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**The many paths to societal
wellbeing: charting a course
forward**

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The many paths to societal wellbeing: charting a course forward

Introduction

Wellbeing is most often associated with quality of life (Shin and Johnson, 1978; Zikmund, 2003; Rees *et al.*, 2010; Stratham and Chase, 2010), whereby quality of life can be defined as:

[...] an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. It is a broad ranging concept affected in a complex way by the person's physical health, psychological state, personal beliefs, social relationships and their relationship to salient features of their environment (World Health Organization, 1997).

Indeed, although traditional conceptualisations of wellbeing tend to focus on individual subjectivity, more inclusive conceptualisations of wellbeing also consider family, community and society and acknowledge the importance of environmental, socio-economic, geographic and political factors that contribute towards the achievement and maintenance of wellbeing at all levels of society (Knight and McNaught, 2011; La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Wellbeing can be conceptualised at the individual, family, community and societal level. Individual wellbeing is actively created and interpreted by individuals in response to their positive and negative evaluations about factors such as work and life satisfaction (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Family wellbeing extends this further by including evaluations of the quality of interpersonal and intergenerational relations and family access to economic and other resources (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Community wellbeing, of which social capital is a core component (Coleman, 1998; Putnam, 1995, 2001; Baum and Ziersch, 2003; Helliwell and Putnam, 2007), extends beyond subjective wellbeing, by also considering the influence of structural, environmental and ecological factors (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Finally, societal wellbeing is achieved when the basic needs of citizens are met, and they are integrated through a sense of purpose and belonging within a society (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Wellbeing is a macro level construct concerned with both objective and subjective assessments of wellbeing as a desirable human state (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Examples of objective indicators that aid in the measurement of wellbeing include economic and social indicators such as income, housing and work (Diener *et al.*, 2009), while examples of subjective indicators include constructs such as individual, emotional and psychological interpretations of wellbeing (Felce and Perry, 1995).

Wellbeing as an emerging policy agenda

The development of societal wellbeing as a concept has highlighted issues around social inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010) and has gained increasing attention from governments and policymakers. In November 2010, the UK Government established the Measuring National Well-being (MNW) programme to monitor and report "how the UK as a whole is doing" through various measures that include both objective (e.g. unemployment rate) and subjective (e.g. job satisfaction) data (ONS, 2017). Twice a year, a report is published to assess change over time and establish if national wellbeing in the UK is improving or deteriorating (ONS, 2017). These wellbeing indicators are intended to complement the data provided by economic measures, such as gross domestic product (GDP), which have been found to be insufficient on their own (ONS, 2017).



Further, in May 2011, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) launched the OECD better life initiative (www.oecd.org/betterlifeinitiative) (OECD, 2013). As a part of this initiative, the *How's Life? Measuring Well-Being* report, published every two years, seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of wellbeing in OECD countries and other major economies through measuring material conditions and quality of life across the population. Like the UK-based MNW programme, the OECD framework for measuring wellbeing and progress was developed in response to the limitations of macroeconomic statistics in adequately providing policymakers with the most accurate understanding of living conditions of ordinary citizens (OECD, 2013). Frameworks that can more holistically capture the everyday experiences of citizens have the potential to produce more accurate wellbeing indicators that can improve the credibility and accountability of public policies (OECD, 2013).

Approaches to wellbeing

One of the most common approaches in wellbeing research is situated within the psychology area, including positive psychology. Psychology-based wellbeing research approaches include two different approaches. First, the hedonic tradition focuses on constructs like happiness, positive affect, low negative affect and satisfaction with life (Bradburn, 1969; Diener, 1984; Kahneman *et al.*, 1999; Lyubomirsky and Lepper, 1999). In contrast, the eudaimonic tradition emphasises positive psychological functioning and human development (Rogers, 1961, Ryff, 1989a, 1989b; Waterman, 1993). There is agreement that wellbeing is reflective of both objective and subjective indicators. Positive psychology has sought to integrate the subjective states with objective elements and then focusses on wider structural considerations (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). This acknowledges the wider, external circumstances that influence individual subjective wellbeing (La Placa *et al.*, 2013). Although there is a lack of a consensus definition of wellbeing, owing to its inherently complex nature, Shin and Johnson's (1978) definition of wellbeing as "a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his or her own chosen criteria" (p. 478) acknowledges both the objective and subjective measures that exist at the individual, community and structural level and which should be considered when determining subjective wellbeing.

Another approach concerned with the achievement of wellbeing outcomes is the transformative perspective (Mick, 2006), which includes transformative consumer research (TCR) and transformative service research (TSR). TCR focusses on issues of consumer welfare (Mick, 2006), however, does not directly address the role of services in affecting consumer wellbeing (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Hence, TSR was borne out of this gap in the TCR research and also in response to a gap in traditional service research, whereby outcomes related to consumer wellbeing are rarely considered (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). TSR focuses on understanding the transformative impact of services on consumers (Anderson *et al.*, 2013) and can include commercial services that also seek to achieve commercial (i.e. profit) outcomes for the organisation.

Finally, social marketing is another approach that is oriented towards the achievement of wellbeing at the individual, collective and societal level. Social marketing involves the development and application of marketing theories and concepts, in addition to other approaches, to influence individuals, communities, structures and societies to bring about positive social change. Contemporary social marketing approach involves strategic considerations and interventions at the upstream (policy), midstream (service, communities) and downstream (individual) levels to achieve societal wellbeing. Upstream and midstream approaches in particular are useful in a field where downstream approaches have long dominated, as these help close the gaps that arise from focussing too heavily on individual

factors. For example, effective upstream social marketing can successfully alter the structural environment (Gordon, 2013) in ways that can facilitate individual and group behaviour change that improve individual, community and societal wellbeing. Midstream social marketing alternatively proposes working with partners and community groups to act as enactors of social change (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013) that can lead to wellbeing outcomes for society.

Societal wellbeing as the theme for the International Social Marketing Conference 2016

In light of the increasing attention and interest in wellbeing in the academic research, practical and policy fields, the 2016 International Social Marketing Conference (ISMC) featured the theme of societal wellbeing. The ISMC was hosted by the University of Wollongong from 25 to 27 September 2016 in coastal Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. In line with the release of the OECD framework for measuring wellbeing and progress (OECD, 2013), and with wellbeing as an interdisciplinary construct, combined with an emerging policy agenda, the opportunity exists for social marketing to be positioned within and add to this important discourse. The theme was not only topical but also diverse enough in nature to assist the linkage of multiple scholars and practitioners.

About the special issue

The use of multiple approaches, perspectives and pathways in a complementary and coordinated way has the potential for the development of more effective social change programmes and intervention strategies that are more likely to achieve desired wellbeing outcomes. A collection of five papers on the theme of societal wellbeing is featured in this special issue. The authors have drawn from a variety of theoretical perspectives and approaches including behavioural science, human geography, engineering, service thinking, systems thinking, community-based approaches and social enterprise to demonstrate how these pathways can be used in addition to social marketing to charter a course forward towards societal wellbeing. The first paper is by François Dessart and René van Bavel entitled, "Two converging paths: behavioural sciences and social marketing for better policies". It argues that social marketing and behavioural sciences should be used as two paths towards the development of better social policies and describes how the two approaches are similar, different and how they can be used to complement one another. The authors highlight that there has been an increase in the adoption of behavioural sciences to inform policies that promote societal wellbeing and that although social marketing is not always explicitly used in the same way it is used in a *de facto* manner. The second paper is by Ross Gordon, Gordon Waitt and Paul Cooper entitled, "A social marketer, a geographer, and an engineer walk into a bar: reflections on Energy+Illawarra and undertaking interdisciplinary projects". This paper describes the interdisciplinary approach undertaken, through the use of the pathways of social marketing, human geography and engineering, towards achieving societal wellbeing in a coordinated and integrated way to overcome the limitations of each individual path and produce better outcomes for all stakeholders involved. The authors use the case of the Energy+Illawarra energy efficiency programme to reflect on key learning outcomes and offer suggestions for overcoming potential challenges associated with using interdisciplinary approaches in social change programmes. The next paper is contributed by Joy Parkinson, Chris Dubelaar, Julia Carins, Stephen Holden, Fiona Newton and Melanie Pescud entitled, "Approaching the wicked problem of obesity: an introduction to the food system compass". This paper focuses on food consumption as part of the wicked problem of obesity and explores the complex interplay between various stakeholders, such as food producers, marketers, health and medical practitioners and policymakers. The authors present a framework, the food system compass, for use as an analytic tool that can assist in planning social change

programmes to address complex social issues like obesity. The next paper is by Cheryl Leo and Nadia Zainuddin entitled, "Exploring value destruction in social marketing services". This paper demonstrates the use of services thinking as an alternative pathway towards societal wellbeing and investigates value destruction in social marketing services designed to facilitate socially desirable behaviours amongst service users. The authors identify value destruction processes that services should manage, to avoid the negative outcomes described in their study. The final paper is by Sarah Keller and Timothy Wilson entitled, "Preventing suicide in Montana: a community-based theatre intervention". This study suggests that community-based approaches, such as community theatre, can have great efficacy in addressing highly stigmatised social issues such as suicide. The authors discuss the Let's Talk programme, a community-based theatre programme that hosts and facilitates a theatre workshop to address suicide risk and describes how encouraging participants shared their personal experiences and then collaboratively produced a play based on these experiences which had a positive impact on increasing help-seeking behaviour.

Concluding remarks

To conclude, we, as Guest Editors, would like to thank the many reviewers who volunteered their time and expertise in providing constructive feedback to the submitting authors. Without their contributions, this special issue would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Professor Sharyn Rundle-Thiele, Editor of the *Journal of Social Marketing*, for allowing us this special issue dedicated to the important and topical theme of societal wellbeing. Finally, we thank all the authors from around the world who submitted their work to this special issue and for showing us the range and depth of work done in this area.

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Two converging paths: behavioural sciences and social marketing for better policies

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Two
converging
paths

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Abstract

Purpose – This commentary argues that social marketing and the application of behavioural sciences to policy constitute two converging paths towards better policies. It highlights points of convergence and divergence between both disciplines and the potential benefits of further embedding social marketing principles and methods within the recent trend of applying behavioural sciences to policy.

Design/methodology/approach – The commentary relies on a review of the behavioural sciences and social marketing literatures and on an analysis of institutional reports reviewing cases of behaviourally informed policies.

Findings – Behavioural sciences are increasingly informing policies to promote societal well-being. Social marketing has seldom been explicitly considered as being part of this phenomenon, although it is *de facto*. Both disciplines share similar end-goals, inform similar policy applications and are rooted in behavioural analysis. They diverge in their theoretical frameworks, their relative emphasis on behaviour change and the span of interventions they generate. Several benefits of embedding social marketing principles and methods within the current way of applying behavioural sciences to policy are identified.

Practical implications – Scholars applying behavioural sciences to policy are encouraged, when appropriate, to use the insights and methods from social marketing. Social marketing can engage in a dialogue with behavioural sciences to explore how to pilot the convergence of both approaches in practice.

Originality/value – The novelty of this contribution lies in providing the first comparison of the application of behavioural sciences to policy with social marketing, and in using the policy-making cycle framework to map the contributions and complementarities of both disciplines.

Keywords Social marketing, Policy, Behavioural economics, *Nudge*, Behavioural insights, Behavioural sciences

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

1.1 Behavioural sciences and policy

Behavioural sciences study human behaviour in an attempt to understand the various factors that affect it (Berelson, 1995), and encompass psychology, behavioural economics, neuroscience and anthropology, among others. Although behavioural sciences have

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produced extensive empirical findings regarding human behaviour for decades, their explicit application to public policy emerged in the early 2000s (Madrian and Shea, 2001). “Behavioural insights”, as they are often called, now inform policy issues as diverse as healthy eating, savings for pensions, energy conservation and tax collection (Lourenço *et al.*, 2016b; Lunn, 2014; OECD, 2017; World Bank Group, 2015).

In parallel, governments have increasingly acknowledged that human behaviour is central to policy-making: policies often affect people’s behaviour, and people’s behaviour will often determine the success of such policies (Oullier, 2013; Shafir, 2013a, 2013b). Consequently, national governments in countries such as the UK (Behavioural Insights Team, 2011), The Netherlands (Kamp, 2014), the USA (Obama, 2015), and Germany (Dams *et al.*, 2015) have set up dedicated teams with behavioural expertise.

1.2 Beyond behavioural economics and nudges

Behavioural economics has been, so far, the most influential behavioural science in policy-making, for a number of reasons. As a sub-discipline of economics, behavioural economics has benefited from economics’ already-established position in policy-making. Economists have indeed a long tradition in providing advice to policy-makers because classical economic theory is the basis of most legal systems (Micklitz *et al.*, 2011). Economists are also well-represented among policy-makers (Adam, 2017), making them naturally more attuned to the findings from behavioural economics than from other behavioural sciences. Finally, policy-makers’ interest in behavioural sciences was triggered primarily by the publication of the book *Nudge* (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008), which presented a predominantly behavioural economics approach and proposed relatively simple and unexpected – and therefore attractive – solutions to policy issues (Lotenberg, 2015).

As a result of the prominence of behavioural economics, initial attempts to apply behavioural sciences to policy mainly relied on the nudge approach, which focuses on changes to the choice architecture, i.e. the way options are presented to citizens and consumers (Bogliacino *et al.*, 2016). For instance, proposing opt-out schemes rather than opt-in schemes in company-run savings plans alters the way options are presented and more than doubles participation rates (Madrian and Shea, 2001). Progressively, the approach has expanded to a broader palette of behavioural sciences beyond behavioural economics and nudges (Lunn, 2014). The use of social norms feedback to promote prosocial behaviours such as energy conservation, for instance, is primarily based on the social psychology literature (Cialdini and Goldstein, 2004). The methodological toolbox of behavioural sciences applied to policy has also expanded, going beyond lab experiments and randomised controlled trials to incorporate qualitative methods such as focus groups and ethnography (van Bavel *et al.*, 2013).

1.3 The positioning of social marketing

Social marketing “seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behaviours that benefit individuals and communities for the greater social good” (International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association, and Australian Association of Social Marketing, 2013). Since much earlier than behavioural sciences, its principles and methods have been applied to inform policies promoting healthy, safe and environmentally friendly lifestyles.

Because social marketing leverages behavioural insights to promote behavioural change (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015), it is *de facto* part of the growing trend of applying behavioural sciences to policy. This fact has not been sufficiently acknowledged. Out of hundreds of cases of behaviourally informed policies reviewed by international

organisations (Lourenço *et al.*, 2016a; OECD, 2017; World Bank Group, 2015), as little as two instances explicitly mention social marketing concepts and tools. The pioneering UK Behavioural Insights Team's three biannual update reports (Behavioural Insights Team, 2011, 2015, 2016), which also showcase hundreds of applications of behavioural sciences to policy, only include one explicit mention of social marketing. Likewise, recent international conferences (e.g. Behavioral Exchange, Annual Conference of the Behavioral Science and Policy Association), the comprehensive edited volume by Shafir (2013b) and new journals dedicated to this discipline (e.g. *Behavioral Science & Policy* and *Behavioural Public Policy*) have not included contributions using an explicit social marketing approach.

In summary, the application of behavioural sciences to policy has not yet fully embraced – at least explicitly – the methods and findings of social marketing. This is a missed opportunity, as both disciplines are very much complementary. In the following sections, we first outline points of convergence and divergence, and then examine how this complementarity can be capitalised upon at the different steps of policy-making.

2. Points of convergence and points of divergence

2.1 Points of convergence

To a large extent, social marketing and behavioural sciences applied to policy overlap. Five clusters of convergence can be identified between both disciplines.

2.1.1 End-goals and policy applications. Social marketing's overarching objective is to contribute to greater social good (International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association, and Australian Association of Social Marketing, 2013), similar to the focus of behavioural sciences applied to policy on human welfare (Shafir, 2013a). Towards that end-goal, both disciplines inform a broad and similar canvas of policy areas such as health, environment, energy and transport. Despite this overlap, there are some specific policy areas that have been tackled relatively more by one or the other discipline, such as financial decision-making (e.g. pension savings, tax collection) in the case of behavioural sciences (Chetty *et al.*, 2014; Madrian, 2014).

2.1.2 Citizen centralism and behavioural analysis. Social marketing and behavioural sciences applied to policy share the commonality of being citizen-centric (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015). Against a backdrop of top-down policy-making where individual preferences and behaviours are assumed, both social marketing and behavioural sciences take the citizen as the starting point for building policy interventions. The analysis of the causes of human behaviour is therefore a central feature of both social marketing and behavioural sciences applied to policy (Aspara and Tikkanen, 2017; Shafir, 2013a).

2.1.3 Multidisciplinary approaches. Because of the nature of its focus, social marketing is expected to be a multidisciplinary field of study (French, 2011). Social marketers are not confined to the theoretical foundations and methods of any particular discipline, drawing on diverse fields such as economics, psychology, sociology and communications theory (Peattie and Peattie, 2003). A similar, yet less developed, multidisciplinary approach exists in the field of behavioural sciences for policy-making, which has primarily applied insights from behavioural economics and social psychology (Shafir, 2013a).

2.1.4 Citizens' sovereignty. Another point of convergence between both approaches is the tenet that citizens and consumers need to be persuaded, not coerced (Russell-Bennett, 2016). Indeed, encouraging behaviours that benefit the majority of society while allowing freedom of choice has been identified as a cornerstone of social marketing (Gordon *et al.*, 2016). Likewise, part of the rise in popularity of the application of behavioural sciences to policy is owing to nudges' emphasis on libertarian paternalism, i.e. guiding behaviour while still giving citizens freedom to choose (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008).

2.1.5 Pretesting and impact evaluation. The rigorous pretesting of different behaviourally informed policy options, usually through lab experiments or small-scale randomised controlled trials, is at the heart of the application of behavioural sciences to policy (Oullier, 2013). The evaluation of the actual impact of policies informed by behavioural sciences is encouraged, but is too often lacking. The same principles of *ex ante* and *ex post* evaluation and reporting of policy impacts are applied in social marketing (International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association, and Australian Association of Social Marketing, 2013).

2.2 Points of divergence

Despite clear points of convergence at a general level, both disciplines differ on some more specific attributes.

2.2.1 Theoretical foundations. Although social marketing is not confined to using marketing principles, its core concepts mirror those of marketing (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015). The marketing mind-set adopted by social marketing entails the creation of value through the provision of social offerings (e.g. ideas, understanding, experiences and environments) via a process of exchange. Social marketing leverages concepts such as the (social) marketing mix, segmentation, targeting and competition. In contrast, the starting point for the application of behavioural sciences to policy was, for the most part, behavioural economics. The recognition that humans do not behave as neoclassical economics assumes is perhaps the single most important premise in the application of behavioural sciences to policy. Many contributions of behavioural sciences to policy therefore leverage concepts from behavioural economics such as loss aversion, time inconsistency and status quo bias.

2.2.2 Behavioural change. Social marketing's goal is primarily to influence behaviour (International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association, and Australian Association of Social Marketing, 2013), although recent research highlights the limitations of this focus (Tapp and Spotswood, 2013). Likewise, the application of behavioural sciences to policy often seeks to promote certain behaviours (Shafir, 2013a). But behavioural change is not always the objective. It may be that behavioural sciences will help provide citizens and consumers with the right information by designing and testing ways to make it is easy to understand, without necessarily steering them in a certain direction. For instance, in 2010 the European Commission ran a behavioural study to inform the design of information disclosure requirements for financial products (Chater *et al.*, 2010). When it then issued a regulation partially based on this study (European Union, 2014), it did not seek to encourage consumers to choose specific financial products, rather just to help them make better-informed decisions.

2.2.3 Span of interventions. Social marketing involves rolling out fully integrated social programmes using the 7Ps marketing mix (social product, social price, social place, social promotion, people, processes and physical evidence; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013), or other, more novel integrated approaches such as COM-SM (Tapp and Spotswood, 2013). Social marketing often intends to address the multiple causes of behaviour by first developing a holistic and integrated understanding of the relevant psychological, economic and also cultural factors (Gordon *et al.*, 2016; Tapp and Spotswood, 2013). The wide span of social marketing is also reflected in its focus not only on individual level change, but also societal changes by intending to challenge the macro institutional norms that shape individual behaviours (Kennedy, 2015). In contrast, policies informed by behavioural sciences, especially those relying on nudging approaches, have tended to be more specific, entailing small changes in citizens' choice architecture (Sunstein, 2014) rather than fully integrated programmes.

2.2.4 *Citizens' level of involvement.* Social marketing programmes actively involve citizens in designing and implementing interventions through a process of co-creation (Clarke *et al.*, 2007) so that they are actors of their own behavioural change. Behavioural sciences, as they are currently applied to policy, do sometimes involve citizens in qualitative interviews or focus groups to get an in-depth understanding of their behaviour in relation to the policy issue (van Bavel *et al.*, 2013). However, there is not much evidence of citizens being involved in the actual design of a policy remedy informed by behavioural sciences.

3. Converging both disciplines to inform policy-making

There are clear convergences between social marketing and behavioural sciences applied to policy and their differences may complement each other. It is therefore worth exploring how the application of behavioural sciences to policy-making can more explicitly leverage social marketing to improve societal well-being. In the next paragraphs, we describe how behavioural sciences inform the different stages of the policy-making process, based in part on the European Commission's (2015) "Better Regulation Toolbox", and how this discipline could benefit from social marketing's insights and approaches to overcome some of its weaknesses. The benefits of this proposed convergence are clear for some phases of the policy-making cycle; for others, we call for a debate.

The policy process can be broken down into five steps (adapted from Jann and Wegrich, 2007):

- (1) *problem definition* (i.e. understanding of the magnitude and causes of the issue);
- (2) *formulation* (i.e. design of solutions to address the issue and assessment of their expected impact);
- (3) *decision-making* (i.e. adoption of a policy solution by policy-makers);
- (4) *implementation* (i.e. practical application of the policy solution); and
- (5) *evaluation* (i.e. assessment of the actual impact of the policy solution on the issue and feedback loop to inform new policies).

3.1 *Problem definition*

By identifying the possible underlying psychological drivers of a policy issue, besides drivers linked to market failures and regulation failures, behavioural sciences are well placed to contribute to the problem definition phase of the policy-making cycle. Unfortunately, behavioural sciences are often involved too late in the policy-making cycle, at the stage of implementing solutions. The nudge approach, in particular, has been criticised for focusing too much on policy solutions without having a thorough understanding of the psychological drivers of policy issues (Marchiori *et al.*, 2017). There are, however, a growing number of cases of explicit use of behavioural sciences in the problem definition phase of policy issues. For instance, the European Commission contracted a literature review of the psychological drivers causing excessive online-gambling (e.g. over-confidence, sunk cost fallacy) before testing different policy options to tackle the issue (Codagnone *et al.*, 2014) and issuing a recommendation based on the findings (European Commission, 2014).

