

# BEYOND THE BIG SOCIETY

PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

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**Foreword by Jesse Norman MP**

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Projects

## **ABOUT THE RSA**

The RSA has been a source of ideas, innovation and civic enterprise for over 250 years. In the light of new challenges and opportunities for the human race our purpose is to encourage the development of a principled, prosperous society by identifying and releasing human potential. This is reflected in the organisation's recent commitment to the pursuit of what it calls 21st century enlightenment.

Through lectures, events, pamphlets and commissions, the RSA provides a flow of rich ideas and inspiration for what might be realised in a more enlightened world; essential to progress but insufficient without action. RSA Projects aim to bridge this gap between thinking and action. We put our ideas to work for the common good. By researching, designing and testing new ways of living, we hope to foster a more inventive, resourceful and fulfilled society. Through our Fellowship of 27,000 people the RSA aims to be a source of capacity, commitment and innovation in communities from the global to the local.

## **ABOUT THE SOCIAL BRAIN PROJECT**

The notion of a rational individual who makes decisions consciously, consistently and independently is, at best, a very partial account of who we are. Science is now telling us what most of us intuitively sense - humans are a fundamentally social species. Science cannot, however, tell us what to do with this knowledge, and it is up to us to shape our lives accordingly.

Since its inception in early 2009, the Social Brain project has sought to make theories of human nature more accurate through research, more explicit through public dissemination, and more empowering through practical engagement. We are now building on this work with a new initiative linking theory and practice, provisionally called the RSA Social Brain Centre, which seeks to support personal development and wellbeing, inform social and educational practice and improve financial and environmental behaviour.

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## FOREWORD: JESSE NORMAN MP

Since its first mention by David Cameron in his 2009 Hugo Young lecture, the Big Society has made an extraordinary impact on the public mind.

It has been warmly welcomed, and reviled and denounced as empty rhetoric by different commentators, many of whom in fact accept some if not all of its basic tenets. No less a figure than the Archbishop of Canterbury has both offered two and a half cheers for the Big Society, and also described it as a stale slogan arousing widespread suspicion – in neither case appearing to recognise obvious overlaps between its vision of community empowerment and human possibility on one hand, and crucial elements of Christian doctrine on the other.

A persistent source of confusion has been a failure to distinguish between the Big Society as a set of political programmes, and the Big Society as an idea. Of these, the latter is by far the more important. Seen in this way, the Big Society is not about volunteering as such, say, or philanthropy or mutuals. No – it is an overarching conception which brings together huge areas of previously disparate and disjointed policy, notably in education, in welfare reform and in local government, and sets a course by which government can help to reshape and enhance society over the long term.

*The Hidden Curriculum of the Big Society* is a very thoughtful and provocative attempt to unpack some aspects of the Big Society, considered in this way. At its heart is a wide-ranging attempt to specify the nature of the social capital, the hidden wealth, the “x-factor” of human engagement and human institutions that distinguishes successful societies from unsuccessful ones. In my own book on the Big Society, I tapped into the psychological literature to identify three fundamental drivers – autonomy, mastery and purpose – that distinguish humans as social animals from the *homo economicus* of the economics textbooks. This report extends the same line of thought.

In the short term, the Big Society as a political programme will be judged by two things: first, whether it leads the Coalition Government to invest in a socially creative way, as through National Citizens Service; and secondly, whether it – and not the old debate of state vs. market – forms the battleground on which the major political parties fight the 2015 election. Over the longer term, the Big Society will be judged in the long term as a governing idea, by no less a criterion than this: whether we can look back in a generation and say in retrospect that it marked a moment when British society started to rebuild its moral and human, as well as its industrial and financial, capital. To both debates this report makes an important contribution.

### **Jesse Norman MP**

Author of *The Big Society: the Anatomy of the New Politics*  
([www.jessenorman.com](http://www.jessenorman.com))

*Whatever ‘caused’ the riots, the fact that they happened represents an opportunity to think of social causes, challenges and opportunities in a more fundamental way. We hope the argument for the importance of mental complexity outlined in this report will be an important reference point for that rethink.*

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**1** Davies, W. (September 2011). [Blog post], Riots and credit crunches: when economic objects attack, [Online], Available: [http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2011/09/when\\_economic\\_objects\\_attack.html](http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2011/09/when_economic_objects_attack.html)

**2** Miliband, E. (13th August 2011). We need to give people a stake in this society. The Guardian.

**3** House of Lords statement on Public Disorder (August 2011), [Online], Available: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201011/ldhansrd/text/110811-0001.htm#1108111000386>

## PROLOGUE: ‘SOCIETY’ IN THE AFTERMATH OF THE RIOTS

During the process of drafting this report the Big Society idea became somewhat tainted, and even toxic for certain audiences. While it is still a working principle for Government, the phrase ‘Big Society’ did not feature in David Cameron’s speech to the 2011 Conservative Party Conference, and the second anniversary of his Hugo Young Lecture on November 10th, where he introduced the idea, passed without major comment. If the idea is to survive, it cannot merely be reheated. It needs to be refashioned.

In this respect, the August riots posed fresh questions about the fabric of the society that is supposed to become ‘bigger’. For some, the widespread looting, violence and opportunism ridiculed the idea that a shared sense of ‘society’ could ever form the basis for joint endeavour. For others, responses to the riots - for instance in clean-up operations and the social protection of private property - showed society at its self-organising best, and reinforced the perception that social fragmentation is a collective challenge best addressed without assistance from Government.

Many have written about the variety of complex causes that led to the riots, including poverty, moral outrage, moral weakness, race relations, alienation, boredom, social contagion and so forth, but Will Davies rightly argued that the riots were an emergent phenomenon in a complex system, and questioned whether considering ‘causes’ is the most fruitful place to start:

*There has been much debate regarding the ‘causes’ of the riots, but intelligent analysis surely also has to cover the meaning of the word ‘cause’ in such a context...I would love to hear a debate amongst politicians, journalists and social scientists on how they understand this word. Most recognise that it isn’t quite the same thing as ‘correlate’, but that’s about as far as the consensus goes.*<sup>1</sup>

Rather than the search for causes amidst all the confounding variables, many commentators were reaching for a perspective that went beyond traditional concepts and language. For instance, Ed Miliband wrote: “I think we need to avoid simplistic explanations either from the left or from the right, either saying it is criminality pure and simple and that is the end of the story or saying it is all about society and it is just that there are not enough youth services.”<sup>2</sup>

In this respect, this report’s emphasis on mental complexity, manifest in autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, chimed with the Archbishop of Canterbury’s speech to the House of Lords.

Rowan Williams argued that education increasingly tends towards instrumental success rather than human excellence, and is more about producing compliant consumers than active citizens. The shock of the riots highlighted “A deepened sense of our involvement together in a social project in which we all have to participate... What we have seen is a breakdown not of society as such, but the breakdown of a sense of civic identity - shared identity and shared responsibility.” He added that people “have discovered why solidarity is important. They have begun to discover those civic virtues that we have talked about in the abstract.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition to the shock of the riots, there was also the aftershock of a relatively feeble psycho-social analysis in the media. Whatever ‘caused’ the riots, the fact that they happened represents an opportunity to think of social causes, challenges and opportunities in a more fundamental way. We hope the argument for the importance of mental complexity outlined in this report will be an important reference point for that rethink.

*Curriculum literally means to ‘run the course’, as in curriculum vitae, the course of my life. The ‘curriculum’ of the Big Society is viewed here as a long term process of cultural change, consisting of the myriad activities and behaviours that people are explicitly being asked to participate in and subscribe to. The hidden curriculum of this process of cultural change comprises the attitudes, values and competencies that are required for this process.*

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**4** Wyler, S. (2011). ‘Building the Big Society: Solid Foundations or Shifting Sands’, p37, in Sotte, M. (Ed) *The Big Society Challenge*. Keystone Development Trust Publications.

**5** Torbert, B. et al. (2004). *Action Inquiry: The Secret of Timely and Transforming Leadership*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## **OVERVIEW:**

The battle of ideas about the Big Society is driven by a desire to inform public policy, but at the core of this battle are important implicit assumptions about human nature in general and adult competencies in particular. We need to make these assumptions more explicit. As Steve Wyler, Director of Development Trusts Association puts it:

*The battle of ideas is, at its heart, a debate about the capability and potential for ordinary people, especially those living in low-income communities, to play a direct part in controlling resources and exercising power. For those who take the view that such people represent a liability...then Big Society becomes essentially a philanthropic and moralising effort. If so, the Big Society is unlikely to succeed... On the other hand, for those who regard such people as assets, or at least as potential assets, rather than liabilities, the Big Society could, in principle, have much to offer, if only it can be built on firm foundations.*<sup>4</sup>

This paper tries to build those firm foundations. The challenge is to increase the salience of the idea, now supported by a wealth of research, that adults vary developmentally, just as children do, and to explain why that matters. The Big Society could either promote adult development through innovative forms of participation and education, or ignore adult development, in which case the idea is likely to fail because people will regularly find themselves performing tasks beyond their competencies, and will not feel the efficacy and fulfilment that participation can potentially offer.

Curriculum literally means to ‘run the course’, as in curriculum vitae, the course of my life. The ‘curriculum’ of the Big Society is viewed here as a long term process of cultural change, consisting of the myriad activities and behaviours that people are explicitly being asked to participate in and subscribe to. The hidden curriculum of this process of cultural change comprises the attitudes, values and competencies that are required for this process. The main purpose of this report is to highlight the nature of this hidden curriculum, and indicate how it might inform policy and practice, particularly in relation to releasing hidden social wealth and increasing social productivity.

We introduce a perspective on public participation that is not new in academic circles but is rarely considered by policymakers, namely mental complexity in the adult population. The wide range in mental complexity is detailed in the huge literature on adult development, and concerns the range of ways in which we make sense of our experiences and construct our relationships. We believe this perspective helps us to deepen the discussion on public participation, because it has greater explanatory power and clearer practical implications than theories of ‘personality’ and ‘interpersonal skills’ that only pay lip service to the complexity of human capital.

Such personal, relational and psychological factors, and many others, do influence whether and how we participate, but we believe they stem from a deeper foundation that needs to be better understood and more widely appreciated. We have elucidated this foundation primarily on the constructive-developmental theory of Harvard Psychologist Robert Kegan, whose work underpins this report, but this is merely one of many important perspectives within adult development that agree this foundation is epistemological, concerned not with what we know, but how we know. For simplicity, we refer to this foundation as mental complexity, and we unpack it in detail below, especially in section four. The importance of this perspective is highlighted by one theorist who called it ‘an overall strategy that so thoroughly informs our experience that we cannot see it.’<sup>5</sup>

*The big idea in the Big Society that has cross-party agreement and public support, is the need to make more of our ‘hidden wealth’- the human relationships that drive and sustain the forms of participation needed to make society more productive and at ease with itself.*

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:**

- Promoting public participation requires a strong narrative, grounded in a deeper understanding of human motivation.
- The public’s ambivalent attitude to the Big Society is at least partly due to the Government’s failure to articulate their vision clearly.
- The idea of the Big Society is at its weakest when it is presented as a partisan technical solution to acute socio-economic problems, and at its strongest when viewed as a non-partisan long term adaptive challenge to enrich our social and human capital. From this perspective, the Big Society should be viewed as a process of long-term cultural change, driven by social participation for social productivity and social solidarity.
- The big idea in the Big Society that has cross-party agreement and public support, is the need to make more of our ‘hidden wealth’- the human relationships that drive and sustain the forms of participation needed to make society more productive and at ease with itself.
- This is a major cultural challenge. Levels of participation in Britain have remained static despite Government initiatives. Values surveys suggest that British people are relatively fearful of strangers and relatively authoritarian in outlook, so the culture change demanded requires a reframing of our relationships to ourselves, to each other and to the State.
- To make these changes we need to invest in our ability to get along and make care-based exchanges, both of which are strong drivers of economic growth and national wellbeing.
- Hidden wealth is grounded in certain key inter-personal and intra-personal competencies. We focus on 1) Autonomy – the capacity to be self-directed, and act through intrinsic motivation. 2) Responsibility – literally to be able to respond, to take ownership of ‘bigger-than self’ problems. 3) Solidarity – the ability to interact in socially heterogeneous groups with a sense of mutual commitment.
- The demand for these complex competencies needs to recognise developmental diversity within the adult population. Not everybody is ‘up to it’ in the same way.
- Acquiring the relevant competencies is a developmental challenge that requires a level of mental complexity, described by Harvard psychologist Kegan as ‘self-authoring’, in which we develop ‘a relationship to our reactions’. Available evidence suggests this level of mental complexity is not currently widespread in the adult population.
- For the Big Society to take root, we need to invest more time and energy making sure that the forms of participation and engagement called for as part of the Big Society are supported by formal and informal adult education. Social productivity requires that people are both supported and challenged.

6 Kegan, R. (2001). 'Competencies as Working Epistemologies: Ways We Want Adults to Know' in Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) *Defining and Selecting Key Competencies*. Germany: Hogrefe and Huber publishers. p196.

7 The first launch of the Big Society was on the 13th April 2010 when it appeared in the Conservative Party election manifesto (available at <http://www.conservatives.com/policy/manifesto.aspx>); the second launch was on the 19th July 2010 when David Cameron gave a speech introducing the vanguard communities initiative (transcript available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-speech/>); the third launch was on the 12th February 2011 when Cameron gave another speech defending the Big Society (available at <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-on-big-society/>); and the fourth launch was on the 23rd May 2011 when Cameron announced a small number of new Big Society initiatives (<http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speech-on-the-big-society/>).

8 See Taylor, M. (2007). Lecture: *Pro-Social Behaviour: the Future – it's up to us*. RSA, [Online], Available: [http://www.thersa.org/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0020/794/Pro-Social-Behaviour-pro-social\\_behaviour.pdf](http://www.thersa.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0020/794/Pro-Social-Behaviour-pro-social_behaviour.pdf)

9 Cameron, D. (18th April 2010). *This is a radical revolt against the statist approach of Big Government*. The Observer.

10 To view this video visit: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/wintour-and-watt/2010/may/03/general-election-2010-labour>

11 See, for example, Blond, P. (2010). *Red Tory: How the left and right broke Britain and how we can fix it*. London: Faber and Faber.

12 Fox, K. (2005). *Watching the English*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

13 Halpern, D. (2010). Lecture: *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. RSA, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/david-halpern-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations>

## INTRODUCTION: RETHINKING THE CHALLENGE OF PARTICIPATION

*We truly become a part of society when society truly becomes a part of us.* – ROBERT KEGAN<sup>6</sup>

David Cameron has so far made four attempts to launch the Big Society<sup>7</sup> and Francis Maude, the minister responsible for developing the idea, has admitted that the Government have failed to articulate the idea in a compelling way. This report argues that the big idea in the Big Society is currently being lost in the detail. For two years the Conservative leadership has neglected to spell out the emotional heart of the idea, namely that the Big Society is ultimately about personal development through participation and improving the quality and efficacy of our relationships. At its best, the Big Society is about helping us to become the people we want to be, in a society of which we feel proud to be an active part. In this respect, it is closely aligned with what the RSA has called 'the social aspiration gap', the gap between the world in which we would like to live, and the world we create through our actions.<sup>8</sup>

David Cameron speaks of his 'profound faith in human beings'<sup>9</sup> and describes making society stronger as the passion that gets him out of his bed in the morning but this core message of the Big Society is not getting through because it is not so much an intellectual position, but more an emotional plea for people to change their attitudes to themselves and their feelings for each other. This narrative of long-term cultural change is being drowned out by news of budget cuts, while the emphasis on changing people is obscured by the minutiae of changing policies. The Big Society needs some analytical traction to sustain public attention; this is what we offer here.

