

Who do you think you are? An examination of how systems thinking can help social marketing support new identities and more sustainable living patterns

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Abstract

In an effort to respond to the challenges faced by the environment and society, a plethora of social marketing campaigns have been launched to encourage the adoption of sustainable living patterns. We argue that the majority of these campaigns appeal to existing, self-interested or materialistic values that may lead to limited behaviour change. All too often these campaigns leave fundamental systematic environmental challenges unchanged, and may even undermine any considerations that people have around the change direction. We suggest that changing behaviour is ultimately about helping society and individuals reframing their identity. A systems theory approach, which acknowledges society as a complex adaptive system, is suggested as providing a useful framework for social marketing campaigns in supporting new identities and increasing sustained behavioural change.

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The focus

Today's environmental and social challenges are increasingly acknowledged as complex, interlinked and characterised by uncertainty. Global examples include the high levels of environmental degradation (Jabbour et al., 2009), the food security crisis (CGIAR, 2009), and climate change (Richardson et al., 2009), among others. Accordingly, asking for change to more sustainable living patterns is becoming a central issue in society, (Andreasen, 2002). However, when we ask people, or organizations, to change their behaviour, we are asking them to change their identity – and that's a big ask.

The majority of mainstream marketing engages audiences with self-enhancing messages that appeal to identity because they reflect the materialistic goals that are often fundamental and present in most people's value system, and sense of self. In contrast, social marketers are charged with seemingly difficult tasks like encouraging people to reduce consumption. Unsurprisingly perhaps, they often find themselves armed with much lower budgets, messages that are unpalatable, solutions that provide no immediate gratification, and an audience who are often unwilling or feel

unable to change their behaviour (Peattie & Peattie, 2003; 2009). Consequently, many social marketing campaigns fail to achieve the desired level of change. In fact, such campaigns may result in members of the target audience experiencing apathy, relativisation, or anxiety. Equally the audience may respond to such campaigns with behaviours such as ignoring, diversion and blaming others (Norgaard, 2006). Clearly none of these reactions is the ultimate goal, and we suggest that, rather than these barriers being the cause of low levels of change, it is the underlying assumptions of the campaigns themselves that is at fault.

Systems theory, identity and behaviour

The growing emphasis on systems thinking provides models and metaphors that may help us to see the bigger picture, and develop campaigns that support creative and transformational change (e.g. Senge 1995; Ackoff 2010).

Because we rarely look at the bigger system itself, the majority of our current campaigns tend to focus on problems which are merely symptoms of deeper directions in society. In this regard Voros (2005) reminds us of the metaphorical “iceberg” model of systems thinking (Figure 1), which depicts problems perceived in the outside world as simply the visible part of a much larger and mostly-hidden “iceberg”. “Patterns and trends” are depicted as submerged just below the water-line, while the underlying system “drivers” or system “structure” that reflect the predominant social paradigm are considered an even deeper and unseen part of the iceberg.

