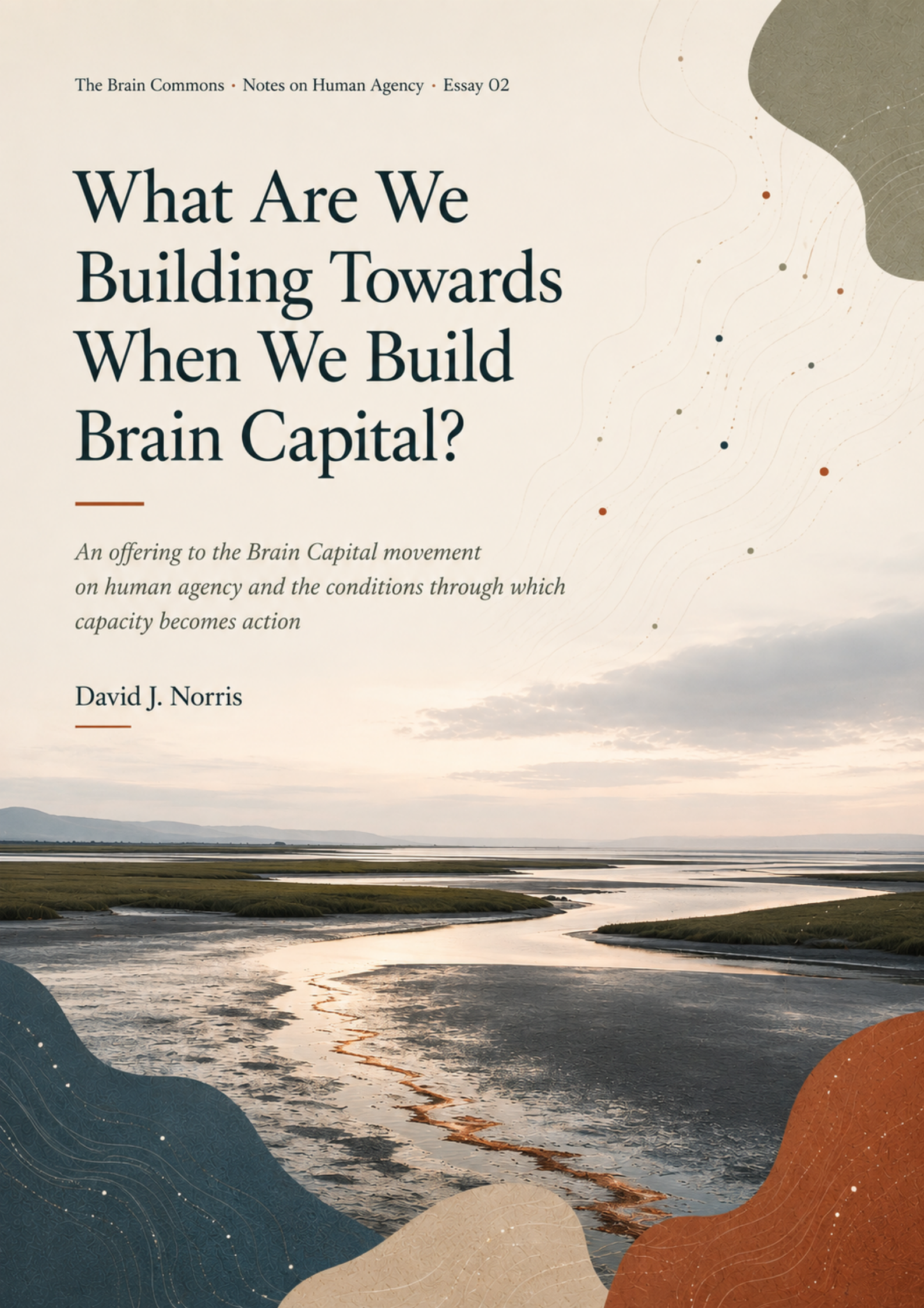


What Are We Building Towards When We Build Brain Capital?