### "WHERE PEOPLE DO THE THINGS GOVERNMENTS USED TO DO"

Before the last general election, the Labour Party produced a video satirising the Big Society. A harried mother returns home from a stint as a teacher, social worker and lollipop lady and scrambles around a chaotic kitchen while responding to her plaintive children. She frantically reads sticky notes and picks up several different phones in order to fulfil her improbable roles as a police officer, parole board official and 999 Operator. She responds to her daughter, who says she is tired, with the line: "Well, we all are darling, that's the Big Society for you". The caption at the end of the advert reads: "*Cameron's Big Society: Where People do the things Governments used to do.*"<sup>10</sup>

The video makes a point, but its critique is presented by proponents of the Big Society, without irony, as a positive development, indeed as the very heart of the Coalition Government's policy agenda.<sup>11</sup> It is not difficult to imagine a similar satirical video, perhaps in the style of *Yes Minister*, about the incompetence of a distant managerial Government, compared to the honest efficacy of engaged local citizens.

Such polarizing caricatures do not get us very far, but they highlight that the credibility of the Big Society hinges on the viability of the demands placed on 'people', and the kinds of assumed competencies implicit in these demands. Moreover, given that anthropological studies suggest the English are prone to 'negative politeness' and disinclined to 'make a fuss'<sup>12</sup>, while surveys of national attitudes suggest British people are unusually afraid of strangers and relatively authoritarian in nature, the Big Society demands on 'people' may be particularly acute.<sup>13</sup>



**14** See, for example, Taylor, M. (December 2010). Blog post: *Big Society – points out of five (times five)*, [Online], Available: <http://www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/politics/big-society-points-out-of-five-times-five/>

**15** See, for example, Taylor, M. (July 2010). Blog post: *The Big Society and the RSA – a good match*, [Online], Available: <http://www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/thersa/the-big-society-and-the-rsa-a-good-match/#hide>

**16** See, for example, Taylor, M. (April 2010). Blog post: *The irredeemable anecdotalism of the Big Society*, [Online], Available: <http://www.matthewtaylorsblog.com/uncategorized/the-irredeemable-anecdotalism-of-the-big-society/#hide>

**17** Halpern, D. (2010). *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. London: Polity Press.

**18** RSA & Ipsos MORI (October 2010). Press release: *Majority of voters still don't know what the 'Big Society' means*, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/about-us/media/press-releases/majority-of-voters-still-dont-know-what-the-big-society-means>

**19** Ibid.

**20** Stott, M. (Ed) (2011). Op cit.

**21** Coote, A. (2010). Lecture: *Cutting It: 'Big Society' and the new austerity*. RSA, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/vision-videos/panel-discussion4>

**22** Kippin, H. & Lucas, B. (2011). *From Big Society to Social Productivity*. London: 2020 Public Services Hub at the RSA.

**23** Leach, N. & Wilson, R. (2011). *Civic Limits: How much more involved can people get?* London: Respublica.

**24** Cameron, D. (July 2010). Speech: *Our Big Society Agenda*, [Online], Available: [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David\\_Cameron\\_Our\\_Big\\_Society\\_Agenda.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David_Cameron_Our_Big_Society_Agenda.aspx)

**25** Norman, J. (February 2011). *Stealing the Big Society*, [Online], Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/feb/08/stealing-big-society-ed-miliband>

**26** Cabinet Office (2010). *Building the Big Society*, [Online], Available: <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/news/building-big-society>

**27** Lakoff, G. & Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## A VISION WITHOUT A STRATEGY?

The RSA has expressed qualified support for the idea of the Big Society,<sup>14</sup> because we believe it has the potential to help citizens to become, in Matthew Taylor's terms, more engaged, more resourceful and more pro-social.<sup>15</sup> However, the idea that the population has what it takes to participate in the requisite ways is based largely on wishful thinking rather than evidence.<sup>16</sup> From this perspective, the Big Society agenda needs to be refashioned as the means of fostering these qualities in citizens, rather than merely being about the end, a vision of a society where those qualities are abundant and effective.

The Big Society agenda should allow us collectively to define and master a new cultural curriculum built around mass participation.<sup>17</sup> However, the Big Society agenda is still not widely recognised<sup>18</sup> nor is it generally understood<sup>19</sup>, and it faces fierce criticism from a variety of perspectives.<sup>20</sup> For instance, while speaking at the RSA, Anna Coote of the New Economics Foundation argued:

*The phrase may sound like apple pie and motherhood, but is actually a major programme for structural reform. It's the social policy that makes the economic policy of the spending review politically possible.*<sup>21</sup>

Without strong leadership on the purpose and scope of the Big Society, these critiques will gradually undermine confidence in the idea. However, given that the idea is not going to go away, and that the Government seems to think it is at least partly 'society's' responsibility to give definition to the idea, these critiques suggest a need to approach the idea from a more constructive angle, ideally in a way that helps people understand what to aim for, and how to act. As a recent RSA 2020 report put it, the Big Society has been presented as a vision, but lacks a strategy.<sup>22</sup>

In this respect, one fruitful perspective is to take David Cameron's reference to 'a huge cultural change' seriously, and ask what kind of change would be a success on those terms. *ResPublica* have suggested that doubling 'the civic core' who regularly participate from thirty to sixty per cent of the population should be a principal aim, but our focus here is on the quality of participants rather than their quantity.<sup>23</sup> If we accept that the Big Society is a long term project about the transformation of society over the course of years and decades, we need to better understand the 'people' who do more of the things that government used to do.<sup>24</sup>

But a programme of long-term cultural change for society has to swim against the relatively short-term currents of the media and electoral cycles, which are focussed on the fates of particular people rather than possibilities for the population as a whole. As Conservative MP Jesse Norman puts it:

*As a political programme it is intrinsically long-term, at a time when public debate is Twitter-quick in demanding instant results. And it faces the deeper problem that while the government can nudge, coax, liberate and, yes, often fund the creation of social capital, it cannot directly create society.*<sup>25</sup>

A further challenge is that 'society' is a hugely ambiguous and contested term. The Cabinet Office defines society as "the families, networks, neighbourhoods and communities that form so much of the fabric of our everyday lives"<sup>26</sup> which appears to be relatively uncontroversial. However, the 'Big' in big society does not refer to the *size* of 'society' as such. It is not that we want more families, more networks, more neighbourhoods, more communities. The point is to make these things more *significant* in our lives. The 'Big' in Big Society relies on a big-as-significant conceptual metaphor, as explained by Cognitive Scientists Lakoff and Johnson.<sup>27</sup> It is a function of quality not quantity.

*Taking participation seriously means recognising that it is often personally challenging, socially divisive or politically contentious, and indeed that these are often its defining features.*<sup>31</sup>

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**28** Cabinet Office (2010). *The Coalition: Our programme for government*, [Online], Available: [http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dg/groups/dg\\_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg\\_187876.pdf](http://www.direct.gov.uk/prod_consum_dg/groups/dg_digitalassets/@dg/@en/documents/digitalasset/dg_187876.pdf)

**29** Halpern, D. (2010). *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. London: Polity Press. p2.

**30** Halpern, D. (2010). Lecture: *The Hidden Wealth of Nations*. Royal Society of Arts, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/events/video/archive/david-halpern-the-hidden-wealth-of-nations>

**31** See, for example, Brodie, E. et al. (2009). *Understanding Participation: A Literature Review*. London: NCVO, Involve and IVR.

## WHAT MAKES A CITIZEN 'BIG'?

*"A Big Society matched by big citizens."*

– THE COALITION: OUR PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT<sup>28</sup>

One way to make sense of the quality in question is through the idea of hidden wealth. This relates to the value of care-based exchanges and the attendant social norms that underpin them. David Halpern defines hidden wealth as "the stuff that, for most part, makes our societies and economies work." And "the parallel world of relationships and habits that forms the backdrop to much of the chatter of contemporary politics".<sup>29</sup>

Hidden wealth is a function of human abilities and social connections; it is about our competencies as individuals and our capacity to relate with others. It is hard to measure existing levels of hidden wealth, and even harder to be sure how these levels change over time or compare within and across countries.<sup>30</sup> Even so, a growth in hidden wealth seems a reasonable approximation of what it means for society to get 'bigger'. But what does it mean to have 'bigger' citizens? Where is the significance in *this* big-as-significant metaphor? We argue that the idea of 'bigger' citizens is best captured in terms of competencies required for effective participation.

## 'BIG' CITIZENS ARE 'COMPETENT' CITIZENS

Taking participation seriously means recognising that it is often personally challenging, socially divisive or politically contentious, and indeed that these are often its defining features.<sup>31</sup> If the core 'curriculum' of the Big Society is that we learn how to get along and participate together, we need to face up to the implicit demands that this curriculum entails. Such a cultural change requires that people grow into personal **competencies** that they may not yet fully possess, in order to address complex demands with their available psychosocial resources. Such contexts may include cooperating with strangers from different backgrounds, negotiating with powerful people, or intervening to reduce public disorder.

**32** For more information on the RSA Opening Minds Curriculum see: <http://www.rsaopeningminds.org.uk/about-rsa-openingminds/competences/>

**33** Skolverket (National Agency for Education, Sweden) (2001). 'Definition and selection of key competencies in Sweden', [Online], Available: [http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat\\_ch/ber15/desecco/sfso\\_desecco\\_ccp\\_sweden\\_19122001.pdf](http://www.statistik.admin.ch/stat_ch/ber15/desecco/sfso_desecco_ccp_sweden_19122001.pdf), cited in Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-Functioning Society*. Germany: Hogrefe and Huber Publishers.

**34** Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). Op cit.

**35** Fraczak-Rudnicka, B. & Torney-Purta, J. (2003). 'Competencies for Civic and Political Life in a Democracy' in Rychen, D. S., Salganik, L. H. & McLaughlin, M. E. (Eds). *Selected Contributions to the 2nd DeSeCo Symposium*. Neuchatel, Switzerland: Swiss Federal Statistical Office; and Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H. & Shulz, W. (2001). 'Citizenship and education in twenty-eight countries: Civic knowledge and engagement at age fourteen.' Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Education Achievement; both cited in Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). Op cit. p44.

**36** Le Boterf, G. (1994). 'De la compétence: Essai sur un attracteur étrange.' Paris: Les Editions d'Organisation cited in Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). Op cit.

**37** Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). Op cit. p43.

**38** Rychen, D. S. & Salganik, L. H. (Eds) (2003). Op cit.

## Figure 1: From Skills to Competencies

**Skills:** often basic, generally automatic or grounded in rules or algorithms, teachable in principle, rarely transferable to other contexts.

**Competencies:** grounded in values, attitudes and dispositions, and responsive to complex and often unfamiliar demands in context. Irreducible to component parts.

Some definitions of a competence

“the ability to understand and to do”- RSA Opening Minds Curriculum.<sup>32</sup>

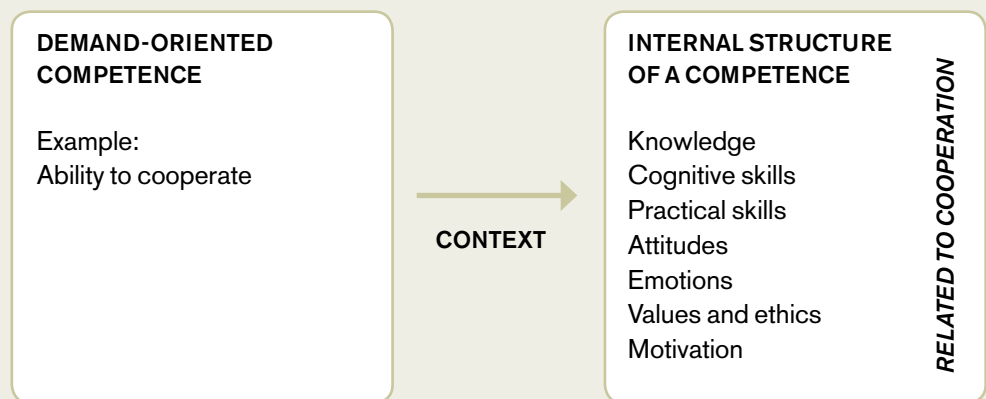
“what one knows, what one can do, what one wants, and what one dares to do” - The Swedish Metal Worker’s Union.<sup>33</sup>

“the ability to successfully meet complex demands in a particular context through the mobilization of psychosocial prerequisites (including both cognitive and noncognitive aspects)”-OECD’s Key Competencies Report.<sup>34</sup>

A useful example of the need for competence is the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study in which knowledge (of democratic principles), skills (in interpreting political communication), attitudes (related to trust in public institutions, the nation, opportunities for women, and political rights), and expectations for participation (in civic-related activities) are all regarded as relevant to meeting the demands of civic participation in democratic societies.<sup>35</sup> Possessing a competence means that one not only possesses the component resources, but is also able to mobilise such resources properly and to orchestrate them, at an appropriate time, in a complex situation.<sup>36</sup>

The primary focus of the notion of ‘competence’ is on the results the individual achieves through an action, choice, or way of behaving, with respect to the demands, for instance, related to a particular professional position, social role, or personal project.”<sup>37</sup>

The following diagram indicates what it means to say that participation may include a ‘hidden curriculum’ in terms of mental complexity. Asking somebody to ‘cooperate’ with people they may not know, often in very complex situations, entails a demand on the internal structure of the competence, which we call ‘mental complexity’.



**Figure 2:** The demand defines the internal structure of a competence

**Source:** DeSeCo<sup>38</sup>

*We do not mean intelligence, knowledge or educational level, but something closer to relational know-how, our varied capacity to understand competing motivations and values in ourselves and others, to ‘get things in perspective’, and to act appropriately in uncertain or ambiguous situations.*

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**39** Ibid.

**40** Kegan, R. (1995). *In Over Our Heads*. Harvard University Press. p4. cited in Berger, J. G. (2010). *Key Concepts for Understanding the Work of Robert Kegan*, [Online], Available: [http://www.shiftingthinking.org/?page\\_id=449](http://www.shiftingthinking.org/?page_id=449)

**41** Indeed IQ appears to have only a very modest correlation with mental complexity. Kegan and Lahey, *Immunity to Change*, Op Cit, p27.

**42** Burleson, B.R., & Caplan, S.E. (1998). ‘Cognitive Complexity’ cited in McCroskey, J. C., Daly, J. A., Martin, M. M., & Beatty, M. J. (Eds) *Communication and Personality: Trait Perspectives*. New York: Hampton Press.

Many of the existing considerations about participation seek to answer the motivational question: Are we up for it? But thus far, few have asked a related but very different developmental question: Are we up to it? Perhaps if we focus more on the latter question the former will begin to take care of itself.

It is useful to consider the Big Society agenda from the perspective of a major 5-year international cross-disciplinary research programme by the OECD, including scholars and international organisations such as UNESCO, the World Bank, the ILO and the UN Development Programme – in order to agree upon the key competencies needed for countries to thrive in the 21st century. The Project’s final report – *Key Competencies for a Successful Life and a Well-functioning Society* – articulated three top-level categories of competence related to demands that were found to be common across OECD countries. They are: acting autonomously, interacting in socially heterogeneous groups, and using tools (including language) interactively. <sup>39</sup>

The OECD report takes great care to define its core ideas of competence, what makes a competence ‘key’ and how these competencies relate to what is desirable in life. The report’s authors agreed that each of the competencies tacitly entailed a higher level of mental complexity than was widely available at present. In a contributing paper to this body of research, Kegan argues:

*The expectations upon us...demand something more than mere behaviour, the acquisition of specific skills, or the mastery of particular knowledge. They make demands on our minds, on how we know, on the complexity of our consciousness.* <sup>40</sup>

The notion of ‘mental complexity’ is unpacked more fully below, but it is worth clarifying at the outset that we do not mean intelligence, knowledge or educational level, but something closer to relational know-how, our varied capacity to understand competing motivations and values in ourselves and others, to ‘get things in perspective’, and to act appropriately in uncertain or ambiguous situations. <sup>41</sup> In psychometric terms, mental complexity has been defined as “an individual-difference variable associated with a broad range of communication skills and related abilities ... (which) indexes the degree of differentiation, articulation, and integration within a cognitive system”. <sup>42</sup>

These ‘demands on our minds’, for instance to differentiate, articulate and integrate multiple perspectives present ongoing challenges, and addressing such challenges needs to be an integral part of attempts to increase hidden wealth and improve social productivity.

