 2019, p. 6). That is, as part of a "species activity" (*homo curans*) that reproduces the relational foundations for all forms of production and the "world" itself (Tronto & Fisher, 1990, p. 40). As one deidentified submission expressed:

> That the fundamental core of human existence, of how we raise our children, should not have been steadfastly prioritized and protected in our societal constructs, is symptomatic of a profoundly unconscious trend of archaic leadership.
>
> (Submission 61, 2019, p. 2)

This submission highlighted the strongly held productivist lens of value used by the Australian Government to define single parents' caregiving rather than embracing "the fundamental core of human existence." Women's Legal Services New South Wales (WLS NSW) (2019, p. 5) shared in this concern about the devaluation of caregiving, stating that single parents are increasingly defined in policy as "unemployed workers" rather than caregiving parents.

The language of work and productivity throughout submitters' caregiving representations can therefore be seen as a *strategic response* to this growing framing within Australian policymaking of single parents as "interrupted workers" and "welfare dependent" rather than carers performing socially valuable care that enriches relationships and communities (Blaxland, 2010). Specifically, within this discursive strategy, an emerging type of quasi-work ethic could be seen to surface: the idea of caregiving's demandingness (*caru*) as a sign of a *carework ethic*. Put simply, a seemingly strategic and partial investment in the dominant capitalist–productivist discourse that performing demanding (care) work enhances one's ethico-moral character and "deservingness" of support (Weeks, 2011). This carework ethic within ParentsNext inquiry submissions is understood in this paper as an expedient mode of demonstrating the social necessity and value of caregiving in a productivist policy environment that systemically devalues and expropriates it (Klein, 2021; Maker, 2017). As the Australian Unemployed Workers' Union (AUWU) (2019, pp. 5–6) highlighted, ParentsNext reinforces a broader set of "implicit ideological and value assumptions" wherein "parenting is not considered 'work' because it is unwaged labour." That is, extended through Weeks (2011, pp. 66–67), the state and its policies fail to recognise caregiving beyond an "ethical discourse of waged labour," thereby constraining discourse about caregiving's intrinsic social worth to a productivist paradigm of value.

The carework ethic, decontextualised from this systemic devaluation of caregiving's social value, may seemingly replicate the "traditional work ethic" insofar as it reintroduces productivist–capitalist narratives of "deservingness" of economic security being linked to

cultivating a work ethic (Weeks, 2011, p. 67). However, the political demands within the carework ethic—which strategically highlighted the productivity and work of caregiving to advocate for greater economic security—were also linked by most submitters to deeper social goals aimed beyond the Australian Government's focus on integrating parents into "productive society" (e.g., CSMC, 2019; Submission 27, 2021, Submission 61, 2019). As noted throughout Weeks' (2011) research, capitalism's productivist core is not aimed toward such social goals and projects. Productivism instead legitimises expropriation, exploitation through the wage contract and sacralises economic growth as an end in of itself (Fitzpatrick, 2004; Fraser, 2022). This contrasts with submitters, like other researched caregiving communities (Cass & Yeandle, 2009; Maker, 2017), who expressed the demandingness of caregiving (care-as-burden) as work or productive labour to encourage solidarity and to generate broader recognition of caregiving's intrinsic value to society (e.g., CSMC, 2019; Submission 27, 2021, Submission 61, 2019).

The uncertainty surrounding the underlying political motivations of the carework ethic in submissions highlights the necessity of further studies with caregiving communities to understand whether this strategy is informed by post-capitalist politics (Gómez et al., 2023). Specifically, whether the carework ethic—understood as the strategic and partial investment in productivist discourses of work and productivity to secure greater economic security—can be linked further to an overarching post-productivist political agenda. This will necessitate collaboration with caregivers, exploring further how caregiving's social value may be constricted by productivism and the degree to which caregivers delink "deservingness" of economic security from waged work and cultivating a work ethic (Klein, 2021; Weeks, 2011).

