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From Big Society to Shared Society? Geographies of social cohesion and encounter in the UK's National Citizen Service

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ABSTRACT

This article explores and expands debates on the geographies of social cohesion and encounter, specifically in relation to young people and informal citizenship training. Three questions drive our agenda in this paper. First, how do certain youth spaces get enrolled into wider political discourses, functioning as geographical expressions of government visions to create a political legacy? Second, how are these spaces engineered and operate on-the-ground? Finally, how do young people understand their experiences of such spaces? To address these questions, we use the example of 'National Citizen Service' – a youth programme operating in England and Northern Ireland – to raise critical questions about the wider politics of spaces of informal education and attempts by the state to 'make' citizens and future neighbours. The article examines the rationale for this growing scheme, targeted at 15–17 year olds and designed to foster a 'more cohesive, responsible and engaged society'. Drawing on original fieldwork with key architects, stakeholders and young people, we analyse the narratives that underlie NCS and its expansion – specifically around social cohesion and citizenship education. We explore the idea of 'social mix' as one of NCS' guiding principles and its place as part of state narratives about the 'Big Society' and 'Shared Society'.

Introduction

A range of geographical work and interdisciplinary scholarship has examined the role and potential of education, and specifically citizenship education, for social cohesion (Butler and Hamnett 2007; Kiwan 2007, 2008; Nagel and Staeheli 2016). Geographers have studied drives for social cohesion in the UK within formal education (Hemming 2011) and inter-faith sports programmes (Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson 2016), highlighting the significance placed on young people's encounters with difference (Wilson 2017) to foster more cohesive, inclusive or engaged communities and societies. However, there remains a real need to understand how the discourses of citizenship education and social cohesion are intertwined and feature in wider political visions. Furthermore, there is a need to better understand the formalized spaces created under the banner of such ideas, and young people's lived experiences of these spaces. This article addresses these needs, critically questioning what role is placed on 'society' and 'communities' to be more cohesive, and on certain social groups and individuals to be better citizens or more engaged neighbours. This article examines how meso concepts of citizenship and social cohesion are scaled down to individual and collective

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embodied encounters with 'others', institutionalized through a range of spaces, but especially citizenship education programmes that target young people.

Furthermore, the article explores how ideas about 'fixing' society are levelled at that of the individual citizen alongside the role of government. Specifically, we look at the UK and two relatively recent attempts to outline a political vision of society and the role of government, each evoking notions of societal norms, expectations and citizenly duty: David Cameron's 'Big Society' (Cameron 2009) and Theresa May's 'Shared Society' (HM Government 2017). Both speeches outlined a personal vision for the respective Prime Ministers of the UK, with multiple references to current societal problems, the future society that could or can be built, and hinted at the problematic social groups within the population that need to be more cohesive (racialized and religiously inflected ideas) or more engaged (read social class) to achieve such a society. Whether political slogans or drivers for public policy, our primary concern in this article is how citizenship education and social cohesion are utilized and framed as part of these wider political visions and narratives about 'society'. We therefore attend to the following questions as part of a three-fold agenda. First, how do certain youth spaces get enrolled into wider political discourses, functioning as geographical expressions of government visions to create a political legacy? Second, how do these spaces operate on-the-ground to engineer a 'social mix' where encounters with difference can occur? Finally, what do young people understand by 'meeting others' and the wider political work of such spaces?

To explore the above questions, we draw on the example of National Citizen Service (NCS) – a short-term state-funded personal and social development programme for 15–17 year olds living in England and Northern Ireland that has rapidly expanded since its launch in 2011. We use an analysis of NCS' genealogy and spatialities as an informal citizenship training programme to elucidate how political visions manifest and directly shape young people's lives. This article uses original research material on the philosophies, practices and young people's experiences of NCS to explore the geographies of social cohesion and encounters with difference, interrogating the three above questions and making three respective contributions to knowledge.

First, by demonstrating how NCS was created and shaped by political discourses, visions and attempted legacies around 'society' (Mohan 2012; North 2011), we offer a much-needed focus on state-led attempts to foster 'encounter', shaped by broader ideas of citizenship and social cohesion. The article contributes an example of a scheme crafted at the heart of a political party and later operationalized in UK government departments, rather than those programmes engineered in the voluntary and charity sector (Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson 2016), employment contexts (Ahmed 2007; Wilson 2013a), or the fleeting ephemeral chance encounters in cities and public space that have characterized lively and theoretically rich work in geography to date (see Wilson 2017 for excellent overview). Second, rather than seeing NCS as a blanket national scheme described as such in policy documents and by political scientists (Mycock and Tonge 2011), we tease out the local and regional challenges in delivering 'social mix' in such a project and how social difference shapes the NCS experience for delivery providers and young people. Our study therefore offers a real insight into the *geographies* of NCS and how diffuse ideas about citizenship and social cohesion are translated into engineering 'social mix' on the ground. Finally, we add to ongoing work in geography and related disciplines on young people's experiences of diverse educational spaces (Holloway et al. 2010; Mills and Kraftl 2014; Staeheli and Hammett 2010), but push deeper by comparing young people's narratives about difference and 'meeting others' with those of NCS delivery providers and the aforementioned policy ideas.

Overall, this article demonstrates how the state has attempted to promote and facilitate social cohesion through NCS, and how education, learning or training *young people* is seen as the answer to a myriad of societal 'problems'. We now turn to the bodies of literature in primarily disciplinary human geography to position this article's focus and contributions.