*Adaptive challenges require changes in attitudes and perspectives and not just behaviours, and they can only be addressed by the people who face these challenges, which is why they are difficult to identify and easy to deny. Much of the critique of the Big Society is based on people seeing it as an unlikely technical solution to social and economic challenges, but this paper asks what follows when it is instead viewed as an adaptive challenge too.*

**43** Heifetz, R. & Laurie, D. (December 2001). 'The Work of Leadership' in *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (11), 130-141.

**44** Kegan, R. and Lahey, L. L. (2009). *Immunity to Change: How to overcome it and unlock the potential in yourself and your organisation*. Harvard Business School Press.

**45** Table from Svaren, E., [Online], Available: <http://www.groupsmith.com/>. Table adapted from Heifetz, R. and Laurie, D. (1997). 'The Work of Leadership' in *Harvard Business Review*, 75 (1), 124-134; and Heifetz, R. & Linsky, M. (2002). *Leadership on the Line*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

**46** See, for example, Taylor, M. (2010). *Twenty-first Century Enlightenment*. London: RSA.

## 1. THE BIG SOCIETY: BAD TECHNICAL SOLUTION, GOOD ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE?

*“The most common leadership failure stems from attempting to apply technical solutions to adaptive challenges.” – HEIFETZ <sup>43</sup>*

Harvard Professor Ron Heifetz makes a useful distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges which highlights why the idea of the Big Society has created so much confusion. Adaptive challenges require changes in attitudes and perspectives and not just behaviours, and they can only be addressed by the people who face these challenges, which is why they are difficult to identify and easy to deny. Much of the critique of the Big Society is based on people seeing it as an unlikely technical solution to social and economic challenges, but this paper asks what follows when it is instead viewed as an adaptive challenge too. <sup>44</sup>

### Figure 3: Technical Problems VS. Adaptive Challenges

(Table adapted from Heifetz and Laurie, used with permission of Groupsmith.com<sup>45</sup>)

TECHNICAL PROBLEMS	ADAPTIVE CHALLENGES
1. Easy to identify	1. Difficult to identify (easy to deny)
2. Often lend themselves to quick and easy (cut-and-dried) solutions	2. Require changes in values, beliefs, roles, relationships, and approaches to work
3. Often can be solved by an authority or expert	3. People with the problem do the work of solving it
4. Require change in just one or a few places; often contained within organizational boundaries	4. Require change in numerous places; usually cross organizational boundaries
5. People are generally receptive to technical solutions	5. People often resist even acknowledging adaptive challenges
6. Solutions can often be implemented quickly—even by edict	6. “Solutions” require experiments and new discoveries; they can take a long time to implement and cannot be implemented by edict
EXAMPLES	
– Take medication to lower blood pressure	– Change lifestyle to eat healthily, get more exercise and lower stress
– Implement electronic ordering and dispensing of medications in hospitals to reduce errors and drug interactions	– Encourage nurses and pharmacists to question and even challenge illegible or dangerous prescriptions by physicians
– Increase penalty for drunk driving	– Raise public awareness of the dangers and effects of drunk driving, targeting teenagers in particular

### SELECTING KEY COMPETENCIES FOR THE BIG SOCIETY

Operationalizing the adaptive challenge of the Big Society requires both critical engagement with the Big Society as it is currently conceived, and a value-driven account of how it might be reconceived. For this purpose we used three distinct but overlapping strategies. First we sought to develop connections between existing OECD research on competencies and the Government’s presentation of the Big Society agenda. This process included critical discourse analysis on existing pronouncements, research and opinion relating to the Big Society. We then integrated elements of the RSA’s existing vision of human capability, which outlines the kinds of citizens we need to face 21st century challenges. <sup>46</sup>

*Operationalizing the adaptive challenge of the Big Society requires both critical engagement with the Big Society as it is currently conceived, and a value-driven account of how it might be reconceived.*

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**47** Ibid.

The OECD study argues that the three key competencies that are required to live a ‘successful life in a well-functioning society’ are acting autonomously, interacting in socially heterogeneous groups and using tools (including language) interactively. Our critical discourse analysis of government speeches and policies revealed that the emphasis within its Big Society agenda is different, envisaging that people must become more civically minded, motivated and self-starting, responsible for whatever they undertake, and become more adept at forming groups and alliances to help them achieve objectives. There is congruence between these themes and the RSA’s 21st century vision of human capability, expressed in Matthew Taylor’s argument that we need to become more engaged, resourceful and pro-social to address modern challenges.<sup>47</sup>

Drawing out the most potent elements from these sources of ideas, we suggest the key competencies needed to allow individuals to contribute effectively to the Big Society are autonomy, responsibility and solidarity. The demand for these three competencies is explained below, and the core argument of this paper is that, properly understood, the acquisition of these key competencies represents a hidden curriculum, the mastery of which requires a certain level of mental complexity in Britain’s adult population. We clarify the meaning of these terms below.

To make better sense of the curriculum of the Big Society, and the hidden curriculum it contains, we need to look more closely at the nature of participation and the demands it places on people, to which we now turn.

*For the shift from social security to social productivity to be realised, people will increasingly need to collaborate, deliberate, and tap into the latent knowledge and skills of their fellow citizens and surrounding organisations.*

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**48** For more details see Cabinet Office (2010). *State of the Nation Report: poverty, worklessness and welfare dependency in the UK*. London: Cabinet Office.

**49** Rowson, J. (2010). Blog post: *Big Society* (1), [Online], Available: <http://projects.rsablogs.org.uk/2010/04/big-society1/>

**50** 2020 Public Services Trust (2010). *2020 Welfare: Life, Work, Locality*. London: 2020PST.

**51** 2020 Public Services Trust (2010). *2020 Vision: A far-sighted approach to transforming public services*. London: 2020PST.

**52** Norris, E. and McLean, S. (2011). *Civic Commons*. London: RSA; McLean, S. & Dellot, B. (2011). *Civic Pulse: Measuring active citizenship in a cold climate*. London: RSA; Leach, M. & Wilson, R. (2011). Op cit; and Aiken, M., Baker, L. and Tarapdar, S. (2011). *Encouraging participation: the role of community-based organisations*. London: Community Matters and IVAR.

## 2. THE CURRICULUM OF THE BIG SOCIETY: DEEPER INTO PARTICIPATION

*“Society is not a spectator sport.”*

– DAVID CAMERON

David Cameron’s rationale for the Big Society is roughly as follows: State intervention helped to advance the cause of social justice in Britain until the late sixties, but less so thereafter. The biggest expansion in state involvement has taken place since 1997, but in this period inequality has grown: the incomes of the bottom 10% fell between 2002-2008, youth unemployment has increased and social mobility has stalled.<sup>48</sup> The State failed to tackle poverty in recent years because those in poverty lacked the education to take advantage of the opportunities of globalisation, and because the state was relatively blind to the social impact of economic reforms, for example when benefit structures serve to disincentivise work. The role of the state therefore needs to shift from one that primarily serves to create economic dependence to one that increases personal and social responsibility. As Cameron puts it, “We need to use the state to remake society”. He proposes to do so by increasing educational opportunity for all and by focusing on social enterprise, community activists, and, crucially, everybody else. The fact that *everybody* needs to become involved in some form of volunteering, associational life, local politics and service provision is one reason why the vision is a ‘big’ one.<sup>49</sup>

The curriculum of the Big Society can be discerned from a diverse range of initiatives. For instance, Community Right to Build, to enable people to decide on the planning of local housing; the Big Society Bank, to provide finance for aspiring charities and social enterprises; the training of 5,000 community organisers, to galvanise grass-roots action in the community; the National Citizens Service, to engender participation from a young age; the Big Society Day, to raise people’s awareness and commitment for civic action; and more generally, the transfer of power from central to local government, in the hope of empowering people to take the lead in the decisions that best suit them. Furthermore, the curriculum also extends its reach into public service territory with, for instance, free schools in education, participatory budgeting in social care, greater service commissioning by practitioners in the NHS, and opportunities for Pathfinder mutual schemes across the whole of the public sector. This diverse range of activities represent a curriculum in the sense that they are implicit injunctions for citizens to act in certain ways - they chart ‘the course’ - and those actions require the mastery of certain competencies.

A useful means of summarising both the overt and subtle demands that are placed upon individuals by the curriculum is to employ the notion of social productivity. The RSA 2020 Public Services Trust refers to a society with ‘the active involvement of citizens in identifying, understanding and solving public problems dynamically using all appropriate means.’<sup>50</sup> For the shift from social security to social productivity to be realised, people will increasingly need to collaborate, deliberate, and tap into the latent knowledge and skills of their fellow citizens and surrounding organisations.<sup>51</sup>

For these reasons, participation should be encouraged, and gives rise to a range of benefits for the individuals concerned and society as whole (see appendix). There have been several recent reports that attempt to address the challenge of increasing participation, including RSA reports on Civic Commons, Civic Pulse, a Republica report on ‘Civic Limits’ and a Community Matters report on the importance of Community based organisations.<sup>52</sup> While these reports give detailed accounts of existing forms and levels of participation, what is not yet very clear is what an optimal level of participation might be, and how we might make that judgment. Moreover, participation is closely related to income and educational level, and is often conflictual, pitting people and groups against each other, so we need to be more discriminating when promoting it (see appendix).

*At the level of social attitudes, stories trump facts.*

*Fifty-two per cent of the public agree with Anne Widdecombe's quip that we now expect more of the government than we do of God.*

**53** Kahane, A. (2004). *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. pp83-84.

**54** See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**55** Pathways through Participation (2009). *Briefing paper no.4 – Why participate? Understanding what motivates people to get involved*, [Online], Available: <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/09/Briefing-paper-4-Why-participate1.pdf>

**56** Value Modes theory suggests that there are three values groups (Settlers, Prospectors and Pioneers) each of which have different values and therefore react in separate ways to different circumstances. Research undertaken by the Campaign Company suggests that of all these groups, Pioneers are more likely to participate in certain activities like the running of local services. For more information about the use of Value Modes see Mansell, C. (February 2011). Blog post: *The Values Gap*, [Online], Available: <http://thecampaigncompany.wordpress.com/2011/02/08/the-values-gap/>

**57** Pecorelli, N. & Harding, C. (2010). *The Big Society: Why values matter*. London: The Campaign Company.

**58** Ibid.

**59** Poll by Ipsos MORI based on British adults, 18th-19th April 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**60** Putnam, R. (2003). *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*. Simon and Schuster.

**61** See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**62** Polling by Ipsos MORI shows that 60% of people either strongly agree or tend to agree that the government is responsible for improving public services and local areas, and that they shouldn't be calling on the public to help. Poll based on British adults, 18th-19th April 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

## **PARTICIPATION: NARRATIVES, FRAMES AND VALUES**

*“If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem”, is entirely misconceived...If you are not part of the problem, you cannot be part of the solution.” – BILL TORBERT <sup>53</sup>*

Many people get involved to ‘stop’ something happening, rather than affecting a positive change so we need to make ‘involvement’ a more positive decision.<sup>54</sup> In this respect, we should recognise that a lot of people get involved in volunteering and other civic duties because they have a personal story that compelled or inspired them to act.<sup>55</sup>

The link between narrative and participation is a useful device to begin to illustrate the value of developmental perspectives. Recent Values Modes research, using a Maslow-based understanding of people’s needs and motivations<sup>56</sup> by the Campaign Company suggests that local grievances often spread in a narrative form and take hold as widely accepted stories, even if they directly contradict available statistical evidence presented by local authorities.<sup>57</sup> In some areas with multiple indices of deprivation, council leaders consistently try to address fear of crime and immigration through ‘factual rebuttals’, for instance challenging conventional wisdom about the allocation of social housing along ethnic lines with geo-demographic data.

However, at the level of social attitudes, stories trump facts.<sup>58</sup> Cognitive scientist George Lakoff argues that this is because narratives are grounded in cultural values and unconscious frames (conceptual constructs that activate and strengthen values like ‘outsiders’, ‘them and us’) that serve to filter facts. We are more likely to reject facts without fully engaging with their objective merits if we question the relevance and authority of the person conveying them (‘the messenger effect’) and if they are not conducive to points of view to which we have become attached, or through which we identify ourselves. As Lakoff puts it, if the facts don’t support a person’s values “the facts bounce off”.

This emphasis on finding a relevant personal story may address the gap between those who think ‘People should get involved in helping improve our public services and local areas’ (strongly agree 49%, tend to agree 37%,) with those who think ‘I should get more involved’ (28% strongly agree, 40% tend to agree).<sup>59</sup> In this case, for ‘I’ to become one of the ‘people’ who should get involved means identifying with a social issue at a personal level, such that we become a character in the story we are telling about the issue, rather than merely a narrator. Such issues are often hyper-local, connected to immediate issues that can be seen on a daily basis, like rubbish collection or traffic violations, as Robert Putnam and others have argued.<sup>60</sup>

One obstacle is that the government is still embedded in people’s minds as the main agent of change. Fifty-two per cent of the public agree with Anne Widdecombe’s quip that *we now expect more of the government than we do of God* and polling data suggests that the public has no clear attitude towards the state. Depending on the issue, we seem to support enabling, nanny and nudging states.<sup>61</sup> Even so, many are trapped in a narrative of waiting passively for an external force to do something that might often be done more effectively by the people closer to the issue.<sup>62</sup>

Whatever stories people tell themselves and each other about the state, it is worth striving to develop some critical distance from them, and to be open to facts that might challenge the legitimacy of these narratives. To achieve this detachment, we need more opportunities to share our stories and have them heard, but we also need a supportive environment to have our stories challenged. As Kegan and Lahey put it:



*In Kegan's language, the Big Society agenda is about getting more people to 'write on' their circumstances, rather than be 'written by' them.*

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**63** Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. L. (2001). *How the way we talk can change the way we work*. Wiley John and Sons Inc. p37.

**64** See Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

*We tell our stories so we can stop being our stories and become persons who have these stories. We tell these stories so that we can become more responsible for them.*<sup>63</sup>

The challenge of increasing participation is partly about fewer people 'being' stories, and more people actively authoring their own stories and 'having' them, rather than merely telling them as if they were authored by somebody else. In Kegan's language, the Big Society agenda is about getting more people to 'write on' their circumstances, rather than be 'written by' them.<sup>64</sup>

What NCVO calls ‘engaging with the state’ begins to look more like the equivalent of a shopping trip to B&Q before doing DIY, where the state is one of the expert shop assistants telling you where to find things.

65 Cameron, D. (October 2010). 2010 Conservative Party Conference Speech: *Together in the National Interest*, [Online], Available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/8046342/David-Camersons-Conservative-conference-speech-in-full.html>

66 The expression ‘auto-telic’ is also used in this context, in the sense of being disposed to automatically set one’s own goals (telos). See for instance, Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2002). *Flow: The Psychology of Happiness*. Rider.

67 Cameron, D. (July 2010). Speech to Civil Service Live Conference: *We will make government accountable to the people*, [Online], Available: [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David\\_Cameron\\_We\\_will\\_make\\_government\\_accountable\\_to\\_the\\_people.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/07/David_Cameron_We_will_make_government_accountable_to_the_people.aspx)

### 3. THREE KEY COMPETENCIES REQUIRED FOR BUILDING THE BIG SOCIETY: AUTONOMY, RESPONSIBILITY AND SOLIDARITY

As indicated above, the three competencies on which we focus were selected on the basis of three main influences: an analysis of government initiative and speeches, a 5-year OECD international research programme into the competencies required in post-industrial societies, and the RSA’s vision of human capability in the 21st century.