*An offering to the Brain Capital movement
on human agency and the conditions through which
capacity becomes action*

David J. Norris



Executive summary

The convening of the Nature Medicine Commission on Brain Health for Economic Resilience creates a formative opportunity to consider how measured capacity becomes participation. This essay enters that work from clinical and service-design practice and offers one distinction for consideration: between the capacities a person or population holds and the practical conditions through which those capacities become action.

Its argument turns on a single line: agency is personally enacted, but never privately created. Measured capacity — Brain Health, Brain Skills — becomes participation only through enactment, and enactment depends on conditions that are shared rather than owned: time, authority, coordination, and the room to judge. These conditions form a commons, the Brain Commons, which can be tended or left to thin. The Brain Capital architecture already holds them centrally, in its Brain Enabler domain; agency is present in the direction of the model, but it is not yet distinguished analytically from capacity, enabling conditions and outcome. Health measurement already makes the neighbouring distinction. The ICF separates what a person can do from what they do in their own setting. The essay lays that precedent beside the model and lets the correspondence stand.

An apparatus carries the formal weight, meant to be read as reasoning made available for scrutiny rather than as ornament. It draws the enactment relation within a reciprocal model (Figure 1); holds the same conditions of enactment at population and institutional level in two companion tables — one naming what to track, the other the questions stewardship must keep asking — and sets out six propositions, each stated so it could be found false, each with its present evidential footing and the inquiry that would test it. The distinction itself is not new coinage: it is drawn from established work — the Global Brain Capital Index and Dashboard, the World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning, the capability approach, and commons governance — and is offered here to be examined, tested and, where it fails, revised. Its practical hinge is plain: measurement lets us see the foundation; stewardship is why we tend it; investment and stewardship are different instruments, doing different work.

The essay closes where it began. If agency is the meeting between a capacity and the conditions of its acting, then a society seeking to strengthen brain health cannot attend only to the capacities people hold; it must also tend the shared conditions through which those capacities become action, and keep a floor owed regardless of what those conditions return.

Where this begins

For much of modern economic measurement, the mind appeared indirectly: through labour, education, productivity or illness, but rarely as a set of capacities a society might deliberately protect and develop. The Brain Capital movement has begun to change that. It has carried health, cognition and skill into the rooms where budgets are set, and it has done so with seriousness and care.

I write from closer, in my daily work, to the single person than to the population. From that vantage point, one observation has become increasingly clear. A person may be regarded as the author of their actions. Judgement, choice and the pause before harm are lived through one body and one life, even when they are supported by others.

Yet the conditions that make those acts possible are not held inside the person. The time to think, the safety to speak, the room to decide and the pace that still allows care are created between us. They are more shared than our usual measures tend to acknowledge.

That is the whole of it, and I will spend the rest of this essay turning it slowly in the light. But I want the sentence to stand on its own first, before any evidence arrives to keep it company, because everything else follows from it:

Agency is personally enacted, but never privately created.

This essay offers a distinction for consideration while the measurement architecture is still forming. It asks whether the relationship between Brain Enablers, Brain Health and Brain Skills might also be read through the question of agency: under what conditions does capacity become action?

What agency is, and where it comes from

Let me stay with the ordinary lived case, because that is where this is clearest.

A person arrives at work able to do the thing they are there to do. The training is real, the health is sound, the skill is present and would show up on any measure we cared to take. And then the day closes around them. The decisions arrive faster than judgement can form. The room is arranged so that the quick answer is rewarded and the considered one is a cost. There is no time to check the work, no standing to question the tool or contest a decision once it is made — what I will come to call contestability — and no one with the authority to hold three parts of a problem together. By the afternoon the person has done less than they know how to do, not because the capacity left them, but because nothing around them let it through.

The person's underlying capacity need not have changed. What changed was the condition governing whether that capacity could be expressed. And this is the whole of what I am trying to name: the capacity was theirs, held privately, countable. What that capacity could become in practice was shaped by decisions made beyond the person alone.