'Learning to be a citizen': geographies of social cohesion and encounter

Social cohesion has diverse definitions and has mainly been studied within sociology and psychology (see Friedkin 2004 for an overview). The term generally refers to the notion that societies, communities or groups display certain levels of 'cohesiveness' (or a lack thereof) and that we can study this via measuring or interrogating individual and group-level approaches to social life. Social cohesion draws on ideas of strength, 'social glue', bonds, trust and relationships displayed across and between axis of social difference and place, linked to related conceptual terms of belonging and in/exclusion. These wider ideas have fuelled swathes of rich research in human geography, however, the specific term 'social cohesion' has been somewhat marginalized as part of this broader locus of work, perhaps due to its political and policy-inflected discourses. Geographers have though examined the key ideas of societal cohesion in public policy, for example, on the potential power of 'neighbourhoods' within New Labour's government agenda on social cohesion (Forrest and Kearns 2001) and ideas of civility and interaction. Other geographical studies on social cohesion have tended to focus on religion and faith, reflecting the political rhetoric of social cohesion and contemporary concerns over certain social (religious) groups more than others (a theme we return to later). In a highly relevant study for this article's approach, Hemming (2011) examines social cohesion and religion in a primary school in England. He focuses on institutional-level micro-processes within the school designed to facilitate and promote social cohesion, and the types of meaningful or positive encounters with difference (discussed below) in this educational context (see also Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson 2016 on an inter-faith sports programme; Annette 2011 on faith-based community action). Overall, the term 'social cohesion' has been problematized (Yuval-Davis, Anthias, and Kofman 2005), but it remains a policy 'hook' in many global contexts, not least the UK. One direct policy area where the term social cohesion is evoked – going beyond the neighbourhood or religious groups – is in efforts to encourage more wide-ranging 'citizenship education' (see also Jansen, Chioncel, and Dekkers 2006 for a commentary).

Citizenship education has been utilized by various state actors, NGOs and government departments to foster 'social cohesion' (Butler and Hamnett 2007; Kiwan 2007, 2008; Nagel and Staeheli 2016). More broadly, there is a complex relationship between citizenship, social inclusion and exclusion, and conditionality (Dwyer 2010; Marshall 1950) that has been concretized in various educational philosophies and spaces. Geographers and researchers in diverse fields have examined wider state mechanisms around education *for* citizenship (Staeheli and Hammett 2010), including national school curriculums (Kiwan 2007, 2008; Pykett 2010; Starkey 2008). In recent years though, we have also seen the increased politicization of spaces for young people *beyond* school, used to meet the needs of the state. For example in the UK, some state-funded local authority youth work has harboured policy-based discourses surrounding participation and citizenship (Williamson 1993; Wood 2010) and extra-curricular spaces of 'wrap-around care' for children have been shaped by parenting policies and state governance (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2011; Jupp 2013). The policy rhetoric in relation to (informal) citizenship education – as demonstrated through our example of NCS – has been on the role of such spaces to foster social cohesion, where young people can have 'meaningful encounters' with others.

There has been a flurry of work in recent years on the geographies of encounter (e.g. Valentine 2008; Valentine and Sadgrove 2014; Wilson 2017) and related terms in social theory, including cross-cultural or intercultural contact (Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012; Butcher 2011; Wilson 2013b). A number of urban sites and settings have been considered by geographers as arenas for encounters infused with the politics of multicultural difference. These studies have variously engaged with Amin's (2002) concept of 'micropublic' spaces and include research on public transport (Wilson 2011), places of worship (Andersson et al. 2011), the school (Hemming 2011; Wilson 2014), playground (Wilson 2013b), University campus (Andersson, Sadgrove, and Valentine 2012), sports projects (Mayblin, Valentine, and Andersson 2016) and youth clubs (Mills 2016). Theories of urban encounter have been largely driven by questions of what constitutes meaningful

contact and how this could potentially combat prejudice and improve social cohesion (e.g. Askins and Pain 2011; Matejskova and Leitner 2011; Swanton 2010; Valentine 2008). These debates sit against a backdrop of ideas on how discourses of exclusion and citizenship often centre on race, ethnicity, (im)migration and the nation (Koefoed and Simonsen 2011; Leitner 2012; Nayak 2010; Painter and Philo 1995), with exclusionary practices that determine insiders and outsiders. In interrogating these questions, there have been re-engagements with philosophical ideas such as 'othering', proximity, distance, exchange, closeness, remoteness and propinquity (Barnett 2005; Bauman 1991; Dafydd Jones, Robinson, and Turner 2012), with the figure of the 'stranger' a common reference point (Ahmed 2000; Harris et al. 2017; Hopkins 2014; Koefoed and Simonsen 2011).

Geographers have also considered the politics of 'the neighbour' in this context, and of friendship and care (Bowlby 2011; Painter 2012). We see great mileage in these ideas in relation to better understanding the contested geographies of social cohesion and encounter. As part of the 'Big Society' rhetoric – explored later – a push for social and informal care at the neighbourhood level (Beckett and Horner 2015) could be seen as a strategic move by the state, with neighbours 'looking out for each other' to reduce the 'burden' on welfare. Painter (2012) uses David Cameron's 'Big Society' ideology and the 'apparent decline in neighbourliness' as an entry point to discusses the etymology, ethics, politics and religious interpretations of the category 'neighbour'. He reflects that 'in highly urbanized societies the neighbour as near-dweller is typically neither a friend, nor a stranger, nor an enemy, but an unknown – one whom we approach somewhat warily' (2012, 524). It is a wariness, what Painter describes as 'the principal affective trope involved in neighbouring today', that NCS – the focus of our study – is seen to combat. In targeting young people, specifically older teenagers, this motivation is driven by ideas of futurity and citizenship – to mould the citizen-in-the-making into a more active, engaged member of society and 'good' future neighbour. Overall in this article, we look at the ambitions and tensions in an informal education project shaped by the state and infused with these wider discourses of social cohesion and citizenship. We now provide an overview of our case-study context, used to meet the wider aims of this paper.