#### **AUTONOMY: “SOCIETY IS NOT A SPECTATOR SPORT”**

*“So that great project in your community – go and lead it. The waste in government – go and find it. The new school in your neighbourhood – go and demand it. The beat meeting on your street – sign up. The neighbourhood group – join up. The business you’ve always dreamed of – start up. When we say ‘we are all in this together’ that is not a cry for help, but a call to arms.” – DAVID CAMERON*<sup>65</sup>

Cameron’s ‘call to arms’ amounts to a ‘Do it yourself’ injunction, and we all know that some are better at DIY than others. Autonomy is a much richer concept than merely doing things oneself, but at its heart is the idea of self-direction and freedom from external coercion. The Big Society is premised on the State, both local and national, not getting in the way of people choosing their ends, or the means to achieve those ends. Autonomy has various definitions, but here it is used to reflect the psychological implications of subsidiarity, in the sense of taking personal initiative without state interference. Autonomy is linked to intrinsic motivation, in the sense of people being self-authoring, creating their own goals and working towards them for their own sake, rather than due to financial rewards or coercion.<sup>66</sup>

In a meeting between Cameron and senior civil servants in the summer of 2010, the Prime Minister gave some indication of this shift towards greater autonomy for citizens:

*Let me be very clear. I do not want you to think your role is to guarantee outcomes of public services. Nor to directly intervene in organisations to directly improve their performance....You should simply create the conditions in which performance will improve....replacing bureaucratic accountability with democratic accountability...If you want to make targets, set new rules, impose restrictions, don’t bother.*<sup>67</sup>

Cameron sees ‘the Big Society’ as a place with radically decentralised accountability, and with Whitehall public servants creating the minimal facilitating conditions for social participation. What NCVO calls ‘engaging with the state’ begins to look more like the equivalent of a shopping trip to B&Q before doing DIY, where the state is one of the expert shop assistants telling you where to find things. What remains unclear is what it will take to make this model of state-citizen relationship work in terms of scrutiny, impact assessment and regulation, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

*The kind of autonomy being asked for is not merely uncoerced decision making by rational agents, but a more reflexive autonomy, in which people become aware of their motivation, prejudices, and biases and use this awareness to overcome the inertia and dependency that prevents participation.*

68 Pearce, J. & Milne, E-J. (2010). *Participation and community on Bradford's traditionally white estates: a community research project*. London: JRF.

69 All quotes are from text messages sent to Suffolk County Council in response to a consultation on their planned 'Big Society initiatives'. We would like to thank Sarah Miller from the Institute for Volunteering Research for sending this information to us.

70 Pearce, J. & Milne, E-J. (2010). Op. Cit.

#### **Figure 4: Save our Sports.**

From 2008 to 2009 the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) undertook an in-depth research project looking at people's experiences of participation on two estates in Bradford. During their time spent with residents, researchers were reminded of the story about the attempt of a group of young boys to save their local sports and recreation facility, the 'Ashy'. Rather than accept the decision, the boys took it upon themselves to argue in favour of keeping the centre and decided to write to the council, arguing that the vibrant centre helps to keep the area safe and keep young people busy. After receiving a brief response to their first letter and no response to their second, eventually nothing was done and the Ashy subsequently closed down. Despite this, one of the boys, Matthew Milne, worked tirelessly to recruit other residents to work with him in restoring the Ashy. Although he was recognised as a champion of the community, it took him and his team of activists many years to raise the hundreds of thousands of pounds to finally replace the recreation facilities on the estate. During that time, many lost faith in his efforts as decisions were delayed and little seemed to happen. Matthew faced a hard personal struggle to persuade his neighbours to keep supporting him and believing in his goal. Matthew's efforts to fight for their local recreational facility and to fundraise for a replacement service once it had been cut by the local authority directly reflects the kind of autonomy that the Big Society is dependent on. 68

The challenge with such autonomous action is that feedback will always be non-linear and unpredictable because you are creating a new process rather than following an established one. When services are run by the State, either centrally or locally, people pay their taxes and receive a service in a fairly linear, continuous process. The Big Society disrupts our familiar pattern of process and result. The texts which were sent to Suffolk County in response to their new Big Society initiatives reveal the difficulty of non-linearity and a sense that cause and effect might be disjointed. For instance:

*"I was on the PCA of my children's school, however, I would not volunteer unless it gave an immediate and positive affect on my family. I simply do not have the time to help out other organisations." Or "A fair day's work demands a fair day's pay - this undermines the very foundation of the economy - I do not wish to be involved at all." 69*

Some are more naturally inclined to autonomy than others. Evidence from the same JRF research suggests that once power is dispersed, it eventually falls on someone whom everyone then turns to for help:

*Often the agencies rely on the known interlocutors. For the reasons already discussed, these same interlocutors are easily construed by residents as people seeking personal power ("If you get involved you're one of them", a female former resident on Scholemoor told us) or as mediators who can solve everything. We found that people often thought that our researchers might similarly be a vehicle for solving problems. 70*

The idea that everybody can be self-starters who set goals for themselves and actively engage with outside agencies independently from the people they live around is highly questionable. The kind of autonomy being asked for is not merely uncoerced decision making by rational agents, but a more reflexive autonomy, in which people become aware of their motivation, prejudices, and biases and use this awareness to overcome the inertia and dependency that prevents participation. However, this kind of reflexive autonomy is a developmental achievement rather than something widespread in the population.

*To be truly responsible for something, you need to be response-able, as in ready, willing and able to respond to a given challenge in a given context. You need to take ownership of the personal, social and environmental consequences of your actions, even when the link between cause and effect is unclear.*

**71** Cameron, D. (April 2010). Speech: *Big Society versus Big Government*, [Online], Available: [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David\\_Cameron\\_Big\\_Society\\_versus\\_Big\\_Government.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2010/04/David_Cameron_Big_Society_versus_Big_Government.aspx)

**72** This was an individual response given in one of many qualitative interviews held by Ipsos MORI. Fieldwork undertaken with British adults aged 16+, 13th-19th May 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Presentation: *Poverty and the Big Society*, [Online], Available: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/News/Blogs/poverty-and-the-big-society-rsa-conference-ipsos-mori-ben-page.pdf>

**73** Cameron, D. (April 2010). Op cit.

**74** Poll by Ipsos MORI based on British adults, 18th-19th April 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**75** Poll by Ipsos MORI based on British adults 16+, 13-19 May 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**76** Poll by Ipsos MORI based on British adults, 18th-19th April 2010. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**77** See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**78** Halpern, D. (2010). Op cit.

**79** See Crompton, T. (2010). *Common Cause: The case for working with our cultural values*, [Online], Available: [http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/common\\_cause\\_report.pdf](http://assets.wwf.org.uk/downloads/common_cause_report.pdf)

**80** Francis, D. and Henderson, P. (1992). *Working with Rural Communities*. Basingstoke: Macmillan cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**81** ippr and PwC (2010). *Capable communities: Towards citizen-powered public services*. London: ippr and PwC.

## RESPONSIBILITY:

*“More responsibility for themselves, for their families, for their neighbours, for their communities.” – DAVID CAMERON <sup>71</sup>*

Qualitative surveys by Ipsos Mori suggest that some adults perceive the main idea of the Big Society as “replacing professional management with citizen management”. <sup>72</sup> ‘Management’ implicitly entails some degree of responsibility, but the activities and behaviours embedded within the curriculum of the Big Society require a more nuanced account of responsibility, in which ‘people’ take ownership of tasks that they might previously have assumed to be the responsibility of government, and often do so together with strangers:

*...the really big change I think we need in Britain is actually all about responsibility because...unless people take more responsibility for themselves, for their families, for their neighbours, for their communities... think of any single subject, and it’s all about the responsibility that we need to bring to our lives, to our country, to our communities, that’s going to make a difference. <sup>73</sup>*

But there is a gap between what people feel is their responsibility and their tendency to act on that feeling. As indicated above, 86% feel ‘other people’ should get more involved in helping to improve public services and their local area, but only 68% feel that they *themselves* should. <sup>74</sup> Moreover, 66% of people agree that government and public services have done too much and that people should take more responsibility for their own lives, <sup>75</sup> but when asked about local services, 60% of people believe the government is responsible for improving them. <sup>76</sup> There appears to be a disparity between what people feel about low-level responsibility and the more demanding onus of improving schools, housing and health care. <sup>77</sup> This changing relationship is captured by David Halpern who writes that “Governments are struggling to move public services built in an age of ‘needs’ to one more suited to an age of ‘wants’, just as the population itself begins to move into an age of ‘cans’”. <sup>78</sup>

The Common Cause report, produced by a selection of leading non-governmental organisations, sheds light on this kind of difference, distinguishing between problems relating to one’s immediate self-interest, and ‘bigger than self’ problems, including, but not limited to, climate change. Asking people to take responsibility for things they do not identify with, or experience on a daily basis again makes demands on mental complexity. <sup>79</sup>

Moreover, leaders within groups may feel threatened by newcomers who wish to join. Research undertaken in rural communities has shown how leaders can control access into groups, reinforce the status quo and discourage others from joining, therefore using responsibility to preclude others from becoming responsible. <sup>80</sup> Similarly, recent research by PwC and IPPR has suggested that professional attitudes of service practitioners may inhibit citizen’s abilities to take part in service delivery. Certain tasks were simply seen as ‘being part of their professional territory’. <sup>81</sup> This shows a reluctance to hand over power and devolve responsibility to outsiders.

The heart of this challenge is that to be truly responsible for something, you need to be response-able, as in ready, willing and able to respond to a given challenge in a given context. You need to take ownership of the personal, social and environmental consequences of your actions, even when the link between cause and effect is unclear. However, this kind of responsibility is a complex one, and also depends upon a certain level of mental complexity.

**82** This section borrows heavily from an unpublished document about solidarity by Sam McLean.

**83** For instance, see Emile Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity in Durkheim, E. (1997). *The Division of Labour in Society*. Translated by Coser, LA. New York: Free Press.

**84** Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p189.

**85** *Gemeinschaft* typically translates as "community", while *Gesellschaft*, in which people's associations are motivated by self-interest and controlled by legal sanctions, typically translates as "society". Moreover, *Gesellschaft* is problematic precisely because of its scale, which leads to the breakdown of shared norms, which is another reason to think that, as the expression of an important idea, the "Big Society" may be somewhat misconceived and poorly expressed.

**86** Clinton, B. (December 2001). Dimpleby Lecture 2001: *The Struggle for the Soul of the 21st Century*, [Online], Available: <http://www.australianpolitics.com/news/2001/01-12-14.shtml>

**87** Goodhart, D. (February 2004). *Too Diverse?*, Prospect Magazine, [Online], Available: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2004/02/too-diverse-david-goodhart-multiculturalism-britain-immigration-globalisation/>

**88** Putnam, R. & Campbell, D. E. (2010). *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*. Simon and Schuster.

**89** See for instance, Giidens, A. (November 2007). Prospect Issue 140, [Online], Available: <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/2007/11/diversityandtrust/>

**90** See Whitehead, T. (26th May 2011). *Net immigration hits six year high in blow to coalition*, The Telegraph, [Online], Available: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/8538318/Net-immigration-hits-six-year-high-in-blow-to-Coalition.html>

**91** Ipsos MORI (February 2011). Briefing Paper: *Strong support for a cap on immigration amidst economic concern*, [Online], Available: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/latestnews/644/Strong-support-for-a-cap-on-immigration-amidst-economic-concern.aspx>

**92** For instance, last year, 84 per cent of people in the UK said they agree that people from different backgrounds get on well together in their local area, and 81 per cent said they mix socially with people from different ethnic and religious backgrounds. See Department for Communities and Local Government (2010). *Our Nation's Civic Health: Summary report*. London: CLG.

**93** Commission on Integration and Cohesion (2007). *Commission on Integration and Cohesion – Our shared future*. London: CIC.

## SOLIDARITY: "WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER"<sup>82</sup>

Solidarity is a hugely complex notion, and there is a large literature on the subject,<sup>83</sup> but it is broadly about integration, about the extent to which we feel we are on 'common ground' with and have a sense of mutual commitment with the people with whom we share space, time and resources. As Sarah Ammed puts it:

*Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.*<sup>84</sup>

David Cameron seems to have a vision of a society of reciprocal altruists, proactively seeking to help each other and seeking help through friends and neighbours, rather than seeking help from the state. This reflects a view of people with a shared sense of belonging who are essentially cooperative and helpful. In this respect, when Cameron invokes the Big Society, he seeks to rekindle "Gemeinschaft" in the classical sociological terms of Tönnies, in which people bond over shared social mores.<sup>85</sup>

Solidarity underpins the shared norms required for these kinds of social productivity, but there is reason to believe that it is not easy to develop. Indeed, it is a perennial challenge. As Bill Clinton once put it:

*Don't you think it's interesting that in the most modern of ages, the biggest problem is the oldest problem of human society - the fear of the other.*<sup>86</sup>

Levels of social solidarity appear to be related to levels of cultural and ethnic diversity. Indeed, many argue that Scandinavian countries such as Sweden and Denmark tend to have enviable levels of social solidarity because of low levels of ethnic diversity and factionalism.<sup>87</sup> This thesis is supported by much of the literature on social capital, including Robert Putnam's latest work and his 'hunkering down thesis', which concludes that basic conditions required for social solidarity to grow – trust, reciprocity and participation – are often weaker in more culturally and ethnically diverse communities.<sup>88</sup> However, it is not clear to what extent these findings transfer to Europe in general or the UK in particular.<sup>89</sup>

This perspective has important implications for building the levels and types of social solidarity the Big Society demands. Cultural and ethnic diversity have significantly increased since 1997 and net immigration has quadrupled to 242,000 a year between 2006 and 2011.<sup>90</sup> Today, seven in ten people think there are 'too many immigrants in our country' and more than three quarters of people think immigration has placed too much pressure on public services.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, generating social solidarity is difficult against a backdrop of rapid social change, economic insecurity and perceptions of unfair allocation of public resources and services.

While statistics on community cohesion (social solidarity between different cultural groups) in the UK suggest some progress in developing solidarity in our most culturally and ethnically diverse places,<sup>92</sup> this progress occurred in conjunction with more than a decade of strong and sustained economic growth, low unemployment and massive investment in public services. Community cohesion could easily become a hot political and social issue as the cuts to public spending begin to bite, and competition for services and resources intensifies. For the Big Society to flourish, policymakers will need to work very hard to better understand and help develop new ways of strengthening social solidarity, particularly in our most culturally and ethnically diverse communities, where levels of social solidarity tend to be lowest and levels of multiple deprivation and social exclusion tend to be highest.<sup>93</sup>

**94** Dwyer Hogg, C. (21st March 2009). *Would you risk your own life to help a stranger in danger?* The Independent, [Online], Available: <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/would-you-risk-your-own-life-to-help-a-stranger-in-danger-1648053.html>

**95** ADT (2006). *Anti-Social Behaviour Across Europe* cited in Rogers, B. (2010). *The Woolwich Model: Can citizens tackle anti-social behaviour?* London: RSA.

**96** These quotes are from focus groups which were undertaken as part of ippr and PwC's report into public services. See ippr and PwC (2010). Op cit. We would like to thank Jonathan Clifton and his colleagues from ippr for allowing us to use this information.