The application of behavioural sciences to policy would certainly benefit from embedding social marketing approaches in the problem definition phase. Social marketing may bring a more holistic understanding of the policy issue and of its causes by identifying the competition aspects in the behavioural analysis (Schuster, 2015), by understanding the marketing practices of the supply side (Hastings and Saren, 2003), and by investigating macro-systemic causes of behaviours besides individual drivers (Kennedy, 2015). For

instance, in the above-mentioned case of excessive online-gambling, social marketing could lead to better regulation by providing a better understanding of marketing practices designed to hook gamblers and make them addictive. Similarly, social marketing can complement a behaviourally informed examination of people's reluctance to pay their taxes on time (Hallsworth *et al.*, 2017) by taking the tax system in its entirety as a contextual factor guiding individual behaviour and highlighting cultural drivers, such as distrust in government and social norms of impunity.

3.2 Policy formulation

Behavioural sciences contribute to the policy formulation phase by proposing policy solutions and by testing people's reactions *ex ante*. Pretesting "what works" should lead to better policies and, therefore, to the efficient allocation of public resources. Acknowledging that more information is not necessarily good for consumers (Micklitz *et al.*, 2011), behavioural sciences have extensively tested different ways of presenting relevant information to consumers (i.e. framing of information disclosure). Examples of behaviourally informed product labelling include the energy consumption of electric appliances (London Economics and Ipsos, 2014), the environmental footprint of products (Ceci-Renaud and Tarayoun, 2016), the durability of products (SIRCOME, University of South Brittany, and University of South Bohemia, 2016) and warnings on tobacco products packages (Bogliacino *et al.*, 2015). Likewise, behavioural sciences were used to design, test and prove the effectiveness of self-commitment devices to enhance job seekers' chances of finding employment (Behavioural Insights Team, 2012).

Here again, those applying behavioural sciences to policy may benefit from working hand in hand with social marketers. Social marketing's focus on the co-creation of policy solutions through citizens' collective intelligence (Clarke *et al.*, 2007) would help generate innovative, citizen-led policy solutions, thereby addressing the recurring issues of low acceptance and mistrust of policies informed by behavioural sciences (Reisch and Sunstein, 2016). Moreover, social marketing can reinforce behaviourally informed policy formulations by suggesting a broader array of policy options based on disincentives and conscious decision-making (French, 2011) and by designing a fully integrated social programme rather than isolated policy solutions addressing specific causes of behaviour.

3.3 Decision-making

The selection of a policy solution by policy-makers is also, in essence, a behavioural issue. The ultimate decision whether to take behavioural evidence into consideration and to choose a policy option is their responsibility. Policy-makers are human and, as such, they are subject to biases, heuristics and social norms regarding, for instance, what they consider as valid evidence (Banuri *et al.*, 2017). Behavioural sciences are beginning to contribute to the decision-making phase of policy-making. For instance, courses are being offered to policy-makers (e.g. at the World Bank) to make them aware of their own decision-making biases. Behavioural sciences are likewise increasingly a part of standard curricula for master's degrees in political sciences. Perhaps this phase of the policy-making cycle is less suited for contributions of social marketing. This is a question for debate.

3.4 Policy implementation

Behavioural sciences can contribute to the implementation phase of policies to increase their chances of success. For this phase as well, embedding a social marketing approach in policies informed by behavioural sciences could prove worthwhile by contributing to designing pragmatic and strategic plans. Social marketing insights based, for instance, on

segmentation using psychographic and demographic data (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015), branding (Evans, 2016), emotions (Hastings *et al.*, 2004) and metaphoric imagery (McQuarrie and Mick, 2003) would prove particularly complementary to the way behavioural sciences are currently applied to policy. In addition, social marketers can enhance the effective implementation of behaviourally informed policies by adequately reaching their targets through appropriate media, in particular when the target consists of hard-to-reach, vulnerable individuals. Finally, behavioural sciences applied to policy could benefit from the long-term strategic approach of relationship social marketing. Rather than implementing one-off policy solutions, relationship social marketing implements dynamic, ongoing, and evolving policy solutions based on a continuous dialogue with citizens (Tapp and Spotswood, 2013). This approach would help address the recurrent issue of the long-term sustainability of interventions based on behavioural sciences' insights (Bovens, 2009).

3.5 Policy evaluation

Assessing the actual impact of any policy is critical to ensuring that public money is wisely spent and, where appropriate, to learn from errors. Thus far, behaviourally informed policies have too often not been properly evaluated (Lourenço *et al.*, 2016b). One of the reasons for this lack of proper evaluation is that a robust evaluation of policies requires comparing the outcome variable between an intervention group and a control group, which is not always possible at the implementation stage. Counterfactual methods still represent an underexploited potential to assess *ex post* the impact of policies informed by behavioural sciences. Social marketing may successfully complement these evaluation methods, often rooted in behavioural economics, by assessing returns on investment and social impacts beyond traditional cost–benefit analysis (Puttick and Ludlow, 2012).

4. Looking forward

Numerous challenges, such as the depletion of natural resources, the increase of non-communicable diseases and rising inequalities threaten societal well-being. Policies tackling these challenges will require multiple paths.

One of these paths is provided by behavioural sciences. We have outlined earlier how they inform the different stages of policy-making. Looking forward, we believe that behavioural sciences should regularly find their way into meetings and conversations at all levels in policy-making, as did cost–benefit analysis in the 1970s (Sunstein, 2012). The ideal path for behavioural sciences, therefore, is to seep into everyday political discourse and present itself as a force to counter the prevalence of economic thinking in policy.

Another path to societal well-being is social marketing. The present special issue of the *Journal of Social Marketing* is a testament to the discipline's ability to inform policies in order to lead to behavioural changes towards societal well-being. We have shown in this paper that social marketing is very similar to the recent trend of applying behavioural sciences to policy. In particular, both disciplines share the end-goal of contributing to greater social good, and they both build on a deep behavioural analysis based on multidisciplinary approaches focused on citizens. Despite this overall convergence, both disciplines do differ on more specific attributes such as their theoretical framework and the span of policy interventions they propose.

Because of these overwhelming similarities, these two paths converge to a large extent: social marketing can and should *de facto* be considered as part of the application of behavioural sciences to policy. As behavioural sciences have gained popularity in policy-making, this approach has become more inclusive over the past few years, moving away from a strictly behavioural economics framework and the corresponding nudging approach,

towards the integration of other disciplines. This inclusive approach could go one step further: where appropriate, behavioural sciences applied to policy should more explicitly acknowledge and build on social marketing's insights and methods. Social marketers, in turn, can engage in a dialogue with those applying behavioural sciences to policy to explore how to pilot the convergence of both approaches in practice.

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A social marketer, a geographer, and an engineer walk into a bar

Reflections on energy + Illawarra and undertaking interdisciplinary projects

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to contribute to contemporary debates about interdisciplinarity and social marketing by presenting the critical reflections of a social marketer, a human geographer and an engineer on working across disciplines in an Australian community energy efficiency intervention – Energy + Illawarra. The paper also aims to identify challenges, practicalities and learning that emerge from collaborating on interdisciplinary projects. It also aims to provide some suggestions and guidelines for researchers in the interdisciplinary space.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses a case study approach and presents the critical reflections of a social marketer, a human geographer and an engineer on working together on the Energy + Illawarra project – a community energy efficiency social marketing intervention.

Findings – Challenges in interdisciplinary projects that are presented by differences in ontology, methodology, language and discourse are identified. The importance of being critically reflexive and openness to alternative perspectives are examined. Concerns over publishing interdisciplinary research are considered. The value of experimenting and developing partnerships through pilot projects is discussed. The potential of leveraging existing synergies and the opportunity to learn from clashes in ontology are also highlighted.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to the discussion about being interdisciplinary in social marketing by identifying subjectivities, practicalities and opportunities from collaborating on cross-



The research is an outcome of a project that involves partnerships between University of Wollongong (UOW), Macquarie University, Regional Development Australia Illawarra (RDAl), Warrigal, IRT Group, Royal Freemasons' Benevolent Institution (RFBI), Illawarra Forum, WEA Illawarra and the Illawarra Joint Pilot Organisation. This activity received funding from the Australian Government, Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, through the low-income energy-efficiency program. The views expressed herein are not necessarily the views of the Commonwealth of Australia, and the Commonwealth does not accept responsibility for any information or advice contained herein. The authors would like to thank all of their colleagues who worked on the Energy + Illawarra, and their community participants, for all of their contributions to the project.

disciplinary projects. Guidance for researchers on working on interdisciplinary projects offers value for social marketers working in this area.

Keywords Challenges, Interdisciplinarity, Recommendations, Subjectivities, Energy + Illawarra, Low income energy efficiency program

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The call for interdisciplinary approaches to behaviour and social change research is well versed in social marketing circles (French and Blair-Stevens, 2010; Lefebvre and Kotler, 2011; Spotswood, 2016; Tapp and Rundle-Thiele, 2016). Commonly, interdisciplinarity is defined as involving the combination of two or more academic disciplines in a research project (Klein, 1990). However, in this article, we take the position of a broader definition of interdisciplinarity that encompasses other non-academic stakeholders that can be involved in social marketing such as development agencies and community service providers. Such stakeholders often play an important role in research design and implementation of social marketing programmes and bring their perspectives and knowledge into the practice of such projects. Therefore, non-academic stakeholders should warrant acknowledgement. We argue that interdisciplinary research, rather than providing more complete knowledge, facilitates the creation of something new by traversing boundaries and thinking across them. It can encourage scholars to conceive of new possibilities through debate generated by different ontologies.

Despite recent calls for more interdisciplinarity in social marketing research (French and Gordon, 2015; Spotswood, 2016), this is not a new idea (Marsiglio, 1985). As Brennan *et al.* (2011) pointed out, social marketing (and indeed marketing) is itself an interdisciplinary discipline. Social marketing borrows ideas from sociology, psychology, anthropology, public health, behavioural theory and communications theory among others (MacFadyen *et al.*, 1999). There are many examples of public health social marketing programmes in which marketers have worked alongside public health and psychologist researchers and practitioners (Stead *et al.*, 2007).

The more recent imperative for interdisciplinarity in social marketing relates to a range of factors. One is the broadening of social marketing concepts, theories, research and practice in the past 20 years. This has taken the discipline beyond one that is solely based on commercial marketing theory (Peattie and Peattie, 2003). Social marketing is now enriched by critical perspectives from the social sciences including critical theory (Gordon, 2011), socio-cultural theory (Waitt *et al.*, 2016; Spotswood, 2016) and systems theory (Domegan *et al.*, 2016). These critical social marketing paradigms challenge individual behaviour-based perspectives from marketing, psychology and economics theory (Brennan *et al.*, 2011; Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014). Together with this diversity of theoretical approaches are the methodologies used. Disciplinary pluralism is being encouraged by the increasing use of mixed methods including ethnographic methods, videography, neuroscience and social media analysis – supplementing conventional surveys and focus groups (Kubacki and Rundle-Thiele, 2017).

Another factor is that many of the social problems that social marketing is used to tackle are complex, or what are often described as “wicked problems”; such as obesity, climate change, health inequality and gender inequality (Rittel and Webber, 1973; French and Gordon, 2015). Wicked problems tend to transcend the knowledge and resources from any single discipline. Due to their complex and often intractable nature, they necessitate interdisciplinary perspectives and input from practitioners seeking solutions in the real

world. It is disingenuous to conceive that single disciplinary perspectives can be used to understand and tackle such complex problems. Taking the example of obesity, the Foresight Report notes to even begin to understand this extremely complex issue requires combining ideas from diverse disciplines including epidemiology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, economics, food science, genetics and political science among others (Butland *et al.*, 2007).

Despite recognition in the social marketing literature of the importance of doing interdisciplinary research, there is less attention on the practicalities of doing it (Spotswood, 2016). The extant literature on interdisciplinary research identifies several challenges for scholars seeking to work together across disciplines. These include ontological and epistemological clashes between quantitative positivist and qualitative interpretivist perspectives, inability to break out of disciplinary boundaries, a lack of reflexivity and consensus building to understanding issues and challenges in obtaining funding for and being able to publish interdisciplinary research (Salter and Hearn, 1996; Wear, 1999; Repko and Szostak, 2017). That said, little consideration of such issues exists in the social marketing literature. This article contributes to contemporary debates about interdisciplinarity and social marketing by presenting the reflections of a social marketer, a human geographer and an engineer on working across disciplines in an Australian community energy efficiency intervention – Energy + Illawarra.

The remainder of this article is presented as follows. First, we briefly examine discourse in the extant literature regarding key strengths, weaknesses and recommendations for doing interdisciplinary projects. We then provide a short background to the Energy + Illawarra project. Following this, the reflections of a social marketer identifies issues with language and discourse and how different disciplines conceptualise the world. The challenge of overcoming certain knowledge as privileged over others and building consensus, and being reflexive at an individual and collective level are discussed. Approaches to project dissemination that are worthy of consideration when doing interdisciplinary projects are also examined. Second, the reflections of a human geographer identify how a commitment to experimentation in research and starting collaborations through smaller pilot projects can be beneficial. The benefits of learning from ontological clashes and leveraging existing synergies are also discussed. Next, we present the reflections of an engineer on the overall coordination of the research teams and on the benefits and challenges for the engineers on the project in determining the impact of the project interventions on the energy consumption and thermal comfort in participants' homes, while collaborating and learning from the other disciplines. We conclude the article with some recommendations and guidance for those interested in or already doing interdisciplinary projects.

On interdisciplinary research

Collaborative projects that draw upon multiple disciplines and perspectives are increasingly emphasised in social research and social policy. Major research funding is increasingly focused on multiple discipline, multi-faculty and multi-institution collaborations (Spiller *et al.*, 2015). Interdisciplinary research is encouraged and supported by major funding bodies, institutions and organisations such as the Australian Research Council (ARC), the National Health and Medical Research Council, Research Councils UK, the European Union Seventh Research Framework Programme, the National Institutes of Health in the USA and the World Health Organisation (Nair *et al.*, 2008; Spiller *et al.*, 2015). This shift in how research is funded, alongside changes in academia such as interdisciplinary teaching programmes and faculties, and joint appointments, has accentuated the value of interdisciplinary research in the eyes of funders, institutions and community stakeholders (Nair *et al.*, 2008).

However, despite an increasing focus on interdisciplinary work globally, there can be some confusion regarding terminology, definitions and understanding of different types of disciplinarity. Cross-disciplinary, multi-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary are often used interchangeably in the extant literature and in practice (Choi and Pak, 2007). Achieving some clarification on the terminology is important for framing the experiences from the Energy + Illawarra project and for the more general debate about collaborative work in social marketing. Cross-disciplinary research is identified as viewing one discipline and creating knowledge from the perspectives of another discipline (Zeigler, 1990), for example a study on the politics of literature would be cross-disciplinary. Multi-disciplinarity involves people from different disciplines working together while each drawing upon their own disciplinary knowledge – it is an additive rather integrative approach with the disciplinary perspectives contrasted but not changed (Klein, 1990). For example, consumer researchers, health researchers and psychologists may study the use of health services, each coming from their own disciplinary perspective. Transdisciplinary research involves using the knowledge and methods of various disciplines to generate new knowledge, approaches or even new disciplines that transcend the original disciplinary perspectives (Nair *et al.*, 2008). It could be argued that social marketing is a transdisciplinary field in which knowledge, and methods are integrated to develop new ideas for behaviour and social change.

While work in social marketing may involve each of these different forms of disciplinarity, as explained later, in the context of Energy + Illawarra, interdisciplinary seemed to be the most appropriate term. Aboelela *et al.* (2007, p. 341) define interdisciplinary research as:

Any study or group of studies undertaken by scholars from two or more distinct scientific disciplines. The research is based upon a conceptual model that links or integrates theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, uses study design and methodology that is not limited to any one field, and requires the use of perspectives and skills of the involved disciplines throughout multiple phases of the research process.

According to Szostak (2007), interdisciplinary research must begin by asking an interdisciplinary question. Interdisciplinary work focuses on problems or questions that are too complex to be answered by any one discipline and draws upon and integrates the insights of and evaluates the findings of specialised research, and the use of multiple theories and methods – acknowledging the strengths and weaknesses of each (Szostak, 2013). Furthermore, interdisciplinarians acknowledge that each discipline is characterised by an evolving perspective of knowing the world but seek to avoid disciplinary stereotypes. The focus is on developing more nuanced understandings of an issue (Szostak, 2013).

Various benefits of interdisciplinary research have been discussed, including tackling complex problems that are beyond the scope of one discipline, greater translational impact and generation of new knowledge (Klein, 1990; Spiller *et al.*, 2015). Benefits to researchers and institutions include the creation of opportunities to broaden the scope of research and teaching, expanding professional networks, increased citations and learning new methods (Nair *et al.*, 2008; Leahey *et al.*, 2017).

However, several barriers and challenges to doing, and emerging from, interdisciplinary work have also been identified. Research shows that interdisciplinary research receives consistently lower levels of funding success from bodies such as the ARC due to reviewers retaining interdisciplinary preference (Bronham *et al.*, 2016). Academic institutions are still primarily organised according to disciplinary-based boundaries with faculty members rewarded, promoted and offered tenure-based on contributions to a specific discipline

(Nair *et al.*, 2008). Junior scholars consistently raise concerns that interdisciplinary work is detrimental to their careers due to the lack of recognition it has in tenure and promotion criteria (Nair *et al.*, 2008). Research suggests that it is often difficult to publish interdisciplinary work with journals and reviewers often deeming the use of a wide body of knowledge and methods a weakness, and asking interdisciplinarians to narrow the scope and explore discipline specific topics in more detail (Spiller *et al.*, 2015). This often leads to a lower number of papers being published by interdisciplinarians than their discipline specific colleagues (Leahey *et al.*, 2017).

Interdisciplinary researchers may also face difficulties in negotiating differences in terminology and culture depending on the research context and this can create frustration at having to constantly re-educate new disciplines about one's own discipline (Szostak, 2007; Nair *et al.*, 2008). Being an interdisciplinary researcher requires significant investment of time and effort to understand multiple domains of knowledge and integrate them in a single project. Time and effort is also needed to build relationships, manage different personalities, work with large numbers of people and coordinate with colleagues and co-authors from different backgrounds (Nair *et al.*, 2008; Leahey *et al.*, 2017).

These challenges have led to the emergence of some guidance for doing interdisciplinary work in the extant literature. A well-thought rationale for interdisciplinary research, with the research team working together to establish how they define and view interdisciplinary research, is one recommendation (Nair *et al.*, 2008). A project plan that includes assessment of whether interdisciplinary goals are met, with regular monitoring, evaluation and refinement of progress, should be in place. Clearly establishing each discipline and person's role and contribution to the study at the outset, regularly assessing contributions and putting strategies in place to maximise the contributions of each researcher, can also help. Strong leadership to ensure all disciplines remain engaged, with attention paid to possible power imbalances is also important (Nair *et al.*, 2008).

Regular meetings and communications by team members, and explaining ideas in plain and simple language using examples that most people can relate to, are also recommended (Klein, 2008; Su, 2016). This can help contribute to the development of good relationships in which dialogue, reciprocity and mutual understand, trust and respect emerge (Nair *et al.*, 2008; Clark *et al.*, 2017). Reflexivity in interdisciplinary research is also important, to challenge assumptions that are brought to the field, to doing research and to understand the world (Wong, 2016). Being open minded, and methodologically agnostic by starting with what and how questions and not making any assumptions about methods, or approaches that should be used can help mitigate ontological divisions and serve to broaden the frame of inquiry (Su, 2016; Wong, 2016). Spiller *et al.* (2015) argue that this involves an element of letting go of our disciplines and coming together to engage new perspectives and knowledge. These benefits, challenges and recommendations for doing interdisciplinary research are considered here in the context of our experience with the Energy + Illawarra Project.

About Energy + Illawarra

Aligning with Stember's (1991) explanation of interdisciplinary work, the Energy + Illawarra project involved the integration of knowledge and methods from social marketing, human geography, engineering and community development (represented by community partners) using a synthesis of approaches to understand and promote energy efficiency among older low income people in regional NSW. In the case of Energy + Illawarra, the research questions were as follows: how can we understand the lived experiences of older low-income people's energy use? How can we promote energy efficiency among this group?

The project was funded as part of the Australian Government's Low Income Energy Efficiency Program (LIEEP). The project involved working with older low-income people in the Illawarra region of NSW to support domestic energy efficient practices and comfort and wellbeing in the home through research and subsequent development and implementation of a community energy-efficiency programme (Cooper *et al.*, 2016). The project mixed method design included a baseline and two follow-up surveys (Cooper *et al.*, 2016), focus groups (Waitt *et al.*, 2016; Butler *et al.*, 2016), ethnographic interviews and video ethnography (Pink, 2007), cognitive neuroscience (Gordon and Ciorciari, 2017), process evaluation research and impact evaluation research (Cooper *et al.*, 2016).

We used a combination of theoretical perspectives to inform the project including value theory (Sánchez-Fernández and Iniesta-Bonillo, 2007), social practice theory (Reckwitz, 2002), socio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the Foucauldian concept of governmentality (Foucault, 1978) and the "adaptive" approach to the analysis of thermal comfort of occupants of naturally ventilated buildings (de Dear and Brager, 1998). The community intervention consisted of a multi-level and multi-component strategic social marketing programme including tailored retrofits to people's homes, newsletters, narrative videos, LCD brochures, small energy efficiency products, a project website, social media activity on Twitter and Facebook, community events, media relations and media advocacy, stakeholder advocacy for example with energy retailers and policy advocacy with local and national government (see www.energyplusillawarra.com.au).

The project was conceived as a collaboration between social marketers, human geographers, engineers, the regional development agency, community service providers, aged care providers and local councils. Each of these stakeholders had important project roles. The complexity of the topic of energy efficiency, and the many interdependencies in the project, required a truly interdisciplinary approach (Szostak, 2013). The project was not one in which people working in different paradigms could simply do their bit in a silo – the project team had to come together, understand one another, and acknowledge that disciplinary knowledge produces different rather than similar understandings of the problem. In the following reflections of a social marketer, a human geographer and an engineer who worked on the project, we draw out some of the practicalities of doing interdisciplinary research.

Reflections of Ross – a social marketer

Although I had worked on interdisciplinary projects in public health in the past that had brought together marketers, public health researchers, psychologists and sociologists, the Energy + Illawarra project was one of the most complex projects that I have worked on and was also the most reliant on interdisciplinary perspectives. One of the key challenges I found especially at the start of the project and indeed throughout was issues with language and discourse. Social marketers are familiar with the idea of focusing on people, and building our approaches around citizen research insight. We know that people often would not do things just because we tell them to. We know that human behaviour is often not rational. We understand that people do not just do things because we provide them with technologies and infrastructure. Yet, using such language and concepts with people coming from different disciplinary perspectives was a challenge in the Energy + Illawarra project.

I remember spending a lot of time in project meetings trying to carefully explain, justify and often defend the use of social marketing principles and why it was important to use research to guide our intervention, take a bottom-up citizen-oriented approach and develop intervention activities after and not before we had gained depth of insight about older low-income people's energy practices and their capabilities, issues and concerns. Some of the

project stakeholders appeared to not initially understand marketing, and especially not social marketing – believing that it was a form of advertising, information provision or education. On reflection, I perhaps could have explained things more plainly in laymen's terms to get my ideas across.

