

## Social good and ethics in social marketing for wicked problems

We are delighted to be acting as guest editors of this special issue of the *Journal of Social Marketing*, in which we seek to showcase work from different areas of behaviour change research to explore the opportunities, challenges, questions and dilemmas involved with diverse understandings of the social good and ethics in social marketing for wicked problems. Social marketing has been deployed in the Global North and South to tackle multiple social issues stretching far beyond the traditional public health-related challenges, including human trafficking, terrorism, political and religious extremism, domestic violence, family planning or climate change. Thus, the question that had inspired us to make this call was: As a discipline, are we ready to address wicked problems that come with the intrinsic moral dilemmas and trade-offs?

Nearly 50 years have passed since the publication of the seminal paper by [Kotler and Zaltman \(1971\)](#), who put forward the idea of social marketing as an approach to planned social change. The growth of social marketing in academia and practice has not always been easy, but we can say with confidence that in the past decade, our discipline has been attracting increasing attention across universities, all levels of government and international organisations, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), for its ability to create positive social impact. Recognising the growth of social marketing as well as the increasing diversity of our community, in 2013, we achieved a major milestone: a consensus definition of social marketing endorsed by all social marketing organisations in existence at the time. The definition, highlighting the importance of ethics in social marketing, posed that:

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.

Social Marketing practice is guided by ethical principles. It seeks to integrate research, best practice, theory, audience and partnership insight, to inform the delivery of competition sensitive and segmented social change programmes that are effective, efficient, equitable and sustainable. ([iSMA](#), [ESMA](#), and [AASM \(International Social Marketing Association, European Social Marketing Association, Australian Association of Social Marketing\)](#), 2013; emphasis added)

More recently, social marketing associations have endorsed a set of core social marketing principles, recognising that social marketing programmes should incorporate “critical thinking, reflexivity and being ethical”, and a professional code of ethics for social marketing should be developed to guide the application of the social marketing principles ([Evans and French, 2019](#), p. 4). However, and despite repeated recognition of the prominent role of the social good and ethics in social marketing, we have observed relatively little progress in our discussions of those issues since the influential work of Alan [Andreasen \(2001\)](#) and George [Brenkert \(2002, 2008\)](#).

With social marketing's increasing focus on wicked problems and system-wide change, there is a pressing need for ethicality of and social good in social marketing to be addressed by academics and practitioners alike. Yet, in the ever-broadening field of social marketing, the social good and ethics have received scant attention. While our understanding of the



effectiveness of social marketing and its various tools and techniques is being constantly enriched with new evidence and systematic literature reviews, the focus on the social good and ethics when engaging with complex social issues should remain at the forefront of our interests to realise the full potential of social marketing. After all, it is the focus on the social good – be it in the form of well-being, quality of life, physical health, or public good – that distinguishes social marketing from its parent discipline of commercial marketing (Hastings and Saren, 2003).

Focussing on the social good has led to many social marketers assuming that their definition of “social good” is the same as that of their target populations. Being provided with government funding for specific behaviour change outcomes that will “benefit society” has also reinforced an assumption that social marketing actions are inherently “good” and, thus, ethical. This is not the case. Yet, the discussion in the field to create a shared definition of the common good is largely ignored (apart from Szablewska and Kubacki, 2019a), as is the overall drive from the industry to develop shared ethical guidelines.

