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**Commentary: Transformative service research and social marketing –
converging pathways to social change**

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to discuss two parallel but distinct subfields of marketing that share common interests (enhancing consumers’ lives and improving well-being): social marketing and transformative service research. We also suggests a research agenda.

Approach –The paper offers a conceptual approach and research agenda by comparing and contrasting the two marketing fields of transformative service research (TSR) and social marketing.

Findings – Specifically, this paper proposes three opportunities to propel both fields forward: 1) breaking boundaries that inhibit research progress, which includes collaboration between public, private, and nonprofit sectors to improve well-being; 2) adopting more customer-oriented approaches that go beyond the organizational and the individual level; and 3) taking a non-linear approach to theory development that innovates and co-creates solutions.

Originality/value – This paper presents the challenges and structural barriers for two subfields seeking to improve human well-being. This paper is the first to bring these subfields together and propose a way for them to move forward together.

Keywords Social marketing, transformative service research, well-being, consumer welfare, service ecosystems

Type Conceptual Paper

Introduction

As marketing academia entered the 21st century, many scholars began questioning whether the discipline's focus on managerially relevant outcomes, such as customer satisfaction, loyalty, behavioral intention, word-of-mouth, and so forth, had truly enhanced consumers' lives and societal well-being. The original goal of the Association of Consumer Research, after all, was to orchestrate the natural talents of academia, government, and industry to enhance consumer welfare (Mick, 2006). As a result, many researchers realized that they had looked askance at the goal or had forgotten the goal regarding the betterment of consumer welfare.

This open questioning by consumer researchers of the relevancy of most of their research on solving real problems has echoed throughout the ensuing decade to become a roar amongst the marketing community. In line with this questioning, service researchers also began to speculate as to whether their research was relevant to consumers' lives and experiences. Indeed, Dagger and Sweeney (2006) remarked that although outcomes such as a customer's intention to repurchase from or to recommend a firm remain worthy of exploration, so too are outcomes such as an improved quality of life and consumer well-being. Quality of life is also closely linked to well-being, and includes physical health, psychological health, social relationships, and the environment (Australian Centre for Quality of Life [ACQOL], 2018).

By the mid-2000s, consumer and service researchers alike were aligned in their intention to address these research and practical voids by creating new transformative paradigms within their respective disciplinary areas. That is, transformative consumer researchers focus on enhancing consumer welfare and quality of life for all beings affected by consumption across the world; likewise, transformative service researchers focus on improving consumer and societal welfare through services, service providers, and service systems (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010). Indeed, one of the ways by which service practitioners may improve consumer welfare is by relieving, or minimizing, the consumer suffering (e.g. pain points) that often occurs in service encounters (Nasr and Fisk, 2019).

Although the missions and goals of both the transformative consumer and service paradigms are noteworthy, this is not to say that all marketing researchers have always looked askance at consumer and societal well-being. Public policy researchers have long explored macromarketing topics that are related to the intersection of consumer welfare, business, and government (Wilkie, 1997). For instance, the mission of the *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* is to explore broad-based topics that impact consumers in their daily lives and experiences, such as issues regarding economic development, globalization, ecology, safety and security, nutrition and health, consumer vulnerability and protection, ethics and social responsibility, regulation and deregulation, antitrust, privacy, and intellectual property.

Social marketers have placed societal well-being at the core of their research since the early 1970s and investigated consumer behaviors, policy, and interventions aimed at improving mental, social, financial, and physical well-being (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015). In contrast to the general nature of macromarketing, social marketing encourages researchers to actively change human behavior by employing commercial marketing principles and techniques (i.e., promotion, social media) to improve the welfare of people and the physical, social, and economic environment in which they live (Andreasen, 1993).

There are many pathways within the field of marketing to seek social change and to enhance consumer well-being. For this commentary, this paper focuses on two of them: social marketing, as one of the most well-established approaches; and transformative service research (TSR), as one of the newest approaches. For this special section on services that transform the social

change space, this article clarifies the differences and similarities between social marketing and TSR. As a result, this article guides service researchers who are intent on investigating issues that have the potential to enhance individual, community, and even global consumer welfare and well-being.

The structure for this article is as follows. First, TSR is defined and the core characteristics of the subfield explained. Second, the paper defines social marketing and explains the key characteristics of the subfield including evidence for effectiveness. Third, it discusses the similarities and differences between the two subfields. Fourth, it proposes a research agenda for researchers in both subfields.

What is transformative service research?