Similarly, I was not familiar with some of the language and concepts of other project partners. I was initially frustrated at my inability to understand the objectives of the regional development agency which differed from my own. The terminology of human geographers was intriguing, seemed full of relevance and potential and took me back to my days as an Arts and Social Science undergraduate student but necessitated a crash course and revisit of key literatures and theories. For example, subjectivities (a sense of self that is related to consciousness, agency, personhood, reality and truth) were often discussed by the geographers. The language of the engineers which focused on buildings and technologies and not so much on people seemed a little foreign to me. Was thermal comfort (a condition of the mind that expresses satisfaction with the thermal environment) only a feeling or something that is measurable? This was an important realisation. If we want to work across disciplines, we need to build in time to talk, learn each other's language, terminology and key discourses and do our homework to get up to speed on what each other is saying, what it means and understanding how we can piece everything together to make sense and move forward. Having our weekly project meetings provided us with a sanctuary and the space and time to negotiate these issues of language, terminology and understanding was crucial to build relationships and a way forward (Rowe, 2008; Spiller *et al.*, 2015). However, this meant that sometimes things moved slowly and took more time than we had budgeted.

Doing interdisciplinary projects means that we will work with people embedded in different paradigms and understandings of what exists in the world and what can be understood. These philosophical questions that form the focus of metaphysics are important as they direct how we each understand the nature of being, existence or reality (Gale, 2002). My own ontological position is that of a critical realist, yet a somewhat pragmatic one. This is not an easy position to take as ontological discourse encourages us to identify with either the Parmenidean ontology of being – on permanent and unchanging reality and a singular “truth” in the world (Gray, 2009), or the Heraclitean ontology of becoming and a changing, transient and emergent world with multiple “truths”. Influenced by the ideas of Quine (1960), I am a mixed methods researcher and use whatever methods that are necessary to understand an issue whether quantitative, qualitative or both. However, my work often takes a critical bent, and critical theory is often in my mind when doing research and taking action (Gordon, 2011; Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014).

Yet, working on Energy + Illawarra forced me to confront my own ontological, epistemological and methodological beliefs when reflecting on the perspectives of my colleagues from other disciplines. The human geographers on the project appeared to come from a Heraclitean ontological perspective and primarily used qualitative methods. We shared some common ground that helped us integrate the insights of our disciplines (Szostak, 2007), for example, we discussed at length how qualitative research can be used to inform social action. But there was also some divergence as human geography seemed more focused on understanding, than acting.

The engineers appeared to take a Parmenidean ontological perspective in which everything was measurable and quantifiable and logic ruled the world. My initial reading was that engineers thought that supporting energy efficiency was a matter of measurement, buildings and technologies, and less so about people. Some engineering colleagues reflected that “we don't do people”. However, during the project, engineers were very open to alternative perspectives and strongly embraced a people and practice centred approach.

Collaborating with the engineers, human geographers and community partners on energy efficiency newsletters, narrative videos and the participant-centred retrofit programme enabled us to socialise different forms of knowledge into interdisciplinary action. For example, ethnographic insights on billing anxiety from the human geographers' research, and technical advice from the engineers on how to use energy efficiently was incorporated into the newsletters and videos developed by the social marketing team. The videos were then distributed by community partners on the project. The retrofit programme involved consultation between the engineers and householders on their preferred installations and drew upon research insights from the focus groups and surveys conducted by the social marketing team, and ethnographic interviews by the human geographers. The regional development agency then developed and drew upon detailed case notes for each household to then manage the retrofit installation programme.

What I learned through this process was that it is important to be open-minded rather than fixed in our understandings of how we see and understand the world. We may have our own ontological, epistemological and methodological preferences, but we should be able to listen to, acknowledge and account for other points of view. On the Energy + Illawarra project, I found that it took some thinking space and time to learn about and understand the perspectives of others and adjust my own thinking accordingly. Collaborative action such as making the videos, newsletters and running the retrofit programme offered the chance to bring together our ideas and put them into practice.

A further important challenge in the project was overcoming divergence in stakeholder objectives, biases and building consensus. As a social marketer, my primary focus on this project was on listening to, trying to understand and working with people to help them reflect on their practices and empower them to be energy efficient whilst maintaining or improving their comfort and wellbeing. However, as an academic, I also wanted to do good quality, rigorous and ethical research and maintain the integrity of our approach as I believed this would help make the project successful. Of course, in the modern University, researchers are required to publish or perish (Neill, 2008), and given my time and energy spent on the project, I would need to produce research outputs. My biases towards using research to inform a community intervention and my resistance to being project managed and running through checklists and risk management strategies caused some issues with other actors. It was only after some time and learning from experience that I let-go and compromised on some issues (Spiller *et al.*, 2015).

Other stakeholders on the project had different objectives and biases. The regional development agency seemed to prioritise delivering a project on time, on budget and according to the requirements of the funding body. These are important objectives for a development agency. They seemed less concerned with using theory to inform the programme, or on the importance of rigorous research. This created differences in expectations, and tensions that took time to resolve through dialogue between project partners. This can cause some frustration and stress and take up a lot of time. The academics on the project spent significant time and energy explaining the concepts and the importance of the use of theory, research methods and generating research insight and taking a participant-oriented approach to the project, to project partners. We also had to argue why we could not come up with an exact specification of the intervention activities until we had carried out the formative research and pilot testing of ideas.

The community service providers seemed focused on community engagement and were concerned that this was not a strong enough feature of the project. Others on the project who were out in the community talking to people every day about their lives, their homes and their energy use practices took a different view on this. Furthermore, some of the

non-academic project partners thought that the academics were mostly interested in abstract theory and research and publishing journal articles, rather than on a genuine desire to help people in the community. These different perspectives and biases meant that it took quite a lot of time on the Energy + Illawarra project to build consensus and work effectively together. I believe that building in time and space in which we could hold a series of workshops to talk openly about our perspectives, objectives, approaches, biases and areas of possible compromise would have been beneficial. This may have helped us to be more collaborative, cooperative, inclusive and participatory as an overall project team and to build consensus earlier in the project (Hartnett, 2011).

My discussion on perspectives and biases leads me to consider the importance of reflexivity when working on an interdisciplinary project. Reflexivity encourages us to question whether certain biases and assumptions have influenced the conduct of research and how research insights are represented (Lynch, 2000). Essentially, reflexivity refers to a crisis of the truth in which traditional understandings of knowledge, reality and existence are open to debate. In the social marketing sphere, Gordon and Gurrieri (2014) argue that to move beyond biases and build consensus on social change issues, key actors are required to engage in reflexive processes to understand how social problems are framed, what role institutionalised practices play, address biases and divergent objectives and work together towards building consensus.

I believe that the actors involved in Energy + Illawarra would have benefited from greater engagement in the ideas and the practice of being reflexive. My interpretation is that we each brought our own biases, perspectives and objectives to the project and due to a lack of experience, time and expediency, and engagement with reflexivity, we did not engage in enough collective reflexive dialogue. Rather, we often learned from each other and shifted our positions reactively, and sometimes following periods of tension. If I were to do it all again, I would try to pay more time and attention to reflexivity and encourage others to do so as much as possible.

A final observation on doing interdisciplinary research relates to project outputs. As a social marketer, I am required by my University management to publish in high ranked marketing journals. And research suggests that business journals exhibit bias in favour of mono-disciplinary research (Rafols *et al.*, 2012). Human Geographers are encouraged to publish in journals in their disciplinary field. Engineers have their own expectations about outputs. This makes it a challenge to work on interdisciplinary publications, and often necessitates an author from one discipline to take a lead while integrating input from other authors and disciplinary perspectives into the text. This is an exercise in careful negotiation and skilful crafting. It also requires consideration on what journal to submit a paper to – for example journals such as Energy Policy may be open to interdisciplinary work, whereas our experience with some high ranked marketing journals was they are less amenable. Furthermore, as a social marketer I was committed to extensive dissemination in other outlets including the media – with a core objective of engaging the community on the topic of energy efficiency, whereas other project partners were wary of the media, or wished to use the media to promote their own organisation and objectives. Reflecting on this, I think building in time and planning dissemination activities from the outset is important, as it can help manage such issues when doing interdisciplinary research.

Although there are challenges in doing interdisciplinary research, I found the experience overwhelmingly positive, and I learned so much from working on the project. It broadened my horizons and forged new ideas and working relationships. So, my advice to others interested in interdisciplinary work is to be aware of potential issues and challenges but see it as a great opportunity to make a difference.

Reflections of Gordon – a geographer

As a human geographer, my work focuses on inequality through three strands: household sustainability, fuel poverty and urban revitalisation. I work from a critical and interpretive perspective using qualitative and ethnographic methods of inquiry. My participation was to present the “human dimensions” of domestic energy use. My entry point was that of situated knowledge or lived experience. This is a different starting point to much energy research within the social sciences. For examples, economists may usually use measurable social units that quantify energy; including those of costs, consumption and market segments. Instead, following the lead of Doreen Massey (2003), I advocated for space. More specifically, I advocated for the ways in which energy is consumed in the ongoing constellation of relationships that simultaneously make and remake both places as home and the multiple subjectivities in and through the home (like mothers, fathers, thriftiness, environmentalists, carers, hosts, guests and grandparents).

What implications arise for a project if energy use is understood in terms of space? In short, attention turns to energy consumption conceived as an event; that is turning on a light, or switching on the washing machine, may be thought of as comprised of a constellation of human and non-human relationships. It is through the connections and disconnections of these relationships, alongside a multiplicity of domestic subjectivities, that spaces understood as home are made and remade. Hence, the “human dimensions” of energy research rather than being reduced to quantifiable social units become ideas, emotions, bodily skills and materials (domestic appliances, curtains, carpets, pets) in an ongoing process of home-making. This spatially informed socio-cultural approach offered our project a framework alive to the critiques that energy policy to date largely ignores social norms, routines and embodied skills, and fails to take seriously the materiality of houses. In what follows, I draw out wider implications for interdisciplinary research from reflecting on my working relationships with the engineering and social marketing teams in this project.

Why were the engineers at the University of Wollongong (UoW) receptive to knowledge and arguments not couched in terms of physical units? In my experience of the project, thinking about energy beyond physical units was not ignored but embraced by engineers in the design and delivery of household energy retrofits. The groundwork of confronting the challenge of communication of research between disciplines had been laid at the UoW through seed funding and start-up projects. These smaller projects may be envisaged as experiments in interdisciplinary inquiry. In the process of conducting these projects, there were moments where competing agendas and ontologies clashed. For example, the notion that thermal comfort is as much entangled in personal biographies, alongside social norms, as it is in measurable units. The idea that decisions around replacing a refrigerator are always more than a calculation of kilowatt hours.

Such clashes need not be destructive. Rather, they provided moments to open-up conversations and helped to join the dots between two research centres, the Australian Centre for Cultural Environmental Research (AUSCCER), of which I am a member, and the Sustainable Buildings Research Centre (SBRC), directed by Professor Paul Cooper. Each centre was positioned within a strong disciplinary base in the social and physical sciences, respectively, and members shared similar values, including a commitment to social and environmental justice. The wider lesson is the importance of not only research track-records but also the generation of trust and respect through experimentation alongside an openness towards different knowledge. These conversations moved our collaboration away from thinking of interdisciplinary research as providing a more accurate or complete understanding of the problem of energy efficiency as if its exist in an objective world simply waiting for the correct answer. Instead of seeking or providing a correct answer to understand the energy use

by older low-income households in the Illawarra, our project sought insights to what is taken-for-granted in terms of how domestic energy living arrangements sustained both domestic subjectivities and the house-as-home. Our starting point for policy interventions is thus thinking about different energy living arrangements, mindful that any alternative arrangement will have implications for the multiple subjectivities sustained through the ways domestic energy is used to sustain the house-as-home.

Synergy underpinned the working relationship in this project between geography and social marketing. What accounted for this synergy? In short, critical inquiry; that is provision of evaluative reasons. Our shared critical ontology sought to provide insights to the diverse social norms of older low-income households. The conversation between geography and social marketing thus became about the *politics* of the research, that is debating what different proposals offered to achieve the project aim of assisting low-income older person households to be more energy efficient while maintaining quality of life/comfort. Here, our discussions focused on where activities across policy, public, professional and academic domains could be best be focused to achieve both energy efficiency and quality of life of older low-income households. In this project, we used conventional policy intervention tools including, training programmes facilitated by WEA, academic publications, newspaper articles, Facebook and reports to the Commonwealth Department.

Alongside these interventions, we discussed the benefits of using participants' own narratives as part of a social marketing strategy. We shared an interest in the transformative qualities of narratives, and the potential of story-telling to encourage personal reflection. Hence, we envisaged that a transformative approach for older low-income households might be possible by incorporating their energy narratives to revisit if households were making sensible choices in how they used energy around the home. This resulted in the design of collaborative video narratives; that were then distributed through the project website, and on LCD brochures through community networks facilitated by aged-care providers and the Illawarra Forum. The design of the narrative videos was envisaged as a way to use story-telling to help open-up conversations around energy use (such as laundry, refrigerators, lighting, heating and cooling) by incorporating the lived experience of older low-income households alongside technical or scientific understandings provided by engineers. In the narrative videos, we sought to socialise the engineering science knowledge about the best way to use energy efficiently to encourage people to reflect and mobilise change.

As an example, one narrative among our project participants that emerged from our research was that a reverse cycle air conditioner was too expensive to use in the winter to heat the home. However, the expert advice from the engineers on the project was that a reverse cycle conditioner is one of the most energy efficient ways to heat a home. In one of the narrative videos the narrative about reverse cycle air conditioners being too expensive is told, and in response information is given that for the same heat output, a reverse cycle air conditioner will be 2.5 to 6 times more efficient than an electric heater. This process of opening-up conversations around energy was particularly important for low income households in the Illawarra, given they thought of themselves as both thrifty, and energy use as too mundane to talk about with friends or relatives. The wider implications arising from the collaborative narrative videos is one example of how an experimental design emerged from an inter-disciplinary conversation.

Reflections of Paul – an engineer

I would not say that this was the biggest, or most the complex, project I have played a major role in delivering, however, it certainly was one of the most difficult in terms of bringing a

group of disparate stakeholders together, including the three research teams, each with different backgrounds, approaches, cultures and expectations. In addition to the challenges faced by the researchers from three very different disciplines and the need to come to a consensus on research approach and practical implementation of the project, as outlined above, there were also some extremely strong external pressures that arose from the very beginning of the project.

These were largely a result of major changes to the original project plan necessitated by issues such as the need to adopt a completely new participant recruitment strategy using random digit dialling in the community rather than recruitment through our community partners due to lack of time and resources on their part, and the constraint clearly stated by the funding body that the completion date of the project could not be extended under any circumstances, despite a nine-month delay in signing a project collaborative agreement, and hence delayed recruitment of research staff. So, this was not an easy project!

It is interesting that my social marketer colleague, in his reflections above, thought that “Some of the project stakeholders did not initially understand marketing, and especially not social marketing”. At the start of the project, I was certainly a case in point, as I had not been previously exposed to the social marketing discipline in any way. It took some time for myself, and other project partners, to absorb the key principles and approaches that were espoused by my social marketing colleagues, which indeed caused tensions. At the time, I felt that it was taking more time than it should for me to gain a clear understanding of the expectations and approach of the social marketing team, and I agree with the thoughts above that, in hindsight, it would have been helpful to build in time at the beginning of the project to hold “[. . .] workshops to talk openly about our perspectives, objectives, approaches [. . .]” and that this approach should be adopted in future projects.

It is also interesting that my social marketer colleague in his reflections above thought that the “engineers appeared to take a [. . .] perspective in which everything was measurable and quantifiable and logic ruled the world” and that “a common refrain from our engineering colleagues at the start was that we don’t do people” at least initially. This was even though myself and the engineering team had worked closely with my Human Geographer co-author and his colleagues on several energy efficiency projects prior to Energy + Illawarra, and that I had recently co-supervised a Human Geography research student studying residential energy efficiency for low income groups to completion. However, it was the first time I had worked with my social marketing colleague. As an engineer, I am a scientist – which identifies with a positivist, epistemic universalism. However, I work across disciplines with a commitment to social and environmental justice, so do not always tend to the stereotypes of the engineering discipline. This simply serves to highlight just how difficult it is to fully adopt and understand the language and culture of the disciplines of one’s collaborators, and how hard one must work to overcome the stereotypical views of engineers that those from other disciplines might hold. It took some time and many weekly meetings at the start of the project to traverse some of these issues.

Nevertheless, once the initial phase of the project was underway the research teams did succeed in developing an extremely collaborative and mutually supportive and respectful *modus operandi*. There were many practical examples that demonstrated just how much extra value was brought to the project table by leveraging the different perspectives of the three research teams. For example, the researchers from all three research teams engaged directly with the program participants through home visits for surveys, building audits and retrofit installations, phone calls to book appointments, and letters and emails. The teams worked together on this by sharing a participant database with detailed case notes and

insights, and regular meetings to discuss participant cases, to foster common understanding.

This also meant that when the research teams came together to workshop ideas on how best to help the participants generally (e.g. how best to develop social marketing resources and ethnographic interview topics) their ideas were built on a shared foundation of understanding participants' situations, perceptions and desires, as well as understanding the characteristics of the participant cohort. Another example of this synergy and interdisciplinary collaboration was the development of the narrative videos, which was again born of the researchers' shared understanding of the participants and their view of energy in the home. Here, the skills and knowledge of the social marketing team in devising appropriate storyboards and communication tools were linked directly with the engineering team's ideas on how best to portray complex energy flows in the home (e.g. in explaining the operation of air conditioning systems in a simple, but rigorous, way), which in turn was informed by the in-depth ethnographic insights provided by the human geographers.

Another benefit that myself and engineering colleagues perceived to come from our multidisciplinary approach was that the development of the project brand "Energy + Illawarra" by the social marketing team and developed based on initial formative research, gave the whole project team a real sense of belonging and cohesion as a welcome by-product of the goal to engage effectively with the project participants and the wider community. We also engaged in team building exercises such as lunches, dinners and lawn bowling which strengthened our collaboration. In most engineering projects, this aspect of engagement within the team and with external stakeholders is generally not as well executed.

The engineers also learnt a great deal in terms of research methodologies from the social marketing and human geography teams. The impressive use of rigorous survey tools, attention to data security and ethical issues, quantitative versus qualitative data collection and analysis and in-depth statistical analyses by our colleagues opened new research ideas and new avenues to link their research outcomes with our quantitative energy consumption, thermal comfort and other technical data. For example, the focus group research by the social marketing team and the ethnographic interviews by the human geography team identified the issue of frugal energy use practices caused by billing anxiety and generational commitment to thrift (Waitt *et al.*, 2016), which helped the engineer team interpret temperature data we collected in participants' homes. The baseline survey conducted by the social marketers helped characterise participant's energy knowledge, attitudes and behaviour which helped inform the building audits and retrofit programme led by the engineers.

The emphasis placed by the social marketing team on issues such as "getting the message out to the community", advocacy for action to improve the situation of our participants, and so on, was something new for myself and the other engineers, and was something that caused a degree of anxiety at first. My experience was that media tend to not always represent things accurately. However, as trust was built between the research teams and other project stakeholders, the benefits of this very proactive approach, to publicising not just the project but also the need for action, were appreciated. We were able to generate significant outputs from the project in terms of advocacy and public relations, which helped to foster conversations in the community and in policy circles.

Discussion and recommendations

Our reflections on Energy + Illawarra identify some important discussion points and generated learning from the project. These help us present some recommendations that can potentially help guide those interested in, or currently engaged in interdisciplinary work in social change (Table I). Our first recommendation is to formally build in time and space at

Issue	Recommendations
Time	<p>Build adequate time into the project plan for dialogue, relationship building, development of trust, and identification of an interdisciplinary</p> <p>Be creative in funding bids to carve out time by incorporating stakeholder workshops that are fully resourced</p> <p>Allocate time for team building exercises</p>
Resources	<p>Apply for enough funding and time to cover all the key goals for a project</p> <p>Map and draw upon additional institutional resources when available</p> <p>Be prepared to push back for more time or request extra resources when needed</p> <p>Be cautious and conservative when budgeting for interdisciplinary projects – do not overpromise and under deliver</p>
Communication and relationship building	<p>Meet regularly ideally face to face, and ensure this is built into the project plan and into people's workload</p> <p>Take time to learn each other's disciplines, ideas, and language and then work towards collaborative opportunities</p> <p>Explain things in plain language and using real life examples that people can relate to</p> <p>Use lack of knowledge or understanding about certain issues as an opportunity to open reflexive conversations</p> <p>Engage in team building exercises such as staff lunches, dinners, and games and other activities</p>
Reflexivity	<p>Make sure project staff know about and identify with the concept of reflexivity from the outset – perhaps have a session on reflexivity at project start</p> <p>Spend some time in meetings discussing and reflecting upon each other's perspectives and discuss the implications of these</p> <p>Seek ways in which negotiated truths can emerge through dialogue in meetings and workshops to offer ways forward</p>
Experimentation	<p>Start small by collaborating on pilot projects – this helps generate trust, respect, openness towards different knowledge, and fosters experimentation</p> <p>Institutions should be encouraged to regularly fund pilot interdisciplinary projects that are distributed fairly across researchers of different backgrounds and hierarchy</p> <p>Be willing to take risks by using new(er) research methods (e.g. video ethnography or neuroscience), or intervention approaches (e.g. narrative videos) when possible</p>
Leveraging existing synergies and collaborating through social action	<p>Map overlaps of interest in terms of ontology, epistemology, methods, and intervention activities</p> <p>Build project activities around existing synergies</p> <p>In projects that involve intervention and social action, be creative and experimental and seek to develop intervention activities such as design and delivery of services, marketing materials, products and materials, and advocacy and public relations, that harness the ideas across the interdisciplinary team</p>
Planning and setting expectations	<p>Identify a project leader from the start that is open-minded, commands respect, listens, ensures active participation from all disciplines, and effectively keeps the project moving forward</p>

(continued)

Table I.
Issues with, and recommendation for, interdisciplinary projects

Issue	Recommendations
Collective identity	<p>Pay attention to power imbalances and address these so that each project collaborator is respected and has agency</p> <p>Discuss and clearly identify each discipline and researcher's role and contribution to the project and embed these into the project plan</p> <p>Regularly assess contributions of all project collaborators, and put strategies in place to maximise contributions such as developing specific activities for engagement in research, planning, analysis, or interventions</p> <p>Discuss and agree on project output priorities across the project team including number of reports and journal articles to be written, target journals, and other dissemination outputs</p> <p>Set interdisciplinary goals for the project at the outset, and regularly monitor, evaluate and refine progress</p> <p>Develop a common project brand and name that project members can share an identity with</p> <p>Work together on joint project tasks such as recruitment, research, design and implementation activities, analysis, write up of reports and journal papers</p>

Table I.

the start and throughout interdisciplinary projects to hold workshops between project partners. As Rowe (2008, p. 8) identifies: "Time is critical in productive interdisciplinary research". It is often the case that things must go slowly. Time is needed for individuals to listen to each other and to learn to work together". However, formally building in time can be challenging as such work is often not accountable on workload models and is not usually funded (Clark *et al.*, 2017), so creative approaches such as describing extra time as consisting of running stakeholder workshops may be necessary.