'For lessons they don't teach in class': what is NCS?

NCS has been described as 'the fastest growing youth movement of its kind in the world' (Cameron 2016) and since its launch in 2011, over 300,000 young people have completed the programme across England and Northern Ireland. NCS challenges 15–17 year olds to 'say yes to adventure' by completing 3–4 weeks of programmed activities (Figure 1) during the summer holidays.[1] The programme begins with an outdoor residential (Week 1 – 'Adventure') intended to create bonds with a range of outdoor activities. Week 2 of NCS – 'Skills' or 'Future' – is an indoor residential often held at Higher Education University Campuses, with workshops, debates and group tasks. Both residential components are seen as preparation for an NCS group's 'social action project' (Weeks 3–4) with popular examples including community gardening, fundraising, and to a lesser extent campaigning. NCS' brand of youth citizenship is therefore firmly centred on social action – volunteering as a form of citizenly duty (Mills and Waite 2017). More broadly, the UK Government define that social action 'can include volunteering, giving of money, community action or simple neighbourly acts' (GOV.UK 2015; see also Birdwell, Scott, and Reynolds 2015). The centrality of social action therefore prioritizes certain practices of active (youth) citizenship and represents the values and politics encouraged within its curriculum.

NCS is advertized as a chance to 'make your mark and build skills for work and life', as part of the wider CV-boosting search to 'stand out from the crowd' (Holdsworth 2017). The scheme is voluntary and participants pay £50 to join, yet despite attempts to differentiate itself from competitors in a wider landscape of extra-curricular activities for young people, NCS is ultimately a shorter burst of activities usually associated with uniformed youth organizations. Crucially however, NCS is different from these voluntary youth spaces as it was created, driven and funded by the state. NCS was championed by the Conservative Party prior to the 2010 General Election as a 'rite of passage' for older

Figure 1. An example of the weekly NCS programme: Images clockwise from Top Left: Week 1, Adventure Residential, Raft Building; Week 2, Future Residential, Business Challenge; Week 3, Social Action Planning, Seeking sponsors and resources; Week 4, Social Action, Decorating the College common room. Source: Author's photographs and whiteboard animation video stills.

teenagers (Mycock and Tonge 2011) and its wide-ranging policy discourses and place in a broader political 'vision' are discussed in the remainder of this article. For context though, it is important to note that the government also devised a new and at times controversial apparatus to deliver NCS via a competitive tendering process for social enterprises, businesses and youth organizations – a landscape of contractual 'winners and losers' in the wider context of the 'Big Society' and age of austerity. These contracted providers organize regional and local NCS delivery, led by a mainly seasonal workforce of adult mentors and volunteers who guide 'waves' of teenage participants through its curriculum. NCS has been managed by various bodies during the coalition government (2010–2015) and subsequent Conservative leadership from the Department of Education and the Cabinet Office, to a community interest company 'NCS Trust' under the wider remit of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. By summer 2015, £297 million had been spent on NCS (HM Government 2016; see also Ipsos MORI 2015 for official evaluation) and the programme has provoked both fierce critique (de St Croix 2011; Murphy 2014; UNITE 2014) and passionate endorsements (Blunkett 2016; Jarvis 2016).

Of direct relevance to this article, is that the NCS programme outlined above has continually been pitched as creating a 'more cohesive, responsible and engaged society' (HM Government 2012). On its current website, NCS Trust advertises three core reasons why it exists: social cohesion, social mobility and social engagement, 'to help tackle some of the biggest social challenges in our country'. These contemporary narratives echo a wider genealogy which we now trace in the following empirical discussion, as well as interrogating these claims and policy rhetoric through uncovering what these ideas mean for stakeholders and young people in practice. First though, we provide an overview of the methods of data collection and analysis that this article draws upon.

Methodology

The findings and discussion presented in this paper form part of a wider study that explores the state's motivations behind, the voluntary sector's engagement with, and young people's experiences of NCS. Eight research methods were utilized during data collection, and with the exception of archival research, all the methods yielded data that is referred to in this article. Relevant policy documents were engaged with via critical discourse analysis to explore how 'interconnected groups of texts, statements and representations' about young people and society emerge and 'take place' (Kraftl, Horton, and Tucker 2012, 15). This was supplemented using interviews with eight 'key architects' (our term) involved in the early design and implementation of the NCS programme. A further twenty-two interviews were conducted with current and former Regional Delivery Providers – the organizations who manage, sub-contract or directly delivery NCS on-the-ground across England and Northern Ireland. To explore the experiences of young people, an online survey was designed and distributed to participants who graduated from NCS between 2011 and 2015 ($n = 407$). From the survey responses, 30 young people were then purposefully sampled by categories of social difference (race, religion, class and gender) as well as by their year of NCS completion and the region where they lived. In addition, an ethnography with a team of nine young people took place in Summer 2015, where a member of the research team openly volunteered as an NCS mentor and engaged in participatory research with this group. This culminated in the final research method, a youth-led production of a professional animated white-board video diary of their NCS 'journey'.[2] All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full, and analysed thematically with other qualitative data using NVivo software. The quantitative survey data were processed using SPSS and were subject to chi-square analysis.

We now present three empirical sections of analysis and discussion that map onto our contributions to knowledge outlined in the introduction. First, we trace the relationship between NCS, policy discourses and political visions. Second, we examine NCS as a universal yet still targeted programme, demonstrating how local geography shapes the state engineering of 'social mix' and subsequent challenges. Finally, we explore how NCS graduates themselves understand 'encountering difference' and 'meeting others', in contrast to NCS providers and state narratives.