### **Figure 5: Solidarity: Should you intervene to help somebody you don't know?**

*During the Spring of 2009 Sophie Richards was in a car waiting at a set of traffic lights in north London when she and her boyfriend noticed a teenage boy being attacked by a gang of teenagers.*

*"The whole group was attacking him punching and kicking him in the head. I was amazed at how violent they were" she says. "I was screaming and shouting at my boyfriend to do something – it looked like they were going to kill him." Concerned about knives her boyfriend called the police and kept his hand on the car horn to alert the gang that people were watching. It worked and they ran off but not before they'd inflicted damage. Her boyfriend said later that he thought if he'd got out of the car others would have followed – and indeed he would have jumped out if others had first.*

*"He said honestly that he wanted to and that if it was someone he knew he'd be out like a shot but he didn't want to be stabbed for someone he didn't know."*<sup>94</sup>

The ability to directly intervene and prevent this kind of violent behaviour is something that few of us would express we have. For instance, although 60 per cent of Germans are happy to tell a group of 14-year olds to stop vandalising a bus stop only 30 per cent of British people would do the same.<sup>95</sup> This lack of action is not for lack of will. Sophie's boyfriend explains that he would have jumped out of the car and tried to stop the gang attacking the boy, but only if another person had done so first. What is more, he said he would have felt no qualms about getting involved if the victim was somebody he already knew. Why, he said, should he risk his life for someone he had never met?

The sense that a fragmented community won't stand up to help if you do wish to tackle threatening behaviour is something continuously brought up by commentators on antisocial behaviour. A recent set of focus groups undertaken by IPPR and PwC in Reading and Darlington<sup>96</sup> suggest this fragmentation is a compelling factor as to why people are becoming less inclined to intervene in the way they might once have done:

*I have attempted to go over and say to them 'come on kids, enough's enough, let people go through.' And it's not worth it. I can't run away from them. And they frighten me now. They made it obvious if I went over again I wouldn't be walking home. So now I just phone the police. Because I can't physically do anything. But our community won't stand up.*

Many of the other residents in the group expressed similar feelings, reminiscing about a time when there was greater community solidarity:

*When I was brought up you daren't do anything. Because everyone knew everyone – they all spoke to each other – and if I went up the road and I was up there with my mates and we got up to anything, they would see it and they'd be round my house and she'd be wagging her finger and so you daren't do anything. So you were actually challenged by people within the area you live.*

This tendency to care about people we know and identify with, often called 'homophily', could suggest there is a danger of the Big Society succeeding for the wrong reasons. For instance, what if people do want to come together to set up free

*The need to build solidarity also requires people to have a special kind of competence. In particular, it requires, as described by Kegan, an ability to “resist our tendencies to make ‘right’ or ‘true’ that which is merely familiar and ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ that which is only strange”.*

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**97** This extract was taken from one of John Harris’s ‘Anywhere but Westminster’ video diaries. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/video/2010/apr/21/big-society-conservatives-stourbridge>

**98** Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

schools principally because they want to keep people who are ‘not like them’ out, i.e. because of a lack of social solidarity. If this is the case, the result would surely be unfavourable for any vision of the Big Society in the long run. The following short interview transcript about the Big Society illustrates the nature of this challenge:

**Figure 6: Solidarity gone bad: ‘A school for our kids’**

“Parents can set up their own school?”  
“Yeah... what do you think of that idea?”  
“Yeah, that’s a good idea”  
“Really? Why’s that a good idea?”  
“‘Cus’ some schools are crap aren’t they”  
“Got enough time?”  
“I’d find time”  
“Right, ok”  
“If it was to be a good school for my kid’s education then you’d find time”  
“How would it be different?”  
“I can’t say that, cus then I’d get done for being a racist and I’m not”  
“Explain that”  
“It’d be a school for our kids”  
“White kids?”  
“Your kids are educated alongside Muslim children and you find that difficult do you?”  
“Sometimes, yeah”  
“Do you talk to Muslim mothers at the gate much?”  
“No, not really. There’s the odd few.”<sup>97</sup>

The need to build solidarity also requires people to have a special kind of competence. In particular, it requires, as described by Kegan, an ability to “resist our tendencies to make ‘right’ or ‘true’ that which is merely familiar and ‘wrong’ or ‘false’ that which is only strange”.<sup>98</sup> Again, this kind of competence is a developmental achievement of social value, and therefore worth striving for.

**99** Nietzsche, F. (1998). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by Faber, M. Oxford: Oxford World's Classics.

**100** Cameron, D. (2009). 2009 Conservative Party Conference Speech: *Putting Britain back on her feet*, [Online], Available: [http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/David\\_Cameron\\_Putting\\_Britain\\_back\\_on\\_her\\_feet.aspx](http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/David_Cameron_Putting_Britain_back_on_her_feet.aspx)

**101** Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit.

**102** David Cameron himself acknowledges that for the Big Society to emerge it will require 'a massive cultural change'. See Cameron, D. (May 2011). Speech: *Speech on the Big Society*, [Online], Available: <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speech-on-the-big-society/>

**103** Cameron, D. (April 2010). *This is a radical revolt against the statist approach of Big Government*, [Online], Available: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/apr/18/david-cameron-my-big-society>

**104** Minogue, K. (Ed) (1996). *Conservative Realism: New Essays in Conservatism*. London: Harper Collins.

**105** Glasman, M, Labour as a Radical Tradition, in *The Labour Tradition and the Politics of Paradox*, The Oxford London Seminars 2010-11. Available online: [http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/labour\\_tradition\\_politics\\_paradox.html](http://www.lwbooks.co.uk/ebooks/labour_tradition_politics_paradox.html)

## 4. UNPACKING THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM

*"I do not like it."*

*"Why?"*

*"I am not up to it."*

*Has anybody ever answered like that?*

– NIETZSCHE <sup>99</sup>

So far we have argued that the 'curriculum' of the Big Society, which asks people to be more socially productive and marshal hidden wealth, requires certain competencies. We suggest the three most important are autonomy, responsibility and solidarity. In examining these three competencies in detail, we indicated why demonstrating these competencies in the requisite way reflects a developmental achievement, and necessitates a certain kind of mental complexity. This section attempts to make sense of what that means and why it matters.

### FAITH IN HUMAN BEINGS?

*We've got to stop treating children like adults and adults like children.*

– DAVID CAMERON <sup>100</sup>

*Adulthood is not an end state but a vast evolutionary expanse encompassing a variety of capacities of mind.* – ROBERT KEGAN <sup>101</sup>

David Cameron was right to say that his vision of the Big Society may take decades to emerge, because the population in aggregate may take that amount of time to develop into the kinds of people that are needed to make his vision manifest. <sup>102</sup> However, the Prime Minister broke with Conservative orthodoxy when he professed his 'profound faith in (his) fellow human beings'. <sup>103</sup> Classical Conservative thought is premised on the imperfectability of human nature, skepticism towards self-improvement and trust in traditional institutions like church and family acting as bulwarks against our selfish natures. As Australian philosopher Kenneth Minogue puts it:

*It is characteristic of the conservative temperament to value established identities, to praise habit and to respect prejudice, not because it is irrational, but because such things anchor the darting impulses of human beings in solidities of custom which we do not often begin to value until we are already losing them.* <sup>104</sup>

Minogue's description is pertinent in a context where the institutions of civil society, including churches and libraries, are under threat or disappearing, when 'solidities of custom' are hard to find, and 'established identities' are increasingly fluid because they have been untethered from their institutional moorings.

Maurice Glasman argues that these kinds of moorings, although classically Conservative, are actually the wellspring of Labour values, manifest in the need for reciprocity among those who need to help each other to help themselves, and mutuality, "where we share the benefits and burdens of association". Glasman also sees such institutions, including churches and trade unions, as crucial for preserving status for persons beyond what is provided by money and power, and recognizes their role in creating "an attachment to place that starts with the common sense of people rather than with external values, and a strong commitment to a common life." <sup>105</sup>



*For Piaget, ‘development’ concerned the extent to which an organism succeeded in differentiating itself from (and so relating itself to) the world, and this process continues throughout the lifespan.* <sup>111</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Norman, J. (22nd February 2010). *The conservative contradiction works*. The Guardian.

<sup>107</sup> Norman, J. (2010). *The Big Society: The anatomy of the new politics*. The University of Buckingham Press. p195.

<sup>108</sup> See Rowson, J. (2011). *Transforming Behaviour Change: Beyond Nudge and Neuromania*. London: RSA, [Online], Available: <http://www.thersa.org/projects/social-brain/transforming-behaviour-change>

<sup>109</sup> These stages are characterised as sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational Piaget, J. (1952). *The Origins of Intelligence in Children*. New York: International University Press. (Original work published 1936.)

<sup>110</sup> Rowson, J. (2011). Op cit.

<sup>111</sup> Kegan, R. (1992). *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Harvard University Press.

<sup>112</sup> Some classic texts include: Perry, William G., Jr. (1970). *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston; Erikson, E. H. (1950). *Childhood and Society*. New York: Norton; Loevinger, J. (1976). *Ego Development*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Gilligan, C. (1993). *In a Different Voice*. Harvard University Press; Vaillant, G. (1998). *The Wisdom of the Ego*. Harvard University Press; Kohlberg, L. (1981). *Essays on Moral Development, Vol. I: The Philosophy of Moral Development*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.

<sup>113</sup> For a succinct introduction and overview, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Piagetian\\_theories\\_of\\_cognitive\\_development](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Piagetian_theories_of_cognitive_development). Moreover, Peter Suedfeld's research on integrative complexity, which measures our capacity to differentiate and integrate perspectives, is also very relevant to our cognitive challenges. Integrative complexity is not merely a theory used for instance to understand the Cuban Missile crisis, but also a practical set of interventions that has been applied to issues as diverse as responses to terrorism, predicting violence, preventing radicalisation. See, for example, Suedfeld, P. & Leighton, D. C. (2002). 'Early communications in the war against terrorism: An integrative complexity analysis' in *Political Psychology*, 23, 585-599.

Cameron nonetheless appears to place his faith in human beings qua human beings, rather than their allegiances or institutions, which is slightly unusual in the context of conservatism. Indeed Conservatism is more typically about:

*Accepting of the imperfectibility of man, not restless to overcome it; and seeking to improve the lot of the many not by referring to some plan, but by working with the grain of “the crooked timber of humanity”.* <sup>106</sup>

This ‘imperfectability’ is all the more reason to be serious about treating adults ‘like adults’, but this means recognising that adults vary considerably in their mental complexity. Jesse Norman argues that one of the things holding back the latent energy that the Big Society agenda seeks to unleash is “a massive misunderstanding of human nature and human motivation” and that this misunderstanding is one of the “targets” of the Big Society. <sup>107</sup> He has in mind our implicit but erroneous belief in ‘homo-economicus’, which is of course a view shared by the RSA Social Brain perspective. <sup>108</sup> However, we think it is possible to take Norman’s point even more seriously, because prior to the assumed know-how of the competences required to build the Big Society is a deeper question of how-we-know.

## PIAGET FOR 21ST CENTURY GROWN-UPS

*“So simple, only a genius could have thought of it.”*

– ALBERT EINSTEIN ON JEAN PIAGET’S THEORY OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT.

Jean Piaget’s theory of human development is often considered passé and usually only discussed with reference to children, but the premise of his world view is hugely relevant to the cognitive challenges we face today, and applies throughout the lifespan. Piaget used a variety of experiments to illustrate that children frame their experience with internal consistency and logic that become clear when you examine the patterns in their mistakes. These psychologies develop through a process of assimilating experience through existing frames of reference and accommodating new perspectives by gradually changing the frames. This ongoing process features a succession of equilibriums, sometimes called ‘stages’. <sup>109</sup>

However, Piaget is poorly understood because he is identified almost exclusively with these stages of intellectual progress, and characterised as a developmental psychologist. Piaget, however, described himself as a ‘genetic epistemologist’. His focus of concern was the origins (genesis) of knowledge (epistemology) and his model of human development arose from open-systems evolutionary biology. <sup>110</sup> For Piaget, ‘development’ concerned the extent to which an organism succeeded in differentiating itself from (and so relating itself to) the world, and this process continues throughout the lifespan. <sup>111</sup>

The claim that this kind of perspective applies throughout the lifespan has a strong theoretical basis and considerable empirical support. Classical models include William Perry’s work with college students, Kohlberg’s theory of moral development, Vaillant’s progressive ‘Wisdom of the Ego’, Loevinger’s stages of ego development, King and Kitchener’s Reflective Judgment model, and Gilligan’s critique of the male-centric traditional models. <sup>112</sup> There is also a huge body of theoretical and empirical work described as ‘neo-Piagetian’. <sup>113</sup>

*We are not saying that the Big Society calls upon people to be nicer, or cleverer, or more informed, much as these things might help. Our point is that a growth in social productivity requires people to be able to disembed themselves from certain social and psychological influences that undermine autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, so that they can relate to those influences more flexibly and constructively.*

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**114** Lahey, L. L., Souvaine, E., Kegan, R., Goodman, R. & Felix, S. (1988). *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its Administration and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education.

**115** Kegan, R. (1992). Op cit.

**116** Ibid. p44.

**117** Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

**118** See Rowson, J. (2011). Op cit.

**119** For more information see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs\\_Type\\_Indicator](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Myers-Briggs_Type_Indicator)

**120** See, for example, Kitchener, K. S. & Brenner, H. (1990). 'Wisdom and reflective judgment: Knowing in the face of uncertainty' in Sternberg, R. (Ed) *Wisdom: its nature, origins and development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Labouvie-Vief, G. (1992). 'A neo-Piagetian perspective on adult cognitive development' in Sternberg, R. & Berg, C. (Eds) *Intellectual development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Kramer, D. A. (1990). 'Conceptualizing wisdom: the primacy of affect-cognition relations' in Sternberg, R. (Ed) Op cit.

**121** A notable exception appears to be Geoff Mulgan, now head of NESTA, who advised researchers in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit to read *A Theory of Everything* by Ken Wilber – a classic treatise on Integral Theory and Adult Development (Based on Testimony of Robin Wood, email Nov 2001).

## **EVOLUTIONARY MOTION: WE ARE IN THIS TOGETHER**

We focus on Robert Kegan's work here for pragmatic reasons. His theory has explanatory power, is empirically grounded, and the social relevance of the theory is presented very clearly and tangibly. <sup>114</sup> Kegan's theory details a process of social maturation, so it is important not to fixate only on the stages of development, but rather to understand the underlying mechanism of change that he argues is driving it. In this respect Kegan draws on Piaget to argue that social maturation is best framed as a general disembedding process that is not domain specific or situation dependent: <sup>115</sup>

*This evolutionary motion is the prior (or grounding) phenomenon in personality; that this process or activity, this adaptive conversation, is the very source of, and the unifying context for, thought and feeling; that this motion is observable, researchable, intersubjectively ascertainable; (...) and that unlike other candidates for a grounding phenomenon, this one cannot be considered arbitrary or bound over to the particularities of sex, class, culture or historical period.* <sup>116</sup>

In simple language, this evolutionary process involves gaining an increasingly sophisticated capacity to 'get things in perspective'. In the context of the challenge of building the Big Society, we need this growth in perspective to acquire the necessary competencies:

*We have tended to yoke our conceptions of full mental development with our conceptions of full physical development – i.e. that in both cases we reach our full stature sometime in late adolescence, but of course, that is not the case, and though we may stop growing in our late teenage years, it is imperative that we continue to grow mentally.* <sup>117</sup>

This core claim – that we can and should continue to grow mentally throughout the lifespan - is hard to disagree with, and has become stronger with recent neuroscientific evidence on neuroplasticity, and myelinisation and neurogenesis in adulthood. <sup>118</sup> However, understood in terms of social maturation, 'growing mentally' is not an individual prerogative, but one of the most tangible ways we can attempt to build hidden wealth. As societies become more complex, a growth in mental complexity may even be a precondition for the kinds of activity that constitute hidden wealth. So why is this view not more widespread?

