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Changing Responsibilities and Roles of the Voluntary and Community Sector in the Welfare Mix: A Review

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Introduction

Many Western states have sought in recent years to harness the energies of voluntary agencies and charitable bodies in the provision of welfare (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006; Milligan and Conradson, 2006; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). More than ever is expected of the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in supporting people and communities, entering into partnerships with governments, and delivering public services (Lewis, 2005; Macmillan, 2010). The mainstreaming of the VCS has been associated with a push towards market reform and reducing state obligations for welfare provision (Amin, 2009). In some European states – for example, Germany and the Netherlands – a three-way mix of state, market and voluntary sector dates back to the nineteenth century (Brandsen and Pestoff, 2006). In the UK too, on which this review article focuses, the delivery of public services by voluntary organisations and charities is far from new, but over the past decade local government and health services, especially in England, have been required to step up their engagement with VCS organisations (VCSOs) (Alcock, 2009; Di Domencio *et al.*, 2009; Macmillan, 2010). Commitment to this sector by the government under New Labour was signalled by the creation for England of the Office of the Third Sector within the Cabinet Office in 2006 and the associated appointment of the first dedicated Minister of the Third Sector, initially Ed Miliband MP. Working with charities, social enterprises and community and faith-based organisations appeals to politicians across the mainstream British political spectrum (Di Domencio *et al.*, 2009; Alcock, 2010); the 'Big Society' agenda of the Coalition government elected in 2010 promises a continuation in this direction of travel, albeit in a new regime of reduced budgets, service cuts and demands of more for less.

In this review, we turn next to the much-contested question of what to call the sector that is neither state nor market, but embedded in a tri-polar system of state, market and family (Evers and Laville, 2004). We explain why we use the term Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS), while recognising that it is only a convenient shorthand for referring to a diverse body of organisations. We then highlight key developments in government interactions with VCSOs in the UK, concentrating on the period from 1980 to the present day while recognising that there is a much longer history. From this, we turn to the theme of 'distinctiveness' and the claims and counter claims around it. We discuss these debates and situate them within the conceptual frameworks of the 'shadow state', public value, and critical approaches to mainstream business and social enterprise. Finally, we suggest some emerging themes and directions for research.

What's in a name?

After the 2010 election, the Office of the Third Sector was quickly renamed the Office for Civil Society. The notion of a 'Third Sector' that is neither bureaucratic state nor profit-driven business was not invented by New Labour, but it gained official acceptance during their second and third terms, perhaps on account of its verbal echo of Third Way politics (Haugh and Kitson, 2007). The Coalition's rejection of the label Third Sector is indicative of the extent to which definitions in this area are invested with political dimensions and sectional interests (Ridley-Duff and Bull, 2011). Alcock (2010) notes that the government now sometimes refers to the sector with lists such as 'charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations', which he sees as likely to be divisive when some groups inevitably get left off the list. Collective terms such as independent sector, non-government sector or non-statutory sector are all problematic for a group of organisations which derive more than a third of their funding from central or local government (Halfpenny and Reid, 2002; Clark *et al*., 2009). Other labels, such as charity sector or community sector, recognise only some of the diversity of organisations.

Haugh and Kitson (2007) argue that prior to the 1978 Wolfenden Committee Report (Wolfenden, 1978), the wide range of VCSOs in the UK were seen as parts of the discrete sectors in which they operated, and in that report they were labelled as a sector for the first time. The legacy is that what we have come to consider the VCS is an extremely broad category, with a vast heterogeneity of organisations within it (Halfpenny and Reid, 2002). The recent momentum gained by 'social enterprise' and 'social entrepreneurship' has, controversially, expanded the category further to include types of organisation with social goals and characteristics in common with for-profit businesses (Shaw and Carter, 2007; Di Domenico *et al*., 2009; Dey, 2010).

