

## Ethics in social marketing: In search of pronēsis\*

Professor Lynne Eagle<sup>1</sup>, Dr Stephan Dahl<sup>2</sup> & Professor David R. Low<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>School of Business,  
James Cook University  
Townsville QLD 4811, Australia  
Email: [lynne.eagle@jcu.edu.au](mailto:lynne.eagle@jcu.edu.au) ; [david.low@jcu.edu.au](mailto:david.low@jcu.edu.au)

<sup>2</sup> University of Hull Business School,  
Cottingham Road,  
Hull, HU6 7RX, England  
Email: [s.dahl@hull.ac.uk](mailto:s.dahl@hull.ac.uk)

\*Greek for practical wisdom

Lynne Eagle: Professor of Marketing at James Cook University. Research interests include marketing communication effects and effectiveness, including: trans-disciplinary approaches to sustained behaviour change in social marketing / health promotion / environmental protection campaigns, the impact of persuasive communication on children, and the impact of new, emerging and hybrid media forms and preferences for / use of formal and informal communications channels. She has published in a wide range of academic journals, including the *Journal of Advertising* and *European Journal of Marketing*, led the development of both Marketing Communications and Social Marketing texts and contributed several book chapters for other texts as well writing commissioned social marketing expert papers and presenting numerous research papers at international conferences. She is on the editorial board of several journals.

Stephan Dahl: Senior Lecturer in Marketing at Hull University Business School in England. His research interests include health and social marketing, cross-cultural marketing and online/social media marketing and he has published widely in national and international journals. Dr Dahl's current focus is on the role social marketing to increase physical activity, online Word of Mouth and marketing using social networks and marketing green issues.

David R Low: Head of School and Professor of Business at James Cook University. He has been a senior academic leader for many years and has a wide variety of both industry and academic senior management and boardroom experience. His research interests include Cross Cultural Issues; Country of Origin Studies; Ethnicity, Social Media, Social Marketing Market Orientation, Firm Performance, E-Marketing; Innovation, SME's and the use of technology in business value chains. David has co-edited a book on E-Novation and Web 2.0. He has supervised to completion a number of HDR students and teaching interests include E-Marketing, International Marketing as well as Marketing Management.

## **Introduction**

Concerns regarding the lack of codes of ethics (CoE) for Social Marketing and related fields such as health promotion have been made for over a decade (Sindall, 2002; Smith, 2001). The establishment of professional associations for Social Marketing (e.g. the Australian Association of Social Marketers (AASM), the International Social Marketing Association (iSMA), the European Association of Social Marketers (ESMA)) has seen increased focus on the issue (French, personal communication, 2013). While CoE are seen by some as a fundamental characteristic of a profession (Sha, 2011), we question what can be realistically achieved with CoE and how they should be developed, communicated and enforced.

### **In Search of Universal Moral Values**

In the wider business context, differences between Anglo-American and European perspectives of professional work have been noted (Evetts, 2011), but the literature is silent on the potential implications for CoE of differences between western and eastern perspectives. Lefebvre (2011:54) notes that Social Marketing thought and practice has “evolved differently in the developing and developed world”, making Quinn et al.’s call for the development of a common Social Marketing language challenging. Can a global CoE for Social marketing be achieved based on the identification of “universal moral values” which continue to be sought in the corporate sector (Schwartz, 2005)? We note the recent call for a “transcendental code of ethics” for all marketing professionals (Payne & Pressley, 2013) but suggest these authors grossly oversimplify the magnitude of the task.

### **What is the Role of a Code of Ethics?**

Given that Social Marketing activity aims to change behaviours in ways that benefit individuals, communities and / or society at large, it surprises tyros that ethical issues can arise, yet there is a growing body of literature that documents ethical issues and unexpected impacts of interventions, including issues regarding targeting, segmentation; consequences of focusing on easy-to reach or influence groups rather than those with the greatest need, and the needs of low literate groups and minority groups and cultures (Newton et al., 2013; Domegan et al, 2010; Eagle, 2008; Cho & Salmon, 2007). Communications strategies also present ethical challenges, such as the impact of fear appeals or other “execution techniques that may impact negatively on vulnerable audiences (Donovan et al., 2009). Codes may thus help educate inexperienced practitioners and sensitise them to issues they may face in the future (Eagle et al., 2013).

