SOME REASONABLE BUT UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTIONS ABOUT SOCIAL MARKETING

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Introduction

The social marketing discipline is maturing fast. There are a growing number of academic courses, conferences, seminars, associations and networks in social marketing around the world; an increasing number of citations in academic journals; frequent use of the term in UK Government policy papers; and a growth in for-profit and not-for-profit organisations offering social marketing services. The UK has gone one step further and published government sanctioned national occupational standards for social marketing.

This enthusiasm and growth is to be welcomed. However, two aspects of social marketing's current stage of development are concerning. Firstly, there tends to be an emphasis on narrow and restrictive definitions in the commentary, and a preoccupation in internet discussion fora with retrofitting innovative practice into these rigid conceptual frameworks. For example, a formal debate held at the world social marketing conference in April 2011 proposed a definition of Social Marketing that concentrates on economic exchange and the 4Ps. This view was supported by a majority, albeit a small one, of those people who voted at the debate[i]. This narrow view of social marketing ignores the on-going diversity of thinking about the nature and purpose of social marketing that is evident in the lively debate between many practitioners and academics about what constitutes authentic practice.

Secondly, there seems to be a reluctance to acknowledge or address ambiguities and tensions within the discipline and to debate the ethical, ideological, practical and academic consequences of these tensions. This phenomenon is not unique to social marketing and has been termed a 'retreat from theory' (French, 2000). It has, however, profound implications for the future development of social marketing as a field of study and application.

In this paper, we explore these ambiguities and tensions, and propose that social marketing, like many other fields of study, is a dynamic and an essentially contested area that by its nature will continue to change. Rather than being concerned about this situation, we believe it is a positive marker of a developing and reflexive field of study and application that bodes well for the future. Indeed, opening the field up to critical debate is an essential and on-going task for all involved in social marketing.

More specifically, in this paper the authors re-examine some of social marketing's core concepts:
- The nature of social marketing's orientation (to examine the balance between the 'wants' of individuals with the 'needs' of society)
- The nature of exchange, specifically to expand the view of exchange to include situations where the citizen may not be aware of the exchange or have engaged with it fully
- The inclusion of techniques not explicitly considered part of the panoply of marketing techniques available to social marketing (like 'nudge' style techniques, regulation, and behavioural conditioning)
- The goals of social marketing, particularly the view that behaviour change may not necessarily always be the definitive goal of social marketing programmes

- The ethical and political dimensions of social marketing
- The definition of social marketing, suggesting an open, ongoing approach to debate that enables a more inclusive process for conceptualising social marketing in a dynamic way over time.

To help us address these points, we have posed a series of key questions and, without making the claim to have provided definitive answers, we have offered our own informed opinions and positioned these as what we hope are interesting debating points for future discourse.

1. Should social marketers use implicit (rather than explicit) behaviour change techniques?

It has been suggested that new home heating systems should be set by default to no more than 18 degrees C to reduce home fuel consumption – without offering a *conscious choice* (Shove, 2003). This is interesting because many "text-book" definitions of social marketing would imply the need for a fully aware exchange (Smith, 2006; Smith, 2000; Kotler *et al*, 2002), and yet many if not the majority of effective techniques used to change behaviour do not. So, are we missing a trick by an over-focus on *conscious* cognitive exchange?

This debate could be framed as a question about value exchange. Situations often arise where the desired behaviour is *not* appealing to the customer, no matter how it is presented, and thus no exchange of value can be said to occur. A recent study of binge drinkers, for example, found that binge drinking met their needs better than any alternative (Spotswood and Tapp, 2010). Social marketers have used a variety of approaches to get round this. The social marketer might, in this instance, make an alternative offer to achieve the desired behaviour, such as offering football to binge drinkers to get them 'off the streets' and allay their boredom-fuelled drinking sessions. Such diversionary interventions can be said to make a valued offer which is cognisant to the customer, even though the offer can perhaps not be considered 'direct'.

Sometimes, however, the offer could be made without the cognisance of the customer at all. For example, the removal of a vending machine from outside a lecture theatre to reduce student impulse purchases of fatty and sugary foods. A student in this example has no knowledge of the offer having been made because it was not communicated to them. This approach, which has been called 'choice editing' (Lang and Caraher, 2009), may be very effective, may achieve positive return on investment (ROI) and may, critically, be less 'painful' to the student than an approach requiring cognition, engagement and a changing of their mind. However, it is difficult to argue that there is an exchange of value here. The student has changed their behaviour because environmental cues have 'nudged' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2001) them into it, and not by accepting something of perceived, cognitive value to them.