In US literature, 'non-profit' marks a distinction from the profit orientation of the market. In the European Union, 'économie sociale' has become an official term, and the equivalent English phrase 'social economy' began to be adopted in the UK from the 1990s. 'Social enterprise' and 'social entrepreneurship' are invoked to denote the use of entrepreneurial skills and processes for social and environmental purposes (Chell, 2007). Although these terms are often used interchangeably, 'social entrepreneurship' tends to emphasise the motivation and leadership of individuals, whereas 'social enterprise' focuses on the delivery of social benefits through the trading activity of organisations (Birch and Whittam, 2008). Social enterprises are characterised by their diversity and there is no universally accepted definition (Shaw and Carter, 2007; Di Domenico *et al*., 2009). There is some consensus that the essential difference between a social enterprise and a for-profit business lies in the primary purpose of a social enterprise to create social value, with commercial activity – including but not limited to tendering for public service contracts – the means by which to achieve that purpose (DTI, 2002; Pearce, 2003; Peredo and McLean, 2006). 'Social enterprise' can be applied to charities and voluntary groups that adopt income-generating strategies, including public sector contracts, but such organisations often do not recognise themselves as social enterprises (Bull, 2008; Parkinson and Howorth, 2008). Clearer definition and stronger identity have been called for to prevent opportunistic misuse of the 'social enterprise' badge with the political attention now focused upon social enterprises (Social Enterprise Coalition, 2010). In this review we use the term Voluntary and Community Sector (with the common abbreviation VCS) as a non-politicised and broad descriptor of organisations, including 'social enterprises'. However, we recognise the inherent weaknesses in any catch-all name for the 'sector' that Kendall and Knapp (1995: 67) famously called a 'loose and baggy monster'.

Mainstreaming the Voluntary and Community Sector

In most Western economies, voluntary groups pioneered the services that became part of statutory welfare in the twentieth century. Lewis (1999) identifies three major changes in the relationship between VCSOs and the state in the UK over the course of that century; from independence, to an extension of public services, to a mixed economy and contracting to provide services. Prior to the 1911 National Insurance Act, VCSOs were generally wholly independent of the state, working to their own agendas in fields in which the government made no provision. Increasing interdependence occurred during the interwar period, as VCSOs and the state began to work in connected spheres of welfare, and to this end the National Council of Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) was formed in 1919 (as the National Council of Social Services) with the aim of coordinating VCSOs and developing their ties with the state (Davis Smith, 1995). The 1942 Beveridge Report proposed comprehensive social insurance, including universal healthcare provision, and was influential in the creation of National Insurance and of the National Health Service (NHS). Despite the highly state-centred nature of the Report, it also acknowledged the role that VCS organisations played in healthcare at that time and would continue to play. By 1945, therefore, there was growing support for the view of the VCS as complementing and supplementing state provision (Davis Smith, 1995; Lewis, 1999). The post-war welfare state saw a rise, not a decline, in charitable formation (Alcock, 2010).

In the 1980s, governments on both sides of the Atlantic adopted the principles of 'rolling back' the state and strengthening markets. Policies and practices that became known as New Public Management (NPM) were based on the neo-liberal conviction that public services underperform when they lack the discipline of competition and profit. NPM is not a single body of theory and its various permutations are beyond the scope of this review. It denotes a cluster of ideas and practices that seek to improve public services through business approaches (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). NPM is significant in the context of government policies seeking to deliver public services through VCSOs, including social enterprises, because it marks, 'a shift in the way in which governments govern from bureaucratic administration to the encouragement of numerous innovative and entrepreneurial forms of service delivery' (Curtis, 2008: 227). Wolch (1990) introduced the idea of a 'shadow state' to emphasise the exertion of government power over VCSOs which had come in to replace diminished state provision. In England, the 1990 *National Health Service and Community Care Act*, implemented in 1993, required contracting out of local authority social care services for disabled adults and older people and led to increased VCS provision in the field of social care (Osborne and McLaughlin, 2004). In 1997, some 44 per cent of home help/care contact hours were provided by non-government providers compared with just 2 per cent in 1992 (Department of Health, 1998). Some commentators in the mid 1990s saw threats to independence and distinctiveness that echo today's debates. Russell and Scott (1997), for example, urged the VCS to resist pressure to seek contract funding in order to maintain independence from the state and to affirm its developmental role.

It has been argued that the 1990s saw VCS organisations becoming more significant deliverers of public services as the state contracted (Howlett and Ellis, 2002; Fyfe, 2005; Buckingham, 2009). Kendall (2000: 246), though, sees this account as 'overdramatising' its role during this period. His stance is consistent with the analysis that VCSOs were a safety net to provide for those individuals unable to meet their own needs, and where no private organisation were prepared to act (Halfpenny and Reid, 2002; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). Overall, the Thatcher/Major period was characterised by piecemeal and *ad hoc* attention to VCS organisations – for example in the field of adult social care. This was a sideshow to the main project of rolling back of the state and the strengthening of the markets (Kendall, 2000; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). In 1996, the Deakin Commission's *Report on the Future of the Voluntary Sector* recommended that a formal relationship be developed between the state and VCS organisations, allowing organisations to have a say in policy concerning the services they deliver (Kendall, 2000). This was to be picked up by New Labour after the 1997 election.