Positive benefits of CoE include assisting and empowering individuals to make ethical decisions through being able to apply principles, processes and decision-making models to ethical issues (Sonenshein, 2007), clarifying expectations around decision making and encouraging dialogue regarding ethical issues (Helin et al., 2011). There is substantial evidence that CoE will not of themselves prevent unethical behaviour (Messikomer & Cirka, 2010), nor change behaviours in the wider business sector (Painter-Moreland, 2010; Webley & Werner, 2008) or in the healthcare sector (Eriksson et al., 2007), however CoE can offer a range of benefits, including sensitizing people to issues they might face, and educating them on strategies to deal with ethical dilemmas.

## **Relationship to Corporate and other Professional Codes**

A Social Marketing CoE would not operate in isolation; social marketers work for a range of organisations, many of which have their own CoEs; professional codes may apply such as in the health or environmental management sectors may also apply (Carter et al., 2011). Research within the accounting profession suggests that professional CoEs have less influence than organisational environments (Somers, 2001). Whether this finding is in any way generalizable will require further research. What is clear is that there will always be an organisational component to code adherence (Malloy et al., 2009). Whether and how professional associations connect professionalism and organisations has been studied in the medical context (Noordegraaf, 2011), but not within Social Marketing. Again, research is needed in this area.

## **Competing Theoretical Foundations and Frameworks**

Within the commercial sector, competing theoretical frameworks have been applied to the study of CoE, including institutional theory and information economics, resulting in differences in definitions and effectiveness evaluations (Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008; Lere & Gaumnitz, 2003). Further research is needed to determine the usefulness of these theoretical frameworks to Social Marketing specifically. Further, there are several competing ethical frameworks available, including deontology (focused on intentions) and teleology (focused on outcomes), with different values (Carter et al., 2011). How do we guide development of Aristotle's practical wisdom (termed in the original Greek 'prōnēsis') in knowing "how, when, where and in what way" (Messikomer & Cirka, 2010: 58) to apply theories, frameworks and other factors in ethical decision making?

## **Code Development and Communications**

It is argued that the development process will influence its subsequent effectiveness (Messikomer & Cirka, 2010). This area is largely un-researched, even in the corporate sector, although it is asserted that the development process is important for building awareness, support and ownership, with ethics training and personnel support enhancing code implementation (Kaptein & Schwartz, 2008). Communications of CoE appear problematic in other areas; despite widespread effects to communication the Academy of Marketing's CoE, they note "a sizable proportion" of members remain unaware of it and "only a very small proportion have read it carefully" (Mowday, 2011: 505).

## **Conclusion**

If a CoE merely lists broad principles, it will, in common with codes in other areas "occupy the role of platitude" (Malloy et al., 2009: 381). If a CoE is to be a living document with value as both an educational and a decision-making support tool, the process of development will require "thoughtful debate" (Skubik & Stening, 2009), be lengthy, but potentially rewarding. The Social Marketing professional organisations will also need, in common with other professions, to consider mechanisms to support those facing significant ethical dilemmas – and code enforcement mechanisms (see, for example, Sha, 2011). For sample codes, see Eagle, 2008.

We make the following recommendations for the exploration of ethics resources for social marketing: In order to inform our own deliberations, comparative cross-jurisdictional and cross-cultural research should be undertaken on the lessons learnt by a range of professional bodies regarding the development of resources, compliance and regulatory mechanisms and on the effectiveness of these resources, including CoEs where they exist or, in the case of health promotion, where a global CoE is being debated (Bull et al., 2012) . We recommend comparison of established professions such as medicine, law and accountancy, plus health promotion, psychology and environmental management, with findings disseminated, and debate encouraged via all three associations.