We already know this in our own lives. A room can enlarge thought or constrict it. A company can make a person more capable or less so. Rest restores capacities that depletion obscures; trust permits judgement that scrutiny suppresses. Human ability does not appear independently of circumstance. When the necessary conditions are removed, the person remains, but access to their own capacities narrows. The phenomenon is ordinary. What is unusual is that we seldom measure it.

Agency is not adequately understood as a possession or a trait. It arises in the meeting between a person and the conditions in which action becomes possible. The pause, the choice, the refusal are enacted in one body and are no one else's to make; the conditions that support or constrain them are shared. Personally enacted; never privately created. Hold both together and the thing comes into view. Attend only to the person, and agency looks like character, and its failures look like personal failings. Attend only to the conditions, and the person dissolves into their circumstances, which is its own kind of disrespect. The fuller account sits in the meeting between capacity and conditions.

People are not passive in this. They resist, improvise, remake the conditions they are handed, and that re-making is itself an act of agency. And capacity is the other half of the meeting: bring nothing to it, and there is nothing for the conditions to release. Capacity and conditions are simply different things, and the outcome we care about lives in the relation between them. A frame centred on individual capacity can mistake a constraint in conditions for a shortage of capacity.

That last move is where the stakes stop being philosophical. When agency thins, it can look exactly like a skills gap. The person is underperforming; the measures of what they hold are the measures we have; so we invest in what we can see, train them further, and return them to the same conditions that foreclosed the capacity they already had. The training is not wrong; it is aimed at the wrong part of the problem, where the binding constraint lies in workflow, authority, coordination, accessibility or trust rather than in the person. A human-agency lens is, at its most practical, a way of telling a genuine need for more capacity apart from a difficulty in letting existing capacity become action.

Why these conditions are shared

If the conditions of agency were private, if each of us carried our own weather, we could stop here, and the task would be to help individuals arrange their own circumstances better. But that is not where the conditions live.

The time to think is set by how the work is designed, and the work is designed by someone other than the person doing it. The safety to speak is a property of a team, a culture, a hierarchy where no one is safe to speak alone. The pace that allows care is set by staffing and systems and the expectations pressing from above. Whether a decision can be questioned depends on who holds authority, and that is arranged before any particular person walks in. Even attention, which feels most intimately our own, is shaped by an information environment none of us made and none of us can individually escape. The conditions of agency are often held between people and within the systems they share. They are common.

And once you see that they are common, you notice they behave like other common things. They can be tended or neglected. They can be drawn down faster than they are replenished. They can be enclosed, captured for private return in ways that leave less for everyone else who depends on them. A workplace that draws heavily on people's attention in pursuit of short-term speed may deplete a capacity on which future judgement and participation depend. A system that shifts the labour of coordination onto the individual — that says, in effect, "make your own case, navigate your own way, hold your own parts together" — is shifting the burden of coordination from institutions towards the individual. These forms of depletion are not always visible in measures centred on individual stocks of health and skill. We measure the stock inside the person and call the surrounding conditions a background.

This is the shape I want to offer, and I will give it a plain name so we can hold it steady: the shared conditions through which human agency arises are what I have come to call a Brain Commons. Not a metaphor for society in general, and not a collective mind. It is more specific. A commons is a shared resource that no one owns outright, that many depend upon, and that is sustained through stewardship, because incentives organised primarily around private or short-term return may deplete conditions on which wider participation depends. And what makes these conditions a commons, rather than simply a list of the things that influence us, is that they carry duties as well as effects. A determinant names an influence on a life.

A commons names an interdependence, and the responsibility that follows from holding power over it — who designs these conditions, who bears the cost when they fragment, who is placed to notice their wearing away. The attention, trust, time, safety and standing that let people act are exactly this kind of resource. They are made between us, depended upon by all of us, and owed a kind of care that the language of investment may not fully capture.