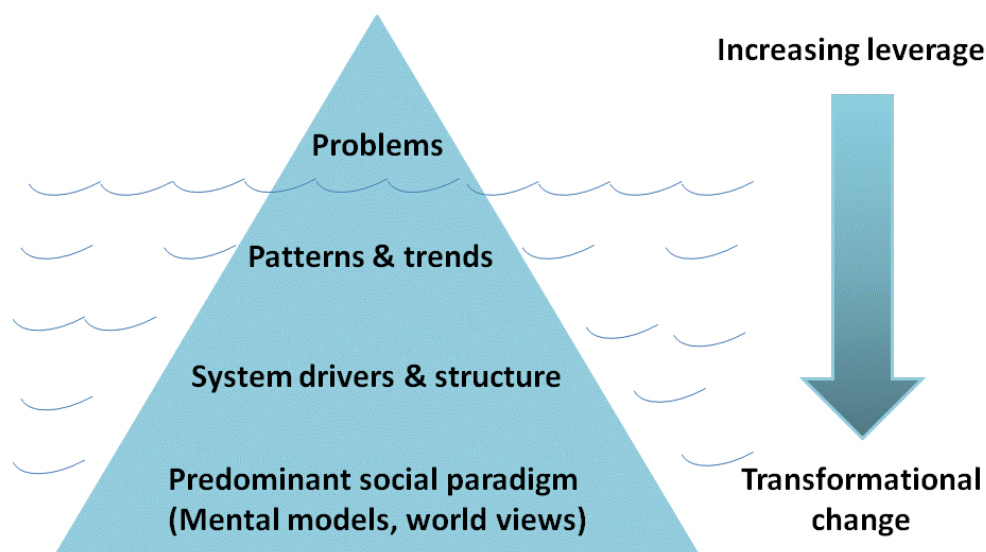


Fig. 1: The iceberg systems thinking model of intervention

Systems thinking encourages success in social marketing and other change campaigns by identifying leverage points lying below the water line in the iceberg model of intervention. The approach generally adopted to date has taken the perspective that people are logical, and therefore social marketing messages are essentially about trying to solve problems. We contend that in fact people are not logical, rather they are rational - preferring to act within the comfort of their own value system (Kelly, 1955). Since the situations within which citizens operate and live are rarely straightforward, and motivations for behaviour are more often rational than logical, society is a complex adaptive system. Thus, we suggest that social marketing practice needs to focus on creating solutions that fit with consumers' identity.

In the long term, people make changes that work for them (Resnicow & Page, 2008), and we suggest that a social-systems approach may be a useful starting point. In general, there is limited understanding that society is a complex adaptive system, and complex systems generate outcomes that depend on numerous interactions. So, rather than offering an intervention that takes a linear approach and anticipates the planned behavioural change will occur providing each step is achieved in sequential order, we propose that the key to success is in having an array of approaches, and being aware of when to use each approach. There needs to be an understanding that successfully changing behaviour may require more than one approach, and more than one intervention.

The metaphor that Glouberman and Zimmerman (2002) provide reminds us of just how targeted our social marketing programmes must be when they suggest that managing a complex adaptive socio-economic system is like raising a child. Blueprints have limited application. Raising one child provides experience but no assurance of success with the next. Just as every child is unique and must be understood as an individual, so too every community is unique. And whether dealing with individual children or communities a number of interventions can be expected to fail as a matter of course. Uncertainty of outcome remains. The most useful solutions to problems usually emerge from within the individual, family or community, and involve values and an understanding of identity.

Changing, even at an individual level is almost never as simple and straightforward as might be expected. Behaviour change involves moving through a range of stages, and each stage has its own requirements for institutional support (Fig 2). Consequently, different approaches may be needed depending on the level of anxiety, certainty, ability etc. of the individual that is being addressed. The stages of a change framework suggest that people move through stages from precontemplation to contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance (DiClemente and Prochaska 1998). However, these authors point out that much can make it difficult to sustain a new behaviour, hence people may revert back to old habits – possibly many times, but with support this reversion can be viewed as part of the process of learning how to maintain a new behaviour.