'To help bring the country together': NCS as an antidote to 'Broken Britain'

As part of the Conservative Party's campaign material for the 2010 General Election, households in the UK were posted a 'contract' signed by the then leader of the opposition David Cameron (Figure 2) with the claim that 'if we win the election – use it to hold us to account':

In claiming that the creation of NCS would 'bring the country together', this document was part of The Conservative Party's wider rhetoric of 'Broken Britain' (Slater 2014), describing the 'big social problems' of breakdowns and failures (of families and education respectively) and that the 'Big Society' would change and mend this 'Broken Society' (see also Crossley 2016 on the 'troubled families' programme). The Big Society is an ideology presented by David Cameron at the Hugo Young Lecture in November 2009 that emphasized localism, empowerment and responsibility in communities, but has been widely critiqued for using voluntarism as a mask for austere social policies (see Mohan 2012; North 2011; Williams, Goodwin, and Cloke 2014). However, the idea of a citizen-building programme for teenagers was floated long before this election pamphlet and Cameron's Big Society speech.

Discussions of the 'need' for *something* like NCS for young people in this context can be traced back to as early as 2005 in youth and policy circles, shaped by ideas of active, responsible duty-bound (young) citizens. There were, however, deeper ideological foundations – shaped most powerfully we argue by race, religion and class. There was, across much interview material with key 'architects' of NCS, a struggle to articulate the sense that 'something was needed' for (some) British teenagers. Although this varied between the need for *something* to mark the transition to adulthood, or for

We will change society

We face big social problems in this country: family breakdown, educational failure, crime and deep poverty.

Labour's big government has failed; we will help build a Big Society where everyone plays their part in mending our broken society.

If you elect a Conservative government on 6 May, we will:

1. **Increase spending on health every year, while cutting waste in the NHS**, so that more goes to nurses and doctors on the frontline, and make sure you get access to the cancer drugs you need.

2. **Support families**, by giving married couples and civil partners a tax break, giving more people the right to request flexible working and helping young families with extra Sure Start health visitors.

3. **Raise standards in schools**, by giving teachers the power to restore discipline and by giving parents, charities and voluntary groups the power to start new smaller schools.

4. **Increase the basic state pension**, by re-linking it to earnings, and protect the winter fuel allowance, free TV licences, free bus travel and other key benefits for older people.

5. **Fight back against crime**, cut paperwork to get police officers on the street, and make sure criminals serve the sentence given to them in court.

6. **Create National Citizen Service for every 16 year old**, to help bring the country together.

Figure 2. An extract from a 2010 General Election Campaign pamphlet designed as a 'Contract between the Conservative Party and [named household members]'. Source: Author's photograph.

something to interest young people in politics, in the following quote from a senior policy advisor we see that this need was explicitly linked to *something* for disengaged youth after the 'homegrown' terrorist attacks in London in 2005:

> I think there was also at the time a background of kind of lots of people saying it would be really good to have National Service [compulsory military duty] back for young people but the Government and politicians not wanting to introduce that, but to introduce something which was more kind of community focused and was voluntary as well … they wanted to basically build community cohesion, and that was in part I guess in response to the 7/7 bombings … . there was a feeling that there was certainly an issue around community cohesion, where you had a situation where young people from one area felt that it was fine to kind of come down to London and commit the acts that they did against people who were from exactly the same nation. (Interview with Author, November 2014)

These geopolitical discourses of youth and security (Benwell and Hopkins 2016), and the explicit reference to community cohesion and by extension young Muslim identities (Dwyer, Shah, and Sanghera 2008; Phillips 2006), only appear in the early part of our data-set. Community cohesion and social cohesion are different yet related ideas both conceptually and in political discourse, but are worth highlighting here as part of a wider historical trajectory that has positioned certain groups of young people in Britain as threats or challenges to the nation-state (and its future), with voluntary

action seen as the panacea to these (in)securities (Mills 2013). These ideas – evidenced in the brand of 'active' citizenship NCS promotes through social action (Mills and Waite 2017) – are linked to powerful notions of duty, service and responsibility, evoked in calls for a 'return' to National Service mentioned in the above quote (see also Mohan 1994 on service learning). National Service as a form of military conscription ran in the UK from 1949 until final call-ups in 1960. Key architects of NCS explained that it was eventually echoed in their scheme's chosen name (as a voluntary and non-military organization) to evoke the same ideas of a common experience that transcended social class. When talking about NCS, David Cameron has often referred to his father's time in National Service and the positive 'bonding and mixing' that experience provided.

We argue these personal ideas seem to have driven a wider attempt at a political legacy. It is clear from our project that key figures in the Conservative Party by 2006 were trying to create a national institution, a legacy built on mixing and social class as well as those earlier racial and religious undertones. A key architect of NCS recalls a conversation with a central figure in the Party at that time:

> He said to me, 'You know the Labour Party brought in the National Health Service and we're going to bring in National Citizen Service, you know, it's going to be that important to us' … I suppose for me it's a service to the citizen, it's helping them. So it's a National Citizen Service … it's for you, you know? (Interview with Author, May 2015)