## **BEYOND 'FLATLAND'**

While the idea that we grow in mental complexity is familiar from childhood development, and informs education policy, in adulthood policymakers typically focus on the need to acquire skills, while organisations are more likely to focus on psychometric testing, resulting in personality measures like Myers-Briggs. <sup>119</sup> Despite a considerable literature on adult development and post-formal thinking (i.e. beyond the mental development of an eighteen year old), <sup>120</sup> public policy appears to operate in what the American Philosopher Ken Wilber calls 'flatland': the view that all adults operate at the same level of mental complexity, and differ only in horizontal skills, intelligence, knowledge and proclivities. <sup>121</sup>

This distinction between horizontal and vertical dimensions of human development is important, because our argument is quite specific. We are not saying that the Big Society calls upon people to be nicer, or cleverer, or more informed, much as these things might help. Our point is that a growth in social productivity requires people to be able to disembed themselves from certain social and psychological influences that undermine autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, so that they can relate to those influences more flexibly and constructively. This kind of growth is 'vertical' in the sense that it changes how we know the world rather than 'horizontal' in the sense of changing what we know about the world. And such vertical growth is progressive

**122** As assessed by the two measures that may be most appropriate for identifying the complexity of a person's working "epistemology." These two measures are the Subject-Object Interview (SOI). (See Lahey, L. L. et al. (1988)). *A Guide to the Subject-Object Interview: Its Administration and Interpretation*. Cambridge: Harvard Graduate School of Education) and the Loevinger Sentence Completion Test (SCT). (See Le Xuan Hy & Loevinger, J. (1996). *Measuring Ego Development*. Routledge.) The SOI is an hour-long structured interview procedure in the Piagetian tradition in which the subject's construction of real life contents is actively probed until the most complex epistemologies available to the subject have been clarified. The SCT is a written test in which the subject completes 36 sentence stems; each completion is separately analyzed and scored, leading to an assessment of the level of complexity of the subject's overall frame of reference. For more information on the Subject-Object interview visit <http://mindsatwork.com> For more information on sentence completion exercises see Holaday, M., Smith, D. A. & Sherry, A. (2000). 'Sentence completion tests: A review of the literature and results of a survey of members of the society for personality assessment' in *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 74, 371-383.

**123** Kegan, R. & Lahey, L.L. (2009). Op cit.

**124** To our knowledge, there has not yet been a comparative study of Values modes and Kegan's developmental model, and this is one of the research challenges we hope will be addressed as a result of this report.

**125** Kegan's model also has parallels with values and lifestyles research at The Stanford Research Institute and research conducted by social psychologist Shalom Schwartz. Schwartz describes values as 'desirable, trans-situational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in people's lives.' He posits ten fundamental values (self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence and universalism). Data merges conducted by Pat Dade and colleagues suggests that sets of these values tend to coalesce into three broad categories of values sets. Moreover, Kegan's own comparative chart of his stages and Maslow's stages, in his book *The Evolving Self*, p986 suggests this avenue may be fruitful.

in the sense that it transcends and includes our prior ways of knowing the world. Moreover, such models of mental complexity are theoretically highly developed, and amenable to empirical measurement. **122**

In light of the explanatory power of this perspective, when policy makers try to change behaviour through incentive structures, environmental influences and choice architectures, they show, as Kegan puts it, "an astonishingly naïve sense of how important a factor is the level of mental complexity". **123**

The use of 'astonishing' is worth emphasising. In a context where 'people' are presented as the solution rather than the problem, mental complexity is perhaps the single most important variable to understand, and is required to inform how people are likely to respond to the behavioural demands of the Big Society agenda.

Kegan's emphasis on the importance of mental complexity has parallels with the method of psychographic segmentation known as 'Values Modes' derived from Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, in which we move from subsistence to social to existential needs. Values are viewed as motivational constructs that underpin emotions, perceptions and behaviours, so they provide good proxy measures for mental complexity, which is useful because data on values is relatively easy to collect. **124** This kind of progression in values has parallels with Kegan's theory of development, and although the underlying mechanism of change is different, both models highlight that the range of values that gives rise to this segmentation is not 'flat'. This model is hierarchical in the sense that people who feel safety, security and belonging will begin to seek social status, and when they feel they have achieved success, to turn to deeper forms of personal development, while change in the opposite direction is rarely observed. **125**

Based on multivariate analysis of over 8,000 people, 30% of the UK are characterised as sustenance driven people ('Settlers') who are driven by the core needs of safety, security and belonging. 30% of the UK population are characterised as outer directed people ('Prospectors') who are driven by the need for self-efficacy and external recognition. 40% of the UK population are inner directed ('Pioneers') and driven by ideas, aesthetics and personal development. **126**

The Campaign Company have recently argued that promoting Big Society behaviours will never be possible without some appreciation of this kind of value segmentation and its impact on the different motivations between communities and local government. **127** Awareness of different psychographic profiles could, for instance, help to promote volunteering, with 'settlers' more likely to volunteer if the 'ask' is clearly local, specific and modest, and communicated by a known messenger, while pioneers are more likely to respond to the idea that participation promotes personal development. **128**

As developmental researcher Pat Dade puts it: "Just as the Multiple Deprivation Index helps us better appreciate the wider picture of needs, a 'multiple psychological index' helps us better appreciate the wider picture of motivational triggers".

## **FEAR OF HIERARCHY**

The neglect of this kind of perspective may be because it is an uncomfortable notion for a liberal democracy. Developmental differences represents a form of hierarchy, and, at first blush, appears to raise similar political issues to IQ scores. **129** This is a valid objection, but is attenuated by at least four factors.

First, In Kegan's model in particular measures of development are complex constructs based on qualitative data, not psychometric measures producing single composite scores that can be readily compared. Second, unlike traditional views of

**126** Within these groups, each individual will have a distinct values profile often comprising elements from more than one set of values. Even so, it is thought that just ten questions are enough to reliably segment individuals into one of these three categories. No 10 strategist and pollster Andrew Cooper suggests the Government is aware of this kind of segmentation: "When Gove talks about school discipline, he is talking to Settlers. When Cameron talks about increasing aid to 0.7%, he is talking to Pioneers. And when George Osborne is talking about the deficit and tax, he is talking to Prospectors." in Stratton, A. (14th July 2011). *Ed Miliband Goes to where the prime minister cannot*. The Guardian. Available online: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2011/jul/14/ed-miliband-phone-hacking>

**127** Pecorelli, N. & Harding, C. (2010). Op cit.

**128** Ibid. p26.

**129** See, for example, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray's controversial book which touched upon the relationship between race and IQ. Herrnstein, R. J. & Murray, C. (1996). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Simon & Schuster.

**130** Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit. p29.

**131** A video of Bill Clinton speaking at the 2006 Davos Global Economic Forum can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEjKr2gA8Wk>. For more information about Ken Wilber's work see Wilber, K. (2001). *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*. Shambala.

**132** Harris, L. S. (2008). 'Looking through the lens of leadership: a constructive developmental approach' in *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*, 29 (1), 47-67.

**133** Rooke, D. & Torbert, W. R. (2005). 'Seven Transformations of Leadership' in *Harvard Business Review* 83 (4) pp66-76, 133.

**134** Olsen et al (2011). 'Teaching for Change: Learning Partnerships and Epistemological Growth', *The Journal of General Education - Volume 60*, Number 3, 2011, pp139-171.

**135** Pizzolato, J. E. (2007). Assessing self-authorship. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning* (109), 31-42.

IQ, levels of mental complexity are not static and evolve in relation to challenges within one's lifespan.

Third, more complex does not necessarily mean 'better'. An adult's mind is not necessarily better than a child's, but it is typically more developed. The values of security and belonging are not less important than the values of self-efficacy and personal development, indeed they may be necessary conditions for them to arise. Kegan uses the example of a driver who can only drive an automatic not being a worse driver than one who can drive both an automatic and a manual car. This difference is one of 'fit' rather than skill, and will only be felt in situations where there are no automatics available. The hierarchy in question is about one relatively basic way of knowing giving rise to and growing into another that is relatively complex, not about something better subsuming something worse in absolute terms.

Even with those three points in mind, the root metaphor of higher as better is difficult to shake. The fourth point is therefore important, and particularly relevant in the context of the Big Society. Simply stated, according to Kegan, more than half of the adult population (c. 58%) share a broadly similar level of mental complexity ('the socialised mind'- see below). This large group therefore experience similar challenges in the mismatch between the cultural demands and their capacity to fully address them. Moreover, it makes it more credible to say that developing mental complexity in the general population is a viable public goal.

## THE CENTRALITY OF MENTAL COMPLEXITY

*"Engineered behaviour and rote learning seldom travel well beyond the narrow contexts in which they were taught...the adult of the 21st century will need to be able to travel across a wide variety of contexts. So when I suggest that 'competence' (is) first a question of how we know, I do not mean this to exclude the question of how we behave or what we know. I just mean that the first question is prior to the other two."* – ROBERT KEGAN <sup>130</sup>

Speaking at the Davos Economic Forum in 2006, Bill Clinton alluded to the importance of mental complexity when he argued that the challenge of integrating all our best ideas to solve planetary problems was that we needed a 'higher level of consciousness' to make sense of how they inter-relate, and he referred to the work of Ken Wilber, a major theorist on the growth of mental complexity. <sup>131</sup>

There are more tangible reasons why this growth in mental complexity is worth pursuing. For instance workplaces where both employees and leaders are at higher stages of mental development appear to be far more successful. Research by Karl Kuhnert and Lauren Harris <sup>132</sup> found a strong positive relationship between a leader's developmental level and ratings of their overall leadership effectiveness, including increased ability to create a compelling vision and think strategically about the future, to inspire commitment, and to catalyse teams. Similarly, an award-winning April 2005 Harvard Business Review article by Prof Bill Torbert and David Rooke – 'Seven Transformations of Leadership' – found a strong and statistically significant correlation between the CEO developmental diversity stage and their ability to innovate and successfully transform their organisations. <sup>133</sup>

More recently, a two-year - deliberately transformational - interdisciplinary curriculum (related to earth sustainability) successfully fostered epistemological growth in students - compared to a control group on a traditional curriculum. <sup>134</sup> They assessed changes using the Measure of Epistemological Reflection and the Pizzolato's Self Authorship Survey. <sup>135</sup> Only those students on the transformational curriculum reached the stage of 'independent knowing', with other students remaining at developmentally prior levels as 'absolutist' or 'relativist' knowers. This finding is pertinent in the context of the Big Society because those students

**136** See Tomasulo, D. (June 2010). Blog post: *The Ghost of Stanley Milgram and The Game of Death*, [Online], Available: <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2010/06/03/the-ghost-of-stanley-milgram-and-the-game-of-death>

**137** For more information see Rowson, J. (2011). Op cit.

**138** Adapted from Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit. by Pruyn, P. W., [Online], Available: <http://developmentalobserver.blog.com>

who progressed developmentally were twice as likely to take on extracurricular ‘service’ projects, and three times as likely to take on leadership positions in community service organisations - as the control group.

A further striking illustration of the relevance of this perspective is a retrospective study on Stanley Milgram’s infamous experiment, in which the deciding factor for those most capable of resisting an experimenter’s injunction to add increasingly hazardous amounts of voltage to a person sitting next door was their level of mental complexity. <sup>136</sup> If it can potentially save lives, our capacity ‘to get things in perspective’ is no mere academic matter.

More fundamentally, unlike classic accounts of IQ, developmental levels make the idea that education can be transformative and meaningful. In Kegan’s terms, complexifying ‘the form’ that underpins our experience can be worked with as an inspiring purpose for adult education:

*The gap between the mental demands implicit in our suggested competencies and the mental capacities of the “student” actually provides a heretofore missing intellectual foundation for the purposes of adult or lifelong education that is as strong as the foundation which exists for the education of the young – namely, education not merely for the acquisition of skills or an increase in one’s fund of knowledge, but education for development, education for transformation.*

This ‘gap’, and the ‘heretofore missing intellectual foundation for the purposes of adult or lifelong education’ has the potential to become a defining theme of the Big Society. Just as some are better placed socially and economically to undertake certain forms of volunteering, participation and cooperation, some are also better placed in terms of their mental complexity.

The RSA Steer approach to behaviour change speaks to this missing intellectual foundation. Sharing knowledge about our brains and behaviour contributes to making people aware of the conditions of their actions. In Kegan’s terms, we are in the process of helping people to move from being the conditions of their action to having those conditions, and helping them to shape their lives with an awareness of them. <sup>137</sup> To gain a deeper grasp of what this means and how it relates to the hidden curriculum of the Big Society it is helpful to examine one theory of adult development in detail:

## **ROBERT KEGAN’S THEORY OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT**





We develop by learning to relate to what we were previously attached to. Kegan characterises this process in terms of evolving ‘subject-object’ relationships. The table below shows five orders of mind, reflecting different ways of knowing. At any given stage of development we are more or less ‘subject-to’ these ways of knowing, and can only begin to move beyond them when we can take them as ‘object’ and disembed ourselves from them. <sup>138</sup>

We develop by learning to relate to what we were previously attached to.

139 Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit. p32 cited in Berger, J. G. (2010). Op cit.

140 Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit. p32 cited in Berger, J. G. (2010). Op cit.

141 Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit.

DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE/ ORDER OF MIND (typical ages)	WHAT CAN BE SEEN AS OBJECT (the content of one's knowing)	WHAT ONE IS SUBJECT TO (the structure of one's knowing)	UNDERLYING STRUCTURE OF MEANING-MAKING
1st Order: Impulsive Mind (-2-6 years old)	One's reflexes	One's impulses, perceptions	Single point
2nd Order: Instrumental Mind (-6 years old through adolescence)	One's impulses, perceptions	One's needs, interests, desires	Categories 
3rd Order: Socialized Mind (post adolescence)	One's needs, interests, desires	Interpersonal relationships, mutuality	Across categories 
4th Order: Self-Authoring Mind (variable if achieved)	Interpersonal relationships, mutuality	Self-authorship, identity, ideology	Systemic 
5th Order: Self-Transforming Mind (typically > -40, if achieved)	Self-authorship, identity, ideology	The dialectic between ideologies	System of systems 

**Figure 7:** Adapted from Kegan, Robert. *In Over Our Heads: the Mental Demands of Modern Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994. pp. 314-315  
 Courtesy of Pruyn, P. W. <http://developmentalobserver.blog.com>

When we take things as subject, they ‘have us.’ i.e. they are not experienced as distinct aspects of experience because they define the structure of experience. Kegan describes “those elements of our knowing or organising that we are identified with, tied to, fused with or embedded in”.<sup>139</sup> Such framings, thoughts and feelings are unquestioned and we cannot see them because we see through them. They might include a relational issue, a personality trait, an assumption about the way the world works, behaviors, emotions, etc. You generally can’t name things that are “subject”, and nor can you reflect upon them because that would require some mental distance and perspective that is not available.

On the other hand, when we take things as **object**, we are aware of them and able to consider them from a distance. While things that are subject have you, you have things that are object i.e. “those elements of our knowing or organizing that we can reflect on, handle, look at, be responsible for, relate to each other, take control of, internalize, assimilate, or otherwise operate upon”.<sup>140</sup>

Each subject-object plateau represents a ‘way of knowing’ that so thoroughly informs our life experience that we cannot see it, and each one is characterised by a growing ability to become aware of more and more aspects of ourselves, to become able to take them as objects’. Each of these different plateaus has a different ‘subject-object relationship’, but we are rarely stable in one of these ‘balances’ and spend most our lives somewhere between two of them. This changing subject-object relationship reflects a change in how we experience ourselves in the world. Kegan even argues that “The experiencing that our subject-object principle enables is very close to what both east and west mean by ‘consciousness’”.<sup>141</sup>

*This is what is meant by developing ‘a relationship to our reactions’- we need to see how this ‘socialising press’ of ideas, images and injunctions is shaping us, and develop some perspective on it so we are less subject-to it, and more capable of acting autonomously. As an example in a Big Society context, when we feel less inclined to help people who are ‘not like us’, we need to have some critical engagement with that idea, and be able to challenge ourselves and the people around us to move beyond this kind of limiting perspective.*

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**142** Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in Classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

**143** Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

**144** Ibid.

## THE HIDDEN CURRICULUM: IN OVER OUR HEADS?

Any curriculum of explicit challenges we are expected to master is concomitant with an implicit ‘Hidden Curriculum’ of both internal and external challenges, in the case of the Big Society these include our capacity to control ourselves, to identify with others, to trust strangers, to open oneself up to criticism and to defer to new forms of authority.