The issue for debate here is the extent to which social marketers could justify using techniques which nudge people towards non-conscious choosing if the techniques make behaviour change easy and less painful, and if the long term result is of implicit value to the citizen through, for example, better health. We may even claim that these nudge approaches are customer-oriented if there are automatic unhealthy behaviours which are

unwanted, such as an overriding urge to eat chocolate to excess, which new environmental cues can help change. Our corporately shaped existing environment, after all, all too often nudges us into making choices that we come to regret (Jebb, 2007).

An alternative ethical approach is to accept that the behaviour change ends (acknowledged as societally 'good') justify the marketing means (which could be unpopular to the individual in the short term or seen as manipulative). An example of a nudge technique rooted in marketing is a device which changes organ donation from opt-in to opt-out, acknowledged as enabling a huge increase in the number of organ donations (e.g. BBC, 2011). This approach is ethically problematic to some, however, and hence may have failed the test that the marketing for social good itself should be justifiable in relation to well established ethical principles of professional conduct. In the light of the recent rise of 'libertarian paternalism', and its attendant rise in techniques based on 'hidden persuasion', our call is for a public, inclusive debate within the discipline of social marketing with a view to generating an explicit ethical template to guide decisions about under which conditions and in what circumstances such tactics might be justifiable.

2.   Why don't social marketers get hugged at parties? Why are we not appreciated?

It is perhaps a surprise, given its importance, that Question (1) is rarely debated in the field. Perhaps social marketers sometimes feel more than a little concerned that by raising the spectre of hidden persuasion or influence, they will lay themselves open to attack by critics working in supposedly more 'ethically driven' disciplines like community development or public health. The word 'marketing', after all, is often associated with manipulation (Brown, 2003; Smith and Schneider, 2009). Perhaps, as such, the authors detect more than a little collective defensiveness embedded in the profession of social marketing, with an internal rhetoric of the discipline creating a narrative that social marketing 'puts the customer first, is 'concerned with doing good', facilitates 'open and fully informed exchange based offers that people are free to reject', and so on, even if these approaches do not achieve the best long term results. Also, while these are potentially accurate statements in their own right, they are nevertheless incomplete descriptions of the discipline's scope.

This defensiveness, or to be more accurate the resulting lack of debate about these issues, has been exposed by the rise of *Nudge* and its ilk (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008; Ariely, 2008). Social marketing, by sticking to the 'party line' of techniques based on explicit exchanges and a marketing offer fitted into a 4Ps framework, has ironically failed to promote some of its biggest strengths; i.e. that it is an eclectic discipline that rests upon a multi-theoretical platform, pragmatically choosing techniques that appear promising for a particular context, but with appropriate ethical checks and balances. We have yet to make explicit a great deal of the valuable social (and commercial) marketing practice; for example, on how services are designed, on how relationship building can smooth the path to behaviour change (e.g. Hastings, 2003), and on how indirect (non-coercive) legislation can shape our environments to encourage behaviour change that operates in the arena of 'social practice', below the 'cognitive radar' (Reckwitz, 2002).

Arguably, another part of the 'value add' of social marketers that we have noticed stems from the pragmatic stance of marketing: if evidence shows it works, let's consider using it.

This is the 'savviness' that comes with the territory. At the extreme, 'morally upstanding' approaches from fellow professionals in other fields make themselves feel good, but may struggle to achieve targets. Maybe this savvy pragmatism is unappreciated, and this is why marketers don't get hugged at parties! There is a serious point here: the (uncomfortable) thought arises that part of the unique added value of marketers is the use of techniques that persuade sometimes by taking advantage of aspects of the human condition.

Writers such as Stephen Brown discuss this in comedic detail with respect to commercial marketing (Brown, 2003). Cialdini's work on persuasion is similarly uncomfortable but thought-provoking, informative and insightful (Cialdini, 1993). Our own view is that too many of Cialdini's examples (foot in the door techniques, charities misusing social norms or reciprocity techniques to trick people) seem to fall the wrong side of ethical acceptability. Here, persuasion gets uncomfortably close to manipulation. However, many of these activities work well in 'softer' forms and are used by social marketers in, for example, environmental sectors (McKenzie-Mohr and Smith, 1999).

If we want to get more hugs at parties we need to be able to explain explicitly how we go about reaching a balance between our power to change people and the legitimate demands of ethical transparency. If social marketing is going to progress, it needs to go through a process of accepting the power that it can bring to bear and the responsibility this implies, rejoicing in its diversity of approach and being able to clearly set out how ethical issues are processed when selecting interventions (e.g. Hastings *et al*, 2004).