## References

- Bull, T., Riggs, E., & Nchogu, S. N. (2012). Does health promotion need a Code of Ethics? Results from an IUHPE mixed method survey. *Global Health Promotion, 19*(3), 8-20.
- Carter, S. M., Rychetnik, L., Lloyd, B., Kerridge, I. H., Baur, L., Bauman, A., Hooker, C., Zask, A. (2011). Evidence, ethics, and values: A framework for health promotion. *American Journal of Public Health, 101*(3), 465-472.
- Cho, H., & Salmon, C. T. (2007). Unintended effects of health communication campaigns. *Journal of Communication, 57*(2), 293 – 317.
- Domegan, C., Davison, K., & McCauley, V. (2010). Realising the management challenges for science communication outreach: A social marketing perspective. *Irish Journal of Management, 30*(1), 89-108.
- Donovan, R. J., Jalleh, G., Fielder, L., & Ouschan, R. (2009). Ethical issues in pro-social advertising: The Australian 2006 White Ribbon Day campaign. *Journal of Public Affairs, 9*(1), 5-19.
- Eagle, L., Dahl, S., Hill, S., Bird, S., Spotswood, F., & Tapp, A. (2013). *Social marketing*. Harlow, England: Pearson.
- Eagle, L. (2008). *Social marketing ethics: Report for the National Social Marketing Centre*. London: National Social Marketing Centre.
- Eriksson, S., Helgesson, G., & Höglund, A. T. (2007). Being, doing, and knowing: Developing ethical competence in health care. *Journal of Academic Ethics, 5*(2-4), 207-216.
- Evetts, J. (2011). A new professionalism? Challenges and opportunities. *Current Sociology, 59*(4), 406-422.
- Helin, S., Jensen, T., Sandström, J., & Clegg, S. (2011). On the dark side of codes: Domination not enlightenment. *Scandinavian Journal of Management, 27*(1), 24-33.
- Kaptein, M., & Schwartz, M. S. (2008). The effectiveness of business codes: A critical examination of existing studies and the development of an integrated research model. *Journal of Business Ethics, 77*(2), 111-127.
- Lere, J. C., & Gaumnitz, B. R. (2003). The impact of codes of ethics on decision making: Some insights from information economics. *Journal of Business Ethics, 48*(4), 365-379.
- Lefebvre, R. C. (2011). An integrative model for social marketing. *Journal of Social Marketing, 1*(1), 54-72.
- Malloy, D. C., Sevigny, P., Hadjistavropoulos, T., Jeyaraj, M., McCarthy, E. F., Murakami, M., Paholpak, Y.L., & Park, I. (2009). Perceptions of the effectiveness of ethical guidelines: An international study of physicians. *Medicine, Health Care and Philosophy, 12*(4), 373-383.
- Messikomer, C. M., & Cirka, C. C. (2010). Constructing a code of ethics: An experiential case of a national professional organization. *Journal of Business Ethics, 95*(1), 55-71.

- Mowday, R. T. (2011). Elevating the dialogue on professional ethics to the next level: Reflections on the experience of the Academy of Management. *Management and Organization Review*, 7(3), 505-509.
- Newton, J. D., Newton, F. J., Turk, T., & Ewing, M. T. (2013). Ethical evaluation of audience segmentation in social marketing. *European Journal of Marketing*, 47(9), 3-3.
- Noordegraaf, M. (2011). Remaking professionals? How associations and professional education connect professionalism and organizations. *Current Sociology*, 59(4), 465-488.
- Painter-Morland, M. (2010). Questioning corporate codes of ethics. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 19(3), 265-279.
- Payne, D., & Pressley, M. (2013). A transcendent code of ethics for marketing professionals. *International Journal of Law and Management*, 55(1), 55-73.
- Quinn, G. P., Ellery, J., Thomas, K. B., & Marshall, R. (2010). Developing a common language for using social marketing: An analysis of public health literature. *Health Marketing Quarterly*, 27(4), 334-353.
- Schwartz, M. S. (2005). Universal moral values for corporate codes of ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 59(1-2), 27-44.
- Sha, B.-L. (2011). Accredited vs. non-accredited: The polarization of practitioners in the public relations profession. *Public Relations Review*, 37(2), 121-128.
- Singh, J.B. (2011). Determinants of the effectiveness of corporate codes of ethics: An empirical study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 101(3), 385-395.
- Skubik, D. W., & Stening, B. W. (2009). What's in a credo? A critique of the Academy of Management's Code of Ethical Conduct and Code of Ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 85(4), 515-525.
- Smith, W. A. (2001). Ethics and the social marketer: A framework for practitioners. In A. Andreasen (Ed.), *Ethics in Social Marketing* (pp. 1-16). Washington: Georgetown University Press.
- Somers, M. (2001). Ethical codes of conduct and organizational context: A study of the relationship between codes of conduct, employee behavior and organizational values. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 30(2), 185-195.
- Sonenshein, S. (2007). The role of construction, intuition, and justification in responding to ethical issues at work: The sensemaking-intuition model. *Academy of Management Review*, 32(4), 1022-1040.
- Webley, S., & Werner, A. (2008). Corporate codes of ethics: Necessary but not sufficient. *Business Ethics: A European Review*, 17(4), 405-415.