One of the earliest references to ‘Hidden Curriculum’ came from Sociologist Philip Jackson in 1968, who argued that what is taught in schools is more than just the sum total of the stated curriculum.<sup>142</sup> He thought that school should be understood as a socialisation process where students pick up messages through the experience of being in school, not just from things that they are explicitly taught.

However, Robert Kegan has built on this idea with a ‘culture-as-school’ metaphor, suggesting that through various mediums, including adverts and advice, we are implicitly asked to master the cultural curriculum, and that we often feel ‘in over our heads’ because we may not have the requisite mental complexity to master it. More precisely, we are ‘in over our heads’ whenever we are expected to take as ‘object’ that which we are subject-to.

Kegan unpacks the cultural curriculum through the competencies/internal tasks placed upon adults in the fields of work, parenting and relationships, and argues that many of the expected competencies associated with modern life outstrip the available competencies in the adult population.<sup>143</sup>

For instance as parents we are expected to establish rules and roles, to institute a family vision and induct family members into it and to establish limits on children, ourselves, and those outside the family. At work we are called upon to be the inventor or owner of our work, be self-initiating and self-evaluating and think of organisations holistically and systemically. In relationships we are expected to be psychologically independent of our partners and have a well-differentiated and clearly defined sense of self, while still being able to listen emphatically and non-defensively.

While the overwhelming majority of expected competencies require us to be well socialized, self-reflective, abstract-thinking, and value-bearing persons, Kegan notes that these competencies alone are not sufficient:<sup>144</sup>

*We are also required “to look at and make judgments about the expectations and claims that bombard us from all directions – whether it be as personal, blunt, and close-at-hand as our children telling us “everyone else’s parents let them”, or as public and subtle as the messages of male-entitlement (or other arbitrarily advantaged in-groups) that still saturate most democratic societies”.*

This is what is meant by developing ‘a relationship to our reactions’- we need to see how this ‘socialising press’ of ideas, images and injunctions is shaping us, and develop some perspective on it so we are less subject-to it, and more capable of acting autonomously. As an example in a Big Society context, when we feel less inclined to help people who are ‘not like us’, we need to have some critical engagement with that idea, and be able to challenge ourselves and the people around us to move beyond this kind of limiting perspective.

Kegan also suggests we are asked: to take responsibility for being the creators and not merely the locus of our feelings and thoughts, i.e. we are asked not merely to be:

*...more astute audience members viewing the drama of our inner psychologies; rather we are expected as mature adults to become more like playwrights who can jump on stage and re-author the scripts of the dramas themselves.*

*The behavioural injunctions of the Big Society agenda: ‘do it yourself’, ‘cooperate’, ‘participate’, ‘take responsibility for something bigger than yourself’ do not sound unreasonable, but they ask a lot of our ability to distance ourselves from our social conditioning and our emotional reactions.*

145 See Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and Self-Identity*. London: Polity Press and Tester, K. & Bauman, Z. (2001). *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

146 For more information on David Chandler’s work see <http://www.davidchandler.org/news/news.html>

147 Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

148 Ibid.

149 Kegan, R. (1995). Op cit. p350.

150 A fifth stage called ‘the self-transforming mind’ is also outlined by Kegan, as a constructive response to the challenges of the postmodern curriculum, but according to Kegan this stage is very rarely achieved and is beyond the scope of this paper.

151 Kegan, R. (2001). Op cit.

152 Ibid.

This point relates closely to the challenge of what Giddens calls ‘Life politics’, and what Bauman referred to as the modern tendency for people to construct ‘biographical solutions to social and economic problems’.<sup>145</sup> David Chandler has argued that it is the lack of workable knowledge of the complex and globalised world that necessitates the focus on the individual rather than the state.<sup>146</sup>

Kegan also highlights the need to create a more complex system of abstractions and values to prioritize them, and internally resolves conflicts among them.<sup>147</sup> This challenge is highly pertinent to local decision making in the context of the Big Society, where people are asked not merely to decide what to do, but the relatively complex task of agreeing on what basis such decisions can be made.

These kinds of expectations outlined by Kegan, and endorsed by the OECD study, are all consonant with ‘self-aware autonomy’ that is a key theme of the RSA’s ‘21st century enlightenment’ vision. However, in Kegan’s theoretical model of adult development, this kind of self-aware autonomy only occurs at the ‘self-authoring’ level of development, while most of the adult population function at the level of the ‘socialised mind’. As Kegan puts it: “The available supply may not meet the increasing demand”.<sup>148</sup>

### FROM THE SOCIALISED MIND TO THE SELF-AUTHORING MIND

*“There is an unrecognised cultural demand upon the minds of contemporary adults for a common order of mental complexity.”*

- ROBERT KEGAN<sup>149</sup>

The behavioural injunctions of the Big Society agenda: ‘do it yourself’, ‘cooperate’, ‘participate’, ‘take responsibility for something bigger than yourself’ do not sound unreasonable, but they ask a lot of our ability to distance ourselves from our social conditioning and our emotional reactions.

Although there are a number of different stages of mental complexity, in Kegan’s model adults navigate between two in particular: the third and fourth orders.<sup>150</sup> At the third order, adults are able to internalise the feelings of others, subordinate their interests to theirs, think abstractly and be self-reflective to an extent about their own feelings and actions. However, there are two main limitations at the third order, both of which are relevant to the curriculum of the Big Society. First, people are subject to the feelings of others - the ‘social surround’ - and feel obliged to please them because their sense of identity and efficacy is constituted by what others think of them. Secondly, while they may be aware of some of their mental limitations, they don’t generally consider how their behavioural dispositions are made up by a system that they can alter e.g. habits are just accepted as given, rather than examined as a recognisable action-tendency that is reinforced by a recurring relationship between oneself and the world.

In the fourth order, adults retain but subordinate the mental structure of the third order and are able to ‘write-upon’ rather than be ‘written-by’ these social and psychological phenomena. The fourth order provides some distance between what Kegan calls “its own mental productions and the reality-framing tendencies of society”.<sup>151</sup> At the fourth order, people can gain some distance from the ‘socialising press’ so that they can look at and make judgements about the expectations and claims that bombard them from all directions. They are also able not only to identify an inner life of feelings and thoughts but take ownership of those feelings and thoughts.<sup>152</sup>

Disembedding oneself does not mean separating oneself. A common objection is that ‘self-authoring mind’ sounds insular and individualistic – something completely at odds with the pro-social tendencies the Big Society is founded upon. But this is not the case, as Kegan explains:



*It is important to clarify that not everyone ‘needs’ to become ‘self-authoring’ in order to participate effectively. The point is rather about aligning Big Society objectives with Big Society resources. The social strategy should be informed by a concomitant strategy for adult development in the long term.*

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**153** Ibid.

**154** Kegan, R. (1991). Op cit.

**155** Kegan, R. (1991). Op cit.

**156** Baxter Magolda, M. (April 2011). Text taken from a personal communication to Matthew Mezey.

*...The capacity for self-authoring may thicken my connection to communities and relationships now more freely chosen by me and it may enable me to contribute more fully to my connection through my capacity to raise questions about existing arrangements.* <sup>153</sup>

However, what is known about the distribution of mental complexity in the adult population of modern democratic societies is tentative, but consistent. Even among highly educated, resource-rich, middle-class, professional samples, while the fourth order of mental complexity is certainly present, a majority of subjects in various studies do not appear to have fully developed this level of complexity. Research undertaken on behalf of the OECD shows that only one in five people have the necessary mental competencies required to fully operate successfully in the modern era, and these competencies are heavily skewed towards those who hold more affluent and professional occupations. Of those assessed through the study’s interviews, while 48 per cent of the professional, highly-educated group reached the fourth order of mental complexity, this only applied to 21 per cent of those from the general population. <sup>154</sup>

These findings matter because the expected competencies that Kegan identifies outstrip the third order capacities of “the socialized mind” and call for a qualitatively even more complex “self-authoring mind”:

*The socialized mind is an adequate order of complexity to meet the demands of a traditionalist world, in which a fairly homogeneous set of definitions of how one should live is consistently promulgated by the cohesive arrangements, models, and external regulations of the community or tribe. (However) Modern society is characterized by ever-expanding pluralism, multiplicity, and competition for loyalty to a given way of living. It requires the development of an internal authority which can “write upon” existing social and psychological productions rather than be “written by” them.* <sup>155</sup>

If one accepts this framing of the problem, it means that the requisite competencies may comprise a curriculum that is ‘over the heads’ of most of the people expected to work with it. The Big Society curriculum of participation therefore needs to be presented as a challenge to adult education, in which people are supported and challenged to learn about their own subject-object relationships and given a deeper appreciation for why this kind of adult development matters at the level of the individual and the collective.

It is important to clarify that not everyone ‘needs’ to become ‘self-authoring’ in order to participate effectively. The point is rather about aligning Big Society objectives with Big Society resources. The social strategy should be informed by a concomitant strategy for adult development in the long term.

If we expect a larger number of people to engage in the implicit fourth order curriculum that the Big Society appears to be, as outlined above in terms of autonomy, responsibility and solidarity, we should work to support the development of a fourth order of mental complexity.

While the more Socialised/Traditional ‘way of knowing’ could give rise to responsible citizens if the external environment supported and affirmed them for doing so, they would not be able to sustain their citizenship role without that affirmation, because they would not have an internal compass guiding them to do so.

In this respect, adult development theorist Baxter Magolda argues:

*A foundation of self-authorship is necessary for authentic responsible/active citizenship. I say authentic, because self-authorship means a person has internally chosen beliefs and a view of social relations that would support authentic engagement with others for the common good.* <sup>156</sup>

*The foregoing argument suggests that working to build mental complexity could be a highly efficient national strategy because it should help to build social wealth and increase social productivity.*

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**157** Chapman, J. (2004). *System Failure: Why Governments Must Learn to Think Differently*, 2nd edition. London: Demos. p68.

**158** Halpern, D. (2010). Op cit. p165.

**159** Baudrillard, J. (2004). *Live Theory*. New York: Continuum.

## 5. DEEPENING THE CITIZENSHIP

### DEBATE: PRINCIPLES FOR POLICYMAKERS

*“If the entities being managed are more like complex adaptive systems than machines, then it might be more appropriate to prioritise the process of improvement than a specific goal or target. From this perspective the manager is acknowledging that she or he does not know the degree to which the capacity of the system can be increased but wishes to find out by implementing a process of improvement.” - JAKE CHAPMAN <sup>157</sup>*

There is value in having a direction of travel. The Government’s plans for the Big Society will be dependent on equally big citizens who are able to navigate the ‘hidden curriculum’ set out before them. Given that the majority of people are not at the order of mental complexity which is implicitly called for, architects of the Big Society need to engage with this neglected perspective, and consider revising their decision-making and policy announcements appropriately.

We believe this is very promising terrain, but we also recognise that for policymakers it is terra incognita. The foregoing argument suggests that working to build mental complexity could be a highly efficient national strategy because it should help to build social wealth and increase social productivity. However, we cannot reliably predict what it would look like in practice, there would almost certainly be unintended consequences, and building a political mandate for such an approach will be difficult in the context of austerity.

If explicit, costed and credible proposals for policy are going to emerge, they will have to be part of a wider narrative that makes sense to the public. In this respect, four shifts of emphasis follow from the argument and these provide the basis for some practical suggestions that could be trialled in the near future.

#### **1) A NEW RESEARCH AGENDA: COMPETENCIES AND MENTAL COMPLEXITY**

They say what gets measured, gets done. We are awash with information about school and pupil performance, but lack agreement about the core competencies we expect in adults, and metrics to make sense of the mental complexity that underpins them. Let’s start by getting a representative sample of mental complexity on a national scale. To justify any approach based on making mental complexity more explicit, we need a baseline measure to gauge impact.

Kegan’s suggestive data is very powerful, but based on a limited sample. We could measure a representative sample using existing measures, including sentence completion tasks and qualitative interviews, or work on finding valid ways to use the relatively quick and inexpensive values modes surveys as proxy measures for mental complexity.

The emphasis on competencies and mental complexity is partly supported by David Halpern’s suggestion that we should “Make hard measures of soft skills widely available, and put the same kind of effort into driving soft skills in the next decade as we did for literacy in the former”. <sup>158</sup>

#### **2) CULTURAL CHANGE: FROM SHORT-TERMISM TO LONG-TERMISM**

Developing mental complexity takes time, which is a challenge in a culture that tends to focus on ‘the perpetual present’. <sup>159</sup> Part of the strategy to build mental complexity is therefore to work towards a society that is more inclined to value the past and future, and more adept at thinking ahead. Indeed, while we have linked

*Planning several years ahead does not mean naively expecting everything to go to plan, but rather grounding your decisions in the present in a way that appropriately values the future rather than discounting it, while offering a shared narrative and sense of direction.*

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160 Norman, J. (2010). Op cit.

161 Halpern, D. (2010). Op cit.

162 Kegan, R. & Lahey, L. L. (2009). Op cit.

mental complexity to the challenge of building the Big Society, there is a broader need, especially in the context of environmental challenges, to move beyond short-termism and return, as Anthony Giddens recently put it, to ‘a culture of planning’. Planning several years ahead does not mean naively expecting everything to go to plan, but rather grounding your decisions in the present in a way that appropriately values the future rather than discounting it, while offering a shared narrative and sense of direction.

Jesse Norman has suggested that creating a British Sovereign Wealth Fund is one way to bring back this long-term perspective, modelled on a scheme controlled by the Norway Ministry of Finance, and designed to distinguish between spending based on Government income and spending based on national assets.<sup>160</sup> We would add that some of this sovereign wealth should be invested in projects that are explicitly long term, including a national objective to develop our mental complexity.

David Halpern has proposed increasing ‘secular rituals’ such as citizenship ceremonies, civil marriages and school graduations: “We need times when we can see ourselves through the eyes of others, and structured moments when we can test our own personal sense of morality against that of the community around us...”. Such moments serve to “...begin to bridge the gap between the realm of collective ethics and personal experience”. We should also think creatively about doing more to mark the significance of transitions, e.g. child to teenager, gaining the right to vote, the birth of a child... “times not only of personal celebration and reflection, but of reflection on the moral and ethical habits that enable us to get along with each other in secular societies”.<sup>161</sup>

The point of such ceremonies, rituals and transitions is that they reconnect personal growth and development with social and civic foundations. In this sense they serve to highlight that wellbeing is more than hedonic satisfaction, and is grounded in a shared sense of belonging and a more meaningful relationship to place, history and the passage of time.

### **3) POLITICAL LANGUAGE: FROM PARTISAN CONFLICT TO ‘OPTIMAL CONFLICT’**

As mentioned above, the idea of the Big Society is diminished when it is a source of partisan conflict, but one of the ways we can attempt to ‘speed-up’ the acquisition of Big Society competencies is to create ‘optimal conflict’, defined by Robert Kegan and Lisa Laskow Lahey as:

*The persistent experience of some frustration, dilemma, life puzzle, quandary, or personal problem that is perfectly designed to cause us to feel the limits of our current way of knowing in some sphere of our living that we care about, with sufficient supports so that we are neither overwhelmed by the conflict nor able to escape or diffuse it.*<sup>162</sup>

When we are in this environment, external challenges push us to question what Kegan and Lahey call our “big assumptions” and force us to see ourselves differently. This is often prompted by other people as well as by experiences which we would not typically find ourselves in. The point is to simulate challenges, dilemmas, and situations where we feel the limitations of our current ways of knowing, and are supported and challenged in moving beyond them.