3.   Can social marketing ever include *involuntary* behaviour change?

Social marketing literature and texts emphasise both customer-centricity and also voluntary behaviour change. However, in a situation where customer consultation and research indicate that direct regulation is the most appropriate approach, or that a nudge or 'shove' (French, 2011) that bypasses critical reflection is the best intervention, many social marketers would contend that despite evidence of potential benefit, these forms of intervention fall outside the social marketing ideology.

For example, consumer research has revealed that people want an easy fix with regards to their oral health, so automatic water fluoridation has been implemented in many areas (e.g. Hastings *et al*, 1998). Similarly, smokefree legislation gives smokers a 'shove' towards quitting and a legitimate, face-saving reason to quit. A traditional social marketer may argue that there is no exchange here. However, a counter argument could be that legal enforcement can be described as a 'negative exchange': smoking legislation punishes people who want to smoke at work. Indeed, fluoridation, and smoke free legislation are undoubtedly effective *and* arguably customer-oriented.

Part of the justification for this kind of upstream approach is that social marketers start with 'social' rather than 'marketing' and what flows from this conception of social marketing is that 'social' is the superordinate concept concerned with 'what and why', and marketing is the 'how', i.e. the subordinate concept. A further justification for non-voluntary interventions is that in political terms these forms of intervention need the general consent of the population if they are to work effectively. In this sense these forms of intervention

are voluntary in the sense that collectively people have decided to give up a personal freedom for the good of society.

Therefore it follows that the key role of social marketing could be to generate the social conditions that allow for regulation to be introduced in the first place. For example, it is argued that had the UK bans on smoking in public places been proposed 20 years ago, they would not have been passed; however, extensive consumer research and public engagement, focusing on the protection of workers and public health benefits, ensured that legislation passed (in Scotland in 2006, England in 2007) not only without any serious opposition but with strong public support (e.g. Hyland *et al,* 2009). Social marketing clearly has a role to work on the interface of voluntary and regulated behaviour, with a key part of the marketing brief to work on generating social acceptance of the regulation.

4. Is behaviour change really the bottom line?

Here, we ask whether social marketers should widen their remit to *re-introduce* a focus on changing ideas, attitudes or language as well as behaviour. Andreasen's original call for social marketing to focus on behaviour change successfully headed off a criticism that social marketing lacked focus (Andreasen, 1994). However, whatever its image now, social marketing is not usually charged with this any longer. Given what we now know about the importance of ideas or 'worldview' in society, and how these shape attitudes which in turn often influence behaviours (e.g. Reckwitz, 2002; Shove, 2003; Bourdieu, 1977), it seems sensible to re-visit this debate.

For example, could a social marketing goal be to encourage a more open conversation about death at the end of life, or to encourage people in a community to feel better about where they live, or to change attitudes towards racism or ageism? Social marketing purists might say that these are not appropriate social marketing goals because no behaviour change is specified, but we recall that early social marketing focused on the promotion of new ideas (Fine, 1981; Wiebe, 1951-2). Often, changing the language people use or the way people feel may be the optimum achievement within the tight constraints of an inadequately-funded or temporally-constrained intervention. Idea changes and changes in public discourse are often necessary precursors to shifts in beliefs and behaviours (e.g. Stead *et al,* 2002).

More pragmatically, when starting with the citizen there are many scenarios where the softer outcomes of idea generation are the first priority of the community – at least as a precursor to future behaviour change. Often there will not be a need to go beyond idea acceptance, because the changes in social norms and re-ignited community influences will bring about the behavioural shifts for us. Once more, however, we move into what has become uncomfortable territory for the profession: a consideration of the extent to which social marketers should deploy influence and persuasion techniques.

5. Is there a need to go beyond a focus on singular behaviour change?

It is quite common to achieve unintended outcomes from interventions, while at the same time struggling to achieve change within the original behavioural goal. Ruthless evaluation

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would suggest failure, but more reflection could come to view this judgement as harsh. If a cooking class has only modest effects on diet and cooking ability but succeeds in attracting low income adults to engage with community education more generally (e.g. Wrieden et al, 2007), it may not be the intervention that has failed to deliver as much as hoped, but an over-simplistic or naïve behavioural goal in the first place. The social return on the investment[ii] in the intervention may still be significant, making the exercise 'profitable' in longer term social and public terms. It seems to us that this is particularly the case in deprived community work, in which public services tend to target singular behaviours (excessive alcohol consumption, smoking, anti-social behaviour, and so on) without seeking the deeper root causes; social isolation, lack of opportunities, lack of direction, low stocks of cultural capital (e.g. Stead et al, 2001).

