Ethics in social marketing: In search of pronēsis

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*Greek for practical wisdom

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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 ‘prôxis’) 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