I use the word owed deliberately, and it is the one place I would ask the frame to stretch. Investment expects a return, and it is the right word for adding to capacity; I would not take it away. But some of what the commons holds is not owed to us because it pays. The room for a person to keep their judgement, the conditions under which someone can still act as themselves under pressure — these are owed regardless of what they return, because they are the ground of a decent working life and not a lever on output. A measure attached to individuals will not capture this on its own — not because the measure is poor, but because the thing is not located in the individual to begin with. Conditions not represented in measures of return can become invisible within the decisions those measures organise. What is not counted is gradually presumed absent. A floor owed regardless of return must therefore be named on purpose, or it quietly disappears from view exactly where it is most depended upon.

What the Brain Capital architecture already holds

Conditions are already central to the Brain Capital architecture. Eyre and colleagues situate Brain Health and Brain Skills within questions of economic resilience, participation and public design (Eyre et al., 2021, 2026). Ayadi and the Euro-Mediterranean team have made that commitment operational through the Brain Capital Drivers and Enablers domains and the Global Brain Capital Dashboard (Ayadi et al., 2026). By retaining access to disaggregated indicators alongside composite indices, the Dashboard preserves analytical relationships that could be obscured by reliance on a single aggregate score.

The measurement distinguishes three domains: Brain Health, Brain Skills, and an enabling environment (Brain Capital Drivers in the Dashboard, Brain Enablers in the Index). The core Index combines Health and Skills; Enablers are held as a foundational pillar and folded into a broader composite. Brain Enablers gather structural, socioeconomic, educational, environmental and institutional conditions; Brain Health is drawn largely from recorded mental and neurological disease burden; Brain Skills from learning, innovation and wellbeing, represented through a small set of comparable proxies. The Dashboard keeps indicators visible so relationships can be examined, while the composites synthesise for policy — so the enabling domain is foundational, not decorative.

The architecture also reaches beyond the formation of capacity: it describes enabling conditions as supporting the development, protection and effective deployment of Brain Capital, and Brain Skills as usable capacities through which conditions and health become participation (Ayadi et al., 2026). Participation, adaptability and workplace design are already in its conceptual field. What remains less developed is an explicit account of the relation through which use becomes possible. Agency is present in the direction of the model, but it is not analytically distinguished from capacity, enabling conditions or outcome.

Naming that relation allows a further question to sit alongside those the framework already asks: which capacities a person or population holds, yes, but also the conditions under which those capacities become practically available. This need not begin with a new pillar or score. The Brain Enabler domain already describes the structural, social, economic and institutional conditions relevant to Brain Capital (Ayadi et al., 2026). Read as contributors, they explain how capacities are formed. Read through an agency lens, the same indicators may help examine why similar levels of Brain Health and Brain Skills are associated with different participation, influence and practical opportunity.

The opportunity is therefore interpretive and empirical. Existing indicators may help identify environments in which enactment is more or less likely, but they cannot by themselves determine whether capacity was present and could not be exercised. Distinguishing a shortage of capacity from a difficulty in exercising capacity already held would require linked measures of participation and practical opportunity, together with more direct attention to conditions such as time, decision authority, coordination, accessibility, trust, contestability and material security. The two can in principle be told apart: where capacity is genuinely short, adding capacity raises participation; where the binding constraint lies in the conditions, participation rises when the conditions change and not when capacity alone is added. That asymmetry is testable, and it is what keeps the distinction from explaining away every shortfall after the fact.

The existing measurement architecture need not be displaced. What changes first is the range of questions it can organise. Recent brain-health research strengthens the complementary half: social determinants and whole-body-exposome models show how deeply capacity is formed, protected and depleted within bodily, social and environmental conditions (Santamaría-García et al., 2023; Ibáñez et al., 2025), while work on women's brain health and mental wealth widens what counts as value (Castro-Aldrete et al., 2025; Occhipinti et al., 2023).