Over the first few years of New Labour's governance, the VCS began to move out of the margins of policy into the mainstream (Kendall, 2000; Fyfe, 2005; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). Compacts were introduced in accordance with the Deakin Commission's recommendation. These set out that the government must recognise the independence of VCSOs, including their right to undertake to offer long-term funding to create stability. The HM Treasury Cross Cutting Review (2002) in Labour's second term called upon all government departments to engage more effectively with voluntary sector partners (HM Treasury, 2002). The Public Accounts Committee report, *Working with the Voluntary Sector* (House of Commons, 2006), criticized the slowness of the take up of public sector commissions by VCSOs. This was tackled on a variety of fronts. The Office of the Third Sector, created in 2006, was tasked with bringing about a 'a step-change' in the quality of interaction with government that VCSOs in England could expect. The Office of the Third Sector initiated a National Programme for Third Sector Commissioners, which aimed to improve the understanding of the potential of the VCS in designing, delivering and improving public services. Other solutions were in the form of guidance and training to address lack of expertise and produce more 'commission ready' VCSOs, with skills to promote and sell their services (SCEDU, 2008). Similar initiatives were made in Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2004), although there are differences in policy and implementation across the nations of the UK as discussed by Danson and Whittam (this volume). New Labour sought not only to enable VCSOs to take on the provision of welfare, but also to promote civic activism and engagement through involvement in VCSOs (Blair, 1998; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). Levels of support offered to VCSOs across all four UK administrations post-1997 were without precedent, and represented a major break from previous *ad hoc* policy and support (Kendall, 2000; Hodgson, 2004; Alcock, 2009).

Just over a week after the formal Coalition government was agreed in May 2010, the new Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister together launched the strategy entitled *Building the Big Society* (Cabinet Office, 2010). The Big Society aims to empower people through families, neighbourhoods and volunteering so that they 'feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their communities' (Cameron, 2010: 1). The strategy document, *Building the Big Society*, declared the government's intention to 'support the creation and expansion of mutuals, cooperatives, charities and social enterprises, and support these groups to have much greater involvement in the running of public services' (Cabinet Office, 2010). The post-election Department of Health (DH) White Paper announced the ambition 'create the largest and most vibrant social enterprise sector in the world' by giving more freedom to foundation trusts, along with handing over commissioning powers to General Practitioners (Department of Health, 2010: 36). What this implies in practice for VCSOs, including social enterprises, is unclear. It could create further opportunity but GPs may not have the capacity to give smaller social enterprises a chance (Hampson, 2010). Meanwhile the personalisation of social care, enabled by mechanisms to devolve budgetary control to the individual, has been extended to the NHS in a series of pilots. To deliver on the promises of personalisation, there is a need for a much-enhanced supply side, which may be 'made up of large, small, private, not for profit, and public providers' (Bartlett, 2009: 8). The Big Society agenda and the debates around it have intensified interest in VCSOs (including social enterprises) and raised expectations for their capacity to deliver better services in an era of public spending cuts.

Change, continuity and distinctiveness

The above account, which has mainly focussed on England, can be read as a story of 'progress' towards greater mainstreaming of VCSOs in public services over a thirty year period. In this section, we turn to the main claims and counter claims around this set of changes and consider some of the conceptual frameworks that can be deployed for analysis and explanation. First, we introduce a note of caution. The scale of change towards VCS responsibility for public services can be exaggerated, as rhetoric tends to outstrip reality (Public Administration Select Committee, 2008). As long ago as 1938, a third of VCS funding was estimated to come from the state (Davis Smith, 1995). The proportion of all public expenditure with the VCS, although rising, amounts to little more than 2 per cent (Public Administration Select Committee, 2008).