We recommend regular meetings and workshops that create time and space, and offer a platform for open-minded and honest conversations that help stakeholders acknowledge and understand different language, perspectives and objectives across various stakeholders (Bracken and Oughton, 2006; Repko and Szostak, 2017). This helps create what Spiller *et al.* (2015, p. 556) refer to as the "research sanctuary". This should ideally be built in to a project proposal and planned as a key activity at the start, and then continued throughout the project. In the Energy + Illawarra project, this was carried out on an *ad hoc* rather than a planned basis which caused some issues with carving out time and space to build understanding. It is often difficult to get such time and space in the workplace, but it is very important in interdisciplinary projects. In our future collaborations beyond Energy + Illawarra, which are already underway, we will work hard on carving out space and time.

Another recommendation is to be critically reflexive when doing interdisciplinary projects. Actors in collaborative projects should be encouraged to think beyond their own ontological, epistemological and methodological subjectivities and seek to critique their own perspectives while acknowledging and seeking to understand alternative points of view. In Energy + Illawarra, we probably could have done more of this as our reflexive action was often reactive rather than proactive. Here, reflexivity should be individual *and* collective (Lingard *et al.*, 2007). Reflexivity is an important process for helping to forge new ideas and develop consensus in interdisciplinary teams (Barry *et al.*, 1999; Barry, 2003). This

necessitates a recognition that there is no correct way of doing things, but different ways of doing things that all should be acknowledged. Being reflexive also leads to a need to be prepared to compromise and be adaptive in interdisciplinary projects. Be open to compromise on key objectives, timelines, methods and approaches, as this helps demonstrate a willingness to listen to other points of view and form a collective and plural, rather than individual imperative, in interdisciplinary projects (Klein, 2008; Miller *et al.*, 2008). Spiller *et al.* (2015) describe interdisciplinary research as being carnivalesque, and it can be chaotic, but there is plasticity that supports the idea of letting go and coming together.

Our experiences of interdisciplinary research also identify that clashes between ontologies and agendas need not be destructive (Miller *et al.*, 2008), but can be used to open-up conversations that help solidify understanding and team building (Lingard *et al.*, 2007). Not understanding a concept or the rationale for an approach or method can be used by members of a project team as a stimulus to hold a conversation during which different perspectives can be shared and new ideas can emerge. Another key recommendation is that seed funding and small pilot projects can offer safe spaces to experiment and help develop collaborative relationships and ideas. The experience of the SBRC and AUSCCER in working together on small pilot projects helped build relationships that were beneficial in the Energy + Illawarra project. Although less commonly discussed in the literature, starting small helps to build trust and generate respect for other disciplines and foster an openness towards proactively integrating knowledge from multiple disciplines (Klein, 2008). Institutions should be encouraged to regularly fund small pilot interdisciplinary projects that encourage relationship building and experimentation.

It is also important to leverage existing synergies in interdisciplinary research were possible (Repko and Szostak, 2017). In Energy + Illawarra, the human geography and social marketing teams shared an interest in critical inquiry. For us, collaborating on qualitative research during the project offered us a platform to identify such synergies and build project activities around this. Beyond this idea of leveraging synergies in research, collaborations involving social marketers often involve the design and delivery of behaviour/social change programmes. This means that social marketing work often goes beyond what is traditionally discussed and done in the world of interdisciplinary research, from understanding to social action. Collaborating not only on research but also on social action offers a space in which to really bring together interdisciplinary ideas. For example, in Energy + Illawarra, the social marketers, human geographers and engineers had a common interest in the possibility of using narratives and provision of technical advice to encourage project participants to reflect upon their energy use. Working together across disciplines on tangible project activities, such as the Energy + Illawarra narrative videos that involved all three research teams, can solidify collaborative relationships and a sense of collective purpose. A common brand can also help foster a sense of cohesion, and the project brand helped in our case as team members could identify as being members of the Energy + Illawarra team rather than members of a specific discipline – it gave us collective identity. These forms of social action that support interdisciplinary collaboration and lead to discernible outcomes beyond publications and reports are not something that has really been discussed heretofore in the literature on interdisciplinary work. Yet, social marketing offers a good platform for doing this.

Setting expectations on outputs from the start of interdisciplinary projects is also very important (Barry *et al.*, 1999). This means having good leadership, and openly discussing and agreeing terms on authorship, expected project outputs in terms of project reports,

number of journal articles to be written, target journals that acknowledge the demands of different disciplines, any media activity and other dissemination outputs such as conferences and seminars. It should also be recognised that publishing from interdisciplinary research is hard and requires additional concerted time and effort (Spiller *et al.*, 2015; Leahey *et al.*, 2017) – something that we struggled with somewhat in the Energy + Illawarra project.

Finally, a key learning from Energy + Illawarra is that interdisciplinary projects are resource intensive and adequate funding, time, space, staff and materials are essential for success (Repko and Szostak, 2017). Our project used up significant amounts of extra time, funding and materials than we anticipated, which would cause us to either be less ambitious or more parsimonious in our project plans in the future. A lack of resources can create anxiety and stress within and across interdisciplinary teams and threaten a collaborative environment. Provision of adequate resources for interdisciplinary projects relies on intelligent costing estimations, risk assessment, building in time for workshopping ideas and fostering collaboration, and institutional support, among other things.

Conclusion

This article brings together the reflections of a social marketer, a human geographer and an engineer who collaborated on Energy + Illawarra, a community energy-efficiency programme. We identified that making time and space to understand and acknowledge different language and discourse, and being critically reflexive to help overcome biases and build consensus are important when doing interdisciplinary work. We argued that setting expectations on project outputs and dissemination is also essential. Starting small through pilot projects that help experiment, build trust and create an openness to new knowledge can also be beneficial. Clashes in ontology need not create conflict, but can create opportunities to hold conversations that open-up new possibilities. Furthermore, leveraging existing synergies, working together across disciplines on project activities rather than operating in silos, and sharing a common project brand can help foster a collaborative environment. Finally, we make the case that access to adequate resources is key when doing interdisciplinary projects. We hope our reflections, and recommendations are useful to those interesting in or doing interdisciplinary work in social change.

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Approaching the wicked problem of obesity: an introduction to the food system compass

The wicked problem of obesity

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to focus on food consumption as part of the wicked problem of obesity. Specifically, the authors seek to explore the complex interplay between stakeholders such as food producers, marketers, health and medical practitioners and policymakers and their influence on the ways in which individuals consume food and also chart a course forward using a systems approach, social marketing techniques and social enterprise to develop solutions to effect change.

Design/methodology/approach – This is a conceptual paper that proposes the food system compass to understand the complex interplay between stakeholders.

Findings – This new tool will provide social marketers with an improved understanding of the complexity of interactions between stakeholders and outcomes and integrating the necessity for coordination within and across micro, meso, exo and macro levels of the system as well as across sectors, institutions and stakeholders.

Research limitations/implications – This is a conceptual paper and proposes the food system compass which offers a foundation for future research to expand upon.

Originality/value – This paper seeks to advance the theoretical base of social marketing by providing new insights into the trans-disciplinary and dynamic circumstances surrounding food consumption and obesity and highlights leverage points where joint actions can be facilitated with actors across and between micro, meso, exo and macro levels.

Keywords Obesity, Stakeholders, Complexity, Social marketing, Wicked problems, Stakeholder marketing

Paper type Conceptual paper



Introduction

There are many factors that impact societal well-being, with food consumption being an important one. While food consumption is a biological imperative for humans to exist, overconsumption leads to social issues including obesity. Food choices and eating habits are much more than a simple decision, or set of decisions, to provide energy or sustenance. They are a complex mix of personal, cultural and lifestyle choices, genetic predisposition, the result of environment and conditions of living and a variety of social and economic factors often referred to as social and economic determinants of health (Gustafson *et al.*, 2016). There is no such thing as a silver bullet “one size fits all” approach to reducing obesity. Rather, obesity has the hallmarks of a wicked problem. Wicked problems are typically multi-causal and more difficult to solve than others (Carvalho and Mazzon, 2013; Kennedy and Parsons, 2012). The purpose of this paper is to focus on food consumption as part of the wicked problem of obesity. Specifically, we seek to explore the complex interplay between stakeholders such as food producers, marketers, health and medical practitioners and policymakers and their influence on the ways in which individuals consume food and chart a course forward using a systems approach, social marketing techniques and social enterprise to develop solutions to effect change. Furthermore, we present a framework for use as an analytic tool that may assist in planning for programs aimed at complex social and public health problems such as obesity.

The prevalence of obesity has been increasing since the 1970s (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2012) and its presence has been associated with a broad range of non-communicable diseases (Ezzati and Riboli, 2013; Kihara and Matsuzawa, 2015), such as Type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and hypertension (Finkelstein *et al.*, 2005). Against this backdrop, it is not surprising obesity has been the focus of a plethora of studies seeking effective prevention and rectification strategies, with figures showing the obesity research effort has risen exponentially over that past decade and has involved 42 different disciplines (Khan *et al.*, 2016). This plethora of studies conducted across a variety of disciplines indicates that a multi-disciplinary approach may not be enough to make significant advances to address obesity, rather a transdisciplinary approach is needed, where individual disciplines stop trying to carve out a niche in the crowded health space, suspend their disciplinary biases, understand the remit of other disciplines and work together to create something new to solve the obesity problem.

Wicked problems such as obesity require action that is multi-level, multi-directional and coordinated (Daellenbach and Parkinson, 2017), and they require understanding of the actions of multiple inter-related stakeholders within an interdependent, interconnected, complex system, that is constantly changing, and therefore may take a long time to stabilise (Kelly *et al.*, 2016; May and Previte, 2016). A large body of evidence suggests there are many barriers to access and consumption of a healthy diet, even when people have a preference to eat well (Fielding and Simon, 2011). This is a particular problem for low socioeconomic status groups. The structure of the food system underpins many of these barriers including the availability of nutritious foods in rural and remote areas (Gustafson *et al.*, 2016; Neff *et al.*, 2009). However, these barriers are also present in urban areas where the quality and quantity of available foods varies substantially between neighbourhoods (Fielding and Simon, 2011 for a narrative on food swamps and food deserts). There is substantial evidence to suggest that healthy foods are often more expensive than less healthy alternatives, (Rao *et al.*, 2013) and healthy, culturally acceptable diets are often beyond the reach of low-income families (Barosh *et al.*, 2014). Lack of time, physical resources (Burns *et al.*, 2011), food literacy (Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014), skills and social support (Parkinson *et al.*, 2016b) are additional barriers to the preparation and consumption of healthy diets and can affect many

groups including geographically isolated, low socio-economic status and the culturally diverse. In a move away from neoliberal approaches, governments and policymakers have a role to play in lifting these barriers to empower and enable people to not only express healthy preferences but to enact healthy choices.

Understanding the interactions between stakeholders and the exchange and causal dynamics is required to identify deep strategic leverage points. There is a need to not only shift the people in the system, but also shift the system. This will require stakeholders to realign, amplify, extend and or transform the system by constantly learning and adapting. By taking a nonlinear approach, the disruption mechanisms in the system can be identified, and sustainability can be incorporated. The permeation of systems thinking into the social marketing paradigm is gaining momentum (Brychkov and Domegan, 2017), and it is argued that nonlinear causal research helps social marketing to break down barriers between behavioural and social change, regardless of the issues being tackled, with the future of the field incorporating transdisciplinary social science work (Domegan *et al.*, 2017). To this end, this paper uses stakeholder marketing as a revised perspective on social marketing, and views stakeholder networks as continuous instead of discrete multiplicities. This revised perspective offers a better understanding of stakeholder networks where the value exchange has become complex rather than dyadic, where the tension between stakeholder interests has become explicit rather than implicit, and control over marketing activities has become dispersed rather than centralised. Stakeholder marketing is defined as “activities within a system of social institutions and processes for facilitating and maintaining value through exchange relationships with multiple stakeholders” (Hult *et al.*, 2011, p. 57). Stakeholder marketing focuses on co-creation in network relationships rather than just dyadic relationships and acknowledges the potential of indirect creation of value (Frow and Payne, 2011; Hult *et al.*, 2011). Stakeholder marketing recognises that individual stakeholder relationships may be influenced by relationships with other stakeholders and that a diverse network of stakeholders creates value (Gummesson, 2008). Despite the growing attention to stakeholder marketing, social marketing literature to date has not gone much further than observing that multiple stakeholders are involved in wicked problems. As the current perspective does not fully reflect the wicked problems that social marketers experience in a complex network of interrelated stakeholders (Gummesson, 2008), there is a need for a more nuanced perspective within the social marketing discipline that recognises that stakeholders are interrelated. A key contribution of this conceptual paper is to provide a social marketing perspective that takes the interrelatedness of stakeholders into account. This system of interrelated stakeholders includes the microsystem which is the setting in which the individual lives; the mesosystem which concerns the relations between microsystems or connections between contexts; the exosystem links between a social setting in which the individual does not have an active role and the individual’s immediate context; and finally, the macrosystem is the overarching institutional patterns of culture in which individuals live including economic, social, educational, legal and political systems of which the micro, meso and exo are the concrete manifestations (Bronfenbrenner, 1995).

Food consumption – a wicked contributor to obesity

As noted earlier, the causal pathways to obesity are multifarious, with food consumption being a significant wicked contributor. As such, there has been an increasing focus on food purchasing and consumption decisions of individuals (Gortmaker *et al.*, 2011; Hawkes *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, there have been concerted efforts to solve inappropriate food consumption (and obesity) through individual-level interventions that restrict particular foods, limit quantities of other foods and require a high level of self-control. These efforts ignore the

social and cultural elements of eating which individuals willingly engage in to meet their needs for normality, connectedness and/or belonging. Moreover, by focusing on individual-level pathways, the complex systemic (aggregate) behaviours of food producers, health and medical practitioners, marketers and policymakers that combine with those of individuals may be overlooked. The interplay between these stakeholders and influences indicates the complexity or “wickedness” of food consumption, with the result being a situation where individuals, families or communities often consume foods in ways that lead to overweight and obesity. Each of the stakeholders in this complex system has multiple goals, and each is subject to multiple pressures and influences. As such, their actions can appear to be in conflict with each other and the ramifications of each action on other parties are often unclear; again, indicators of a wicked problem. An alternative approach is to frame food consumption in terms of a complex dynamic system with a range of social mechanisms.

While there have been numerous frameworks developed to examine the problem of obesity, many of these are linear rather than dynamic in nature, for example, the ANGELO framework (Swinburn *et al.*, 1999). The ANGELO framework is useful for dissecting obesogenic environments and prioritising future interventions; however, it does not provide an understanding of the complex interplay between stakeholders. Other existing complex diagrams, such as the Foresight Obesity System Map, also may serve as useful heuristics to demonstrate the sheer complexity of issues (Finegood *et al.*, 2010); however, they are perceived to lack practical utility because of the density of information provided (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2007). Therefore, we present a simplified framework for use as an analytic tool that may assist in planning for programs aimed at complex social and public health problems such as obesity. In the next section, we review the ways in which food consumption decisions and practices of the community can be influenced by five key stakeholder groups, namely, individuals, marketers, the food industry, the health and medical industry and the government.

Individuals as food consumers

Individuals, as stakeholders in food consumption, can influence food availability, access and variety for themselves and in many cases, members of their household. For example, they decide what to buy, how much and from where, and although it is widely recognised these individual decisions are influenced by outside sources, individuals do exercise human agency and impart a degree of control over their food choices (Parkinson *et al.*, 2016a). Such decisions can be shaped by a range of lifestyle factors including the presence of conflicting values and goals with respect to consuming food. And then, because individuals are embedded within a larger system, these food choices are subject to influences that arise from social and community networks, and socio-economic, cultural and environmental conditions.

There are multiple points of connection between individuals and other stakeholder groups. One way to illustrate these connections is through the issue of food literacy. Food literacy can be described as the practicalities involved with navigating the food system to obtain what is required to satisfy nutritional requirements and incorporates food and nutrition knowledge, food skills and abilities/capacity within a complex food system (Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014; Cullen *et al.*, 2015). Thus, food literacy involves both declarative knowledge (of “what is”), procedural knowledge (of “how to”) and the skills and willingness to apply this knowledge for the desired outcome. However, declarative knowledge is often warped by the environment. Individuals, for example, measure food volumes relatively (Chandon and Ordabayeva, 2009; Ordabayeva and Chandon, 2016), and when the environment shifts (for example, increasing sizes of dinner plates and food packages),

individuals may think they are reducing portions when in fact they are increasing consumption. By improving people's access to health information and their capacity and readiness to use it effectively, food literacy is critical to individual empowerment (Thomas and Irwin, 2011; Vidgen and Gallegos, 2014). Thus, improved food literacy has the potential to improve the quality of food choices (Block *et al.*, 2011) and therefore enables more healthful choices and improves individual and societal wellbeing.

In summary, although individuals have values and goals concerning food consumption, and exercise human agency in that direction, there appears to be many points in the system that provide positive feedback for unhealthy food consumption behaviours and patterns. Taking a transdisciplinary approach may assist in understanding how these elements come together and identifying the pressure points (bottlenecks) in the system that can be leveraged to improve food consumption behaviour. We address each of these pressure points in turn below.

Marketers as shapers of individuals' food consumption practices

Marketing plays an influential role in food consumption, as individuals are faced with a barrage of marketing strategies and messages from the food industry which seek to influence their food attitudes and choices (Chandon and Wansink, 2012). Marketing has been found to influence food consumption and practices, through aspects such as product packaging and placement, with the majority of these decisions happening with little cognitive effort or awareness (Wansink and Sobal, 2007).

Marketing strategies, including advertising, can effectively nudge consumption behaviours by making food more salient in the minds of individuals (Milosavljevic *et al.*, 2012). Furthermore, they can normalise consumption outside of regular meal times. Marketing strategies frequently connect food consumption to pleasant or desirable states or behaviours, for example, by positioning snack food consumption as an essential part of a well-deserved break or as the antidote to "grumpiness", whereas soda is associated with happy social times. These associations socialise the use of these foods within groups so that they become normalised and embedded in routine consumption practices.

Food retailers can also influence consumer choice through a range of marketing and merchandising activities that determine which items are offered for sale (Kahn and McAlister, 1997). Branding is also an important aspect of this sales activity, with retailers increasing their control over branding of food and grocery products and in so doing often determining the composition of the products offered to consumers (Cohen and Babey, 2012). The demands and wishes of consumers are important, but exist alongside retailers' activities in shaping consumer's choice, as retailers measure success in terms of increased sales and market share. Influencing what consumers buy is part of the competitive weaponry of large retailers and their tactics become more sophisticated as they succeed and grow. Whilst successful retailers undoubtedly respond to consumer demand, they also are a major influence in shaping food choice and preferences (Dawson, 2013). Over time, as the supermarket industry has discovered which store factors are most closely associated with sales and thus consumption patterns of consumers, store designs and practices have been modified to maximise profits (Dawson *et al.*, 2008).

Marketing also influences food consumption through both food socialisation and food literacy concepts. For example, health claims, such as low fat, made on food packaging can lead to increased consumption (Block *et al.*, 2011). While such claims may be intended to help individuals and can contribute positively to increases in food literacy, they can also cause confusion in terms of legitimacy and impact on energy intake. Taken together,

marketers exert considerable influence on food purchases and consumption, which in turn has implications in terms of individual well-being.

Health and medical industry as guides in food choice

The health and medical industries advocate monitoring and controlling the consumption (or non-consumption) of certain foods. In this way, the health and medical industry takes on some responsibility for increasing food literacy through education and health promotion and through the creation of programs to improve food consumption to meet health guidelines. Consequently, they act as a bridge between government guidelines and individuals. In essence, practitioners from the health and medical industries are tasked with the responsibility of communicating complex information to populations that consist of many different types of individuals who may be confused, apathetic, informed, misinformed or some combination thereof. For example, general practitioners (GPs) may be highly regarded by individuals as sources of dietary information (Jackson, 2001), despite GPs themselves admitting nutrition is only superficially addressed in general practice (Ball *et al.*, 2010) and seeing referral to nutrition and dietetics professionals as the major management strategy to assist individuals to change food consumption practices (Pomeroy and Cant, 2010). Nutritionists and dietitians play a key role in individual food consumption choice by performing dietary assessments, educating and providing counselling to individuals on optimal food choices (Kulick *et al.*, 2010). However, individuals often find their advice to be conflicting and confusing (Anderson *et al.*, 2010; Ball *et al.*, 2016; Murphy and Girot, 2013).

Furthermore, Cullerton *et al.* (2016) found that nutrition professionals may be hampered by their reliance on strong ties with other nutrition professionals as well as limited direct links to “decision makers”. Further, Cullerton *et al.* (2016) argue that those interested in solving the obesity problem need to increase their level of engagement with the health policy process and consider building alliances with senior policymakers or politicians as well as with those outside of nutrition (Cullerton *et al.*, 2016). Dietitians and GPs are the main providers of weight loss interventions (MacDonald-Wicks *et al.*, 2015). Thus, treatment of overweight and obesity must examine outcomes not just compliance with evidence-based guidelines (Dean, 2009). On the other hand, the majority of registered fitness professionals provide individual dietary advice to their clients (including advice relating to underlying medical conditions) despite only a small number having any training in nutrition (McKean *et al.*, 2015). As such, the route to help and the assistance provided can be complex to navigate.

The food industry as enablers of individuals' food availability

The food industry (food producers, suppliers and manufacturers) has benefitted from technological advances in agriculture, food technology and processing, that has greatly increased the number and type of foodstuffs that can be grown and produced, much of which have a long or extended shelf-life has. These advances have afforded benefits to retailers and individuals alike, allowing food to be transported further and stored longer, under less restrictive conditions. Moreover, the food industry has become increasingly sophisticated in managing their supply chains and pricing strategies, thus increasing individual access to their products at attractive prices.

The food industry has also been attuned to the need to respond to, and even shape, individual desires around food. Evidence of this can be seen in the array of “diet” and “functional” food products on the market (Golan and Unnevehr, 2008; Siro *et al.*, 2008). This interaction between individuals and the food industry represents a socialisation process as each entity shapes the others' actions. Emerging individual needs or desires become

increasingly normalised throughout the industry, and in turn, new products or product ranges are introduced, socialised and normalised within the individual base. Although this appears to quite openly deliver foods that satisfy individual desires for appealing, palatable and convenient options, the ways in which foods are commercially prepared can also contain hidden traps. Highly processed foods that are hyper-palatable can create addiction-like symptoms (Gearhardt *et al.*, 2011), and the composition of many foods have changed as ingredients are added, removed and substituted to create either more appealing or longer lasting food stuffs.

As a multi-trillion dollar industry (Murray, 2007), the food industry operates within a profit-seeking paradigm and exerts influence on policy, including lobbying governments over regulatory frameworks (Cullerton *et al.*, 2016; Nestle, 2013; Brownell and Horgen, 2004). The industry sponsors physical activity-related endeavours within the community (Kelly *et al.*, 2016) and engages in corporate social responsibility activities (Richards *et al.*, 2015) partly to counter criticism that they are contributing to the prevalence of obesity. Although promoting physical activity in the community could be construed as a positive step towards encouraging societal wellbeing, some argue that such initiatives are merely an antidote to a permissive approach to food industry business practices; one which reduces the connection between inappropriate food consumption and obesity (Malhotra *et al.*, 2015). The food industry also interacts with elements of food literacy, providing both food information and new ways of “doing”, some of which is beneficial for wellbeing from a nutrition perspective, and some of which could be considered less helpful.

