Introducing Social Practices Theory to the Social Marketing Agenda

Abstract
This paper introduces Social Practices Theory (SPT) as a way of facilitating necessary evolution in social marketing. SPT conceptualises individuals as carriers of practices comprising materials, competences and meanings (Shove *et al.,* 2012). The theory enables problem 'practice' to be analysed in the abstract through the detailed consideration of the links between elements. Thus social marketers can use SPT to frame their contribution to the strategic planning of interdisciplinary solutions, which has been identified as the future of effective behaviour change (House of Lords, 2011). Secondly, SPT removes the individual from the focus of enquiry, distancing social marketing from its criticisms of myopic individualism. Both disciplinary evolutions are required for social marketing to survive.

Introduction
This paper considers two problems faced by social marketing; both of which, it is argued, could potentially be tackled through the adoption of Social Practices Theory as part of the panoply of theoretical frameworks adopted by our field in our analysis of socially problematic behaviours. The first problem is social marketing's limited readiness to tackle social change in a truly interdisciplinary way. The second is the increasingly vocal criticism of our field as being 'myopic' in its individualistic focus (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013).

The House of Lords *Behaviour Change* report criticised the government's myopic commitment to 'nudge', which has not produced the promised results and concluded that 'behaviour change' must take an interdisciplinary approach, *i.e.* where a range of disciplines work together to tackle complex problems from a multitude of theoretical starting points, taking their combined goal and not their starting position as the central driving force. The report emphasised that any strategy based solely on one approach is unlikely to enjoy successes required to match the scale of problems like incommunicable disease. Given this and other calls (West, 2006) for an evolution in 'behaviour change' towards inter- (or ideally trans-) disciplinarity (Robertson *et al.,* 2003), it is of concern how little social marketing commentary exists about our field's place within a framework of interdisciplinarity. Publications tend to focus on the effectiveness of various case studies (*e.g.* Friedman *et al,* 2014); commentary around definition and scope (*e.g.* Lefebvre, 2011; Macaulay, 2014); innovative approaches *within* social marketing (*e.g.* Bernhardt *et al,* 2012) and guidance for practitioners (*e.g.* Lynes *et al.,* 2014). This paper will introduce SPT as a framework for exploring social marketing's contribution to interdisciplinary behaviour change.

In addition, Social Practices Theory offers an innovative way of conceptualising 'behaviour' which would enable social marketers to avoid the criticisms that it takes a largely individualist approach (Szmigen *et al.,* 2009); the result of the field's normative use of psychological models to understand social problems (Truong, 2014). SPT provides a framework for analysing a practice in the abstract, removing the individual from their otherwise central position in social marketers' thinking. This paper considers SPT as a welcome addition to our theoretical stable and encourages the political and ideological evolution its use would trigger.
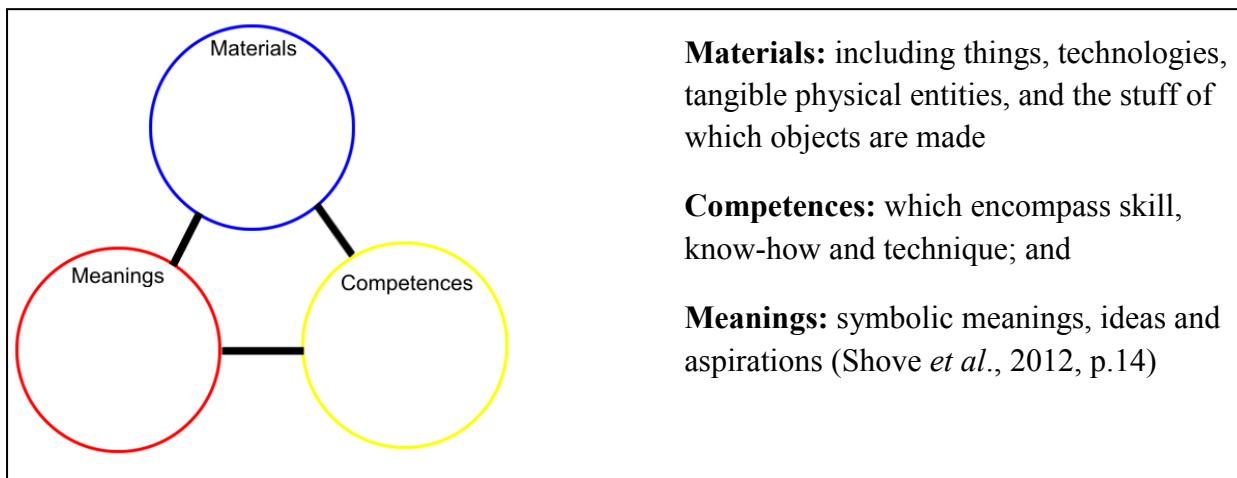
Social Practice Theory (SPT)
Practice theories are a long-standing stream of sociological scholarship and closer to home have been widely adopted by Consumer Culture theorists to explore the practice of consumption (Warde, 2005; Halkier and Jensen, 2011). However their recent rise in

prominence (thanks to Reckwitz, 2002) has seen their adoption by scholars in the sustainability field interested in understanding and influencing environmentally damaging 'behaviours' (Chatterton and Anderson, 2011; Shove, 2010).