As *a service to the citizen*, we argue that NCS is the latest chapter and (re)configuration of the relationship between the state and civil society in the post-war period (Grant 2016). Its reciprocal 'gift' to the citizen for their voluntary activities is that it intends to provide opportunities – through 'social mix' – to create networks, connections and increase social mobility. This ambition from the early working groups is admirable. However, this notion was lost in the eventual policy connections made in the Conservative Party's 2007 Green Paper on NCS whilst in opposition. This paper instead included statistics on teenage pregnancy, sexual health, truancy, looked-after children's education, mental health, alcohol, drugs, workless households, benefits cycle and young people 'Not in Education, Employment or Training' (Conservatives 2007, 8–9). NCS became drawn into the 'Broken Britain' narrative outlined earlier, that 'these problems affect all of us but the lives of those young people who live on the fringes of society can be over before they started' (Conservatives 2007, 9). As such, we argue that although NCS aimed to create a universal service with an offer for all young people to foster social cohesion and social mobility, it drew upon certain constructions of social difference and enfolded certain young people and families into its policy objectives. Indeed, Cameron's foreword in the NCS Green Paper includes references to 'healing Britain's broken society' and that 'our social fabric urgently needs repair today' (Conservatives 2007, 1), ideas that then formed the centrepiece of his 2009 speech on the 'Big Society' (Cameron 2009) that would define his 2010 election campaign (See Figure 2) and the coalition government's subsequent agenda (2010–2015) – with NCS described as the 'flagship' policy of the Big Society (Mycock and Tonge 2011). In recent years, especially with the move to NCS Trust, this connection to the Big Society has been played down in favour of links to 'social action' and 'wellbeing' (terms with less political baggage), although we return to ideas of the Big Society and 'Shared Society' later in this article, with reference to the present struggle over political visions in the UK.

The earliest racialized, religious and class-based understandings of social cohesion discussed in this section can still be seen today. Ideas of 'mixing' are one of NCS' core narratives amongst MPs that champion the programme, with one stating in an interview 'Kids do not mix! … Kids are growing up in siloes and NCS is an opportunity to sort of break that down' (Interview with Author, October 2015). This echoes the racialized ideas of parallel lives and community cohesion discussed earlier (Phillips 2006), but also continues to be expressed in relation to social class. In 2017, NCS Trust still claim the programme aims 'to bring our country together by building stronger, more integrated communities and fostering understanding between young people from different backgrounds'. This section has revealed the early motivations and ideas about social cohesion in policy circles that shaped the emergence of NCS. We now turn to a discussion of the wider state

apparatus and NCS infrastructure to achieve these goals and broader ambitions. Namely, how discourses of social cohesion are translated into a specific concept within NCS – 'social mix' – a term often associated with public policy, planning and housing. The Conservatives originally defined social mix for NCS as 'where young people of all classes, races, dis/abilities, both genders and from a range of geographical locations within the UK come together' (Conservatives 2007, 13). The next section demonstrates how social mix is operationalized in practice.

Engineering and manufacturing social mix

The early policy discussed above suggested that young people completing NCS would be 'socially mixed' by different geographical *locations*. In reality, the infrastructure of NCS once piloted and launched was more localized and operates via regional and localized delivery as part of an 'imagined community' of national NCS graduates. This is not a programme that, for example, creates exchanges of young people between different regions, but where a young person from Leicester, for example, will be placed on a NCS 'wave' with other young people from Leicester, or nearby towns and villages. Despite this limited geographical *reach* or *distance travelled,* ideas of difference and mixing at the local or *neighbourhood* level are evoked instead. Social mix therefore appears within the NCS infrastructure as part of its 'ethos' and subsequent 'ethos training' for NCS providers and mentors on the principles and values of the organization. More powerfully, social mix is embedded in the 'Payments by Results' (PBR) system in delivery contracts. This PBR system is the central way in which 'social mix' is institutionalized and evaluated at the local level using local authority data, to ensure that 'the mix of participants on this programme should reflect the mix of the population' (NCS Senior Staff, Interview with Author, March 2015). PBR is important to discuss here as it is the legalistic expression of the premium put on achieving 'social mix', chiming with other decisions about how to deliver the NCS programme.

Our research found there were multiple and competing pressures in relation to PBR on the ground. First and foremost, geography matters in navigating social mix targets. As a provider in Northern Ireland outlined, 'social mix' between Protestants and Catholics (an additional criteria in this context) was seen as limited by the local geographies of housing and population demographics:

> Sometimes the nuances of geographical locations in Northern Ireland is quite particular … some areas are potentially you know 80% from one religion or another. So trying to then, you know if you're given that area, trying to get a mix of young people from different backgrounds sometimes can be slightly challenging. (Interview with Author, October 2015)

Second, we found that each regional provider is negotiating multiple strands of PBR criteria, which then feeds into their recruitment strategies. For example, whilst individual schools may display high levels of 'social mix' and diversity, PBR must be carefully managed to not over-recruit participants from the same school – another element of their contractual obligations with financial consequences. These logistics therefore pose challenges for NCS providers, who overwhelmingly named recruitment as their biggest test. Some of their subsequent recruitment strategies then reveal a tension between NCS as a universal or targeted service, as one provider recalls:

> So in our targeting approach, we would make sure that we're visiting the person that's got responsibility for looked after [children] in the local authority, somebody that's part of the Youth Offending Team, somebody that's got some careers responsibility, although that's really patchy these days, particular training providers as well, and the schools. So that would have been our targeted approach. And then you know towards the end of the season, it's people like youth clubs and Scouts and you know other providers. (Interview with Author, March 2015)

Different providers therefore have their own recruiting mechanisms to hit their social mix PBR criteria – via the schools they target for assembly talks or in seeking referrals from other youth programmes. As one of the original architects explains:

> It's a universal service … we want everyone to be able to do it … but in making it a true universal service, we do have to target some people who are less likely to come on board. (Interview with Author, May 2015)

This quote reveals a key tension and challenge for NCS: without some form of *engineering*, the fear is that 'social mix' will not occur. For example, there were early concerns that NCS would fail to engage 'hard-to-reach' religious minorities, or become appropriated by young people from middle-class families with more social capital (see Jupp 2013 on these class dynamics in Sure Start Centres).