Governments as administrators of the status quo

Governments play a role in the often-contested space of individual food consumption behaviours and practices – they seek ways to maximise the wellbeing of the population and minimise health costs now and into the future. They formulate a range of food policies (for example, nutrition content labelling and school tuckshop food guidelines) and develop, ratify and disseminate dietary guidelines. These guidelines have typically focussed on the prevention of disease through the consumption of foods to provide certain nutrients in particular amounts. Although they are based on a large body of epidemiological evidence linking nutrient deficiencies or excesses to increased likelihood of diseases, they translate poorly to information for the general public, the majority of whom cannot accurately gauge daily consumption of calories, fats, cholesterol, fibre or salt (Mozaffarian and Ludwig, 2010). Similarly, the “whole foods” approach to dietary guidance (Freeland-Graves and Nitzke, 2013) is not without problems. The “whole foods” approach is easier to understand and apply, but food consumption remains, for many individuals, inherently complex. A key limitation of such approaches is that right and wrong may be more a matter of degree rather than black and white absolutes. As an example, some carbohydrate is essential to bodily functioning, but too much, and especially refined carbohydrates such as sugar, can cause poor health outcomes.

Further, Government initiatives include, but are not limited to, public service announcements, guidelines as to what constitutes a healthy weight, as well as the funding of community level programs (Hawkes *et al.*, 2015; Swinburn *et al.*, 2013), macro-level programs (Lawrence *et al.*, 2015) and social engineering (Kennedy and Parsons, 2012). These initiatives aim to increase individuals’ knowledge and skills, thereby empowering them to improve their health. However, this official information is often viewed with scepticism or mistrust (O’Key and Hugh-Jones, 2010), and as dietary evidence and information evolves over time, individuals can become confused about what to eat and begin to doubt the veracity of such information (Nagler, 2014). These issues suggest the need for public health

professionals and policymakers to dedicate time and resources to evaluating the short- and long-term consequences of behaviour change initiatives (Holden and Cox, 2013a; Holden and Cox, 2013b).

Governments support a market-based economy and individual freedom of choice and by extension do not unnecessarily curtail the sales and profit seeking agendas of the food industry (Gortmaker *et al.*, 2011; Swinburn *et al.*, 2011). The multi-trillion-dollar food industry (Murray, 2007) is intricately entwined with international trade agreements and political agendas (Swinburn *et al.*, 2011), and therefore there is political interest in preserving the status quo. This notion explains the seeming reluctance of governments to move beyond encouraging voluntary industry-based self-regulation to curb poor food consumption practices and behaviours and obesity (Moodie *et al.*, 2013; Roberto *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, there is ample evidence of government policy being influenced by the food industry (Nestle, 2013), especially through lobbyists (Nestle, 2013; Brownell and Horgen, 2004).

The discourse surrounding food consumption and obesity has raised questions of whether health-care professionals are best placed to address the complex and challenging tensions that exist between an individual's food-related physical needs, sensory desires and social/cultural enactments. Researchers have questioned current medical models for the treatment and prevention of obesity that are individually focussed (Fildes *et al.*, 2015) and recent calls for theoretical and conceptual perspectives which span levels of influence are considered to have the potential to offer the greatest effect (King, 2015). The preceding sections have highlighted the numerous challenges that individuals face in making food choices, especially when information or influence from one source seemingly conflicts with that from another source. One means of addressing these challenges is to position food consumption decisions in the socio-cultural totality of the individual (Domegan *et al.*, 2016; Parkinson *et al.*, 2016b). This allows the identification of leverage points at which the system may be most easily influenced to produce the outcome sought.

Mapping the interconnections between stakeholders and social systems

There have been calls for widespread incorporation of a systems thinking approach when seeking to address obesity-related issues (Carey *et al.*, 2015) and indeed other complex social issues (Domegan *et al.*, 2016). Systems thinking enables causal loop and pathway mapping to identify how one part of the system has flow on effects to another (Mahamoud *et al.*, 2013; Newell and Proust, 2012) and how actions in one area of the system have the potential to manifest as unintended consequences in another (Mahamoud *et al.*, 2013). Domegan *et al.* (2016) argue models depicting such dynamic relationships between systems serve to prompt the development of multi-level interventions which will lead to enhanced impact, reach and eventually change. The systems approach also allows a reframing of the issue to align with individual and societal beliefs and values to create an exchange. Adopting a systems approach therefore provides a framework for transition from interventions to sustainable dynamic behaviour change, not only at the individual level, but also at the societal level.

In this paper, a transdisciplinary and systems approach is proposed as both a lens through which to view the complex issue of unhealthy food consumption (which contributes to the wicked problem of obesity) and as a framework from which to co-create, implement and evaluate behaviour change. In response to calls for the simplification of diagrams such as the Foresight Obesity System Map (Finegood *et al.*, 2010), to make it easier for stakeholders to engage and focus in on particular variables (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2007), we present the food system compass. The compass (Figure 1) is based on the four levels of

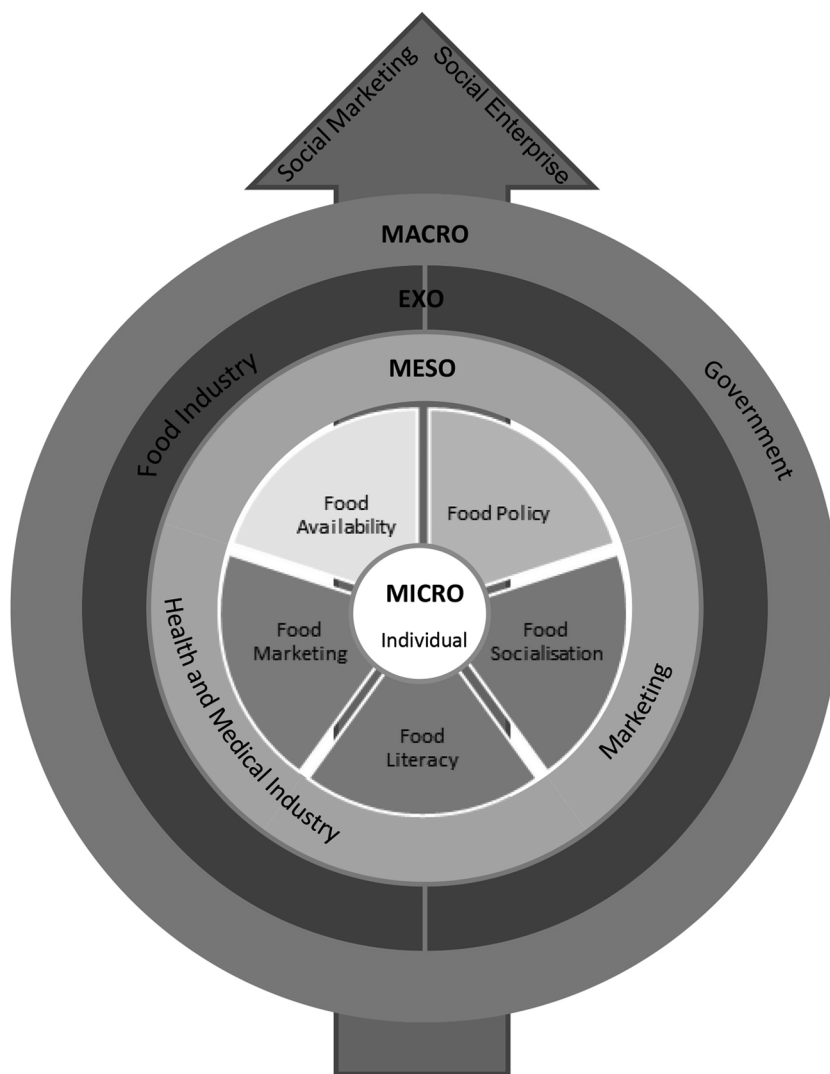


Figure 1.
Food system
compass

Bronfenbrenner's (1995) ecological system, micro, meso, exo and macro systems. The five primary domains of food consumption identified by Block *et al.* (2011) form the first layer of the compass surrounding the individual at the micro level. The meso level, or second layer, consists of the health and medical industry and the marketing industry. The exo level, or third layer, includes the food supply and production industry, and finally, Government forms the outer macro layer (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Social marketing and social enterprise sectors are included as potential levers to affect dynamic change across the system. The compass is designed to be rotated around the individual to identify points where levers of change can be actioned.

Potential levers for addressing unhealthy food consumption

At a conceptual level, a number of the puzzle pieces are already in place to facilitate the implementation of our proposed food system compass. There is existing recognition for future initiatives to span the behavioural and micro-environment; the behavioural and social/cultural and the social plus physical environments, thus including the micro, meso and macro levels of the system (King, 2015). Moreover, there is acknowledgment of a need for multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches incorporating collaboration between the health and medical industry (which provides the evidence-based science regarding food consumption and physical activity levels for health and wellbeing) and a variety of other stakeholders including governments, the food industry and marketers (Hawkes *et al.*, 2014). These collaborations have the potential to stimulate action and change in the food consumption context where social marketers can work with stakeholders to shift the current ideology and change the beliefs and values of politicians and the public.

Under a transdisciplinary approach, social marketers have a key role in developing individual insights and viable value propositions, as do systems scientists who look at the big picture to determine how to design, implement and evaluate multi-model complex approaches to social issues. Social enterprise can assist in the development of actions to produce change in the system. This requires a willingness to embrace new skills in design, evaluation and analysis. The complexity of such a transdisciplinary approach may also require a reconsideration of funding allocation and program goals and objectives. By moving away from the desire for one-off silver bullet ideas towards behaviour change programs that acknowledges and utilises interactions and feedback loops between different drivers of food consumption, we begin to develop a more holistic approach to obesity behaviour change. Thus, there is a need to reframe the issue to align with the beliefs and values of all stakeholders to create a mutually beneficial exchange.

Social marketing as a significant lever of change

Using a stakeholder marketing approach (Hult *et al.*, 2011), social marketing has the potential to play a fundamental role in tackling wicked problems such as obesity by identifying and coordinating key stakeholders, explicating their goals and needs whilst also looking for ways to broker co-creation of value exchange and mutually beneficial value propositions. Social marketers are generally not experts in any one area so can work across sectors as they tend to be impartial. Collective agency can be conflicting, and brokering requires a willingness to reserve judgement while gathering as much knowledge and information as possible to ultimately decipher key leverage points where change can be affected within the system. As such, the social marketing discipline may need to come to terms with working in a system where a business paradigm dominates, where success is measured in terms of profits earned while working within the rules. Under this paradigm, if the rules are not broken, then the profits are ultimately legitimate, despite causing negative consequences elsewhere in the system. Judgement needs to be reserved when businesses succeed at the cost of another element of society, when society does not specifically preclude this outcome. Solutions need to be sought within the system, working to identify and develop common ground from which to move forward in unison.

Given the diversity of stakeholders involved in the system, there is a need for the social marketing discipline to become adept at addressing social change via multiple interacting sub-systems. The social marketing literature emphasises a focus on value and incorporation of new concepts such as engagement and partnerships (French and Blair-Stevens, 2007), providing a conceptual basis for this action. In practical terms, this would require the discipline to take a marketing stakeholder approach to facilitate discourse around the rights

and responsibilities of disparate stakeholders and to help establish a common understanding of problems and preferred solutions. Arguably, social marketing can act as the “glue” that holds multi-stream initiatives together. The discipline is therefore well positioned and skilled to play a role in developing and guiding such transdisciplinary initiatives. As Kennedy and Parsons (2012, p. 37) argue, social marketers have a key role to play in “creating societal motivation to change, as well as promoting social flexibility, creating desirable images of change, attitudinal change and developing individual’s skills, which contribute to macro-level change”. While these purported roles apply to food consumption and the broader context of obesity, they may also apply to other complex societal issues such as climate change and violence against women.

Furthermore, social marketing is grounded in the notion of value exchange (Lefebvre, 2012) and therefore aptly suited to facilitating mutual exchange of values and value propositions between stakeholders. However, due to the intangible nature of social change offerings and their public domain (Peattie and Peattie, 2003), social marketing typically tackles contexts which involve universal and complex exchanges (Parkinson *et al.*, 2016b). Therefore, to address the issue of unhealthy food consumption, rather than designing interventions directed at individuals, we need to pursue avenues that allow for co-creation of value by stakeholders within the system. Providers of health, medical and well-being services operating at the meso-level of influence also offer opportunities to co-create value with individuals or assist in facilitating individual to individual value co-creation through a variety of mechanisms such as social support (Parkinson *et al.*, 2017). Going a step further, Kennedy (2016) argues for a macro-social marketing position to change the institutional norms surrounding the problem, as a way to transcend the issue of scale. This means when working in diverse, non-rational and dynamic circumstances, social marketing has the potential to progress action when it facilitates joint efforts with stakeholders across and between, micro, meso, exo and macro levels.

Social enterprise as a secondary lever of change

To truly overcome issues of unhealthy food consumption and obesity into the future, there is a need for self-sustaining programs which support adoption of positive behaviours and long-term behaviour maintenance. Social enterprises are well positioned to progress this aim, as they can assist in sustaining behaviour change (Costanzo *et al.*, 2014) and overcome traditional short-term funding cycles.

Social enterprises are broadly defined as entrepreneurial processes aiming at bridging social gaps through the combination of social value creation with economic sustainability (Dacin *et al.*, 2010; Perrini *et al.*, 2010) and are increasingly seen as a valuable complement to both the public sector and the business sector (Levander, 2010; Luke and Chu, 2013). Social enterprise is a transformed rather than new concept, which involves business as a tool for social development, and, as such, has the potential to fill the gap in the market left by public and private sectors (Luke and Chu, 2013). As a whole, both theory and practice appear to converge on viewing social enterprises as having potential to offer a significant contribution to economic and social growth; in fact, they are able to provide goods and services which neither the market nor the public sector are able to offer. At the same time, they are able to develop skills, create employment, generate and manage workspace, thus enhancing public involvement (Smallbone and Welter, 2001) and alleviating social problems (Dacin *et al.*, 2011). There are multiple examples of social enterprises in the areas of food security, food sovereignty, the development of local food councils. For example, “The ugly fruit and veg campaign” in the USA (www.endfoodwaste.org/about.html) is a social enterprise which provides low cost, imperfect fruit and vegetables to low socioeconomic individuals while

reducing food waste. This program has assisted these individuals to adopt and maintain a high level of fruit and vegetable consumption as well as assisting local farmers to sell their imperfect produce. Social enterprises find new and innovative approaches to better address complex social issues, and in doing so potentially can provide valuable guidance to others including policymakers and practitioners seeking new ways to address wicked social problems that, due to being driven by a business model, are sustainable in the long term (Luke and Chu, 2013).

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to focus on food consumption as part of the wicked problem of obesity. Specifically, we explored the complex interplay between stakeholders including individuals, food producers, marketers, health and medical practitioners and policymakers and their influence on the ways in which individuals consume food to chart a course forward using a systems approach, social marketing techniques and social enterprise to develop solutions to effect change. Furthermore, we presented a framework for use as an analytic tool that may assist in planning for programs aimed at complex social and public health problems such as obesity. Unhealthy food consumption is a significant problem with implications for societal wellbeing. As outlined in our integrated and critical review of the drivers of food consumption and obesity, the contributing factors are diverse and complexly entwined, giving this social issue all the hallmarks of a wicked problem. This complexity can complicate stakeholder efforts to identify clear pathways forward (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2007; Allender *et al.*, 2015), especially in situations that require the cooperation, expertise and skills of the multiple stakeholders.

Multi-modal, transdisciplinary initiatives are required to address unhealthy food consumption along with an understanding of the complex and non-linear interactions between variables within the system. Engagement with a range of stakeholders across sectors is necessary to create traction around this “wicked problem”. To overcome the limitations of current systems diagrams depicting the complexity of interactions occurring across the system, for example, the Foresight diagram (Vandenbroeck *et al.*, 2007), we present a simplified tool that not only denotes the complexity of the interactions between stakeholders and outcomes but also integrates the necessity for coordination within and across micro, meso, exo and macro levels of the system, as well as across sectors, institutions and stakeholders.

Further, given the need for a “total system approach” to unhealthy food consumption and obesity, the model draws much needed attention to the importance of multi-level collaboration in identifying mutually acceptable leverage points to assist in overcoming the problem. We contend that social marketers are well equipped to act as a lever and in doing so facilitate the co-creation of mutual value across stakeholder groups. In addition, our food system compass draws attention to the cross-sectorial and dynamic circumstances surrounding food consumption and obesity and highlights leverage points where joint actions can be facilitated with stakeholders across and between micro, meso, exo and macro levels. In essence, our food system compass is in line with King’s (2015) position that this socially complex issue requires the identification of conceptual models and levers of change capable of impacting change beyond the individual, as opposed to causality. This tool has the potential to facilitate stakeholders working together to consider flexible and agile scientific approaches capable of accelerating both population relevant discoveries and applications to the problem (King, 2015). Due to the conceptual nature of the compass presented in this paper empirical testing is recommended. The compass presented also

highlights opportunities for further inquiry in the food consumption area and other wicked problems.

Finally, the incorporation of social enterprises into the food system compass provides a more holistic approach for longer-term success. Arguably for problems where new thinking and sustainability are required to achieve long term effective outcomes, innovation is a necessary factor. Social enterprises by their very nature are innovative and offer sustainable business models to improve societal wellbeing over the long term.

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Further reading

Kerlin, J.A. (2013), "Defining social enterprise across different contexts: a conceptual framework based on institutional factors", *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, Vol. 42 No. 1, pp. 84-108.

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Exploring value destruction in social marketing services

Exploring
value
destruction

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to draw from services marketing theory as an alternative and under-used pathway to social and behaviour change for the achievement of societal well-being. Social marketing services are an important part of social change programmes as they contribute towards service users' health, well-being, and the fulfilment of social marketing goals. However, value destruction can occur in users' service experiences, leading to a decline rather than improvement of their well-being. The purpose of this paper is to understand the nature of the value destruction process and identify the outcomes in social marketing services from a consumer's perspective.

Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative exploratory study using a focus group ($n = 4$) and individual depth interview ($n = 4$) methods was undertaken. The discussions were guided by a semi-structured interview guide and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Findings – Thematic analysis of the data revealed two value destruction processes: incongruent resource application and misuse of firm resources. The value destruction processes suggest three types of outcomes: reduced usage of the service, termination of service and strategic behavioural actions.

Originality/value – This study is the first to examine value destruction processes and outcomes in social marketing services from a consumer's perspective. This study contributes towards the small but growing body of research on value destruction in both commercial and social marketing by challenging the assumption that value creation is always positively valenced and responding to critique that there is currently insufficient focus on value destruction in service research and its impact on well-being.

Keywords Well-being, Consumer behaviour, Social marketing theory, User experiences, Value destruction, Social marketing services

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Services play an important role in social change programmes (Gordon *et al.*, 2016) and using service thinking in social marketing is one of many useful paths towards improving societal well-being. However, the approach is relatively under-utilised (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013) in comparison to other approaches such as communications. Despite this, the interest in service thinking in social marketing is growing, and this study aims to contribute towards this growing body of research. Social marketing services share similar aims with transformative services, which are those that are oriented towards the achievement of well-being outcomes for service users (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Transformative services include those offered by commercial organisations and examples include wellness retreats or meditation courses. These service types achieve commercial (i.e. profit) outcomes for the service provider, in addition to the well-being outcomes for the service user. In contrast, social marketing services are delivered in marketing-based programmes that are designed to facilitate socially beneficial, as opposed to commercially beneficial, outcomes (Gordon *et al.*, 2016).



Therefore, social marketing services are offered by non-commercial (i.e. government or non-profit) organisations.

Despite the efficacy of providing services to help and support people (Wood, 2012), services remain a relatively untapped resource for social marketers (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013). A growing body of research on social marketing services is emerging in areas such as mental health (Schuster *et al.*, 2013), breastfeeding support (Gallegos *et al.*, 2014), blood donation (Chell and Mortimer, 2014) and health screening (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013), demonstrating the growing importance of this area to social marketing scholarship. Maintaining the use of social marketing services in the long term is important given the delayed and long-term benefits of much positive social behaviour (Andreasen, 2003; Schuster *et al.*, 2013).

However, relapse of previous habitual behaviours that are negative and abandonment of positive new behaviours, including those facilitated through service use, is common (Prochaska and DiClemente, 1983). We posit that this occurs due to the devaluation of consumers' services experiences, which occurs when a consumer's value judgements become more negative than positive, and when features of a good/service are denigrated (Woodruff and Flint, 2006). This describes a negative, rather than a positive, impact on consumer value creation (Grönroos, 2011), reflecting value destruction. Value destruction is described as "an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the system's well-being" (Plé and Cáceres, 2010, p. 431), meaning that misuse of resources by actors in a dyadic exchange can lead to value destruction. With the exception of works by Echeverri and Skålén (2011), Smith (2013) and Zainuddin *et al.* (2017), there is little understanding of value destruction in social marketing. In addition, much of the existing research on value in social marketing has focused on the creation of positive value for behaviour maintenance (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013; Mulcahy *et al.*, 2015; Chell and Mortimer, 2014), rather than on the destruction of value and its negative impact on behaviour maintenance. Indeed, Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder (2016) highlight that there is insufficient focus on value destruction in service research and its impact on well-being, whereas Blocker and Barrios (2015) identify that much of the existing research on value creation assumes a positive valence. In response to these criticisms, the purpose of this study was to discover the nature of the value destruction process and identify the outcomes of value destruction in social marketing services from a consumer's perspective. In doing so, we make inferences on how value destruction negatively influences well-being.

The paper begins with a review of the literature by first discussing social marketing services and the important role that they play in social marketing programmes. Then, value creation and destruction of social marketing service users' experiences are discussed. This is followed by the study method and a discussion of the results following a qualitative analysis. Finally, the theoretical and managerial implications are presented, followed by an acknowledgement of the limitations of the current study and suggestions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Social marketing services

Embracing service thinking in social marketing has grown in recent years in response to calls to increase our focus on midstream social marketing efforts, which involves working with partner organisations and community groups (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013). Social marketing services are services that are delivered in marketing-based programmes designed to facilitate socially beneficial outcomes (Gordon *et al.*, 2016). They share similarities with transformative services in that they are both service types that seek to improve the well-

being of individuals, communities and the ecosystem (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). However, a key feature that distinguishes social marketing services from transformative services is that social marketing services focus on socially beneficial outcomes over commercial outcomes (Gordon *et al.*, 2016) and can only be delivered by public or non-profit organisations. For example, breast cancer screening services offered by the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK (gov.uk, 2015) or by BreastScreen in Australia (BSQ, 2017) are social marketing services, as they are offered as part of government population health screening programmes in those respective countries. In contrast, transformative services can be delivered by commercial (i.e. profit) organisations and therefore are focused on achieving commercial outcomes. One example of a transformative service is health retreats, which offer holiday packages that include a range of service offerings including spa treatments, personalised exercise plans designed by fitness trainers and consultations with psychology experts to address underlying personal issues such as stress or burnout (Well-being Escapes, 2017). Many transformative services like health retreats, nutrition services or fitness services are sought by consumers as their ability to improve the health and well-being of the service user and help them achieve their goals is easily understood. In contrast, many social marketing services are unsought products (Murphy and Enis, 1986) that consumers avoid despite the known benefits of using these services (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013). This is usually due to unpleasant features of the service experience such as embarrassment, discomfort or perceived stigma. This creates a barrier towards the uptake of these services, despite the benefits to personal health and well-being from service use. This is supported by population health trends, which show that participation rates for some services types (particularly in the health-care sector) are in decline or below programme targets (NHS, 2016; NIH, 2015; AIHW, 2016), even though people are adequately informed of the health benefits of using these services. Therefore, value destruction from “avoidance services” has the potential to create greater deleterious effects on the well-being of service users and the wider community than if it occurs in other service types. Hence, it is important for social marketers to understand how value destruction can occur to manage the service design, processes and experience to minimize the occurrence of value destruction and any negative impact on behavioural outcomes.