Longer term social returns on investment have a temporal as well as 'breadth' dimension to consider in their evaluation. The financial return on an intervention aimed at reducing obesity amongst children may not accrue for forty years, and this long term benefit may well be missed by the pressure on managers to demonstrate immediate results. Our argument is a call for a more sophisticated, holistic set of measures that allow for both temporal and multiple behavioural, and non-behavioural, changes.

More rounded impact measures would be equally as valuable when the wider repercussions of an intervention are negative. For example, Rothschild's solution to drink-driving – sponsored limos to take groups of men on pub crawls (Rothschild et al, 2006) – can be criticised as sanctioning, or at least ignoring, the wider problem of societal attitudes to alcohol over-consumption and the norm that having a good time means getting drunk. Other criticisms of narrow goals have been made, such as Buchanan et al's (1994) critique of the use of 'sexual attractiveness' to 'sell' messages to young people. Rothschild's response is that he was asked to tackle the drink-driving problem and that is what he did, and in Buchanan's example the designers would defend the use of sexual attractiveness as a message appeal if consumer research suggests this would be persuasive in a particular behaviour change context (Hastings and Haywood, 1994).

Finally, this tension ties in with the dangers of an absolute commitment to community-orientation and community co-creation. What if 'the community' wants something which we know to be ineffective or which will be unacceptable to another segment? We cannot just abdicate responsibility as experts or arbiters in our quest to be consumer or community-oriented. We posit that social marketers should engage with the issue of multi-behavioural changes, whether they are the intended goal or the unintended consequence of their interventions.

6. What is the relationship between social good and democracy?

Here, we consider whether 'bad guys' can use social marketing. An extreme example of the 'misuse' of social marketing could be religious fundamentalists or extremist political parties using social marketing to promote their views about how society should operate, and to change how people behave to match these views. A less extreme example could be anti-immunisation or anti-fluoridation groups using social marketing to campaign for their goals. Most social marketing definitions specify that what differentiates social marketing from

other marketing is that our work is for the benefit of society (e.g. Kotler *et al*, 2002; French *et al,* 2010; Zaltman and Kotler, 1971), but if these groups think what they are doing is socially beneficial and right, then who decides what 'social good' actually is?

The way to address this challenge, we believe, is for those applying marketing to social issues to be able to, and possibly required to, answer two sets of questions. First, social marketers should be able to demonstrate through evidence that their proposed target behaviour will have measurable benefit to society. Second, social marketers should be able to set out what they mean by social good and how it has been derived from an understanding about what the majority of the population believe and support (rather than have been persuaded) constitutes social good.

This is probably the primary ethical basis upon which to legitimise what social marketers do. The answer may be related to political legitimacy, but, arguably, it must be more than 'let the will of the people be done'. It could be beneficial for social marketers to set out a clear set of liberal social principles based on, or reflecting, a set of values that unite the communities we serve. (The UN declaration on human rights[iii] might provide such a template from which to begin). This would facilitate the development of both professional codes of conduct and possible principles that could guide governments and other public bodies when they are developing or commissioning social marketing interventions.

As a start, we list below a set of criteria that could be used when seeking to intervene with a full set of both positive and negative interventions and ones that use both cognitive and non-conscious decision making:

1. The risk is severe
2. Political and civic mandate for action exists
3. There is an acceptable trade-off between risks and freedoms confirmed by target group and society
4. Effective intervention/s exist and can be delivered
5. Cost effectiveness of intervention/s can be demonstrated, hence, a clear demonstrable benefit to society, capable of measurement, is identifiable.
6. Known negative side effects are acceptable to the target group and civic society
7. Interventions will not increase inequality or will increase equality but will improve everyone's health or wellbeing

7. What happens if market-orientation and democratic values are at odds?

Staying with the theme of democracy, we next ask: what happens when 'being democratic' means not meeting a specific sub-set of the customer's perceived needs? The rhetoric of social marketing implies an equal and democratic process which has the needs of the target customer at its root, but these principles can clearly be at odds with each other. Such a conflict may particularly arise when we need to influence behaviour that the target customer does not view as a problem behaviour but which society does (such as binge drinking) or when a small sub-set of customers may want help to change something that is not supported by the rest of society.