Many VCSOs (and infrastructure organisations that speak for them) welcome opportunities to gain fee income, to improve services and to influence policy (Alcock *et al.*, 2004; Blackmore, 2006). Not all, however, concur that this agenda from central government should be wholeheartedly embraced. There are concerns within the sector that by working in partnerships with state agencies and taking up contracts for services, VCSOs are likely to weaken their distinctive organisational values and become more like agencies of the state, or more like for-profit businesses. The latter stance tends to inform current academic debates, as it did in the 1990s. The twenty-year-old notion of the 'shadow state' (Wolch 1990) is still resonant, with growing unease about pressure for sameness and erosion of VCSOs' distinctive characteristics and trusting relationship with clients (Yarwood, 2005; Milbourne, 2009; Macmillan, 2010). Hodgson (2004) in similar vein argues that the delivery of public services means working towards a bureaucratic mandate laid down by the state.

The sector's capacity for innovation is one claim that underpins the case for more involvement in public services. Voluntary organisations were the prime innovators of social welfare in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Osborne *et al.*, 2008). These authors found from survey work in 1994 and 2006 that innovative activity of VCOs had shrunk, a finding that they explained was because innovation is not always possible when working to risk-averse public policy frameworks (ibid.). In an era of growing mistrust in many public institutions, there is still at least the perception of higher levels of

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trust in the VCS (Paxton *et al.*, 2005). Moreover, VCSOs claim to have greater ability to engage with and understand the needs of individual service users and communities than statutory or private sector providers. These are important planks in the political case for increasing the VCS role in public service delivery. Billis and Glennerster (1998) proposed the notion of the 'comparative advantage' of VCSOs over other sectors on account of ambiguous and hybrid organisational structures characterised by 'stakeholder ambiguity'. Stakeholder ambiguity refers to the lack of clear-cut differentiation between the various roles of employer, employee, provider, recipient, volunteer and others. This, they contend, implies a flexible, changing and informal structure capable of responding more sensitively than the state or the market to the disadvantage of service users. Stakeholder ambiguity implies that, unlike innovation, closeness to users is an intrinsic characteristic of VCSOs, but also a fragile one. Alcock (2009) writes of the risk of incorporation, where VCS organisations become part of the state in all but name, and those delivering public services increasingly come to resemble the public providers they have replaced. This draws upon the concept of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991), which sees organisations becoming like each other under various pressures: coercive (when conformity is enforced), mimetic (when there is a need to reduce uncertainty) and normative (with pressures to show legitimacy). Milligan and Fyfe (2005: 419) report a 'bifurcation' of the VCS, with larger 'corporatist' organisations increasingly working with the state – and with state funds – to delivery public services, while much smaller 'grass-roots' organisations continue to work in the community and to campaign for change and reform. VCSOs have been urged by commissioners to enter into collaborative arrangements to achieve the capacity to deliver large contracts (Mitchell and Drake, 2005). This is challenging for some organisations, because of the high value they place on independence and the distinctiveness of their mission and values (Chapman *et al.*, 2006).

Threats to distinctiveness (of individual organisations and the sector) can be discerned in closeness to the market, as well as in unequal partnerships with agencies of the state. VCSOs, it is sometimes claimed, are tending to become more like private sector enterprises, with the need to anticipate change and spot opportunities in response to an increasingly competitive environment for resources (Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004; Haugh and Kitson, 2007). Contracting out services formerly provided by the public sector to the VCS may open up services for contests, which can subsequently be won by the private sector (Davies, 2006). To remain competitive, VCSOs are exhorted to adopt entrepreneurial practices, language, behaviour and mindsets associated with the private sector (Peattie and Morley, 2008; Zahra *et al.*, 2009; Baines *et al.*, 2010). For Howarth *et al.* (2011) all this can displace radical approaches in ways that can weaken the potential of VCSOs to bring about change through community initiatives. Taking issue with both the isomorphism thesis and the uncritical importing of mainstream business discourse, Curtis (2008) highlights examples of resistance and recalcitrance when social enterprises refuse (or fail) to perform to the expectations of government sponsors. The alternative social practices that result, he argues, can be understood not as weakness or failure but as what Williams (2002) has called 'spaces of hope'. Failure is rarely mentioned in the light of the 'halo effect' that surrounds the VCS in general and social enterprise in particular (Scott, 2010). There is a need to acknowledge and learn from failure, and to raise the critical reflexivity of the field (Dey, 2010).