2.2 Value creation in social marketing

Value creation is a paradigm (Sheth and Uslay, 2007) involving multiple stakeholders who work collaboratively in a consumption process to create mutually beneficial outcomes and value. It aligns with social marketing aims as value creation can achieve satisfaction and behavioural intentions to engage in an activity again (Chell and Mortimer, 2014) and support the maintenance of positive social behaviours in the long-term (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2017). Consumer research on value originates from an economic perspective, whereby value is an outcome of a cost/benefit analysis focussed on utility gained (Payne and Holt, 1999). This perspective focuses on the exchange, and value is determined when the benefits outweigh the costs of using a service. However, the exchange represents only one aspect of the overall consumption experience (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2016), focussing on the purchase or consumption stage of the consumption experience and does not consider the pre- or post-purchase/consumption stages (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2009). Given that many pro-social behaviours sought in social marketing are complex and multi-faceted, it is important to consider the interactions involved in the consumption experience and not just on the outcome (Holbrook, 2006). Furthermore, it has been acknowledged that the *locus* of value creation has expanded beyond the provider-customer dyad where interactions between the two actors occur (Vargo and Lush, 2008; Black and Gallan, 2015). Therefore, activities in the pre- and post-

consumption stages that can include little to no interaction between consumers and services providers (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2016) also need to be considered. Value can be created (and destroyed) throughout all the stages and phases of the consumption process, and therefore there is a need to consider the consumption process in its entirety (Cronin, 2016). However, the economic perspective adopts the view that value is a determination from a specific point-in-time (Blocker and Barrios, 2015) and does not consider the value that is realised at every stage and phase of the consumption process. Taking a holistic approach is important, as many of the pro-social behaviours sought in social marketing programmes are long-term and ongoing behaviours. There is a need for social marketers to understand individuals' experiences and interactions at all stages of the consumption experience, beyond the exchange, to provide better social marketing services and deliver better social marketing programmes. A need to consider factors beyond the exchange and beyond focussing on outcomes alone necessitates the adoption of a more contemporary approach to understanding consumer value, which is the experiential perspective.

The experiential perspective to understanding consumer value emerged in response to the limitations of the economic perspective. The experiential perspective considers value to be an interactive relativistic preference experience (Holbrook, 2006) or a relativistic construct, which is more reflective of (social) marketing contexts (Cronin, 2016). This perspective acknowledges that consumption experiences are comparative, personal and situational (Holbrook, 2006) and can vary from individual to individual, even within the same context. Assessments of benefits and sacrifices are relative and subjective (Cronin, 2016) and can vary between individuals, and therefore using the economic perspective does not allow for the consideration of these subjectivities and complexities. The experiential perspective is a more useful perspective as it acknowledges the subjectivities that are inherent in all social marketing contexts. For example, although the medical benefits of cancer screening (i.e. early detection and greater treatment options) outweigh the negatives of using screening services (e.g. fear, discomfort), for the many non-users of screening services, the costs outweigh the benefits for them and they avoid screening. Consequently, the current study adopts the experiential perspective to understanding consumer value, which is consistent with the approach adopted by the existing research on value in social marketing.

With the exception of a recent study by Zainuddin *et al.* (2017), much of the existing research on value in social marketing has focussed on the creation of value, as a positive process that has positive impact on desirable outcomes, such as intentions for repeat use (Chell and Mortimer, 2014). It is important to note that the absence of value creation does not equate to the diminishment of value or value destruction. For example, in a study on bowel screening self-services, Zainuddin *et al.* (2016) found that emotional value was not created from the affective contributions of self-service users; however, this does not imply that emotional value is *destroyed* by affective contributions. It is neither appropriate to presume that given our current understanding of how value creation occurs in social marketing services (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013, 2016), that we understand through inferences how value destruction is likely to occur. It is important to avoid the assumption that concepts can directly translate across contexts (Peattie and Peattie, 2003), such as from commercial marketing to social marketing, or from value creation to value destruction. Instead, there is a need to focus on understanding how value destruction occurs in social marketing services, which is the aim of this current study. This will add to our existing knowledge on value in social marketing.

2.3 Value destruction in social marketing

The assumption that value creation is always positively valenced is slowly being challenged (Blocker and Barrios, 2015), given the growing attention and interest in value destruction. In contrast to value creation, the destruction of value leads to the cessation of positive behaviours (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2017), which is a negative outcome in social marketing. Value destruction is defined as “an interactional process between service systems that results in a decline in at least one of the system’s well-being” (Plé and Cáceres, 2010, p. 431). It describes a process of devaluation whereby a consumer’s value judgements of a consumption experience become more negative than positive, and features of a good/service are denigrated (Woodruff and Flint, 2006). This results in a negative impact on value creation (Grönroos, 2011). It is important to examine value destruction, as scholars such as Cronin (2016) believe that value is more important than other attributes, such as quality or satisfaction, in consumer decision-making. Given that the creation of value leads to a variety of positive outcomes for individuals, including improved well-being (Black and Gallan, 2015), the destruction of value has the potential to negatively impact individual well-being, as consumers’ decisions to use services designed to improve their well-being are likely to be negatively influenced when value destruction occurs.

Studies in both commercial marketing (Plé and Cáceres, 2010; Robertson *et al.*, 2014; Grönroos, 2011) and social marketing (French and Gordon, 2015) predominantly examined value destruction conceptually. However, limited empirical examinations of value destruction have begun to emerge in both commercial marketing (Echeverri and Ska³le³n, 2011; Smith, 2013) and social marketing (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2017) research. Despite this, our empirical understanding of value destruction remains in its infancy, representing a gap in the knowledge base. There is insufficient focus on value destruction in service research and its impact on well-being (Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder, 2016). Thus, the current study aims to address this gap by contributing towards the growing body of empirical research on value destruction. In particular, this study seeks to examine value destruction in social marketing services from a consumer’s perspective. The following research questions guides this inquiry:

RQ1. How does value destruction occur in social marketing services?

RQ2. What are the outcomes of value destruction in social marketing services?

3. Method

Given limited, existing understanding of value destruction in social marketing services, an exploratory qualitative study utilising focus group ($n = 4$) and individual-depth interview ($n = 4$) methods was conducted. Details of the participants are shown in Table I. There are no closely defined rules for sample sizes for exploratory qualitative enquiry (Patton, 2002). A small-scaled sample suits this study that is conceptually generative (Crouch and McKenzie, 2006), seeking to gain meaning and insights to build on current gaps in the literature on value destruction in social marketing from a consumer’s perspective. In seeking richness of data, purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who had experiences using social marketing services. Participants were asked to discuss support services that they had used and to describe their experiences with using the service, with some participants discussing experiences of diverse social marketing services. The focus group lasted 2 hour in a University meeting room. The individual-depth interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 hour and were conducted at locations that were convenient for participants. Participants

Table I.
Study participant
information

Method	Participant	Gender	Age	Service types	
Focus group	Participant 1	Male	22	Alcohol hotline service	
	Participant 2	Female	44	Counselling services	
	Participant 3	Female	50	Social services	
Individual-depth interview				Mental health hotline	
				Suicide prevention hotline	
				Health-care hotline	
				Social services	
		Participant 4	Female	32	Community gym
		Participant 5	Female	37	Psychology
					Health-care hotline
					Men sexual health service
	Participant 6	Male	33	Alcoholic counselling	
	Participant 7	Male	34	Mental health service	
	Participant 8	Male	38	Social services	

were offered a \$30 gift card as an incentive for participation. The individual-depth interviews and focus group were conducted in a semi-structured format. Participants were first provided with some examples of social marketing services and, subsequently, asked to discuss their experiences with similar services. Subsequently, key interview questions that focussed on uncovering participants' broad experiences and expectations with social marketing services (e.g. Could you tell me about your experiences using a social marketing service?) were asked. Probing was conducted to provide further clarification for the specific service issues raised by respondents (e.g. Why do you feel this way?). The focus group was conducted first, followed by the individual-depth interviews. This combination and sequence allowed for some initial insights prior to gaining deeper insights on personal experiences with using social marketing services. The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were manually analysed using thematic analysis technique (Boyatzis, 1998). The process of coding involved generating initial codes though the data set and some examples include knowledge, skills, disengagement and waiting. Codes were then collated into broader themes (Vaismoradi *et al.*, 2013). Subsequently, the themes were reviewed in relation to the extracts. Coding also involved the assignment and refinement of labels to the themes, and this helped to establish the core categories within the data. The codes were generated based on some prior understanding of the value destruction and social marketing literature, and the process involved a deductive coding process derived from the literature and inductive coding that emerged from the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The analysis involved cross-checking the findings between two researchers to ensure agreement in the interpretation of themes and helped to ensure the validity of the research findings (Barbour, 2001).

4. Results and discussion

RQ1 was addressed with three themes emerging. Findings from a consumer's perspective revealed two key broad value destruction processes central to social marketing services. Value destruction occurs in one of two ways through:

- (1) incongruent resource application; and
- (2) misuse of firm resources.

RQ2 was addressed with three emerging themes of outcomes:

- (1) reduced usage of the service;
- (2) termination of service; and
- (3) strategic behavioural actions.

4.1 Value destruction processes

4.1.1 Incongruent resource application. We define incongruent resource application as an actor's incompatible application of resources (behavioural interactions and expertise delivery) with behavioural needs. Congruent application of resources (interactions and expertise) that match behavioural needs of consumers is important for behavioural change goals. Previous research identified organisational and consumer resources as important contributions towards value creation in social marketing services (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013). Resources can include the ability to communicate, expertise or solutions provided by an actor (Dagger *et al.*, 2007). Based on the data, we differentiate between the application of resources in terms of behavioural interactions and the knowledge, skills and resolutions applied by the service provider. The data indicated that in social marketing services, value destruction can involve an inappropriate application of resources in terms of expertise and solutions that fail to sufficiently cater to behavioural goal needs of actors in the exchange. In these situations, service employees play a critical role facilitating value initiatives (Domegan *et al.*, 2013). Distinctively, actors may have incongruence with another actor on the behavioural contributions in the expertise, knowledge and resolutions that they provide. Below, Participant 1 describes the distinction between the use of a service that provided specialised knowledge and a service that conveyed generic information and emphasises that specific information is more useful for her behavioural goal needs. Service dominant-logic research places emphasis on operand resources such as knowledge and skills as critical to the benefit of another actor (Vargo and Lusch, 2004). The data suggest that service users expect service providers in social marketing to provide them with customised information aligned with behavioural goal needs, in this case alcoholism:

Because the counselling service here is very general, some services are obviously specific to certain situations, so Alcoholics Anonymous is dealing with one certain issue. I found they were a lot more useful because they had specialised expertise in that certain area [...] More specific assistance on my issues, rather than general help [...] (Participant 1 (Focus group), Male, 22 years old).

The participant elaborates on the practical aspects of information conveyed. His comments allude to the impracticalities and patronising nature of providing generic information incongruent to his behavioural goal needs. The need for customised information is consistent with Neghina *et al.*'s (2014) conceptualisation of individuating interactions that calls forth the need to take into account consumers' needs, resources and preferred interaction styles to deliver value. Studies in health-care contexts show the value of information. In an online self-diagnosis setting, Robertson *et al.* (2014) highlight the quality of online content as a key determinant of service operator operand resource that could potentially skew consumers' focus. Frow *et al.* (2016) offer a typology of patient centric practices that shape mental models of patients, and this includes the contributions of collaborative professional knowledge. Not surprisingly, a lack of specific information provided in social marketing services can result in a decline in well-being because service users are less able to make concrete steps meeting behavioural goals:

The part of the service that really helped were the practical steps that they advised me to take, not broad sentences like, “you’re going to feel better soon”, that kind of stuff, but practical steps that actually assist me in my day to day life (Participant 1 (Focus group), Male, 22 years old).

Alternatively, as demonstrated by Participant’s six comments below, when professional information is perceived as invaluable, this has positive implications for service users. His comments implied that received expertise matches the needs of bisexual men in achieving behaviour goals of sexual health screening. Alves *et al.* (2016) highlight firms undertaking efforts to educate their customers by providing them information results in value creation given higher self-efficacy levels. Thus, in a social marketing service, operant resources not only need to ensure relational exchanges (Madhavaram and Hunt, 2008) but also enable consumers to effectively reach behavioural goals to be perceived as delivering value:

They have very smiley faces, they talk nicely and they explain what should be done, and what treatments should be done, if any case, what are the preventative methods. It is specifically catering to gay and bisexual men who really know they are well taken care of and it is exclusive to them. I think the labelling, the mannerisms, the setting, and the training that was given to staff make all the patients or clients comfortable (Participant 6 (Interview), Male, 33 years old).

Apart from the delivery of specific expertise and knowledge, interaction processes between actors seem to impact on the value derived from social marketing service encounters. Service encounter processes and practices are critical for value creation opportunities (Payne *et al.*, 2008). Encounters can be categorised as emotion supporting, cognition supporting and action supporting encounters (Payne *et al.*, 2008). Communication of expertise and value-explaining messages can occur in ways that fit communication needs. Below, Participant 3 outlines how her interactions with a service provider has been coercive to the extent she felt indignant. The quote suggests incongruence with the consumer’s expectations of treatment and undermines the aim of the service to achieve behavioural goals. In this situation, it appears the service provider hinder further dialogue due to the hierarchical nature of the interaction (Ballantyne, 2004). Likewise, Echeverri and Skálén (2011) outline how incongruence between practices elements during interactions can destroy value:

The lifeline was [. . .] they were like [. . .] “Well you just need to do this; you just need to do that”. I was like, “Are you ordering me to do it?” (Participant 3 (Focus group), Female, 50 years old).

An interaction presents opportunities for value destruction or creation (Echeverri and Skálén, 2011). Vafeas *et al.* (2016) illustrate that power held by clients in a client–agency relationship reduced motivation due to the experience of conflict and coercion. In a social marketing context, Participant 6 provides a contrasting perspective to demonstrate how service providers need to balance the use of concern and control in their interactions in social marketing services. In doing so, the service provider fulfils a well-balanced conduct well received by the service user. This need for balance in interactional elements is consistent with Leo’s (2013) proposition that service providers in social marketing services need to balance concern and influence to achieve goals. The utilisation and assessment of resources that contributes to perceptions of value seem unique (Edvardsson *et al.*, 2011) within the social structure of social marketing services. This is likely due to the lack of choice, involuntary nature and need to achieve behavioural outcomes typically associated with social marketing programmes (Baker *et al.*, 2005, French, 2011) that makes it particularly important to balance these elements (Vafeas *et al.*, 2016):

I think they are concerned but they are not forceful. I might carry on using the clinic given it is the only gay and bisexual clinic so I don’t really have much of a choice (Participant 6 (Interview), Male, 33 years old).

Similarly, Participant 8 illustrates in a mental health service context, the combination of fine balance of application of resources in terms of provision of concrete opinions, a plan of action, as well as dedicating time and genuine concern is crucial:

There are staff in there who are genuinely interested in the situation and they are the ones who actually bring you aside and sit down and talk to you, and have time to actually counsel you, give you opinions, give you alternate points of view, and suggest alternate action plans (Participant 8 (Interview), Male, 38 years old).

4.1.2 Misuse of firm resources. We define misuse of firm resources as the inappropriate organisation of resources that result in failure to meet behavioural goals by a firm's employees. The interview data suggested some social marketing services might inefficiently utilise resources resulting in suboptimal outcomes for users. Studies in value destruction emphasise how the misuse of resources by a business can create value for the misuser or destroy value for another party (Plé and Cáceres, 2010; Smith, 2013). Resource integration may be difficult due to unattainability or lack of resources from the initial interaction (Laamanen and Skálén, 2015). This corresponds with Osborne *et al.*'s (2016) observation that regardless of the state of service users being unconscious or unwilling users, the touch and fail points within public service systems can impede engagement and value creation. While social marketing services have the potential to improve the well-being of the consumer (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013), inactions from functions of a service can reduce well-being (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, the data showed misuse of resources might arise from various avenues including the kind of personnel hired to provide the service. Participant 2 outlines how some employees are “clock watchers” and hired to fill in the time. When service employees are not attentive to user needs in social marketing services, this may affect users because they are likely to integrate resources effectively for behavioural goals:

Like any particular workforce, there are some people who are just what I call “clock watchers”. They are just there doing the job and they are in and out (Participant 2 (Focus group), Female, 44 years old).

Similarly, Participant 3 raises the issue of the use of volunteers who are unpaid workers, of which she believes contributes to the problem of non-response in phone service. The use of volunteers in social services is difficult to manage and these services have to dedicate human resources to deliver value (Ling *et al.*, 1992; Polonsky and Garma, 2006). The use of volunteers potentially results in non-integration of resources (Plé, 2016) due to inadequate staff and employees' low engagement, all of which can result in diminished value perceptions at the point of initiation:

But a lot of them rely on volunteers, and if they don't have the volunteers to man the phones or whatever, they're not able to respond (Participant 3 (Focus group), Female, 50 years old).

The same participant raised the issue of being put on hold on the phone and her comments reflect a sense of personal cynicism with non-response by the suicide hotline. Her distrust is evident on her conclusion that the long waiting process was aimed to reverse her suicidal thoughts. Cynicism occurs because trust on the service serving her interests and behavioural goal needs was eroded and, subsequently, emotional and well-being needs also were not met (Berman, 1997):

I thought they put you on hold because, if there were any thoughts of suicide you would be put on hold and stay on the line for 20 minutes and go, “That will pass” (Participant 3 (Focus group), Female, 50 years old).

As previously discussed, the misuse of resources involves processes of waiting. However, Participant 8 outlines that service providers may handle processes through injudicious ways (e.g. accidental loss of paperwork). The provision of wrong information seems to occur from having to manage excessive paperwork. His comments imply a callous approach that can influence one's well-being. These actions are similar to Plé's (2016) reference to mis-integration whereby employees may accidentally or intentionally misuse resources. In this case, the accidental loss of paperwork and submission of incorrect identification reflect accidental integration of inappropriate resources. Furthermore, because a service provider's actions, emotions and cognitions also influence resource integration (Plé, 2016), it is possible that at a sub-conscious level (Payne *et al.*, 2008), these employees mis-integrate customers' resources due to their cognitive orientation of working in a resource challenged sector (Plé, 2016):

Well, who would not be after waiting and standing in line for three and a half hours. These people, basically would be in a position whereby they can potentially stuff you around if they feel like it. They can accidentally lose your paperwork [. . .].

Even social workers who are professionals, for instance one of the social workers who was assisting me with housing and even when the social worker themselves were applying for housing for me, they got lost in the paperwork and were submitting incorrect identification (Participant 8 (Interview), Male, 38 years old).

In contrast, Participant 6 describes a provider operating within constraints in social marketing services. In his comments, he highlights how service providers send text messages in a timely and yet not excessive manner. His comments seem to imply that the quantity of resources (misuse of firm resources) conveyed through technology has implications on users' integration of the resource (acting on the informational resource). However, excessive information can result in reducing value when the amount of information is incongruent with what the consumer expects:

If they do more constant checking, it will be kind of a nuisance. They keep their timing and send a SMS. I think they are doing the best they can with the resources they have (Participant 6 (Interview), Male, 32 years old).

4.2 Value destruction outcomes

In addition to the value destruction processes, the consumer data suggested three broad categories of behavioural outcomes:

- (1) reduced usage of the service;
- (2) termination of service; and
- (3) strategic behavioural actions.

The first two sub-themes relate to consumers coping behaviourally through a spectrum of gradual dissociation with the service. The third sub-theme reflects how consumers may creatively seek alternative solutions to overcome the value destruction processes.

4.2.1 Reduced usage of the service. Reduced usage of the service reflects a gradual reduction of participants' usage of a social marketing service. Below, Participant 7 puts forth that his friend began a decline in use of the alcoholics anonymous group to eventual termination. His comments suggest the reduced usage occurring over a period of time results from a lack of strong relational exchanges within the group. Similarly, Participant 4 below admits reducing her use of a subsidised gym service due to not only a lack of motivation but also a due to lack of information specific to her behavioural goals. According

to the conservation of resources theory, individuals invest their resources as a means and ends that includes adaptation, well-being and coping (Hobfoll, 1989). Specifically, individuals who fail to gain resources after resource investment result in stress (Salanova *et al.*, 2006). Thus, it is possible that the resources (time and energy) put into attendance did not result in perceived resource gain (e.g. improved social support or health). A gradual termination of service use may reflect a lack of personal capacity to invest further given the vulnerable position of the user (alcoholic) and a lack of adequate gain in resources necessary for behavioural maintenance. Value destruction processes appear to increase barriers to changes and make it difficult to maintain desired social behaviours (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2013). While in stark contrast, the findings are consistent with research on value in social marketing that show positive processes have a positive impact on behavioural goals such as intentions to reuse a service (Chell and Mortimer, 2014):

We tried [...] she probably went for maybe two and a half weeks, then it started dropping down to every second day and she just dropped out [...]. I think maybe if she developed a stronger bond, with the facilitator and maybe if she was not that skeptical of some of the people there [...]. (Participant 7 (Interview), Male, 34 years old).

On one hand, I have to admit that I cannot convince myself to go there constantly, but on the other side; I think I have not received sufficient advice or assistance from the gym [...] I was thinking if the coach can give me other advice that I can do something in a correct way, maybe I would go there more often than I now do (Participant 4 (Focus group), Female, 32 years old).

4.2.2 Termination of service. Termination of service reflects a complete cessation of service use. In contrast to reduced usage, termination of service seems to occur when there is not just a lack of gain but also a threatened loss in resources. A threat of a net loss of resources can produce stress (Hobfoll, 1989; Smith, 2013). Below, Participant 3 outlines her strong opinions of not using a service again. These decisions to terminate engagement with the service appear to be a conscious attempt that may either occur at the beginning of the service experience, or through a gradual decline due to perceived ineffectiveness. Assumingly for Participant 3, the fear of resource loss from further interaction limited her engagement with the service. When a service fails to provide a positive outcome, it is possible that service users perceive the use of the service to result in further resource losses (e.g. loss in self-esteem or psychological health). The complete detachment of the service matches French and Gordon (2015) cautioning of how inertia in social marketing occurring through destruction of value can result in the severe outcome of stopping service use:

Yeah, I was like, "Screw you". I was not impressed with them. I just thought, "I'll never ring you again. I won't use your service again" (Participant 3 (Focus group), Female, 50 years old).