Practices are defined as "a routinized way in which bodies are moved, objects are handled, subjects are treated, things are described and the world is understood" (Reckwitz, 2002, p.250). Practices are therefore any activity performed in a routinized, culturally normative way, such as showering (Hand *et al.* 2005) or car driving (Rettie *et al.*, 2012). Practice theories are a type of cultural theory, which considers humans as agents who behave within the structures of various practices. The theory treats practice itself – an abstract and objectively existing phenomenon - as the focus of analysis. Agents are treated as the carriers or performers of practices; the crossing points of various practices which overlap and interlink, but the focus of analysis is the practice not the performer. Analysing the carrier's talk and behaviour is simply a useful access point for exploring the structure and evolution of practices (Martens, 2012).

As such, practices are deconstructed into several interconnected elements (Reckwitz, 2002), and although various configurations of these elements have been proposed, the simplified model devised by Shove *et al.* (2012), illustrated in Figure 1, is viewed as having considerable potential for 'behaviour change' research and suitable intervention/policy response (Chatterton and Anderson, 2011). It is therefore introduced here.

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)

Social Practice Theory applied

The three-element model above can be used as a framework for analysing problematic practices which social marketers wish to tackle. The practice of cycling is used as an example; based on the close SPT analysis conducted by the author of a UK-wide hybrid research study designed to explore the 'image of cycling' (Spotswood *et al.,* unpublished). The problem of the low levels of utility cycling (*i.e.* that performed in place of car use for short, regular trips) is a significant social problem in the UK. Overuse of the car as a travel mode has led to increased environmental damage and serious health problems associated with lack of exercise (Gärling and Schuitema, 2007).

Analysis identified that the competences required to perform the practice of utility cycling might include the skills necessary for cycling, but also navigation, time-management, personal organisation, security and personal safety management and fitness. 'Materials' required included the bicycle itself but also the road network, route network and storage

facilities at home and work. 'Meanings' refers to understandings shared by the group about the significance of the practice. Data suggested that meanings associated with cycling in the UK are that it is 'embarrassing' (particularly for women), dangerous, only for dedicated people, only for those who are 'super fit' and not an appropriate method of commuting for 'important' or career-driven people in positions of leadership or management.

Deconstructing a practice into its constituent elements as illustrated in this brief example (explored in depth in Spotswood *et al.*, unpublished) enables social marketers to achieve a holistic understanding of a practice but also to critically analyse the links between elements and between closely overlapping bundles of other practices, (*e.g.* car driving). Through this approach it is possible to explore how practices evolve over time. For example, the increase in car traffic will have impacted the meanings of cycling as 'unsafe', and the improvement in bicycle technology will reduce the 'fitness' competences required as the competences become 'hybridized' into new bicycle design (Shove *et al*, 2012). However, this approach also provides a useful framework for those interested in *changing* practice and not just those interested in its evolution. By closely interrogating the links between elements, it may be possible to use SPT as a mechanism for managing the proactive changing of problem practices by planning to influence the links between each constituent element.

Implications for social marketing

This application of SPT to social marketing problems makes two potentially significant contributions. The first is its potential to encourage social marketers to engage with other approaches in an interdisciplinary way. Social marketers have always been adept at using a range of techniques in their work, but true interdisciplinarity (such as that to which scholars of the development of research innovation and scientific thought refer (Nash *et al.,* 2003; Rosenfield, 1992), take their starting point as the goal that is sought through research or intervention. Social marketers working with other fields to develop social marketing takes 'delivering effective social marketing' as it's starting point and not the goal of behaviour change for social good. Thus, starting with an analysis of the problem practice – using SPT - as a mechanism for considering what actions by which disciplines (or agencies) are required for change to occur, is a distinct approach.

For example, an SPT analysis of a 'problem', such as the low numbers of utility cyclists in the UK, can provide a range of footholds for influencing the practice from across the elements, which require a range of solutions most likely extending well beyond social marketing's core competences. Undoubtedly, by using marketing techniques such as branding and integrated marketing communications, combined with in depth knowledge of consumer behaviour, social marketing could be a highly effective means of changing the meanings a group associates with the practice. An example of such effectiveness in another area is the 'Truth' campaign, which changed teen perceptions towards smoking (Farrelly *et al.*, 2002). However, social marketers lack core competences in urban planning or engineering, so designing and implementing new road layouts, cycle paths and 'desire lines' for cyclists (*e.g.* bridges and cut-throughs in semi-permeable developments) would best be tackled by those with appropriate expertise. What is crucial here is that if the SPT analysis of the problem practice has identified that such material elements might be pivotal to changing the practice then such measures are included in the final interdisciplinary solution, and not side-lined because they fall outside social marketing's remit.