In terms of religious minorities, some NCS tenders have been used to support specific faith-based identities. For example, The Jewish Lads' and Girls' Brigade (JLGB) secured an NCS tender in North East London, and have named their programme 'inter-faith' delivery. This programme is marketed as Kosher, but also includes a wider pitch to other religious minorities with the appeal of staff and volunteers who are experienced in navigating appropriate gendered activities. We argue that NCS provision is being stretched or re-imagined in this example, with the JLGB increasingly using discourses of (religious) mixing in their wider material, with a recent tweet stating they are 'inviting Muslim and Jewish to join together this summer'. This does not mean there are not Muslim and Jewish youth mixing within other NCS providers, but this infrastructure echoes wider debates about accommodating religious difference in youth work spaces (Mills 2016).

In terms of social class, NCS has sought to engage hard-to-reach-groups with bursaries to cover the £50 NCS participation fee for young people from families struggling to meet that cost. On one level, this has led to NCS reaching young people without any previous experience of extra-curricular activities. Indeed, in our national level survey data, there was a statistically significant relationship between social class and participation in extra-curricular activities prior to completing NCS.[3] Fifty-five per cent of respondents who said that no-one in their household was in paid work said they did no extra-curricular activities prior to completing NCS, compared to only 21% of those respondents who reported that the main wage earner in their household was in a managerial/professional or intermediate occupation. However, we argue that despite mechanisms currently in place to achieve social mix (PBR and £50 bursaries), there are hidden costs involved in NCS. Ultimately, social differences shape and impact NCS experiences and, intentionally or not, much of the curriculum design, infrastructure and implementation overlooked social class, and this is more acutely felt in rural communities. Our overall analysis is that many social action projects have a fundraising element that may require young people to collect donations or need resources from family and friends. It is important to recognize that not all parents or families have the resource(s), time or opportunity to contribute in various ways that are often assumed or expected, for example, to bake a cake or take a sponsorship form to work. There are also material costs, as one young carer aged 17 from a rural area explained:

> I went in [to my social action project] when I could because Nan doesn't drive, the rest of my family that do drive have family or work, they couldn't take me, and I'd already paid out about, just over £100 in travelling to get to the … coaches for getting to the residentials, and also for travelling to [the project]. I had £80 refunded for that, I think, in total, which was helpful but nothing else was given really. (Sophie, 17, Suffolk, Interview with Author – February 2016)

Although this was a relatively isolated account in our data-set, we can see how despite state attempts to make NCS more 'universal' and 'socially mixed', some of the apparatus and infrastructure involved in targeting hard-to-reach-groups does not go far enough, as this young person encountered transport difficulties and unexpected costs. So whilst the overall government ambition is to promote social action, under the banner of 'encouraging and enabling people to play a more active part in society' (GOV.UK 2015), this is not so simple in practice. This section has discussed how national government-led attempts to engineer 'social mix' within NCS are shaped by a number of regional and local geographical factors on the ground that impact lived experiences.

Ultimately, it is the PBR and bursary system that are seen as doing the 'work' of social mix, rather than the curriculum or content of NCS itself. Encounters with difference are then assumed to happen naturally or organically within NCS' programme, as part of a wider educational journey that creates spaces where this *may* occur, rather than young people learning about local communities, social

difference or direct forms of intercultural education. NCS is therefore a scheme designed by adults for teenagers to meet 'others' across a series of educational spaces, and is a structured attempt at hosting encounters with 'difference' to foster social cohesion – or to 'build bridges across social divides' (Cameron 2016). We now turn to young people's experiences of NCS in relation to these ideas and their own understandings about social cohesion and encountering difference.

'I met people I'd have never met in real life': encountering difference

This section explores young people's experiences of NCS in relation to encountering difference and pushes deeper at the narratives used by young people in the context of this paper's discussion. Our national level data-set found that 96% of NCS graduates we surveyed would recommend NCS to others, with 88% of respondents stating they made new friends at some point in the NCS programme. 'Meeting new people' was the third most popular motivation to complete NCS for our survey respondents (after 'excitement' and 'CV/future job prospects'), with 64% stating they wanted to meet new people. There was no statistically significant relationship between those young people's desire to meet others and any aspect of their social identities. However, there was a statistically significant relationship between those respondents who identified as having a religion and those who said they were motivated to do NCS because they wanted to volunteer[4] and those who said they were motivated to do NCS because they wanted to learn more about their communities.[5] In total, 89% of our survey respondents had stayed in touch with those they had met on their NCS programme, and overall, the accounts of NCS graduates in our quantitative and qualitative research were largely positive.

