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# Strengthening social marketing research: Harnessing “insight” through ethnography

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to challenge social marketers to extend their research repertoire beyond restrictive ‘individualised rationalities’ driving reliance on scientifically proven evidence, population data and focus groups as insight-oriented research. Social marketing, as a discipline, is constrained by using techniques aimed at (dis)proving scientific hypotheses, thus misses the mark when it comes to creating effective social change. Gaining insight into human conduct requires research tools that examine the deep ecological context of behaviour. Ethnography has the capability to generate deep culturally based insights that captures the social world through the eyes of the consumer, yet to date remains largely underutilised in social marketing. This article explores the value of ethnography as a social marketing research method enabling in-depth and meaningful engagement with the social and cultural experiences and the performative practice that is the manifestation of human existence.

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## CHINESE ABSTRACT

本文旨在驳斥社会营销人员，以扩展他们的研究才能，使其不局限于限制性的“个体化合理行动”，促使其从洞察力导向性研究的角度，依靠被科学证实的证据、人口数据和讨论组等。作为一门学科，社会化营销受限于旨在证明（或反驳）科学假设的技术的应用，因此，当涉及到建立有效的社会化变革时，便忽略了目标。需要研究工具才能深入了解人的行为，这些工具能考察行为的深层次生态背景。人种学能够产生基于文化的深层次洞察力，这种洞察力可从消费者的审视角度，抓住社会世界，然而，至今它在很大程度上仍未被充分应用在社会化营销中。本文探讨了人种学作为一种社会化营销的研究方法的价值，使人们有机会深入和有意义地接触社会和文化体验，以及体现人类生活方式的行为习惯。

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## 1. Introduction

Societies worldwide are facing an array of social issues and health problems to which governments and not-for-profit institutions aim to seek a solution. Social marketing is a social change approach increasingly used by institutions as a mechanism to effect change within the social system (Pykett et al., 2014). As a social change methodology, social marketing has underpinned a diverse range of change programmes from young women’s breast feeding (Parkinson et al., 2012); reducing arson (Peattie et al., 2012); reducing drink-driving (Duong et al., 2015; Tapp et al., 2013); to child abuse (Hyman et al., 2014). These are all deep ‘social’ issues where behaviour change strategies must go beyond targeting the individual and incorporate a consideration of the social system in which behaviours occur. Fun-

damental to the success of these social marketing programmes is the strategic integration, at programme planning level, of deep culturally based research to harness insight as to the target audience’s social reality of the phenomena under investigation. Extending beyond embedded social research is the utility of data to generate insightful and relevant social change solutions that the target audience, as member embedded within a social system, consider appropriate and doable. Yet, the extent to which social marketing programmes integrate deep culturally based insight oriented research to fully comprehend the complexity of the target audiences’ social circumstances and their ability to change appears under-researched (for examples, see Brennan et al., 2014).

Recent commentary discussing the effectiveness of social marketing to achieve social change argues the discipline is at risk of myopia for its single focus on individual behavioural change as a measure of programme success (Lefebvre, 2012; Szmigin et al., 2011). Reliance on individual level behavioural outputs reinforces individuals as sole regulators for their health and welfare (Crawshaw,

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2012), which in turn constrains ability to consider consumers as actors operating within wider socio-cultural contexts. Critically, and in concert with Grier and Bryant (2005), we argue the overreliance on *individual* opinions garnered from focus groups, surveys and interviews as insight oriented research methods, the utility of population level data influencing expert driven solutions (Woolf et al., 2015) and the reliance on scientifically ‘proven’ evidence before acting (Capella et al., 2012) has led to inappropriately designed social change programmes. Non-consideration of the wider determinants impacting behaviour change positions social marketing at risk of inadvertently stigmatising individuals and cultural groups who engage in activities that are in opposition to pervasive or institutionally sanctioned solution (Gurrieri et al., 2013), such as the stigma experienced by non-breastfeeding mothers in a culture that reifies motherhood (The VOICE Group, 2010). The continual reliance on the biomedical model and individually focused market-managerial approaches to socio-cultural predicaments ultimately restricts capability to develop social change opportunities that not only have wide reach, but importantly target audience relevance.

As Fry (2007, 2014) argues, it is now time to observe behaviour change and related solutions as a human experience. Taking this opportunity, this paper contributes to strengthening the social marketing research toolkit by reflecting on the utility of ethnography as a methodology for viewing the ‘social world through the eyes of the consumer’ (Bryman and Bell, 2007). In particular, we aim to inspire and motivate social marketers to infuse self-reflexivity in their assumptions and methods when planning social change programmes, and importantly shift away from the restrictive paradigm of ‘individualised rationalities’ towards more thoughtful consideration of viewing social issues within a behavioural ecology lens.