Here the argument can be clarified by establishing the definition of democracy as something set by society, not by individuals. If society deems it appropriate that driving at 50mph through a built up area is illegal, then arguably we do not need to worry about meeting the needs, or protecting the democratic rights, of the individual 'boy racer' who drives badly but does not view their behaviour as problematic. An additional layer to this argument is that society, through deprivation and its trappings, has created the environment in which these young adults make their behavioural choices, so we have a responsibility to them to be sensitive and to meet the needs which underlie their behaviour, even if we cannot meet their need to be left alone to drive as they wish. As Andreasen suggested, sometimes social marketers focus on the needs of the individual, sometimes the needs of society and sometimes on both (Andreasen, 1994).

However, we argue that despite embracing the flexibility of this approach, it would be beneficial to review some criteria that might guide when each option is appropriate. In the case of the speeding boy racer, 'society' clearly should trump 'individual'. In fact, arguably social marketers should seek behaviour changes that support the greater good by default. However, exceptions to this may arise when the individual's current behaviour is something they cannot control, such as from addiction or medical deficiency; or when they do no particular harm to others, such as in some cases of personal drug consumption. In these instances, it may be most appropriate to focus on individual wellbeing which could be at odds with the standard utilitarian response.

It is clear that there is not a single universal principle that can be applied that will guide how these tensions can be resolved in every situation. However, by establishing a debate around a set of processes to formally address these implicit tensions, social marketing practitioners would be in a stronger position to justify why they focus on such issues and how they seek to influence people within the broader democratic landscape. We must be approaching fast a point where through one of the new international fora we could develop a set of transparent ethical principles to guide our work in the form of a published code of conduct.

Conclusion: Towards a broader debate and definition of social marketing

A common focus of our discussion has been widening the concept of social marketing. We have asked some uncomfortable questions about what is legitimate in terms of outcomes; i.e. attitude values as well as behaviour, about what are acceptable forms of intervention to change behaviour and attitude, and whether 'invisible' techniques or coercive techniques are acceptable. We have also asked questions about the nature of exchange and about choice and customer-centricity. Finally, we have asked questions about the political nature of social marketing and encouraged a debate about an expanded range of interventions to be used that could go beyond the rational and positive, if guided by a transparent set of democratic, liberal humanistic and ethical principles.

Overall, we argue for social marketers to accept that social marketing contains within its purview a broad range of influencing methodologies that go beyond rational choice-based approaches. We need to acknowledge that social marketing could use (and often already does use) a broader mix of approaches to achieve social improvements. This mix should be

based on citizen insight, evidence about behaviour change and social acceptability, and be guided by a set of clearly defined ethical principles.

We believe that a more mature and inclusive view of what constitutes social marketing is now required: one that, in particular, can respond to the debates explored here and stand its ground when exposed to such philosophical scrutiny. To do this, some of the theoretical and ethical work suggested in this article needs to be commenced. The new International Social Marketing Association and its federated national associations may well be ideal organisations to address these tasks. If developed, such guides would enable us to better defend a social marketing discipline that deploys more implicit techniques, and strongly persuasive techniques, common in the commercial world but somewhat unacknowledged in polite social marketing circles.

A more 'grown up', honest and transparent social marketing could perhaps marry the best of commercial behaviour change 'savviness' to meet the goals of society with a compassionate, relationship-driven approach to meet the needs of the individual and small group. Perhaps we work with citizens to help them 'save them from themselves', in overcoming their weaknesses. Perhaps we work slightly 'invisibly' in order to do what is best for society, knowing that standard 'explicit' offers would fail in a particular instance. In doing these tasks, we are guided pragmatically by 'what works', but also by a set of ethical codes and guidance which are transparent to those we seek to influence and ideally receive approval and acceptance.

To conclude, we call for social marketers to avoid two clear traps. First, there is the futile trap of absolutism; the search for the final and complete definition of what social marketing is and is not. Second, there is the trap of defining social marketing by reference to tactical rather than principle based considerations. To this end we call for an end to arguments about whether a specific technique is or is not social marketing and whether it can be fitted or not into the '4 Ps' framework. Rather, the important questions are those that relate to the ideological and ethical principles that underpin social marketing practice, and those that address the efficacy of direct or more implicit methods. If addressed, these questions are capable of generating progress and improved practice. Social marketers will also only make progress at gaining more influence in a crowded behaviour change marketplace if more robust and explicit guidance, and in some cases justifications, can be developed that are capable of withstanding critical review.

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