Value and values

In the summary account of recent history above, we noted how policies influenced by New Public Management (NPM) tried to make public sector organisations more like private ones, and how NPM's application in England in the early 1990s led to increased VCSO participation in some welfare services as a largely unintended consequence. An alternative to NPM known as 'public value' refers to the things that public services produce, either directly or indirectly, using public money. A 'public value' framework emphasises outcomes and wider collective objectives (Horner *et al.*, 2006). Service quality, according to a public value framework, consists of three domains – services, outcomes, and trust/legitimacy (Kelly *et al.*, 2002). Assessment of public perspectives on issues of quality in all these domains is considered necessary to demonstrate the public value – and hence, quality and effectiveness – of specific public services (ibid.). The similar but rather narrower concept of 'social value' denotes the added benefit to the community from a commissioning/procurement process over and above the direct purchasing of goods, services and outcomes (National Health Service North West, 2009). Public value and social value are neutral about whether the public, private or voluntary sector provides a service. The sector as a whole, it has been argued, increasingly needs to work harder to assert its intrinsic value if it is to retain public trust and avoid becoming a stepping stone from the public to the private sector (Paxton *et al.*, 2005; Moxham and Boaden, 2007; Social Enterprise Coalition, 2010).

Discussion and conclusions

In this review article, we have summarised some of the key themes around VCSOs taking on aspects of welfare from state agencies. The growing importance attached to the VCS is an international phenomenon (Milligan and Conradson, 2006). There are national variations, for example within the UK (Danson and Whitham, this volume) and across Europe (Lyon and Glucksmann, 2008). Focussing on the United Kingdom, and in particular on England, we have reviewed the changing relationship between the state and VCS organisations over the past thirty years. We have discussed how academic studies have explored a shift from a social to a business focus, and to some extent endorsed concerns from within parts of the VCS about pressure on organisations to neglect or compromise their original social objectives (Amin, 2009). For some organisations, this may be set to intensify as the Coalition government's Big Society proposals roll out against a background of heavily curtailed public spending. We now turn to tentatively suggest emerging themes for practice and research.

How VCSOs articulate and demonstrate their value to funders, donors, commissioners and others is an evolving area, and there is now a large selection of 'prove and improve' toolkits designed to assist with monitoring and evaluation (NEF, 2009). For VCSOs that seek to influence services, and to deliver them, the need to demonstrate and quantify their value is becoming increasingly important and complex, and likely to become even more so in an era of austerity, when providers will need to do 'more for less'. This leads to the question, how can evidence be used to support or refute claims made by and on behalf of individual organisations, and a whole sector? It also leads to more fundamental questions about the values that inform VCS activity, their negotiation, and how VCSOs deal with value conflicts (Westall, 2009).

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One of the recurring themes in the literature is the size of organisation, in particular evidence that larger VCSOs have tended to be more successful in partnering with government agencies and securing funding to deliver services (Milligan and Fyfe, 2005), and that from the commissioners' perspective either large organisations or partnerships are often preferred (Munoz, 2009). In England, local GP commissioning and continued personalisation in social care and health seem to be moving towards a much more fragmented market where the 'commissioner' will be a local consortium, an individual or family. Ideas of collaborative advantage associated with size may need to be revisited, and the role of the small and micro provider reconsidered.

The weight of expectation about the contribution volunteering can make to social good has never been greater (Rochester *et al*., 2010). In this review, we alluded briefly to citizens engaging with VCS organisations as a means of fulfilling their civic responsibilities (DiDomencio *et al*., 2009; Fyfe and Milligan, 2003). There has been some commentary on volunteers' responses to more professionalised VCSOs that deliver public services (Milligan and Fyfe, 2005; Lie and Baines, 2007). Little has been said, however, about unpaid work in the context of social enterprises and co-operatives, and the adoption of entrepreneurial strategies by VCSOs.

Evers and Laville (2004) conceptualise VCSOs as occupying a tension field influenced by state policies and legislation, business practices and the needs and contributions of family. In the literature discussed in this review, the focus has been on the intersection of VCSOs with the state and to a significant but lesser extent with the market. The other part of this tension field is the informal and semi formal communities with the family at the core, whose contributions grow and decline with changes in the mixed economy of welfare (ibid.). In England in the early 1990s, for example, the reforms that transferred public provision for adult social care to the private and voluntary sectors also meant increased responsibilities and work for informal carers, usually, but not always, the family (Lyon and Glucksmann, 2008). In the era of the Big Society and reduced public services, there is an urgent need for more careful understanding of the contrasts and overlaps between VSC activity and forms of self-help and mutual aid in the community and family, as discussed by Williams (this volume).

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