A distinction health measurement already makes

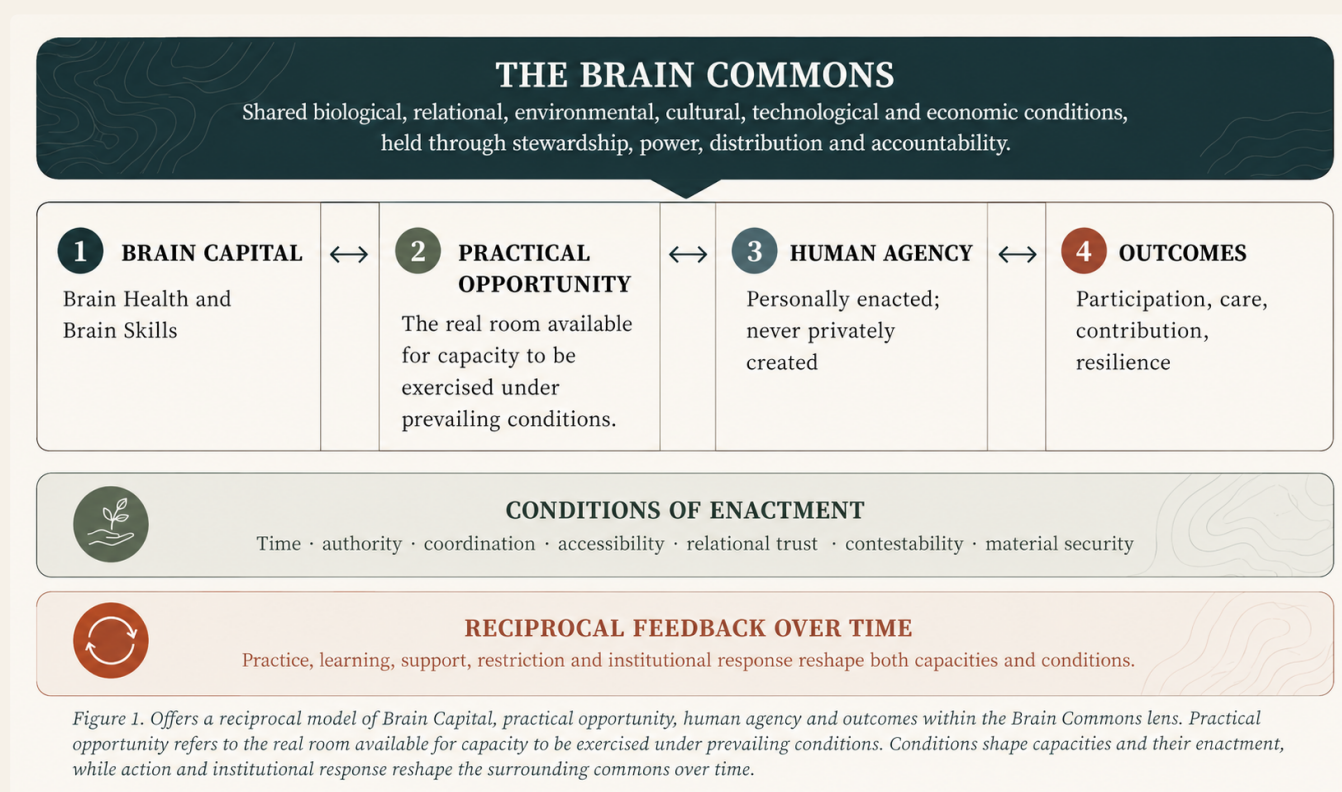
The distinction is new to this frame, but not to health measurement. The World Health Organization's International Classification of Functioning already draws it (World Health Organization, 2001). The ICF distinguishes capacity—what a person can do in a standardised environment—from performance—what they do in the environment of their life—and uses the relationship between them to examine the influence of environmental factors. Set beside the Brain Capital architecture, this brings the relation of interest into view. Brain Health and Brain Skills represent aspects of capacity; Brain Enablers represent aspects of the surrounding conditions. What remains less explicit is the interaction through which capacity becomes practically available in action.

The ICF does not name human agency, and performance is not equivalent to agency. It does, however, provide an established precedent for keeping capacity, environment and realised functioning analytically distinct. A measurement architecture can hold capacity held and capacity enacted together without collapsing one into the other, and has done so, ratified by WHO member states and in routine clinical use for two decades (World Health Assembly, 2001). The WHO Healthy Ageing framework rests on the same foundation, defining functional ability as intrinsic capacity, environment, and the interaction between them (World Health Organization, 2016, 2020).