Although social marketing's contribution has been increasingly viewed as being fixated on downstream behaviours (Fry, 2014; Spotswood and Tapp*,* 2013; Truong, 2014), social marketing has undoubtedly made efforts to broaden its scope and particularly to engage with

upstream mechanisms such as policy, which undoubtedly underpin many of the social problems we seek to tackle (Dibb, 2014). However, there is still considerable work to be done to strengthening our contribution to 'whole system' approaches to behaviour change. Indeed, reviewing recent social marketing academic publications shows that our field's focus tends to be on the effectiveness of various case studies, commentary around field definition and scope, innovative approaches *within* social marketing guidance for practitioners. There is only limited consideration of social marketing's contribution to behaviour change in a broader sense (Truong, 2014). Thus SPT provides an exciting opportunity to tackle social problems from a different starting point. Shove *et al*'s three-element model provides a framework for dispassionately analysing the range of approaches required for the practice to change and then provides a mechanism for scrutinising the potential contribution of social marketing and other approaches. Such systematic interdisciplinarity has been strongly called for as the only effective approach to complex social problems such as those social marketers face (House of Lords, 2011). Indeed, the reduced population-level effectiveness of social marketing interventions is well-known (see Stead *et al*, 2007), and therefore it is time we join forces with other disciplines to become more effective than the sum of our parts.

These potential benefits of SPT notwithstanding, it is important to emphasise that the theory has yet to be adapted and tested as a model or management tool for practice change intervention development. The theory's heritage lies in sociology and in the understanding of changes that occur within practices over time, particularly with the impact of technological innovation (such the impact of hot electric showers on the 'new' meaning of cleanliness and our routinized showering practice in the 20th Century (Hand *et al.,* 2005). Indeed, research into experiences of working in an interdisciplinary way in the behaviour change field has concluded that significant barriers may obstruct effective cross-organisational communication, interdisciplinary team management and goal management (see http://tinyurl.com/kffdmpc). Nonetheless, the application of SPT in practice is the subject of considerable debate amongst scholars of sustainability (see www.sprg.ac.uk), and therefore warrants similar consideration by social marketers.

However, there is a second potential benefit which social marketing might gain from adopting SPT; that it offers a theoretical lens for understanding 'behaviour' that will help us avoid the increasingly vocal criticisms that our approach is individualistic and therefore is premised on the assumption individuals are responsible for their own health inequality (Szmigin *et al*. 2011). Similar criticism has been harboured in the environmental arena with the likes of Hargreaves (2011, p.80) questioning why pro-environmental behaviour change interventions so often presume that social change lies "within the capacity of individual agents to bring about alone". This criticism of the neo-liberal paradigm, with which social marketing is closely associated (Raftopoulou and Hogg, 2010), is founded on the field's reliance on psychological theory for the framing of 'behaviour', and practitioners' closely linked reliance on downstream marketing approaches (Spotswood and Tapp, 2013).

Using SPT would enable social marketers to distance themselves from an ideology which purports that there is a freely acting independent consumer who, with the right persuasion and support, can self-regulate sufficiently to change ingrained behaviours (Jacobsen and Dulsrud, 2007). Rather, given SPT's focus on the practice and not the individual carriers of the practice, the alternative associated ideology is that attitudes and beliefs towards socially significant practices will be "the result of political decisions, culture, and tradition as well as economic factors" (Fahlquist, 2008, p.116). By putting cultural frameworks at the centre of both research and intervention, social marketers using SPT would be able to take the position

that "individuals do not exist in a social vacuum and… in some cases the surrounding context overrides all… cognitive factors" (Hargreaves, 2011, p.81).

SPT would facilitate this paradigm shift through its focus on the constituent elements of the practice as the unit of analysis and not the individual. From a practices perspective, the individual is largely irrelevant to the understanding of 'behaviour' because their routinized performances are processed cognitively at only the most superficial level. For example, people tend not to carefully evaluate the phenomenon of showering daily; it is normative and largely automatic. Analysis of showering would consider the existence of electric showers in every household and even workplaces and by the aggressive marketing of 'daily fresh shower gels' which mean that 'being clean' has taken on a different cultural meaning to previous generations (Hand *et al*. 2005). Thus the starting point for a practice-based understanding is the links between constituent elements, rather than presupposing that the individual is responsible or actively involved in decisions to shower daily. A practice-based analysis of social problems such as low utility cycling, smoking or unhealthy eating would similarly start with an analysis of the practice's constituent elements rather than leaping to downstream activities which assume that the individual is responsible, or indeed powerful, to the point that they can shift practices which they are unlikely to engage with at a cognitive level.

Conclusion

The argument here is not that downstream marketing activities for the purposes of behaviour change have no place. Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that the dramatic contraction in the practice of smoking after the British smoking ban could not have been achieved without the contribution of 'soft' individual-level measures (Hastings and Saren, 2003). Rather, it is posited that social marketing's reputation as overly individualistic has been problematic to the perception of our 'brand', particularly at a policy level, and that Social Practices Theory offers an opportunity to embrace a more politically radical paradigm. In addition, social marketing needs to routinely consider our strategic contribution to interdisciplinary behaviour change solutions, and SPT also has the potential to facilitate our evolution here. Both of these developments are essential if we are to secure our place at the future behaviour change table.

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