The term “transformative service research” was first used in a service journal by Rosenbaum *et al.* (2007) in a study of the role of third places in providing commercial social support. The concept quickly attracted further interest and was advocated as a service research priority (Ostrom *et al.*, 2010). As a research paradigm, TSR was inspired by transformative consumer research that seeks to “solve real [consumer] problems” (Mick, 2006, p. 1) by applying marketing techniques and tools to enhance the lives of individuals and communities.

TSR was originally defined as “the integration of consumer and service research that centers on creating uplifting changes and improvements in the well-being of individuals (consumers and employees), families, social networks, communities, cities, nations, collectives, and ecosystems” (Anderson *et al.*, 2011, p. 3). In short, TSR is service research that centers on creating uplifting improvements in consumer well-being, which, as previously discussed, may be obtained by service practitioners designing services, training service providers, and developing service networks that simultaneously work together to relieve, or to minimize, consumer suffering that often transpires during service encounters (Nasr and Fisk, 2019).

The emergence of TSR is a continuation of the evolution of the service literature. Fisk *et al.* (1993) described three stages in this evolution. “Crawling out” (before 1980) occurred when service scholars asserted the right to exist as a separate marketing subfield. The second stage, “scurrying about” (1981–1985), occurred when a small group of service scholars from around the world met and began collaborating. “Walking erect” (1986–1992), the third stage, occurred when the services marketing paradigm was finally being treated with respect by the marketing discipline.

Fisk and Grove (2010) chronicled the second era in the evolution of the service field. According to Fisk and Grove (2010), “making tools” (1992–2000) was a stage where numerous technological tools were developed that advanced the sophistication of the service field. “Creating language” (2000–2010) occurred when the terminology associated with services marketing and service management began to spread widely. The “building community” (2010 to the present) stage envisioned the emerging future of the service field. In this “building community” stage, the service field became its own propagator of new subfields. TSR emerged as a service research subfield just as the “building community” stage was taking shape.

Using the logic of Fisk *et al.* (1993), the TSR subfield can be described as being in its own “scurrying about” stage. In the short time since TSR was introduced to the service research field, the literature has flowered significantly. In addition, two prominent service research centers have chosen to make TSR a significant theme of their research; that is, both the Center for Service Leadership, at Arizona State University Center, and the CTF Service Research Center, at Karlstad University, actively engage in TSR investigatory studies. Additionally, TSR is now a

subject of many research articles as well as a key topic in numerous calls for papers, and academic conferences.

Three examples of contemporary TSR investigatory studies include topics such as service inclusion (Fisk *et al.*, 2018), vulnerable consumers (Rosenbaum *et al.*, 2017), and social support (Parkinson *et al.*, 2017). The concept of service inclusion is a response to the unfairness that many consumers experience during service interactions which limits, or destroys, their ability to obtain maximum value from a service. If service organizations practice service inclusion they will provide all customers with “fair access to a service, fair treatment during a service, and fair opportunity to exit a service” (Fisk *et al.*, 2018, p. 835). Design for service inclusion is a necessary concept and method for transforming all service systems into inclusive life-affirming experiences. Fisk *et al.* add (2018, p. 851), “Service inclusion should be a moral imperative for service organizations, systems and nation-states.” Indeed, Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) have shown that nations fail when they become extractive institutions and they prosper when they are inclusive institutions, because such inclusion creates a level playing field that enables social progress and encourages technological innovation. Vulnerable consumers are attracting TSR researchers, indeed there have been several special issues in services journals on this topic. For example, TSR researchers have examined the design of services (Dietrich *et al.*, 2017), the use of third places (Parkinson *et al.*, 2017), and place identity (Rosenbaum and Montoya, 2007). The topic of social support often accompanies TSR research on vulnerable consumers through the lens of digital social support. Parkinson *et al.* (2017) identified the use of online support groups while Khaksar *et al.* (2017) examined the role of assistive technologies.

The idea of service fairness is linked to Rosenbaum *et al.*'s (2017) conceptualization of vulnerable consumers as those “who enter service exchanges with some type of disadvantage” (p. 310), which may include physical disabilities, visual/auditory challenges, older-age, sexual orientation, sexual exploitation, geographical remoteness, mental health, language barriers, obesity, and so forth. The researchers encourage service organizations to understand how they can create value with vulnerable consumers, perhaps by designing inclusionary practices.

Lastly, Parkinson *et al.* (2017) reveal how stigmatized and marginalized consumers, such as those battling obesity and weight-management issues, obtain therapeutic support from like-others in an online setting. Indeed, this research builds on other social support investigations (Rosenbaum and Smallwood, 2013) which reveal the profound impact of customer-to-customer support on people's lives and well-being.