This matters to a frame organised around investment. Where Brain Capital is linked to participation and resilience, the anticipated value of Brain Health and Brain Skills depends on whether those capacities can be exercised under real conditions. A frame built to grow capital has its own reason to attend to the conditions under which capital becomes action.

The relation, drawn out

Figure 1 draws the enactment relation within a reciprocal model. The shared conditions of the Brain Commons shape the capacities that develop, meet those capacities in the situations where judgement and action are required, and are themselves altered by what people and institutions do. The figure extends the dynamic pathways already present in the published architecture (Ayadi et al., 2026) and is offered as a companion interpretation for examination, rather than as a settled model.



If agency is the meeting between a capacity and the conditions of its acting, then it is not only a matter for reflection. It leaves marks, and the marks can be looked for. The central claim is provisional but testable: conditions of enactment materially shape whether and how measured capacity becomes participation.

Several propositions follow. Three can be put simply here; the apparatus sets out all six, with their evidence and lines of inquiry:

- Enabling conditions may moderate, rather than merely add to, the relationship between measured capacity and participation.
- Among populations with similar measured capability, differences in outcomes may be partly explained by the conditions in which capacity is exercised.
- Some technologies may improve immediate performance while reducing opportunities to practise and retain the judgement they support.

The apparatus also carries the other three — the burden the commons can impose, how agency is relationally supported, and what institutions owe regardless of return — each with its present evidential footing, so that all six can be tested and argued with, and added to the arguments already under way.

An offering at a formative moment

I enter this conversation from a different vantage point: more than two decades of clinical and service-design work concerned with the conditions under which people can continue to act, participate and exercise judgement. The distinction offered here has emerged from that work and is presented for examination alongside the economic, neuroscientific and policy perspectives already shaping Brain Capital.

I return, then, to the proposition with which I began:

Agency is personally enacted, but never privately created.

If this holds, a society seeking to strengthen brain health cannot attend only to the capacities people possess. It must also tend the conditions through which those capacities become available in practice: the time to think, the authority to act, the safety to speak, the support to participate and the material security from which meaningful choice becomes possible.

These conditions form part of a commons. They are created and maintained between people, shaped by institutions and technologies, and unevenly available across lives. Some warrant protection for reasons that exceed economic or social return: because they sustain the possibility of judgement, participation and a decent human life.

The apparatus sets out how this distinction might be examined, challenged and developed. The proposal is offered as a companion lens for the next phase of Brain Capital work. It keeps in view the relation between what people hold and what their circumstances make practically available, while providing a basis for empirical testing, institutional inquiry and stewardship.

A brain-positive economy will be judged not only by the capacities it builds, but by the practical room people retain to exercise them in shaping their own lives and the worlds they share.

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About the author

David J. Norris writes about human agency and the conditions that shape it. With more than twenty-five years' experience across acute, rehabilitation and community neurological care, he has designed health services and contributed to national strategic discussions on ageing and the future of work. He convenes the Brain Commons, a public inquiry into the shared conditions that sustain or deplete human agency, and what is owed to them regardless of return. He is writing *A Way In* and publishes *Notes on Human Agency*.

APPARATUS

The workings behind the essay

The workings behind the essay gather the enactment relation drawn out, the companion tables that shape it for population and local use, the propositions and their evidence, and the references. The essay carries the central offering; the apparatus makes its reasoning available for examination, testing and further development.

A. The enactment relation, drawn out

The Brain Commons names the shared, governed medium within which the whole relation sits. Read as a sequence it runs: shared conditions (the commons) $\rightleftharpoons$ capacity (Brain Health and Brain Skills) $\rightleftharpoons$ practical opportunity $\rightleftharpoons$ human agency $\rightleftharpoons$ outcomes (participation, care, contribution, resilience) — with reciprocal feedback across the whole, and distribution running throughout.