In 20 of our 30 qualitative interviews, young people discussed ideas around meeting others and 'social mix' without prompting when discussing their NCS experience. For example:

> There were some people which, especially in my group, who became like my best mates, but I would never have approached them, like if they came to like something like a social event, I wouldn't have talked to them … but actually they're lovely people … you met people who you wouldn't, didn't, you would never have thought you would ever like socialise! (Jayne, Birmingham, 16, Interview with Author – February 2016)

Indeed, although 'meeting others' was a common feature of graduates experiences of NCS, friendships were the overwhelming narrative through which they discussed these ideas. Young people in interview material rarely expressed a particular view or opinion on the *type* of difference they encountered in relation to certain social markers of identity (e.g. race, religion or sexuality) but instead they described different personalities, not 'judging' others, and being less 'fearful':

> I felt so nervous talking to anyone before … even just going down the street, down here, and when it's, even when it's not dark, on my own, would be such a, worry. I'd be so scared, I'd be like, 'what are you doing?' And I think NCS made me step away from that, look at things objectively and think, but they're not really there to hurt you, I mean what is the problem with them, they are just normal people. (Emma, Lincolnshire, 16, Interview with Author – October 2015)

We argue that this example demonstrates a newly found security at a personal and embodied level, rather than earlier notions of national security and community cohesion in policy rhetoric. Although Emma does not name a particular social group she previously was scared of, the worrisome location she is referring to in this quote was a socially deprived area of her hometown, a less desirable place near the interview location infused with ideas about crime and social class. There were some other examples in interview data of references to different schools and estates with class-based inflections, and more general references to different 'backgrounds', as Leanne states:

> Meeting friends from different, say, backgrounds, so then three years later still being friends with them now … you'd just never have met and you'd never have known these people, I think that's what I liked the most. (Leanne, Greater Manchester, 19, Interview with Author – March 2016)

Leanne's statement that 'you'd just never have met' reveals that she has framed NCS as the *only* opportunity she would have had to meet other *different* young people, beyond school or other

local public spaces (the bus or playground, see Wilson 2017), or even perhaps in her future (via employment or further education). In that sense, we argue that NCS is understood by some young people as a particular time–space, and in terms of encounter, some graduates perceived (and imagined) that they would have *never* met these new friends otherwise. If we push further, it is clear that NCS is understood by some young people as a kind of temporary 'unreal' space – suspended in time – with another graduate stating that 'I met people that I would never have met in *real life*'.

However, drawing on the example of our ethnographic 'wave' of nine young people with sustained participatory research, we would suggest that sometimes, NCS contained the very people some participants had been trying to avoid. In stark contrast to the official government message about NCS' 'social mix' and the discussions of meeting new friends in qualitative interviews, within our ethnographic cohort there were already some connections via schools and friendship networks. This challenges the idea that all young people on NCS are 'unknown strangers' just waiting to meet each other for the first time. In some cases, these existing connections between young people enhanced the NCS experience and helped with bonding and team-work. In other cases however, where friendships or relationships between young people at school had broken down prior to NCS, this created real tensions. For example, one young person in our participatory research switched NCS 'team' due to a previous experience of bullying with a group member. NCS is therefore not always a 'bubble' detached in both time and space from the rest of young people's lives and experiences. Friendships observed during our participatory research grew and flourished, both on programme and at evenings and weekends, but this was a complex web of friendships that saw whole team cinema outings and emerging romantic relationships, but also exclusions from Whatsapp groups and intense arguments. This demonstrates how spaces such as NCS are negotiated by young people through their everyday encounters and practices of friendship and in/exclusion. Furthermore, in our follow-up meetings and animation workshop sessions with this group after NCS had finished, it became clear that some friendships (and romantic relationships) had strengthened, while others had ended. Overall these geographies of friendship (Bunnell et al. 2012) reveal the everyday and ordinary encounters of young people at this stage in the lifecourse, and yet, it is important to remember that these encounters were originally set in motion by the manufactured and engineered programme designed within government and policy circles, as outlined earlier in this paper. This context does not make these friendships and encounters any less powerful, meaningful or valid, but rather, it demonstrates that not all encounters are haphazard chance meetings: these were orchestrated by the state.

Finally, we argue that young people's narratives outlined here differ to the delivery providers and how they understand or articulate NCS' role in fostering social cohesion. Representatives from Regional NCS Providers were far more likely to vocalize ideas about racial or religious differences amongst their NCS 'waves' as specific types of encounter that chimed with the government agendas outlined earlier in this article. As one programme manager reflected:

> … during Ramadan it was, you know, it was really interesting to see how people gathered round together and supported the young people that were fasting and to try to identify with it. … One of the lads from Bradford … he decided he was going to see what it was like to fast and he … and by the end of week 3 … the Asian boys were going, so how does it feel now …?! You know?! And he actually had done this. (Interview with Author, May 2015)

On one hand, we could describe these 'encounters' with religious difference as organic, natural, spontaneous and diffuse. On the other hand, we argue these have still been manufactured through the very idea of a state-funded youth programme with 'social mix' in its institutional apparatus. The government has made a large investment in NCS and embedded 'social mix' as a key tenant of its foundational ethos, therefore engineering through its infrastructure the type of spaces and participants where this may occur. The above quote hints at how employees working for NCS are, at times, complicit in these social engineering agendas; indeed many Regional Delivery Providers believe social

cohesion is the driving force behind NCS and its unique contribution to the youth sector landscape. It is noteworthy that these inter-faith or inter-racial encounters are the examples providers tended to draw upon during interviews in relation to the 'work' NCS does, rather than featuring in young people's narratives. Furthermore, adult employees of Regional Delivery Providers interviewed in our project also highlighted the theme of generational difference to articulate ideas about young people today and social cohesion more generally. Here, an NCS employee recalls an example of having lunch with two NCS participants from different ethnic minority communities who lived just three miles apart:

> I said to them, oh you know 'You two you must have known each other before' … and they were like 'no, no, we didn't but you know we're best friends, she's my best friend' … And I asked them about their parents and they said their parents would never talk to each other, that would never happen … so I said, 'Well how will the parents be about you two being friends then? if you're going to stay friends?', and they said, 'No they won't mind, they'll be fine about it, but they won't want to mix themselves, you know?'. (Interview with Author, September 2015)

This quote reveals how ideas about 'mixing' can be framed in relation to wider reference points of neighbourhoods, communities and significantly, families. However, we argue that despite these generational challenges, the state's focus on older teenagers through NCS represents the long-standing idea that young people are the most 'in need' of attention in order to foster social cohesion and 'fix' society.