5.2 | The state's "care" as burden

Another prominent discursive strategy used throughout submissions was highlighting the state's care-as-control that underpins ParentsNext's operations. Within this emphasis, it was further underlined by submitters that the programme's "caring" on behalf of the state was burdensome for parents. Accentuating this burdensome quality with reference to the program's forcing victim–survivors to disclose family violence, the Centre for Women's Economic Safety (CWES) (2021) described the burden of the "support" offered by ParentsNext as:

> placing too great a burden on victim-survivors to reveal their situation to people who may not have a good understanding of the impacts of family violence.
>
> (CWES, 2021, p. 1)

Several parents subjected to the programme also drew on this burdensome quality of the controlling "care" imposed through ParentsNext's conditionality. They highlighted the programme as taking away from their time and acting as a barrier rather than an enabler of their caregiving or future plans (often already directed toward employment). These parents reported:

> The last five years have been the hardest of my entire life. ParentsNext has not eased any of my burdens.
>
> (Buckland in CARC, 2019b, p. 16)

> Total waste of time as I get no help, I get no assistance towards my university course or transport costs and it means I lose a day of study to attend a pointless appointment.
>
> (Parent quoted in CSMC, 2019, p. 13)

Beth Goldblatt (2021b) described the programme's overall impact in terms of the Australian Government's systemic failures to fund initiatives that would represent a more equitable valuation of caregiving. Goldblatt (2021b, p. 5) emphasised that "the government has further burdened this group with punitive conditions that are humiliating, intrusive and undermine rather than empower parents by telling them they need help to undertake the task of being parents." Once again, the burden described was not squarely positioned within the immanent demands of caregiving. Rather, Goldblatt (2021b), paralleling the above submissions by parents, placed burden in relation to the state's paternalism or a form of care that centres control (care-as-control).

An interrelated theme throughout submissions was an emphasis on the compulsory nature of the programme's "Participation Plans," and their creation or exacerbation of parents' burdens. As Anglicare Australia (AA) (2019 p. 4) described "compulsory activities place further burden and stress on parents" and that the "burden of meeting these compliance requirements has also harmed the ability of parents to engage with other programs, work or education activities." Mission Australia (MA) (2019, p. 16) similarly gestured not only the burden of compulsory activities but also the *administrative burden* placed on parents to engage in online reporting.

Describing the cognitive and emotional burden of ParentsNext's paternalistic and coercive monitoring, Goodstart Early Learning's (GEL) (2019) submission focussed on the exacerbation of exhaustion and stress. GEL (2019) contended:

> Sole parents have no-one to share that [care] burden and it is unsurprising that once they do get their children to sleep they are often exhausted themselves. Sole parents do not need the stress of having to report by a set time when they should be enjoying quality family time with their children, particularly after a day of studying or job-hunting.
>
> (GEL, 2019, p. 3)

Goldblatt (2021b, p. 3) similarly highlighted the exacerbation of a "care burden," describing the known impacts of conditionality on women's caregiving obligations. To alleviate these pressures, she argued that the income support system should transition to a rights-based model rather than "demand more from them [mothers] through onerous conditions (such as attendance at appointments and services)." Such a rights-based approach would aim to "address the underlying inequalities that give women primary responsibility for the care of children and others and contribute to their poverty" (Goldblatt, 2021b, p. 3).

In addition to centring the burdensome quality of state "care" through the conditionality of the ParentsNext programme, a cluster of submitters focussed on the administrative burden placed on provider organisations trying to support single-parent families. Mission Australia (2019) reported:

> In addition to burdening the participant, these system issues also add unnecessary administrative burdens on the service providers.
>
> (MA, 2019, p. 17)

An oral submission by Marion Bennett (Mission Australia) to the 2019 inquiry further implicated the administrative burden of compliance checks on provider organisations mandated by the state, describing them as "excessively burdensome and onerous" and "defeat[ing] the objective of supporting parents to prepare for future employment." (M. Bennet in CARC, 2019b, p. 33). Karen Bevan's (the then General Manager of Settlement Services International) oral submission similarly emphasised the administrative character of the burden placed on single parents and organisations providing the programme. Bevan (2019) said:

> We would also like to see changes and increased flexibility in reporting and a massive reduction in administrative burden on ParentsNext participants first and providers second.
>
> (Bevan in CARC, 2019b, p. 49)

Other submissions echoed this argument, calling "to alleviate the burden on parents" (M. Bennet in CARC, 2019b, p. 33) as part of their recommendations for future change:

> [W]e put the burden of responsibility for the employment pathway back onto the single parent, when in fact the burden should remain with government policy settings [.]
>
> (Mallett in CARC, 2019b, pp. 31 & 35)