Two operational companions follow from the model. The first names what to look at; the second names how to keep looking. Table 1 takes four families of condition — time and authority to act, coordination and accessibility, durability of capability under repeated use, and stewardship — and asks the same question of each at population/measurement level and institutional/local level.

Table 1. Companion domains and operational focus.

Condition	Population / measurement	Institutional / local
Time, authority and coordination	Indicators of decision latitude, working time and administrative burden	Whether this team has the time, standing and coordination to act on what it knows
Distribution of practical opportunity	Disaggregated analysis of where capacity becomes participation and where burden concentrates	Whether the room to act is evenly available, or falls to those least able to carry it
Capability over time	Longitudinal measures of whether practised capability is sustained or depleted	Whether this setting sustains judgement or erodes it through overload
Stewardship and responsibility	Governance indicators aligning authority with the power to alter conditions	Who here can change the conditions, and who is answerable for them

Table 2 is not a second measurement grid; it is what keeps Table 1 honest — a relation to sustain, not a set of functions to install. The questions do not resolve; that is what makes them stewardship rather than audit.

Table 2. Stewardship as questions kept open.

Question kept open	Population / measurement	Institutional / local
Is there still room for considered judgement?	Are decision latitude and time-to-judge measured, or presumed?	Does this role still allow a considered answer, or only a fast one?
Where is the burden of coordination falling?	Is coordination and administrative burden measured, and its distribution tracked?	Who carries the coordination cost — the person, or the design?
Who holds the power to alter these conditions?	Is responsibility aligned with design authority in the data?	Can the person held accountable actually change the condition?
What is owed here regardless of return?	Is a normative floor owed regardless of measurable return?	What will this institution keep even when it does not pay?

B. Propositions offered for testing and further research

Table 3 turns the enactment relation into claims that can be tested. Each proposition is stated so it could be found false: a testable expectation, not a finding. The first four are empirical, the fifth concerns how agency is enacted, and the last is a normative claim about stewardship.

Table 3. Propositions, evidential position and indicative inquiry.

Proposition	Evidential position	Indicative inquiry
1. Shared conditions of enactment moderate whether measured capacity becomes participation; they do not merely add to it.	Moderate, indirect support (Bahadurzada et al., 2024; Karasek, 1979; Taouk et al., 2024). Untested within Brain Capital measures.	Multilevel models testing whether enabler indicators moderate capacity–participation relations.
2. Shifting administrative burden onto individuals may reduce access and participation, more so where resources are constrained.	Substantial support for burden and take-up; moderate for unequal effects (Christensen et al., 2020; Halling & Bækgaard, 2024; Nagtegaal et al., 2026).	Combine burden, uptake and simplification studies with distributional analysis.
3. Practical agency is unevenly distributed even where formal opportunity is equal.	Substantial domain-specific support (Christensen et al., 2020; Mani et al., 2013).	Disaggregated equity analysis of formally similar opportunities.
4. Some AI assistance may improve immediate performance while reducing practice of independent judgement.	Emerging, mixed evidence (Bastani et al., 2025; Dell'Acqua et al., 2026; Noy & Zhang, 2023).	Longitudinal designs on AI-assisted vs. retained judgement.
5. Agency is personally enacted, relationally supported and collectively organised; supported decision-making may extend participation.	Strong conceptual/legal foundation (Bandura, 2001; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Mackenzie & Stoljar, 2000).	Mixed-method study of supported decision-making.
6. Institutions that shape enactment conditions hold a duty to steward them (normative claim).	Normative synthesis (Ostrom, 1990; Robeyns, 2005; Sen, 1999).	Feasibility of agency-impact assessment and burden reduction.

The final proposition is normative rather than empirical. It draws on disability rights, occupational justice, relational autonomy and sociotechnical governance; the Brain Commons offers a language for holding these obligations together, not independent proof of them. Its practical implications are the questions Table 2 keeps open: whether institutions preserve room for judgement, reduce avoidable burden, and align responsibility with the power to shape conditions.

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