Conclusion

In October 2016, former UK Prime Minister David Cameron announced that he had 'found [his] first job after politics, building the Big Society' (Cameron 2016). He was referring to one of his 'proudest achievements' – NCS – and his new role as Chairman of NCS Patrons. In this announcement, Cameron revived a connection between NCS and the widely critiqued ideology of the 'Big Society' discussed earlier. Just a few months later however, current Prime Minister Theresa May marked a clear break with the previous PM and included NCS as an example in her speech for the 'Shared Society', a political vision of overcoming divisions, and of respect for family, community, citizenship and 'fairness' that provoked similar debate. She stated:

> The shared society is one that doesn't just value our individual rights but focuses rather more on the responsibilities we have to one another. It's a society that respects the bonds that we share as a union of people and nations. The bonds of family, community, citizenship and strong institutions. And it's a society that recognises the obligations we have as citizens – obligations that make our society work. (HM Government, January 2017)

There is therefore a current contemporary struggle between two visions: Cameron's Big Society and May's Shared Society, with NCS used as an example in both speeches as a 'rite of passage' for teenagers. May is continuing to expand NCS, recently awarded a further £1.2 billion pound investment, at the same time she is carving out her own political vision for the role of individual citizens, communities and government (Grice 2016). NCS is, for now, voluntary without compulsion and represents a unique lens through which to view the shifting relationship between the state and civil society in the UK. Whether trying to create a 'Big' or 'Shared' Society, NCS represents an on-the-ground attempt to *engineer* social mix for the purpose of fostering social cohesion, driven through informal citizenship education.

This paper had a three-fold agenda. First, to interrogate how certain youth spaces get enrolled into political discourses, functioning as geographical expressions of government visions to create a political legacy. In our discussion, we outlined how NCS was designed as a space to encourage young citizens to actively contribute in responsible ways via social action as part of the 'Big Society'. Furthermore, NCS was seen as a *service to the citizen*, a 'gift' by the state to create opportunities for social mix and social mobility. Whilst an admirable ambition, it is hard to shake off those earliest racialized and religiously inflected policy connections to security and community cohesion, as well as the class-

infused ideas about troublesome youth in this 'modern' version of National Service to 'bring the (broken) country together' again.

Second, we set out to explore how spaces tied up in wider political visions operate on-the-ground to engineer their target audience as part of broader policy aims. Using the example of NCS, we explored the infrastructure and institutional practices of this programme to engineer 'social mix' on the ground. We discussed the apparatus of NCS and its payment-by-results and bursary system, arguing that providers engineer social mix to some extent (or are controlled to by the state) because of their engagement with these mechanisms. We argued that these infrastructures are challenged by local geography and social differences, emphasizing that attempts to foster 'social mix' have material impacts and barriers, with hidden costs for some groups.

Finally, we interrogated what young people understand by 'meeting others' and the wider political work of such spaces. We demonstrated how young people in our study were largely positive about their NCS experience and chance to meet 'others' and make new friends in this unique time–space. However, they had divergent understandings of the difference they encountered, which varied from policy documents and NCS providers. Furthermore, our ethnographic work demonstrated that NCS cannot create the 'bubbles' of total strangers it seeks to create via its current local geographical infrastructure. Overall, the paper has examined how meso concepts of citizenship and social cohesion are scaled down to individual and collective embodied encounters with 'others', institutionalized here through a rapidly expanding programme for young people. The paper has demonstrated how drives for social cohesion are spatialized, in this case through NCS as an attempt to manufacture encounters with 'difference' (Wilson 2017). In so doing, this article contributes to literature in social and political geography by demonstrating how the discourses of citizenship education and social cohesion are intertwined and feature in wider political visions. The paper illustrates how formalized spaces are created under the banner of such political ideas, offering an original discussion of young people's lived experiences of these spaces to the existing literature. More broadly, this example highlights continued attempts by the state over time to use the informal citizenship training of young people as the answer to a range of 'problems' in society.

Significantly, the paper has also critically questioned the role placed on 'society' and 'communities' to be more cohesive, and on certain social groups and individuals to be better citizens or more engaged neighbours. In November 2016, The Mayor of London Sadiq Khan (Labour) critiqued the lack of social integration in the UK, stating 'It is not enough to tolerate people of other races, religions, sexuality, age, class, we must make them friends, welcome them as neighbours' (BBC Radio 4 2016). This moral politics of friendship and neighbourliness involves deep philosophical questions that go beyond party politics, and indeed beyond England and Northern Ireland where NCS operates. Do states have a moral commitment to make societies more inclusive? Or have states created the tensions they are now trying to fix? In the context of the recent EU referendum campaign and result in the UK, it is clear these questions are more pressing than ever. Young people will no doubt be given (or shouldered) with the burden of responsibility to 'fix' society, and will be cast once again as the future neighbour, friend and citizen. The wider philosophies that underpin this positioning of young people stretch well beyond the UK. Indeed, these impulses shape the global dynamics of youth citizenship and social cohesion in different geographical contexts. A future research agenda around these themes and their diverse expressions across and between different nations is crucial, especially in the context of understanding children and young people's everyday lives.

Notes

1. Shorter offers of NCS are available in Spring and Autumn as condensed 1 week versions of the NCS programme.
2. Available in full at www.geographiesofyouthcitizenship.com.

3. $X^2 = 13.149$, $p = .004$.
4. $X^2 = 6.257$, $p = 0.012$.
5. $X^2 = .020$, $p = 0.045$.

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