The importance of social marketing ethics is further highlighted by the fact that wicked problems have increasingly been addressed by social marketing academics and practitioners (for example at the 2015 World Social Marketing Conference in Sydney and beyond). Wicked problems can be defined as social issues that do not have a clear single cause or solution (Rittel and Weber, 1973). These include problems – such as environmental degradation, obesity or smoking, among others – that are highly complex, have multiple stakeholders and multiple facilitating factors (Kennedy *et al.*, 2017). While defining a particular wicked problem is a difficult task, agreeing on its causes and solutions proves to be even harder. Furthermore, when a change is introduced into a complex system, it causes a ripple effect through that system, often leading to unintended consequences and ethical dilemmas (Kennedy, 2016; Rittel and Weber, 1973). Special issues in journals, such as the *Journal of Marketing Management* on strategic social marketing (Gordon *et al.*, 2016), epitomise the views that wicked problems need to be addressed as part of a social system. Extending this debate further, using social marketing as a tool of system change bringing about a far-reaching societal transition can, in itself, be ethically problematic (Kennedy, 2016) and is often considered a form of social engineering (Kennedy and Parsons, 2014; Szablewska and Kubacki, 2019b). As such, engagements with the ethical considerations of these issues are beginning to emerge as important; however, this has not translated into scholarly work fully dedicated to addressing normative and practical challenges of behaviour change in social marketing for wicked problems. In response to this shortcoming, this special issue provides a forum for authors to fully engage with the subject matter.

While the social good has been the focus of academic enquiry in a number of studies (Brenkert, 2002; Gordon and Gurrieri, 2014; Spotswood *et al.*, 2012; Szablewska and Kubacki, 2019a), the many meanings of the social good in social marketing and behaviour change have rarely been systematically explored. Yet, considering the social good in social marketing as inherent, obvious or taken-for-granted makes social marketing vulnerable to criticisms (Gurrieri *et al.*, 2014; Pang and Kubacki, 2015). As a conduit for the social good, a robust ethical framework has been identified as critical for delivering the social good in social marketing for wicked problems (Szablewska and Kubacki, 2019a). If the aims of social marketing are inherently subjective and political in nature (Dann, 2010), it is our responsibility as applied behaviour change scholars and practitioners to advance theories of the social

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good and ethical approaches that can guide the practice of social marketing and provide “criteria and standards for individual and social welfare” (Brenkert, 2008, p. 213). Although there is ample literature on social marketing tools and techniques (Tapp and Spotswood, 2013; Wood, 2008), the meanings, and the associated challenges, of the social good and ethics in social marketing for wicked problems remain under-conceptualised and under-researched. Increasingly, social marketers are being called upon to demonstrate not only the effectiveness and economic value of their interventions but also to consider the wider social and cultural impact of their actions on societies at large.

The three papers we have selected for this special issue reflect the diversity and complexity of social marketing ethics for wicked problems. The first paper entitled “Food ‘boycott’ as an ethical choice against Mafia in Italy”, by Sergio Rivaroli, Arianna Ruggeri and Roberta Spadoni, is an empirical study that considers the role of agri-food co-operatives, supported by a social marketing initiative, in combatting the problem of Mafia-type systems in Italy. Exploring consumer motivations to “boycott” food produced on lands confiscated from Mafia-type organisations, the study also delves into a complex ethical dilemma: while “boycotting” consumers contribute towards positive social change, their actions unintentionally discriminate against food producers that have always operated legally.

Our second paper by Mazia Yassim, entitled “The wicked problem of social cohesion: moving ahead”, explores the important issue of social cohesion as a wicked problem, influenced by, among others, the rise of religious, ideological and far-right extremism, increased migration and economic austerity. Notwithstanding the criticism of the role of consumerism in creating social divisions embedded in critical marketing, psychology and other disciplines, this study takes a multidisciplinary approach to conceptualising social cohesion to facilitate social marketing programmes and address social divisions as one of society’s most pressing wicked problems.

The third paper in this special issue by Ann-Marie Kennedy and Nicholas Santos, “Social fairness and social marketing: an integrative justice approach to creating an ethical framework for social marketers”, focusses on ensuring social fairness in social marketing. The authors develop a normative ethical framework for social marketing based on the integrative justice model. Their proposed macro-social marketing ethics framework provides social marketers with guidelines that focus on co-creating social marketing interventions through authentic engagement with stakeholders without exploitive intent. Aiming to represent stakeholder’s genuine interests within a long-term, systemic, behaviour change framework.

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focussing on the social good and social marketing ethics in the context of wicked problems, and incorporating ethical considerations into social marketing discourses and practice, are not only viable but also critical to making our discipline grow stronger and continue to deliver on its definitional aims.

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