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**Using Social Practice Theory to frame the contribution of social marketing in the multidisciplinary future of ‘behaviour change’**

*Background*

The 2011 House of Lords *Behaviour Change* report[[1]](#endnote-1) concluded that ‘behaviour change’ must become multi-disciplinary, criticising the government’s myopic commitment to ‘nudge’. It emphasised that any single-approach strategy will fail to tackle the scale of problems like incommunicable disease. Given this and other calls for multi-disciplinarity[[2]](#endnote-2),[[3]](#endnote-3), the lack of commentary around the place of social marketing (sm) within a multi-disciplinary framework is of concern. Rather, publications tend to focus on effectiveness*e.g.*[[4]](#endnote-4); definition*e.g.*[[5]](#endnote-5)*,[[6]](#endnote-6)*; innovation of sm approaches*e.g*.[[7]](#endnote-7) and practitioner guidance*e.g.*[[8]](#endnote-8). In response, this paper introduces Social Practice Theory (SPT) as a framework for scrutinizing sm’s contribution to multi-disciplinary ‘behaviour change’.

*Social Practice Theory*

Practice theories, which have recently regained prominence[[9]](#endnote-9), are a type of cultural theory which consider humans as agents who act within the structures of practice. Agents ‘carry’ practices, which they ‘perform’. Thus understanding society using SPT focuses not on the experience of the individual actor as the subject of research or intervention, but on the practice itself. Practices are deconstructed into “several elements, interconnected to one another”[[10]](#endnote-10), and although various configurations have been proposed[[11]](#endnote-11),[[12]](#endnote-12) ,[[13]](#endnote-13),[[14]](#endnote-14) the simplified model devised by Shove *et al[[15]](#endnote-15),* (figure 1), has the most potential when considering ‘behaviour change’ research and intervention/policy response[[16]](#endnote-16).

**Figure 1: The Social Practice Framework**



**Materials:** including things, technologies, tangible physical entities, and the stuff of which objects are made

**Competences:** which encompass skill, know-how and technique; and

**Meanings:** symbolic meanings, ideas and aspirations (Shove et al, 2012, p.14)

The practice of cycling is used to illustrate. Required ‘competences’ include the skills necessary for riding a bicycle, navigation and time-management. ‘Materials’ include a bicycle, the road network, cycle paths and storage. ‘Meanings’, referring to understandings shared by the group about the practice, include a sense that cycling is not an appropriate method of commuting for ‘important’ people or that cyclists are intimidating[[17]](#endnote-17). The practice comprises a combination of these elements, and changes to any element will create evolution of the practice. Such deconstruction can enable researchers to achieve a holistic understanding of a practice and also potentially, albeit in an untested way[[18]](#endnote-18), examine the ways it might be changed to benefit society. (The approach also holds for social marketers the appeal of avoiding criticisms of political individualism as identified in recent commentary[[19]](#endnote-19), although examining this potential is not the purpose of this paper).

*The role of social marketing in multi-disciplinary ‘behaviour change’*

The SPT framework can help identify how sm, in combination with other approaches, might be used to change the various elements of ‘problem’ practices. SPT analysis of the low numbers of British utility[[20]](#endnote-20) cyclists, for example, provides a range of footholds for change, requiring multi-disciplinary solutions extending beyond sm’s core competences. Sm would be suitable for changing the ‘meanings’ around cycling by using techniques such as branding and integrated marketing communications combined with insights into consumer behaviour to change perceptions and attitudes. (A comparable example of such an approach is the ‘Truth’ campaign, which changed teen perceptions towards smoking[[21]](#endnote-21)). Analysis using SPT may also illuminate an upstream role for sm to work with local policy makers to establish policies for educational approaches such as adult cycle training. However, other approaches would be required to change ‘materials’; such as urban planners for designing cycle paths, law enforcers for restricting driving speeds and engineers for providing ‘desire-line’ cycle bridges and cycle parking.

*Conclusion*

This paper does not argue that sm should be reduced to social advertising, and the panoply of marketing-based approaches used by social marketers is wholly acknowledged. Rather, it acknowledges that stand-alone sm interventions have enjoyed limited effectiveness on population-level problems (see[[22]](#endnote-22)), and thus it is posited that social marketers should routinely consider their contribution to ‘behaviour change’ as part of a multi-disciplinary approach. The 3-element SPT model may provide a useful framework for analysing the potential contribution of sm by assessing which element(s) would be influenced, and for identifying essential collaborators to achieve the multi-disciplinarity that has been called for.

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