From another perspective, Participant 8 offers his opinion that value destruction processes make it challenging for admission into social services such as mental health service, resulting in individuals not using the service from the onset, thus denying themselves treatment. The negative experiences of using the service (value destruction processes) appear to compromise his physical well-being. This perspective highlights how resource constraints can affect service use at the initiation stage and have severe implications on users' well-being:

It becomes blatantly obvious to me that for some, even speaking of myself, there may become a point whereby the admission stress becomes so great that you deny yourself that level of treatment (Participant 8 (Interview), Male, 38 years old).

4.2.3 Strategic behavioural actions. Strategic behavioural actions describe service users' tendencies to find alternative solutions independently that may involve them engaging in dysfunctional ways to overcome value destruction processes. Below, Participant 8 describes how he triple photocopies his documents to overcome the lack of service. It seems the user's experiences with the service shaped his low expectation and anticipation of potential problems to the extent he devised alternative solution. Environmental circumstances signify a potential of resource loss (Hobfoll, 1989). The participant offset the potential of resource loss through an additional investment of energy. He executes this strategic action to achieve his goal of obtaining a desired level of service. His actions, learnt from previous experiences, are intentional to counteract the potential of resource loss. Similarly, Smith (2013) highlight consumers undertake coping strategies to regain control following resource loss in destruction processes:

[...] If you did not happen to be mindful enough to make double, triple photocopies of everything (Participant 8 (Interview), Male, 38 years old).

Again, the same participant elaborates on how he utilises his personal skills in technology to circumvent the situation, such that the service provider had no choice but to deliver the service according to his needs. This strategic action on his part seems to reflect a learned resourcefulness (Rosenbaum, 1989), acquired with the experience of multiple value destruction incidents. Learned resourcefulness includes behavioural repertoire such as the self-regulation of emotional and cognitive responses and the use of problem solving skills. Indeed, the participant's actions reflect him utilising his skills in an adaptive way to receive the resources he needs. These actions suggest domination and contestation of power in service interactions (Laamanen and Skälén, 2015):

Luckily, thanks to cloud computing and the internet, I was able to reproduce my lost paperwork literally in front of their eyes, thereby forcing their hand and making them follow on with delivering their particular level of service (Participant 8 (Interview), Male, 38 years old).

Below, Participant 5 admits that she will hang up and then repeatedly ring a health support service whenever she speaks to someone she is dissatisfied with. Her extensive professional health knowledge creates high expectations on health support. While her deliberate and strategic actions of ringing multiple times is likely to provide her with the precise information she desires, they reflect misbehaviour that potentially disrupts functional service for the organisation or other customers (Daunt and Harris, 2014). Such behaviours are in line with consumer misbehaviour incidents occurring from structural issues (Kashif and Zarkada, 2015). In contrast with commercial motives typically discussed in the literature (e.g. financial and ego motives) (Daunt and Harris, 2012), in the case of social marketing services, users seek to satisfy utilitarian motives that should help achieve behavioural goals:

If they are not friendly, I would hang up and call again and get someone else. If someone cannot understand what you are asking, and give you some other answers that you are asking, that means they don't understand you and you don't understand them or what they are talking about is not fitting to what you are wanting to know, so I would say, "I am sorry, but I don't think we are on the same wavelength, I will call back (Participant 5 (Interview), Female, 37 years old).

In another instance, Participant 7 describes how a stereotypical perception of a specific suburb negatively influence a decision to use a social marketing service despite positive recommendations. In this case, the participant wanted alternatives that better fits the needs of him and his friend. Stigma theories highlight that negative stereotype perceptions generate prejudice and negative reactions (Kirkwood and Stamm, 2006). In light of the incongruent

resource applied (solution) by the employee, the service user who perceived a lack of social acceptance of the service appears to devalue the benefits to the extent he tried to strategically seek alternatives more aligned to his personal needs, even if they may not be as effective:

Look, I was a bit sceptical; maybe I was a bit judgmental as well. I said, “Maybe we shouldn’t go to this particular suburb even though they recommended it as the best support group”. I said, “Maybe we should go to the one in Claremount” (Participant 7 (Interview), Male, 34 years old).

4.3 Theoretical implications

This study sought to draw from services marketing theory as an alternative pathway to social and behavioural change for the achievement of societal well-being by exploring value destruction in social marketing services. *RQ1* and *RQ2* were addressed using an exploratory qualitative approach from the perspective of consumers. The current study contributes to the academic literature in three ways. First, it provides empirical insights into how value destruction processes occur in services and identifies the behavioural outcomes that occur because of value destruction. Consequently, this study responds to Kuppelwieser and Finsterwalder’s (2016) criticism that there is currently insufficient focus on value destruction in service research and its impact on well-being. Second, in directly examining value destruction, this study responds to criticisms that much of the research on value creation is predominantly positively valenced (Blocker and Barrios, 2015). This provides us with the foundation for a more balanced understanding of how value creation and destruction occurs. Third, this study adds to our existing knowledge of value destruction in social marketing, which to date, has focussed on non-service contexts (Zainuddin *et al.*, 2017). Providing insights to value destruction in service contexts allows social marketers, particularly at the midstream, to understand the challenges facing value creation efforts in social marketing programmes and acknowledges the complexities of creating value for individuals and societies. Incongruent resource application and misuse of firm resources highlight the importance of systemic processes in the sense that resource poor agencies widely adopt activities that not only do not add value but also could reduce value for service users. Findings of this study are consistent with work by Kashif and Zarkada (2015) who investigate the influence of system failures that result in customer misbehaviour and destruction of value. Furthermore, this study highlights the importance of finer behavioural interaction and expertise elements encapsulated in the incongruent application of resources. This perspective is consistent with emerging studies that focus on the interaction as reducing value outcomes (Stieler *et al.*, 2014; Plé and Cáceres, 2010) and contributes to understanding finer-grained value destruction processes particularly relevant to social marketing services. The two value destruction processes uncovered in this study highlight the importance of considering how systemic misuse of firm resources and interpersonal level application of resources can hinder resource integration. As such, these perspectives correspond and contribute to emerging research in social marketing that emphasize the need to incorporate midstream influences including firms and employees to influence change (Gordon, 2013; Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013; Leo, 2013) in more effective ways. These service provider value destruction processes derived from a consumer’s perspective also highlight the potential of multiple actors engaging in the destruction of value.

4.4 Managerial implications

This study highlights the realities of social marketing services operating in resource constraint environments. The first practical implication of resource constraints resulting in value destruction suggests these service operators need to optimize their resources to support behavioural goals. This may mean dedicating resources to particular stages of the service

(Alvaro *et al.*, 2010), for instance, by providing more resources at the initiation stage of service use (e.g. more counsellors on the phone) and at certain time periods (e.g. ensure responsiveness to answering and promptness in returning calls). Because resources are likely to have different value at different points of the service use (Hobfoll and Jackson, 1991), optimisation of resource allocation should counter negative impacts of value destruction. Second, this study highlights the micro-level importance of interactions between social marketing service providers and users. In particular, the study suggests high value placed on individualised processes. This finding highlights the potential for service providers to scrutinise their actions and activities to achieve positive effects on behavioural goals. For example, employees could examine and apply micro-level detail of interactions that might include providing specific content in interactions and seeking to relate (Neghina *et al.*, 2014) to increase perceptions of customisation.

Third, the outcomes of value destruction processes indicate the importance of efforts to recover consumers at risks of terminating or reducing service use. Social marketers can develop strategies from a customer churn and retention perspective. For those who reduce service use, social marketers can actively anticipate and integrate resources congruent with consumers' behavioural needs. In contrast, for consumers who terminate service use, regaining defectors may require re-engagement strategies that involve communicating fundamental changes in service functions. Finally, the self-initiated outcome of consumers' strategic behavioural actions may not always represent the most appropriate solution. While service users may seek to correct value destruction processes through these actions, their involvement, if not properly managed, could potentially result in further decline of their well-being due to the informal and nonconforming nature of these actions. To manage, service providers can allocate resources and develop skills to prevent, identify and influence service users to act in constructive ways in the face of value destruction processes. Such actions could help prevent consumers from devising strategies that may arise from mindsets of failure anticipation.

4.5 Limitations and suggestions for further research

There are several caveats associated with this paper. First, due to the exploratory nature of this study and its small sample, the findings are not generalisable or representative to all social marketing services. However, the current study represents a preliminary step to elaborate on gaps in the literature on value destruction in social marketing from a consumer's perspective. The study findings do not aim to produce generalisable frameworks to describe and measure these concepts. Further studies can aim to replicate this study using larger sample sizes and draw comparisons across other service settings. Second, this study focused on and uncovered limited antecedents and outcomes. One of the findings is that value destruction in social marketing contexts can result in termination of service use. Yet, the non-usage of any service is potentially harmful for social marketing service users due to their behavioural goal needs. Future research could explore the behavioural patterns of users after they terminate service use. Third, this study focused on service users and the insights reflect the perspective of only one actor type (i.e. consumer) and firm-focused value destruction. Future studies can seek to triangulate the results from the perspectives of other actors. Finally, this study did not measure individual well-being in the current study. Instead, the study focused on understanding the value destruction processes and outcomes of value destruction. Thus, the findings only infer that if individuals were to reduce their service usage, terminate their use of the service or engage in strategic behavioural actions that are dysfunctional; this can lead to a decline in their well-being. Consequently, further studies can investigate from a well-being perspective.

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Preventing suicide in Montana: a community-based theatre intervention

Preventing
suicide in
Montana

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to examine whether a community-based suicide prevention project could increase willingness to seek professional help for suicidal ideation among young people.

Design/methodology/approach – Online surveys were administered at baseline ($n = 224$) and six months post-test ($n = 217$), consisting of the Risk Behavior Diagnosis scale; self-report questions on suicidality; willingness to engage with suicide prevention resources; and willingness to communicate with peers, family members, teachers or counselors about suicide.

Findings – A comparison of means within groups from pre- to post-test showed increases in self-efficacy for communicating about suicidal concerns with a teacher, school counselor or social worker; increases in self-efficacy for helping others; and increases in response-efficacy of interpersonal communication about suicide with a teacher, school counselor or social worker.

Practical implications – Young adults need to be willing and able to intervene in life-threatening situations affecting their peers. In step with narrative empowerment education, personal experiences can be used to communicatively reduce peer resistance to behavior change.

Originality/value – Health communicators tend to rely on overly didactic education and awareness-raising when addressing suicide prevention. This research shows the importance of direct and personal forms of influence advocated by social marketing professionals.

Keywords Public health, Self-efficacy, Social marketing, Health promotion, Culture, Communication, Depression, Health communication, Suicide prevention, Perceived stress, Community-based research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Individuals living with suicidal ideation are frequently isolated, especially in rural communities with limited access to professional counseling or where talking about suicide is profoundly stigmatized (Ingram and Franco, 2012). Exacerbating the problem, people with suicidal symptoms are often reluctant to seek professional help (Niederkröthenthaler *et al.*, 2014; Barney *et al.*, 2006). As with alcohol prevention, research on suicide shows that didactic education and awareness-raising alone will not reduce the risk (Gould *et al.*, 2003; Niederkröthenthaler *et al.*, 2014; Wyman *et al.*, 2008; Dryfoos, 1993). For long-lasting attitude



changes regarding sensitive issues like suicide, more direct and personal forms of influence are needed (Rich and Cargile, 2004; Wasserman *et al.*, 2012).

While social marketing engages a more holistic view of individuals and decision-making in its persuasive strategies, research on suicide indicates a need to address upstream, cultural factors that influence decision-making in a seemingly unconscious or irrational manner (Colucci and Lester, 2012; Xerfan, 2014; Evans-Lacko *et al.*, 2012). As noted by Tapp and Spotswood (2013, p. 278):

In social marketing there tends to be a preoccupation with theories which emphasize the cognitive, self-reflexive decision making surrounding a behaviour, rather than hidden cultural influences which underpin these seemingly rational decisions.

Changing lifestyles may require an understanding of competing factors that are intrinsic to particular subgroups (Giles and Brennan, 2015). This is particularly true for suicide, where individual-focused efforts are criticized: "Suicide prevention has narrowly focused on identifying proximate, individual-level risk factors, rather than thinking about population mental health in terms of complex social and ecological relations" (Knox *et al.*, 2004, p. 37). Suicide does not have a well-defined disease mechanism; "it reflects diverse risk factors and is best understood within a complex paradigm of social, behavioral, and psychiatric factors" (Knox *et al.*, 2004, p. 37). Owing to this complexity, suicide prevention programs should combine social marketing persuasive techniques with approaches that address cultural building blocks to inform the attitudes and decisions around suicide prevention behavior.

Suicide in rural areas

Rural communities may represent one type of subgroup where local, embedded beliefs and customs affect attitudes and behavior around suicide. Residents of rural mountain states (e.g. MT, AK, CO and UT) experience excess mortality from suicide at almost twice the national average, with 24.5 per 100,000 in Montana compared to 13.4 per 100,000 nationally (Centers for Disease Control, 2015). In 2015, MT had the highest suicide rate in the nation and has ranked among the top five states for 30 years (Centers for Disease Control).

Suicide prevention strategies

While some educational interventions appear to have a positive impact on both mental illness stigma reduction and reductions in suicide attempts (Wasserman *et al.*, 2012; Chisholm *et al.*, 2016; Corrigan *et al.*, 2012; Ke *et al.*, 2015; Milin *et al.*, 2016), few such interventions have engaged social marketing strategies to address suicide. One noted exception by the US Air Force in 1996-2002, achieved significant reductions in suicide rates and risk by implementing a population-based prevention program designed to change social norms around suicide and stigma of mental illness (Knox *et al.*, 2010). A 2009 review of 43 public awareness campaigns about depression and suicide demonstrated that few campaigns invoked theoretical design or used audience research to identify specific risk factors – as indicated by social marketing science. Of these campaigns, only two showed impacts on behavior – increased short-term visits to clinicians were associated with Suicide Prevention Week in Canadian communities in 1991 (Dumesnil and Verger, 2009), and reduced suicide attempts were associated with the Nuremberg Alliance Against Depression, in German in 2001 (Hegerl *et al.*, 2010).

Evidence on suicide prevention does not indicate one superior approach (Zalsman *et al.*, 2016; World Health Organization, 2010). Some studies show that the most effective educational programs feature dialectic behavior therapy, cognitive behavior therapy, direct contact with individuals suffering mental illness, drama and theater about stigma or role

playing (Gould *et al.*, 2003; Murman *et al.*, 2014; Dalky, 2012; Mann *et al.*, 2005). Other reviews indicate that combining contact-based anti-stigma interventions with educational approaches may be most impactful (Chisholm *et al.*, 2016; Corrigan *et al.*, 2012, 2015; Dalky, 2012). In addition, in a review of 244 suicide prevention studies, Zalsman *et al.* (2016) found that restricting access to lethal means, some pharmacologic treatments and school-based programs have the greatest impact on suicide behavior.

Given the mixed record of suicide prevention programming, we look toward Tapp and Spotswood (2013, p. 276) who recommend that any type of embedded social practice, such as suicide, will be more likely to change in response to a cultural-based approach “which seeks to analyze the cultural underpinnings of individual tastes and decisions [. . .]”.

Interactive educational tactics have emerged in public health partly in response to a belief that didactic approaches foster passive learning, and partly in the quest to incorporate more cultural background into message creation (Conquergood, 1986; Feldman *et al.*, 2011; Langellier, 2009). Rodriguez *et al.* (2006) found that an interactive performance model, where students engaged actively in their own learning through dialog, experimentation and movement, was more effective than a traditional classroom approach at increasing student willingness to comfort distressed sexual assault victims. Similarly, Rich and Cargile (2004) achieved success in confronting student attitudes about race through an interactive pedagogy, involving immediate feedback and discursive loops, rather than a traditional classroom model. Most important for our work is the work of Howard and Ferrier (2009), who demonstrated how an interactive theater can be effective at reducing prejudice and confronting stereotypes within the news industry. Wasserman *et al.* (2012) found that interactive role-playing with students can affect both suicide attempts and help-seeking behavior.

A community-based theater approach to preventing suicide

The *Let's Talk* program directors hosted and facilitated a theater workshop to address the risk of suicide (Keller *et al.*, 2017). Each writer-actor group met bi-weekly for 12 weeks to share their personal experiences with suicide and/or major depression, and to collaboratively write a unique play based on their experiences. At the end of the writing-rehearsal period, the writer-actors staged performances for their peers, after which they held discussions with audience members. Each discussion was moderated by the school counselor to help answer difficult questions.

Applying social marketing principles

In the preface to *Marketing Social Change*, Andreasen (1995) defines social marketing as “the application of proven concepts and techniques drawn from the commercial sector to promote changes in diverse socially important behaviors such as drug use, smoking, sexual behavior [. . .]”. By “proven techniques” Andreasen meant methods drawn from behavioral theory, persuasion psychology and marketing science with regard to health behavior, human reactions to messages and message delivery. By using research and behavior change theory, Andreasen recommends that social marketing approaches develop health promotion through the following six stages:

- (1) plan a strategy;
- (2) select media channels;
- (3) develop materials and pre-test;
- (4) implement;

- (5) assess effectiveness; and
- (6) incorporate feedback to refine message strategy.

The *Let's Talk* program fits into the social marketing model insofar as the six steps were mostly followed. In planning a campaign, Andreasen (1995) urges health communicators to adhere to behavioral theory. This community-based theater project was instigated without any clear theoretical design. The project, planned by the Global Health Equity Foundation, did, however, follow the planning stages in other ways, insofar as a cross-section of community members (counselors, teachers, school leaders, researchers and hospital executives) were engaged in a conversation about the health problem (suicide) and invited to support the proposed campaign (*Let's Talk*). Community theater and a youth photo workshop were selected as the media channels based on the executive director's desire to use youth-generated art and community voices to tackle the problem. The materials were developed through a ten-week youth theater workshop, facilitated by a professional theater director, and photography workshop, facilitated by a professional photographer. No "pre-testing" was conducted. Once complete, the first performance was conducted before a community-wide audience at the local Veteran's Association building and the public was invited to an opening of the youth photography exhibit at a local museum. Effectiveness of the program was assessed through baseline and follow-up surveys, focus groups and observation. Feedback was incorporated through actor-audience town-hall style discussions that took place after each performance.

The current study

Short-term goals were to educate small groups of adolescents in Montana's rural frontier about the high prevalence of suicide in the state and to increase acceptance of open communication about the topic. The long-term goal was to increase usage of professional counseling services by youth at risk. The program had several components:

- providing suicide prevention training to writer-actors;
- creating and maintaining a website with videos, phone numbers, and crisis contacts;
- posting flyers throughout schools; and
- initiating a publicity program through local television and newspapers to draw in widespread community support.

Theoretical background

Narrative Engagement Framework, a prominent model in interactive education, and community-based social marketing, can be applied retroactively to describe the theoretical basis for the intervention (Mckenzie-Mohr, 2000; Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013). Although not a traditional theory of behavior change, the narrative model states that personal narrative-based messages can be meaningful to other members of a single community, and can also yield important information about perceptions, attitudes and beliefs within a community (Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013; Langellier, 2009). This approach can also be compared to "community-based social marketing", in which behavior change strategies are designed to overcome the barriers identified within specific communities and pre-tested with small segments of those communities (Mckenzie-Mohr, 2000). Consistent with the recommendations from this body of research, the suicide prevention program was provided in a community-based manner, enlisting community members to design and deliver narrative-based messages (Kalafat, 2003; Jepson *et al.*, 2010; Langellier, 2009; Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013).

To analyze the effects of the *Let's Talk* project, we used the extended parallel process model (EPPM; Witte, 1992, 1994) to examine the threat components related to suicide (perceived susceptibility to suicide and perceived severity of suicide) and efficacy components related to the goals of the *Let's Talk* program (perceived self-efficacy for and response efficacy of interpersonal communication with professionals, friends and family about suicide risk; accessing help; and helping others). As suicide has such a low baseline level, it is hard to document effects of preventive programs on behavior (d'Orio *et al.*, 2014). Hence, we focus on attitudes related to help-seeking, open dialog and helping others as outcomes variables.

EPPM posits that respondents are more likely to change their behavior in response to a health message if both the perceived threat and their perceived efficacy (including self-efficacy, behavior-specific self-confidence and response efficacy, perceptions of the effectiveness of the recommended solution) are high. However, Witte (1992, 1994) warns that messages that increase the audience's perceived threat without simultaneously increasing their perceived efficacy to make a change can stimulate unhealthy coping mechanisms, including defense-avoidance, denial or reactance (i.e. blaming the messenger) (Figure 1).

The threat component of the EPPM includes both the perceived severity and perceived susceptibility of the health threat (e.g. "Is there really a suicide epidemic?" "Am I at risk for suicide?"). The efficacy component of the model includes both perceived self-efficacy and perceived response efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy refers to beliefs as to whether or not one is capable of performing the behavior in question (e.g. "I am able to get professional help if I feel I'm depressed or have suicidal ideation"), whereas perceived response efficacy relates to one's belief in the effectiveness of a specific recommendation/proposed behavior (e.g. "Speaking with a professional counselor will help reduce my depression").

EPPM was selected over other health communication theories because of the extensive body of evidence showing it has been used effectively to both generate and evaluate messages intended to motivate health-related behaviors (Witte, 1994; Cameron *et al.*, 1999; Kline and Mattson, 2000; McKay *et al.*, 2004; MaGuire *et al.*, 2010; Witte *et al.*, 1996, 1998; Askelson *et al.*, 2015). Because no direct fear appeal was used in this intervention (the script, while infused with confessions of suicidal thinking and stories of loss, delivers a strong message in promotion of open dialog and seeking help; www.letstalkmilescity.org), we elected to use the EPPM to study the intervention's effects on efficacy.

The study sought to assess this two-dimensional concept of efficacy at baseline and follow-up.

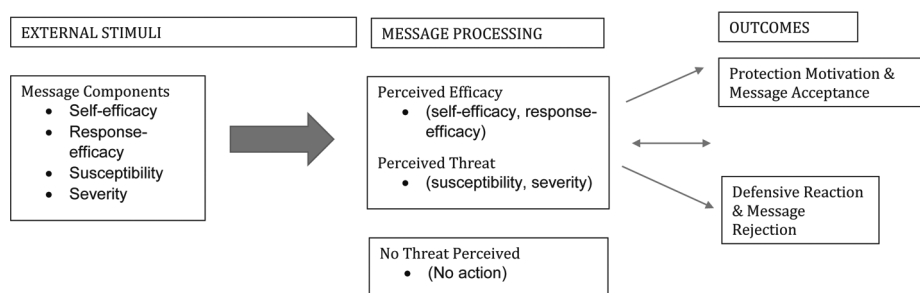


Figure 1.
Extended parallel process model

Source: Witte *et al.* (1996)

Hypotheses

To identify whether this approach would be effective in *Let's Talk*, the EPPM framework was used to understand Montana students' perceptions in response to *Let's Talk* health messages to reduce barriers to help-seeking and helping others.