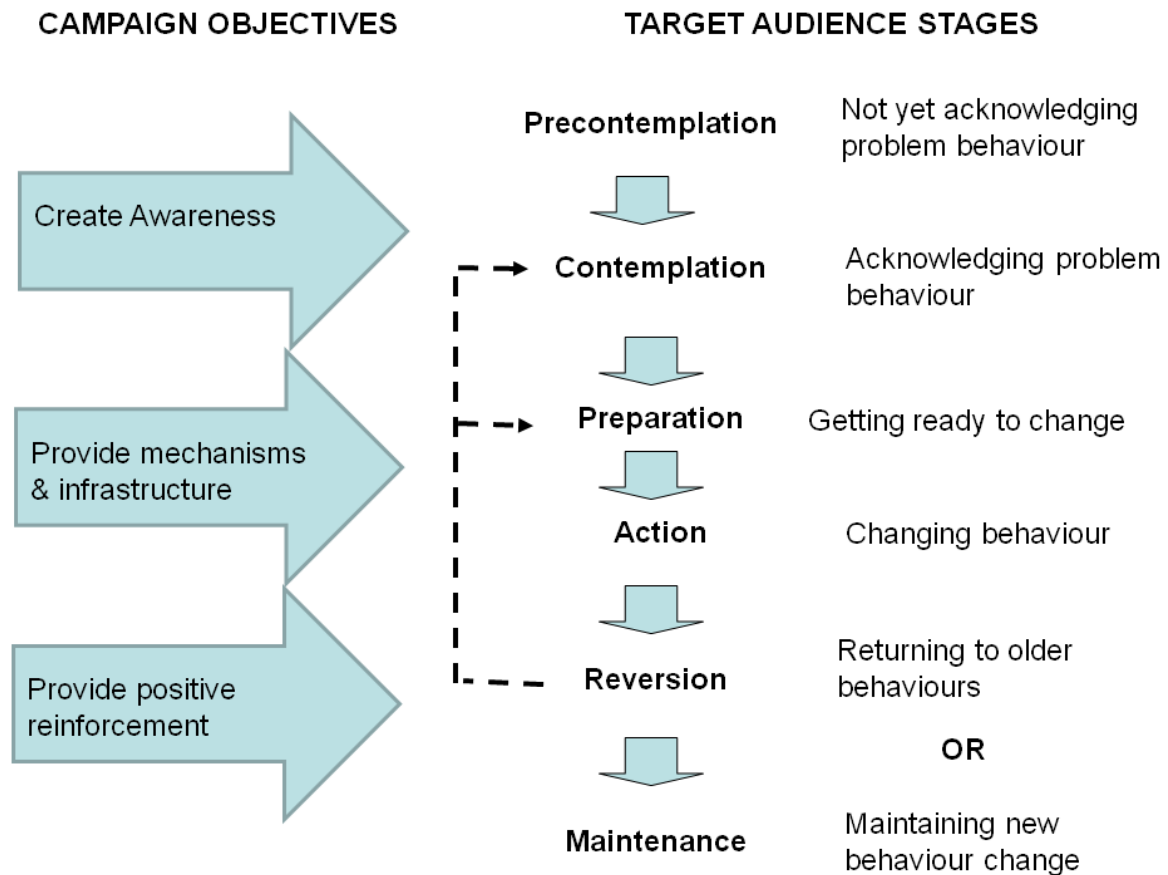


Fig. 2: The stages of change continuum (Adapted from DiClemente and Prochaska, 1998)

Clearly there is a need to limit the potentially negative or restricting impacts of current campaigns for change by limiting iatrogenic effects which may cause anxiety, and to identify enabling factors - e.g. in-group out-group behaviours (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Systems theory would also suggest that a pro-environmental behaviour campaign should aim to activate positive features of identity. For example, rather than using traditional marketing methods to appeal to economic benefits of switching behaviour, it would be preferable to use intrinsic benefits, and stop ascribing value to the environment purely via its utility.

Conroy and Lee (2006) provide an interesting example of the failure of a campaign whose appeal was directed at economic, individualistic values, when most of the target audience were more concerned with self-actualization values. The case they present is of a small rural village close to a major New Zealand city. The village is home to an essentially well educated upper middle class demographic whose peaceful existence was threatened by the potential introduction of 'super-sized' above ground power lines. In order to gain the support of residents the power line company offered economic incentives and their own logical argument, but they failed to consider the social conditions and local environment. In the end they failed in their effort to change opinion and behaviour because they failed to resonate with identity.

Reasons to be hopeful

There is growing recognition within the environmental movement of the impact of values in driving behaviour and a rising awareness that local solutions that consider local conditions are often more likely to be successful than global solutions (Rose & Dade, 2007). Equally, systems theory reminds us that seemingly unsuccessful campaigns can and do have positive impact. It is often necessary for several interventions to be undertaken before the majority of the target population has spiralled through behavioural change from ignorance to habit, but each intervention will support change. For example, raising awareness may have an impact on people's deep cognitive frames or may start a dialogue and commence social engagement, thus moving people towards a change of identity.

Conclusion

In this discussion we have asserted that designing sustainability campaigns to appeal to existing, self-interested or materialistic values may lead to some behaviour change, but may also undermine more fundamental attempts to address systematic environmental challenges. We suggest that changing behaviour is ultimately about changing identity, and a systems theory approach may provide an important alternative to traditional marketing campaigns in supporting new identities and promoting an increased adoption of sustainable living patterns. Systems theory reminds us that society is a complex adaptive system and that people act in rational rather than logical ways and therefore appeals need to focus on intrinsic values that resonate with identity. Consequently, this requires attention to the social context, and that means local context. Such an approach also requires recognition that an intervention which is successful in one situation may not be in another, and visa-versa. Such an understanding has significant implications for how we determine policy, funding, and campaigning.

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