As demonstrated across these submissions, the care-as-burden concept was extended through this overlapping of the "care burden" with the "administrative burden." Care-as-burden became associated with not only the cognitive and emotional demands of caregiving by advocates, providers and parents (cf., Dean et al., 2021; Lynch, 2021). Submitters also connected burden (*caru*) to the administrative-governmental factors that intersect with and obstruct parents from performing beneficial activities they value, including but not limited to caregiving. By doing so, ParentsNext's conditionality and its consequences—deprivation of time, inappropriate activities and referrals, and the difficulties/inequities of compulsory reporting—were foregrounded. Consequently, submitters could articulate the paternalism and punitiveness of the state's so-called curative "care" operating through ParentsNext. That is, the modes of care-as-control and care-as-cure underpinning "state care" were exposed through this extension of care-as-burden. This finding extends understandings of "administrative burden" beyond a focus on the complexity of social security and government services administration (Brown et al., 2021) by drawing attention to how a concurrent and underlying "care burden" can interact with and be compounded by paternalistic "state care."

6 | CONCLUSION

In contrast with the rise in carelessness descriptions of policy and service environments (Chatzidakis et al., 2020; Considine, 2022; Dowling, 2021), this paper highlighted four interrelated modes of care to better sensitise critical investigations to different ways of caring. Drawing on this typology and post-productivist thought (Weeks, 2011), two key interlocking discursive strategies to "unburdening care" in ParentsNext submissions were critically analysed.

The first strategy used by submitters was to explicitly highlight the value of caregiving, demonstrating its centrality in socioeconomic life. Within this strategy, a complex tension surfaced in submissions between positioning caregiving as contributing to "productive society" while simultaneously signalling to a deeper or more politically progressive conception of care: care as a socially beneficial and life-sustaining species activity (*homo curans*). Within this tension, the concept of the *carework ethic* was introduced.

The carework ethic was broadly defined as a *strategic* and *partial* investment in the productivist narrative that performing demanding (care) work demonstrates "deservingness" (Weeks, 2011). Crucially, the paper identified the carework ethic as used by submitters appears to be a strategic reaction to three intersecting forces: the dominant positioning of caregiving as unproductive (Weeks, 2011); the ongoing ascendancy of productivism in liberal-capitalist society (Gorz, 1989); and single-parent caregivers being frequently represented as "welfare dependent" or "interrupted workers" in government policy

(Blaxland, 2010), separate from the "traditional work ethic" and in turn "deservingness" of economic security.

The second strategy highlighted the nature of "state care" administered through ParentsNext. In this strategy, contrasting caregiving as a burden or "care burden," submitters foregrounded the burdensome quality of the state's "care" (care-as-cure and care-as-control). This burdening force of the state was associated with the conditionality and monitoring requirements of the ParentsNext programme. Most importantly, this positioning of burden (*caru*) as both intrinsic to caregiving and then compounded by the state's so-called curative care, extended the advocacy platform of care-as-burden. This discursive shift enabled submitters to better discuss the paternalistic and punitive administrative operations of ParentsNext as an "administrative burden." Further, the shift enabled submitters to discuss the contemporaneous gendered impacts of paternalistic social security and government services administration on the "care burden."

The study's conceptual interventions and discursive findings extend critical discussions of care in two ways. First, understanding care as multimodal challenges the simplification of care as a matter of absence or degrees of presence, which underpins "careless" or "care-less" approaches in social policy studies (Considine, 2022; Hart & Field-Pimm, 2022). In contrast, a multimodal approach invites a critical understanding of care that is sensitised to care containing the possibilities of burdening (care-as-burden) or enabling state-based controls ("state care") that can reimpose classed, racialised and gendered pathologies (care-as-control and care-as-cure). Second, as shown throughout this paper's analysis of ParentsNext submissions, caregivers and their advocates appear constrained in framing caregiving as intrinsically valuable to society (care-as-gift) in policymaking contexts due to productivism, necessitating the carework ethic strategy. This constriction of opportunities to express caregiving's inherent social value encourages further investigation into how policy and service settings can be designed to better recognise caregiving, delinking "deservingness" of economic security from performing waged work or cultivating a work ethic (Klein, 2021; Weeks, 2011). Future research should refine this study's concepts and findings through caregivers' economic biographies (Klein, 2021) and political perspectives about caregiving and care-related advocacy.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Chabel Khan: Conceptualization; writing – original draft; methodology; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; project administration; data curation; investigation.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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ENDNOTE

[1] ParentsNext was also included in the Workforce Australia Employment Services inquiry (2022–2023). This inquiry was not underway when the broader research informing this paper was conducted.

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