One of the Big Society’s flagship initiatives is the intention to train at least 5,000 community organisers across the UK. These people will be tasked with galvanising citizens to take part in shaping their local area and public services. Part of this will also involve identifying local leaders, bringing different groups of people together, liaising with the council and driving forward new community projects. In short, those who sign-up for the role of community organiser could easily become ‘in over their heads’.

*The competencies required to build the Big Society cannot be conventionally 'learned' as skills through training. Rather, mastering these competencies is more to do with 'how we know' than 'what we know'.*

163 Ibid.

164 Berger, J. G. (2010). Op cit. p1.

165 Durkin, K., Manners, J. & Nesdale, D. (2004). 'Promoting Advanced Ego Development Among Adults' in *Journal of Adult Development*, 11:1, 19-27. p19.

166 Pindeo, V. (2004). *Tsunami – Building organisations capable of prospering in tidal waves*. iUniverse, Inc. p14.

It is recommended that a significant proportion of the initial training budget for community organisers be spent on exercises which provide the right conditions for optimal conflict. Specific exercises are available which help to create these conditions. The 'Immunity to Change X-Ray', for instance, guides people through a process of identifying and recording their assumptions, thereby drawing out what they have typically taken as subject. <sup>163</sup>

#### **4) ADULT EDUCATION: FROM INFORMATIVE TO TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING**

*"Why should society feel responsible only for the education of children, and not for the education of all adults of every age?" - ERIC FROMM*

As indicated above, the competencies required to build the Big Society cannot be conventionally 'learned' as skills through training. Rather, mastering these competencies is more to do with 'how we know' than 'what we know'. Kegan says transformative learning happens when someone changes:

*...not just the way he behaves, not just the way he feels, but the way he knows – not just what he knows but the way he knows...transformation is about changing the very form of the container – making it larger, more complex, more able to deal with multiple demands and uncertainty.* <sup>164</sup>

Two pilot studies show the promise of making transformative learning an explicit goal.

A recent Australian study that investigated the effects of a 10-week intervention programme, using an experimental design with random allocation of participants to intervention groups or a control group, found a 'significant increase' in the developmental stage in two equivalent intervention groups, and none in the control group. <sup>165</sup>

Moreover, in the Caribbean nation of Curacao, the largest island in the Netherlands Antilles, a major developmental levels intervention, with the support of business and political parties, was organised after the country's capital was hit by rioting due to the industrial conflict. <sup>166</sup> Research – including 5,000 developmental diversity assessments – concluded that "it is indeed possible to restart and even accelerate the maturation process in individuals, organisations and societies". The project's chief organiser – Harvard's Dr Harry Lasker – also found that screening to gauge developmental diversity "was an effective way to tailor training content to individual characteristics".

One implication is that community centres should be turned into transformational learning hubs which run training exercises for community leaders. A tool-box of training exercises designed to build mental complexity should be offered to community centres, particularly those already offering adult learning courses. Through these institutions, local practitioners could also be encouraged to take up teacher-training courses, for instance via Open University modules, and become specialists in setting up their own optimal conflict exercises.

We should also encourage businesses, community organisations and other bodies to form transformational learning consortiums. For instance, businesses should work with local community groups and voluntary organisations to improve the productivity and overall effectiveness of their workforce. Just as active citizenship has its own Hidden Curriculum of mental tasks, so too does working life. By pooling resources, a consortium of community organisations and businesses can cost-effectively train their staff together while at the same time sharing knowledge and insights about what approaches work best when training staff.

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Robert Kegan's ideas play a prominent role in this report largely because they made such a deep and lasting impression on me (JR) while I was a Masters student at Harvard almost a decade ago. Some ideas excite you momentarily, and others change your view of the world forever, which was the case with Kegan's theory of adult development for me. I am glad to be able to bring this perspective to a wider audience and hope we have represented it here in an appropriate way.

**167** Mohan, J. (October 2010). 'What do volunteering statistics tell us about the prospects for the Big Society?' from NCVO/TSRC Big Society Evidence Seminar cited in National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2011). Op cit.

**168** Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**169** Department for Communities and Local Government (2010). 'Citizenship Survey: March 2009 – April 2010'. London: CLG cited in National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2011). Op cit. See also Low, N. et al. (2007). 'Helping Out: A national study of volunteering and charitable giving'. London: Cabinet Office cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**170** National Council for Voluntary Organisations. (2011). Op cit.

**171** Department for Communities and Local Government. (2009). 'Citizenship Survey: 2008 – 2009'. London: CLG cited in National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2011). Op cit.

**172** Coxall, W, Robins, L. and Leach, R. (2003). 'Contemporary British Politics'. London: Palgrave Macmillan cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**173** Charities Aid Foundation and NCVO (2010). 'UK Giving 2010'. London: CAF/NCVO cited in National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2011). Op cit.

**174** Evans, E. and Saxton, J. (2005). 'The 21st Century volunteer: A report on the changing face of volunteering in the 21st Century'. London: nfpSynergy cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**175** David-Smith, J. 'Volunteering and social development' in *Voluntary Action* 3 (1), 9-23 cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**176** Machin, D. (2005). 'Young people in Scotland: those who volunteer and those who do not' in Williamson, H. and Hoskins, B. (Eds) *Charting the landscape of European youth voluntary activities*. London: Council of Europe cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**177** Department for Communities and Local Government (2009). *Citizenship Survey 2008-09: Empowered Communities Topic Report*. London: CLG.

**178** Ibid.

## APPENDICES

### A) WHO PARTICIPATES AND WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS?

**Figure 8: Who Participates?**

ATTRIBUTE	DETAILS
GENERAL POPULATION	It is widely accepted that only a small percentage of the population – the civic core – participates in any substantial way. Research has shown that 8% of the population deliver nearly 50% of total volunteering hours. <sup>167</sup> Likewise, only 4% of people are actively involved in their local services, and only a further 5% say they want to take part. <sup>168</sup>
AGE	The most active volunteers, marginally, are those in middle age. There is little difference between this age group and that of younger and older generations, but the volunteering rates of the latter have been falling for some time. <sup>169</sup> The difference between age groups is more marked when considering participation in 'thicker' activities. 70% of local councillors, for instance, are aged 55 or over. <sup>170</sup>
EDUCATION	Education is a key predictor of participation. The higher the level of qualification received, the more likely the individual is to volunteer. 56% of degree holders formally volunteer while only 23% of those with no qualification do. <sup>171</sup> Some commentators attribute this to the impact of education on people's self-confidence, their political knowledge and their literacy skills. <sup>172</sup>
EMPLOYMENT	Participation in formal volunteering is also correlated with higher levels of employment and professional hierarchies. Those in managerial positions volunteer more often than those in intermediate and routine occupations. <sup>173</sup> Socio-economic groups AB and C1 are considerably more likely to volunteer formally than C2 and DE groups, <sup>174</sup> and this has changed little over the past decade. <sup>175</sup>
ETHNIC BACKGROUND	Although groups often identified as marginalised communities are relatively inactive in formal activities, this is not the case in other forms of participation. Within BME groups there is 'a long tradition of more informal, self-help participatory activity between individuals and households rather than with organisations'. <sup>176</sup>
PLACE	Rural areas have far more engaged communities, with 70% of people involved in civic engagement and formal volunteering, compared to 60% for urban areas. <sup>177</sup> People are less likely to participate in civic engagement and formal volunteering in deprived areas. <sup>178</sup>

**179** Ockenden, N. (2008). *Valuing Time and Money: The real and perceived value of volunteering and giving*. London: IVR.

**180** Teasdale, S. (2008). *In Good Health: Assessing the impact of volunteering in the NHS*. London: IVR.

**181** McLean, S. & Andersson, E. (2009). 'Activating Empowerment'. London: Ipsos MORI cited in Norris, E. and McLean, S. (2011) Op cit.

**182** Crosby, N. et al. (2008). *A report on In Control's Second Phase: Evaluation and Learning 2005-07*. London: In Control.

**183** Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

**184** Understanding Society (2011). *Early findings from the first wave of the UK's household longitudinal study*. London: Understanding Society.

**185** Thoits, P. & Hewitt, L. (2011). 'Volunteer Work and Well-being' in *Journal of Health and Social Behaviour*. 42, 115-131.

**186** Bandura, A. (1997). 'Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control'. New York: Freeman cited in Brodie, E. et al. (2009). Op cit.

**187** See Blond, P. (2010). Op cit.

**188** Department for Communities and Local Government (2008). *Communities in control: real people, real power*. London: DCLG.

**189** Department for Communities and Local Government (2006). *Strong and Prosperous Communities – The Local Government White Paper*. London: DCLG.

**190** Lyons, M. (2007). *Place-shaping: a shared ambition for the future of local government*. London: The Stationary Office.

**191** For more information on these initiatives see <http://www.idea.gov.uk>

**192** For instance, the proportion of people who have given unpaid help to relatives in the last 12 months has remained relatively static over the last decade: (i) at least once a year: 2001 (67%); 2005 (63%); 2008/09 (62%); and (ii) at least once a month: 2001(34%); 2005 (37%); 2008/09 (35%). For these figures and more, see National Council for Voluntary Organisations (2011). *Participation: Trends, facts and figures*, [Online], Available: [http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/participation\\_trends\\_facts\\_figures.pdf](http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sites/default/files/participation_trends_facts_figures.pdf)

**193** For instance, polling by Ipsos MORI showed that in 2001 25% of people agreed that they could influence decisions affecting their local area, while in 2005 and 2008/09 only 22% agreed. See Page, B. (2010). Op cit.

**Figure 9: Benefits of 'participation'**

BENEFIT	DETAILS
ECONOMIC	Participation helps to save money. Increasing the numbers of people who participate will be critical in helping to plug the gap left by a retrenched state. Regular volunteers are estimated to contribute the equivalent of £88 per person per month to the economy, <sup>179</sup> while for a service like the NHS, the economic value of volunteers is considered to be worth £700,000 per hospital trust. <sup>180</sup>
SERVICES	Participation develops more effective services. A recent evaluation of citizen empowerment mechanisms – including participatory budgeting, individual budgets and deliberative forums – concluded that involving people in decision-making delivers improved public services. <sup>181</sup> In Control, an organisation dedicated to expanding the level of self-directed support in health and social care, found that three quarters of people who took part in setting their own budgets felt their quality of life had improved as a result. <sup>182</sup>
COMMUNITY	Participation is considered an important means of developing both bonding and bridging social capital. <sup>183</sup> Shared social norms and strong feelings of trust and belonging are in turn able to nurture further participation. <sup>184</sup>
INDIVIDUAL	Participation increases individual wellbeing, confidence and skills. People who are engaged in activities such as volunteering tend to experience greater levels of happiness and wellbeing. <sup>185</sup> In addition, through participating people can develop useful skills, confidence and self-determination which they can apply in other areas of their lives. <sup>186</sup>
INTRINSIC	Participation is good in itself. For many, a vibrant and active citizenry acts as a buffer to the forces of both the market and the state. <sup>187</sup> For others, participation in civil society is the sign of a healthy society and something we should be obliged to take part in if we have the capacity to do so.

## B) IS THE BIG SOCIETY 'NEW'?

Many have argued that the Big Society agenda is not new. For instance, the community development movement of the sixties and seventies was arguably a precursor, and the previous Labour Government developed policies that seemed to have similar aims. Moreover, the overarching aim to re-engage citizens was encapsulated in a 2008 White Paper, which looks at the range of existing and new tools that citizens can use to access and lever power at local and national levels.<sup>188</sup> Furthermore, throughout a 2006 DCLG white paper<sup>189</sup> and the Lyons Inquiry's final report on local government,<sup>190</sup> there was a strong expectation of local authorities to give people the choice to have their say in decisions affecting their local community. In addition, both the Comprehensive Area Assessments and Local Authority Agreements placed a great deal of emphasis on 'what a place wants to be'.<sup>191</sup>

However, this emphasis was arguably symptomatic of an agenda that saw government and institutions, rather than citizens, as central to driving social change. Where participation was promoted this was pursued through agreements such as the Compact which governed relations between the state and voluntary sector, and local-authority administered initiatives such as council consultation exercises. Active citizenship was viewed through the prism of what the state could encourage from above, rather than what could be generated at a grass-roots level. Labour's attempts did not bring about significant changes in participation rates,<sup>192</sup> and attitudes and a general culture of non-participation also proved difficult to shift.<sup>193</sup>

**194** Cameron, D. (12th February 2011). *Have no doubt, the big society is on its way*. The Guardian.

**195** Ibid.

**196** National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Involve and IVR (2009). *Briefing paper no.1 – What is participation? Towards a round-earth view of participation*. London: NCVO, Involve and IVR.

**197** See McLean, S. & Dellot, B. (2011). Op cit.

**198** Smith, M. J. (2011). 'The Intellectual Roots of the Big Society' in Stott, M. (Ed) (2011). Op cit.

**199** For more information see Arnstein, S. R. (1969). 'A ladder of citizen participation' in *JAI/P*, 35 (4), 216-224, [Online], Available: <http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html>

In an attempt to distinguish the idea, David Cameron outlined the three main 'methods of the Big Society':<sup>194</sup>

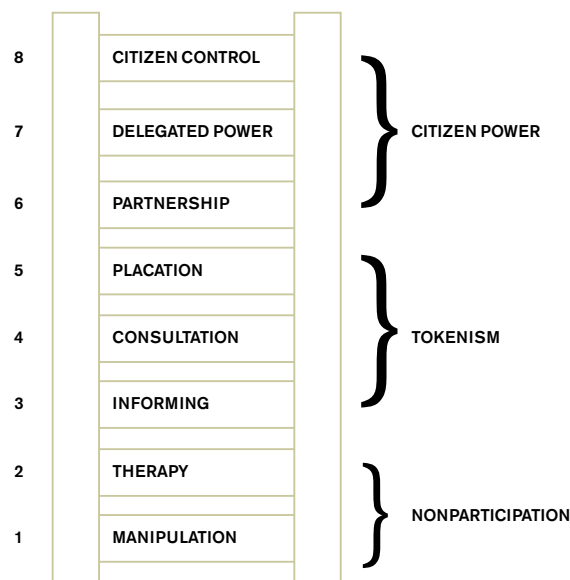
- 1 Devolving power to the lowest level so neighbourhoods take control of their destiny.
- 2 Opening up public services, putting trust in professionals and power in the hands of the people they serve.
- 3 Encouraging volunteering and social action so people contribute more to their community.

These three methods are open to wide interpretation, but this is precisely Cameron's point- it is up to 'society', rather than the state, to determine what the Big Society should look like:

*True, it doesn't follow some grand plan or central design. But that's because the whole approach of building a bigger, stronger, more active society involves something of a revolt against the top-down, statist approach of recent years.*<sup>195</sup>

Given the centrality of such interactions, it is noteworthy that the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) recognises three types of participation: 1) Public participation: engaging with the state. 2) Social participation: engaging with other people. 3) Individual participation: personal acts, such as charitable donations.<sup>196</sup> The Big Society calls for an increase in all three forms of participation, but the emphasis on social productivity challenges the distinction between public and social participation, with a view to breaking it down. Cooperating with other people is the means through which we either bypass the need to engage with the state or learn to engage with it more effectively.<sup>197</sup>

This dissolution of the distinction between public and social participation also highlights that the Big Society agenda is about creating and spreading the kinds of engagement illustrated in the upper levels of Arnstein's ladder of participation (see figure two below). The difference between the Conservative-led Big Society agenda and Labour's Empowerment agenda is therefore principally in the underlying theory of which state-citizen relationship best fosters regular and constructive participation.<sup>198</sup>



**Figure 10:** Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

That said, the curious thing about the Government's emphasis on participation is that it is somewhat out of step with their principle approach to behaviour change. The Big Society asks for the 'citizen power' at the top of the ladder, while the dominant model of behaviour change targets the bottom, with benign manipulation in the form of nudges.<sup>199</sup> Overcoming the challenge of participation requires a much deeper grasp of who exactly it is that is charged with participation, and what might motivate them to do it.