Using the EPPM, this study hypothesizes that:

H1a. The *Let's Talk* program will increase self-efficacy to access prevention resources; and

H1b. The *Let's Talk* program will increase self-efficacy to talk to others about suicide and suicidal ideation.

The *Let's Talk* theater performance addressed self-efficacy by promoting interpersonal communication about suicide, and increased self-confidence to access professional counseling or formal suicide prevention resources.

H2a. The *Let's Talk* program will increase perceived response-efficacy of prevention resources.

H2b. The *Let's Talk* program will increase response-efficacy to talk to others about suicide and suicidal ideation.

The content of the play, and counselor-led question-and-answer sessions that followed each performance, were designed to highlight the benefits of seeking professional counseling and contacting suicide prevention hotlines.

Methods

Facilitation of the intervention

Recruiting, writing and rehearsal. The local high school counselor recruited the writer-actors. Student status and interest in the program were the only screening criteria used to select participants. They did not undergo mental health screening, but voluntary reports of mental illness or history with counseling were noted. Prior to the start of the program, all writer-actors signed consent forms and received Question, Persuade and Refer Gatekeeper Training for Suicide Prevention.

Throughout the play-writing process, workshop members shared journal entries, stories, memories, songs and poetry with the director and the rest of the group. By contributing creative non-fiction based on their own experiences with self-harm (e.g. cutting), suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and grief over a friend's or family member's suicide, the writer-actors collaboratively created an original narrative theatrical performance (Langellier, 2009; Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013, p. 658).

Performance and discussion. At the end of the rehearsal period, one performance by five writer-actors was staged in a school-wide performance at the local high school. Before the performance, audience members were given reference cards containing crisis prevention hot-line numbers and local mental health resources. A member of the research team introduced the performance with a brief explanation of the *Let's Talk* program, the importance of the research, and the need to eradicate stigma surrounding mental illness and suicide. The performance lasted 20 minutes, followed by a moderated 40-minute Q&A session.

In addition to dramatizing the distress that mentally ill and suicidal people experience, the performance was designed to model adaptive decision-making strategies in times of stress, accessing emergency help, providing ongoing support to peers during a crisis and

identifying at least one caring adult in the school or community from whom to seek help (Mazza and Reynolds, 2008; Miller *et al.*, 2009). Following this structure, in their opening scenes, the performance demonstrated the destructive power of negative self-talk. For example, the play opened with a young woman's inner voice saying to her, "Look at all those people out there staring at you, judging you, waiting for you to mess up like you always do. All you do is ruin everything you touch". Then, as it went on, the performance incorporated more hopeful messages.

At the end of the play, the high school counselor initiated the question and answer session. The performers sat on the edge of the stage facing the audience. The first question, posed by the director, was, "How many in here have had some experience with suicide?" Most audience members and actors raised a hand. Some audience members spontaneously started sharing their own experiences with loss and asking questions of the moderator or the performers.

Evaluation procedure

In Spring 2012, an online questionnaire was administered to 224 high school students (ages 14-18 years) (all freshmen and sophomores who had participant assent and parental consent) in a school computer laboratory, prior to a school-wide performance of one of the *Let's Talk* plays. Questions assessed self-reported history of suicidal thoughts, willingness to access suicide prevention resources, willingness to engage with interpersonal communication about suicide and perceived effectiveness of both prevention resources and open dialog. The survey took 5-10 minutes to complete.

Six months after the intervention, a second round of online data collection was conducted, also in a school computer laboratory ($n = 217$), asking the same scales and demographic questions as the baseline survey, alongside exposure questions to assess reach of the intervention. The procedure for the second survey was identical to the first.

Sample

Owing to the small size of the community ($n = 8,758$) at the research site, and the opportunity to access all teenagers currently attending the city's only high school, the sample included all current students (440) enrolled in county high school (ages 14-18 years). Seniors were excluded from the pre-test to ensure the same students would be around for the follow-up. Hence, 224 students were surveyed at the pre-test and 217 students were surveyed six months later, after the intervention. For logistical reasons, and to protect anonymity, the two samples were *not* matched and, therefore, treated as independent samples in the analysis.

Measures

One validated tool was included on the *Let's Talk* Suicide Prevention survey assessments which helped quantify the health-related concerns of risk behavior. Questions from the Risk Behavior Diagnosis (RBD) scale (Witte, 1994) probed students' perceived self-efficacy and response-efficacy for engaging with suicide prevention resources; communicating with peers, family members or professionals about suicide; and helping others perceived to be at risk of suicide.

The RBD scale is a 12-item, five-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) (Witte *et al.*, 1996). The scale was developed to use all aspects of the EPPM as its theoretical baseline. The RBD scale asks individuals three questions each about their perceived attitudes toward susceptibility, severity, self-efficacy and response efficacy toward a certain behavior or topic (Tables VI). The analysis enables a researcher to

identify whether an individual (or individuals) is (are) in fear control or danger control processes before or after exposure to a health risk message. The results from the RBD scale allow researchers to create an effective message directed toward their target audience. The following scales assessed the stage of a particular individual regarding danger control or fear control toward the suicide.

Severity. Participants rate the following items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “Suicide is a serious threat” and “Suicide is a severe threat”. Pre-test Cronbach’s alpha = 0.91 and post-test = 0.88.

Susceptibility. Participants rate the following three items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “I am at risk for suicide”, “It is possible that I will attempt suicide” and “I am susceptible to depression”. Pre-test Cronbach’s alpha = 0.85 and post-test = 0.91.

Self-efficacy. Participants rate the following six items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “If I were suicidal, I would feel comfortable talking with a _____” (parent/family member; friend; teacher/school counselor; church leader; doctor/nurse/health care provider; social worker; counselor/therapist) (Table I). Pre-test Cronbach’s alpha = 0.95, and post-test = 0.96. A separate measure of self-efficacy was also administered: “If someone talked to me about being suicidal, I would feel comfortable talking to: _____” (parent/family member; friend; teacher/school counselor; church leader; doctor/nurse/health care provider; social worker; counselor/therapist) (Table II).

Table I.
Self-efficacy for communicating about personal suicide concerns

If I were suicidal I would feel comfortable talking with a	n	Pre-test		n	Post-test	
		M	SD		M	SD
Parent/family member	215	3.26	1.44	161	3.37	1.39
Friend	222	3.72	1.31	160	3.83	1.20
Teacher/school counselor	215	2.80	1.43	161	3.07**	1.70
Church leader	211	2.71	1.51	159	2.93	1.40
Doctor/nurse/healthcare provider	211	2.76	1.41	161	2.93	1.23
Social worker	209	2.22	1.28	158	2.54**	1.18

Notes: Significant differences within groups (between time periods) using Pearson chi-square (or Fisher’s exact test whether predicted count less than 10) are noted with double (*) to denote *p*-values of ** < 0.05

Table II.
Self-efficacy for communicating about suicide concerning others

If someone talked to me about being suicidal I would feel comfortable talking to	n	Pre-test		n	Post-test	
		Mean	SD		Mean	SD
Parent/family member	218	3.72	1.37	182	3.90	1.28
Friend	212	3.56	1.39	174	3.50	1.30
Teacher/school counselor	217	3.63	1.41	185	3.94**	1.21
Church leader	207	3.10	1.55	178	2.23	1.46
Doctor/nurse/healthcare provider	207	2.99	1.46	175	3.15	1.37
Social worker	204	2.65	1.49	173	2.95**	1.38

Notes: Significant differences within groups (between time periods) using Pearson chi-square (or Fisher’s exact test whether predicted count less than 10) are noted with double (*) to denote *p*-values of ** < 0.05

Response efficacy. Participants rate the following six items on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree): “*The following individuals can help young people deal with depression and/or suicide: _____*” (parent/family member; teacher/school counselor; church leader; doctor/nurse/health care provider; social worker; counselor/therapist) (Table III). Pre-test Cronbach’s alpha = 0.87, and post-test = 0.92.

Only the efficacy components were used in this study, based on pilot studies indicating perceived threat of suicide was high at baseline in the community being studied [Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (MDPHHS), 2016]. Efficacy components were measured with six items for self-efficacy and six items for response efficacy (see Tables I to III).

Students were asked about basic demographic information (age, race and gender), and about their experiences with suicide (personal knowledge of victims; personal experiences with treatment for depression; personal history of suicidal ideation; and recent history of attempts) (Tables IV and V). To assess for program exposure, students were asked both prompted and un-prompted recall about whether they had seen the *Let’s Talk* performance.

Analysis

Descriptive frequencies on all constructs were compared at baseline and post-test, to assess changes in attitudes and behavioral intentions before and after the campaign. In addition, bivariate analysis assessed for relationships between campaign exposure and all descriptive variables. One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare differences in means between groups. Significant differences within groups (between time periods) were assessed using Pearson chi-square. Demographic variables collected were controlled to assess campaign affects beyond pre-existing variations within the sample.

Results

Outcome variables

Tables I-III display outcome variables of interest (self-efficacy and response efficacy). Mean scores for five-point Likert scaled items ranging from 1 to 5, with the higher number indicating greater agreement or affirmation for the item. Table I compares the pre- and post-test means and standard deviations of six items used to measure self-efficacy. Using Pearson’s chi-square test, the mean of only two items increased significantly from pre- to post-test: students were more confident they could talk to a teacher or school counselor about a suicidal thought (pre-test mean = 2.80, SD = 1.43; post-test mean = 3.06, SD = 1.7;

Item	<i>Let’s Talk</i> Suicide Prevention			
	Pre (<i>n</i> = 224)		Post (<i>n</i> = 217)	
	M	SD	M	SD
The following individuals can help young people deal with depression and/or suicide				
Parent/friend	4.1	0.90	4.2	0.83
Teacher/school counselor	3.5	1.00	3.7	0.91*
Church leader	3.7	0.99	3.6	1.04
Doctor/nurse/healthcare provider	3.8	0.99	3.8	0.96
Social worker	3.3	0.85	3.3	0.94
Counselor/therapist	4.4	0.31	4.4	0.26

Notes: Significant differences within groups (between time periods) using Pearson chi-square (or Fisher’s exact test whether predicted count less than 10) are noted with single (*) to denote *p*-values of * < 0.10

Table III.
Response efficacy for
accessing
interpersonal support

Characteristic	Pre (n = 224)		Miles City Post (n = 217)	
	n	%	n	%
<i>Gender</i>				
Female	135	60.2	130	59.9
Male	88	39.3	84	38.7
Not specified	1	0.5	3	1.4
<i>Ethnicity</i>				
American Indian or Alaskan Native	8	3.6	4	1.8
Asian/Pacific Islander	3	1.3	1	0.5
Black/African-American	2	0.8	2	0.9
Hispanic/Latino	6	2.7	4	1.8
White/Caucasian	204	91.1	200	92.2
Not specified	1	0.5	6	2.8
<i>Age</i>				
Less than 15 years of age	16	7.2	43	19.8***
Between 15 and 16 years of age	121	54.0	124	57.1***
17 years of age or older	87	38.8	47	21.7***
Not specified	0	0.0	3	1.4***

Notes: Significant differences within groups (between time periods) using Pearson chi-square (or Fisher's exact test whether predicted count less than 10) are noted with triple asterisks (*) to denote *p*-values of *** < 0.01

Table IV.
Demographics

Variable	Pre		Post	
	n	%	n	%
Do you know someone who has committed suicide?	182	81	160	74
Are you currently being treated for depression?	27	12	22	10
Have you ever sought professional help for depression?	49	22	41	19
Have you considered suicide in the past year?	41	18	29	13
Have you ever attempted suicide?	11	5	9	4

Table V.
Suicide experience

Variable	Definition	Cite
Self-efficacy	Individuals' beliefs about their ability to perform the recommended response	Witte <i>et al.</i> (1996)
Response-efficacy	Individuals' belief in the effectiveness of a recommended response	
Perceived susceptibility	Beliefs about one's risk of experiencing the threat	
Perceived severity	Beliefs about the significance or magnitude of the threat	

Table VI.
Variables and definitions

p ≤ 0.05); and they were more confident they could talk to a social worker about a suicidal thought (pre-test mean = 2.22, SD = 1.28; post-test mean = 2.54, SD = 1.18; *p* ≤ 0.05) (Table I). Although no significant change occurred, the mean was highest for confidence in being able to talk a friend at both time intervals.

Insofar as social workers and school counselors can be considered to be suicide “prevention resources”, both *H1a*, “The *Let’s Talk* program will increase self-efficacy to access prevention resources”, and *H1b*, “The *Let’s Talk* program will increase self-efficacy to talk to others about suicide and suicidal ideation”, were supported.

Table II examines the pre- and post-test means and standard deviations of six additional items also used to measure self-efficacy for communication with another – if a friend had confided in them about suicidal ideation. Teacher/school counselor and social worker were the only two items to show a significant increase, using Person’s chi-square test (pre-test mean for teacher/school counselor = 3.63, SD = 1.41; post-test mean = 3.94, SD = 1.21; $p \leq 0.05$; pre-test mean for social worker = 2.65, SD = 1.49; post-test mean = 2.95, SD = 1.98; $p \leq 0.05$) (Table II). Once again, campaign exposure appears to have supported *H1b*, “The *Let’s Talk* program will increase self-efficacy to talk to others about suicide and suicidal ideation”.

Table III examines the pre- and post-test means and standard deviations of six items used to measure response efficacy by asking respondents to rate how helpful various people or occupational groups would be in assisting young people with suicidal ideation. Using Person’s chi-square test, response efficacy was significantly higher than pre-test for teacher/school counselor (pre-test mean = 3.5, SD = 1.00; post-test mean = 3.7, SD = 0.91; $p \leq 0.05$) (Table III).

Insofar as teachers and school counselors can be considered to be suicide prevention resources, *H2a*, “The *Let’s Talk* program will increase perceived response efficacy prevention resources”, was also supported. Regardless, *H2b*, “The *Let’s Talk* program will increase perceived response-efficacy of talking to others about suicidal risk”, was clearly supported, for the category of teachers and school counselors.

Demographics

See Table IV for a breakdown of the samples by age and race. In both samples, the racial breakdown was identical. The age distribution was fairly even, but the post-test sample was slightly younger. There were more females (60 per cent) than males (39 per cent) in both surveys.

Suicide exposure

Responses obtained from the surveys were examined for descriptive information about the sample’s experiences with suicide and depression, drawing from dyadic measures only. Although exposure to suicide and suicidal thoughts was slightly lower in the post-test survey (possibly explained by the younger age of participants), levels of personal knowledge of suicide victims seemed high, but we were unable to compare this statistic to a national sample (Table V): 81 per cent ($n = 182$) at baseline and 74 per cent ($n = 160$) at post-test said they knew someone who had committed suicide. A full 18 per cent ($n = 41$) at pre-test and 13 per cent ($n = 29$) at post-test admitted they had considered killing themselves in the past year, similar to or lower than the national average of 17 per cent of high school students who seriously consider suicide in a given year (Centers for Disease Control, 2015). Five percent ($n = 11$) at pre-test and 4 per cent ($n = 9$) at post-test said they had actually attempted suicide – significantly lower than the national average of 8 per cent (Table V) (Centers for Disease Control).

Campaign exposure

Three items were used to measure campaign awareness. A majority, 66.4 per cent, reported having heard of a suicide prevention campaign. Thirty-five percent of respondents were able to correctly give the name of the campaign without prompting; 54 per cent said that they had heard of the “*Let’s Talk*” campaign when prompted.

Discussion

Results of this study show that the perceived efficacy of communicating with teachers, high school counselors and social workers about suicidal risks (among one-self or others) increased after the *Let's Talk* theater intervention. One possible explanation for this change is the strong role played by the high school counselor in administering the project and facilitating post-performance discussions. Another possible explanation is that the open discussion about suicide loss, ideation and attempts presented in the live theater performance reduced audience members' fears about contacting professional adults about suicidal risk. If the latter is true, the intervention achieved one of its primary goals. If the former is true, then the intervention achieved its desired effect, but only in a roundabout manner – through the moderated post-performance discussions, rather than the theater performance itself. A third explanation lies with the on-going post-show talking/interaction between student actors and among the show audience, and within the broader community, during the six months after the play, prior to the post-test evaluation. This explanation assumes that such ongoing open discussion about suicide and risk is helpful; i.e. it can increase students' perceptions of their efficacy (behavior-specific self-confidence) to contact teachers or professionals about suicide risk. Future evaluations of this intervention should use a matched pre/post sample to more clearly identify a causal link and should probe on perceived efficacy for accessing other types of prevention resources.

Although the EPPM was used as a model to guide our evaluation, it was not the central model used to formulate the intervention. The intervention presented here does not dictate a specific format; rather, it provides an illustration of how a community-based approach might be used to increase efficacy for help-seeking behavior among high-risk communities. While the script-writing process was grassroots, insofar as students wrote the plays, *Let's Talk* directors were instructed to ensure the resulting plays delivered several key messages:

- interpersonal communication about suicide risk is important;
- professional resources for suicide prevention exist and can be helpful; and
- talking about suicide risk and resources can reduce barriers to prevention.

Since the intervention was not based on a theoretical model, perhaps future iterations of *Let's Talk* should draw more explicitly from current findings about suicide prevention (e.g. a focus on stigma reduction) (National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2014; Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2014).

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention identifies stigma as a significant barrier to suicide prevention (National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, 2014). The community-based nature of this intervention is ideally suited for addressing stigma of mental illness. *Let's Talk* could be tailored to more directly confront both public and self-stigma related to suicide. In fact, the researchers are currently working on a study to evaluate the impact of *Let's Talk* documentaries (videos produced about the theater workshops and performances described in this paper) on students' perceived stigma of suicide and stigma of help-seeking. Pilot results will be used to guide revisions of the documentaries to increase their educational impact on stigma, prior to an experimental evaluation.

Limitations

A possible limitation is the study's omission of scaled measures of perceived threat. However, it can be argued that such a measure was not necessary, as the intervention was not designed to increase perceived threat of suicide. As more than 75 per cent of respondents

had experienced a personal loss because of suicide, perceptions of threat were likely to have been high at baseline. Given that the performance was scripted by students from the target audience, they elected to focus on increasing perceptions of efficacy rather than emphasizing the severity of the threat of suicide. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of EPPM, to emphasize efficacy for health actions (when perceived threat of a health risk is already high), to both reinforce accurate beliefs as well as to provide information to address and correct concerns and misperceptions (e.g. stigma against accessing help). However, scaled measures for perceived susceptibility and severity would have enhanced our understanding of the audience's level of fear, and any changes in relation to the intervention.

Limitations of this research include the small sample size, the lack of randomized controls to isolate the effects of the intervention, our inability to match the pre- and post-test samples and the lack of diversity in the sample (Peters *et al.*, 2015). Although the highest rates of suicide in Montana occur among men of ages 55-65 years, and among Native Americans, this study was unable to track its effectiveness with those populations because of our sample. Future adaptations of this project to address the highest risk groups are recommended, although it should be noted that even Montana's young adults have a risk of suicide that is twice the national average (Centers for Disease Control, 2015).

Another limitation had to do with the possible interference of seasonality with our results. As baseline results were collected in fall, and post-test results were collected in spring, it is impossible to know whether perceptions related to suicide (and prevention) were affected by changes in season. Research to date is mixed on this topic (McCarthy, 2010; Pretti and Miotto, 1998).

Finally, the intervention may have suffered from a lack of intentional theoretical design. Post-hoc, we feel the approach most closely fits with the Narrative Engagement Framework (Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013) discussed above. At the initial workshop rehearsal, a director (drawn from a pool of adjunct theater faculty at the university hosting the study) gently probed the writer-actors' experiences with stress, anxiety, depression, alienation from school and home, and relationships. Throughout the play-writing process, workshop members shared journal entries, stories, memories, songs and poetry with the director and the rest of the group. By contributing creative non-fiction based on their own experiences – with self-harm (e.g. cutting), suicidal ideation, suicide attempts and grief over a friend's or family member's suicide – the writer-actors collaboratively created an original narrative theatrical performance (Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013, p. 658; Langelier, 2009).

The intervention also addresses suicide in an approach that could be informed by the community-based social marketing model (Mckenzie-Mohr, 2000), also discussed above. One approach that can be applied to the intervention that was not discussed previously is the interpersonal theory of suicide (Van Orden *et al.*, 2010). Van Orden and colleagues suggest that two factors must be present for a person to commit suicide: perceived burdensomeness, the belief that one is a burden to others in some way; and thwarted belongingness, which occurs when one is socially isolated but would prefer the company of others. By engaging community members to openly discuss both the fears of being a burden to others (through one's personality differences or emotional vulnerabilities), and experiences of being alienated from others, this community theater intervention may have addressed both risk factors of suicide. If the assumption is true, that open discussion or interpersonal communication about both suicide risk and its risk factors can lead to prevention, the interpersonal theory of suicide may explain part of the intervention's effectiveness.

Insofar as we have assumed throughout this report that open discussion of a risk can reduce its threat, we turn to the theory of social norms (Perkins, 2003). Social norms depend on people's perceptions of what is "normal" behavior, regardless of whether this perception

is correct or accurate. Many prevention campaigns are designed to help change people's perception of social norms, for example, behaviors regarding alcohol use: while driving, while pregnant, in excessive amounts. Community theater can be used to help change descriptive (perceptions of what most people are doing) and prescriptive norms (perceptions of what should be done) related to health and well-being, at both the individual and societal levels. As prevention messages achieve critical mass, the behaviors they promote gradually become the "new normal", replacing previous standards. In this case, the theater program may have shifted the community's perception about how many people are *actually* experiencing risk factors for suicide (e.g. perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness), allowing for increased acceptance of those feelings and experiences, while simultaneously shifting the perception of how people *should* feel (e.g. "It's actually quite normal for me to feel like I don't belong").

While this study seems to indicate some success, far more extensive evaluation is needed to determine the applicability of similar interventions on a large scale, and stronger measures of behavior are needed. Further replication and refinement of the intervention should actively engage a well-established theoretical model from the literature on behavior change communication.

Conclusion

This paper began by examining the effectiveness of a community-based theater program on youth attitudes and beliefs about suicide prevention. Suicide prevention in the USA will not be achieved without addressing the current knowledge gaps in the field of suicide research. As discussed earlier, traditional, didactic or lecture-style educational approaches have not been shown to reduce the risk of suicide (Gould *et al.*, 2003; Niederkrotenthaler *et al.*, 2014). Instead, more direct and personal forms of influence are needed (Wasserman *et al.*, 2012; Rich and Cargile, 2004). Young adults need to be willing and able to intervene in life-threatening situations affecting their peers. In step with narrative empowerment education, actors in this project were instructed to use personal experiences to communicatively reduce audience members' resistance to openly discussing the risk of suicide, the use of professional help and the strategies needed to intervene in suicidal ideation and attempts (Seibold *et al.*, 1985; Seibold and Thomas, 1994; Wyman *et al.*, 2010; The JED Foundation, 2016; Miller-Day and Hecht, 2013).

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