The following discussion elaborates on the term ‘insight’ as a critical phase of social marketing planning, and then discusses issues limiting social marketers’ capability to harness ‘deep’ insight of the behavioural ecology of the phenomena under consideration. We then discuss the value of ethnography to social marketing, and illustrate this value with an overview of how specific ethnographic techniques provide opportunities for social marketing practice. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss each technique in-depth, but rather the objective of the paper to extend social marketers’ research toolkit to explore more about the ‘why’ of the consumer behaviour to uncover the dynamics behind the micro-level consumer’s behaviours as it occurs within their behavioural ecologies. The tools are presented with a view to adding to the social marketer’s repertoire of alternative approaches to deepen their insight into the social systems in which behaviours are embedded.

## 2. Delineating social marketing ‘insight’

Prior to discussing the utility of ethnography to social marketing, we engage a discussion as to the meaning of ‘insight’ in relation to social marketing. Social marketing is widely accepted as a social change mechanism which aims to increase the acceptability of a social idea or practice across society to achieve a social good (Andreasen, 2002). Effective social marketing relies on the development of relevant and viable interventions that resonate with the target audience. Central to this process is the harnessing of deep, meaningful insight of consumers’ behaviours, roles, networks of interactions, co-created outcomes and practices in order to develop understanding of the social issue under investigation. Stone (2004) viewed insight as a process of engaging research that enables capability to get close to the target audience in order to perceive clearly or deeply. The UK based National Social Marketing Centre view insight as that ‘pivotal piece of understanding into the target audience that is achieved by moving beyond simply looking at demographic or epidemiological issues to focus on what ‘moves and motivates’ people’ (NSMC (National Social Marketing Centre), 2015).

Echoing these positions, French et al. (2010, p. 99) articulate ‘insight’ as that ‘discovery of deeper or hidden meaning’ into consumers’ experiences in relation to the social issue. They further contend effective behavioural change is underpinned by harnessing consumer insight, and as such ‘insight’ is of paramount importance in designing social marketing strategies that ‘work’.

These views of insight suggest the term is not unidimensional, but rather is eclectic in nature. As such, it borrows from the variety of traditions that have formed the foundation of marketing and therefore social marketing (Brennan et al., 2014; Dann et al., 2007). Nonetheless, there is certainly a commonality across the varied interpretations of insight. Fundamentally, insight refers to viewing the phenomena of interest through the eyes of the consumer in the aim to capture the deep truths as to the experiences, behaviours, beliefs and the ways of life of consumers in relation to the social issue of interest. Furthermore, insight is that ‘aha’ or ‘Eureka’ moment that enables the examiner to ‘see’ what can be done with the issue under scrutiny (Smith and Yang, 2004). This thinking extends beyond simply considering individual level impacts; requiring consideration of individuals as social actors within a market-space, and of behaviour change as operating as a social interaction between actors within a dynamic and interactive market system.

Additionally, Stone (2004) distinguishes between insight as an aspect of the data capturing process, as opposed to insights that serve as a functional output of the process of capturing insight. In this way insights refer to those ‘flashes of inspiration or penetrating discoveries that can lead to specific opportunities’ for leveraging the value exchange entity. As such, the value of harnessing consumer insight is to help structure social change programme thinking and decision making, but more importantly to identify the value exchange entity with which consumers will identify. The value exchange entity is the ‘thing’ that brings the consumer and the social marketer to the market space where interaction and engagement may result in value being created and exchanged (and possibly re-created and re-exchanged until the parties are content with the outcome). The entity may be co-created (Aggarwal and Basu, 2014), or it may be created by the social marketer and offered in exchange for some desired outcome (for the social marketer) and benefit for the consumer (Layton, 2011). As Peattie and Peattie (2003) note, the effectiveness of behaviour change lies in the development of new sustainable practices that have relevance and meaning, and reproduction capability. Within this frame, ‘insight oriented’ research acts as a strategic tool within social marketing to unveil the hidden truths of consumer experiences and lived reality associated with social issues.

## 3. Limitations to harnessing ‘insight’ in social marketing

Influencing and facilitating individual and social change is notoriously difficult (Geller, 2002; Guidry et al., 2014). Yet, the key to achieving improved health and social outcomes hinges on designing social marketing programmes grounded in quality evidence and an in-depth understanding of the target audience as social actors within a market-space of engaged interactions that both define and design the shared outcomes. Despite the breadth of social marketing as a social change tool, there remain remarkably few examples of truly successful sustainable social change programmes (Langford and Panter-Brick, 2013). Many interventions are poorly designed, demonstrate a lack of theoretical underpinning and are based on theoretical foundations that may not be commensurable given the context (i.e. they may be ecologically invalid (Brennan et al., 2014; Bronfenbrenner, 1979)). For example, there remains an overreliance on social advertising, particularly threat appeals as an educative motivator to stem risky behaviour, alongside continued attention to addressing rational, cognitive drivers of behaviour (Kessels et al., 2014; Kim et al., 2014). Although this theme of research is recognised

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