What is social marketing?

Social marketing seeks to develop and integrate marketing concepts with other approaches to influence behavior that benefits individuals and communities for the greater social good (Australian Association of Social Marketing, 2013). It involves influencing individuals, communities, structures, and societies to bring about positive social change (Zainuddin and Russell-Bennett, 2017). Social problems and issues such as alcohol consumption, smoking, obesity, road safety, energy efficiency, environmental protection, water usage, and fire safety have been investigated by social marketing scholars and practitioners. Contemporary social marketing involves strategic considerations and interventions that are integrated and consider the upstream (policy), midstream (service, communities), and downstream (individual) levels to achieving societal well-being (Zainuddin and Russell-Bennett, 2017).

Whereas TSR is largely in the “crawling out” phase of its disciplinary evolution, social marketing is arguably in the “walking erect” stage. Social marketing is a branch of marketing

that started more than 40 years ago when Kotler and Zaltman (1971) published the first formal definition of social marketing in the *Journal of Marketing*: “the design, implementation, and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communication, distribution, and marketing research” (p. 5). Since then the branch has flourished, with four major associations, subjects in university degrees, social marketing conferences, PhD dissertations, two dedicated social marketing journals, and hundreds of articles published in the field. Social marketing scholars are now found in universities throughout the world, from business schools to public health departments.

A key characteristic of social marketing is the benchmark criteria used to assess and develop social marketing programs that are distinct from other social approaches, such as social advertising or social media marketing. Andreasen (2002) originally identified six benchmark criteria for identifying social marketing which define it to be distinct from commercial marketing. These criteria included a focus on behavior change, the use of consumer research to understand the target market segment, the use of segmentation and targeting, the creation of attractive and motivational exchanges, the use of a methods mix, and understanding the competition (Andreasen, 2002). These benchmark criteria were later expanded upon by the National Social Marketing Centre (NSMC) in the United Kingdom (UK) to include two additional criteria. The first is the inclusion of a customer orientation, which seeks to fully understand participants’ lives, behavior, and the issues surrounding them through a mix of data sources and research methods. The second is the use of theory to understand behavior and inform the intervention (NSMC, 2016a). The eight benchmark criteria have recently been classified into a hierarchy of a core principle, core concepts, and core techniques to illustrate equivalence and weighting (French and Russell-Bennett, 2015).

Three examples of social marketing in practice are Snake Condoms in Australia, Smarter Travel Sutton in the UK, and Verb in the United States (US). Snake condoms was a sexual health program developed by Marie-Stopes International in 2004 to address the high incidence rates of sexually transmitted diseases and youth pregnancy amongst Indigenous Australians in a rural town. Instead of developing a communication campaign to educate the target market, they used a classic 4Ps approach to address the problem. A new range of condoms was developed and branded as “Snake Condoms”, a play on the significance of snakes in Indigenous culture and the shape of the penis, that used peer-selling as a key distribution channel and narrow-cast communication channels. The result was a financially sustainable program that changed sexual health behaviors (Molloy *et al.*, 2004). In the UK, Smarter Travel Sutton was a social marketing program that ran between 2006 and 2009 to improve the use of public transport in London. Using a range of strategies, including travel planners for large employers to on-street cycle parking, this program saw a 6% decrease in cars as a mode of transport and a 3.2% reduction in traffic levels (NSMC, 2016b). Finally, the VERB campaign in the US was a social marketing program between 2002 and 2006 that aimed to increase physical activity amongst tweens (Asbury *et al.*, 2008). Using an experiential marketing strategy, physical activity increased in the target group, along with improvements in psycho-social variables.

Converging pathways to social change

The pathways to social change between TSR and social marketing converge within ecosystems. Ecosystems are communities of living organisms. Earth is the only known ecosystem for life as we know it, but there are many more specific ecosystems that are discussed in the business

literature. “Service-related problems are common because humans live and work in families, cities, states, nations, corporations, non-profit organizations and governments, which are all service systems” (Fisk *et al.*, 2018, p. 2). Social change occurs in these complex ecosystems.

The service ecosystem approach

As social creatures, a human being’s well-being is dependent on their social interactions with other humans in ecosystems. The service ecosystem approach operates around individual behavior that facilitates or inhibits well-being. In recent years, service research has recognized the importance of the micro, meso, and macro levels of the service ecosystem for the design and delivery of service experiences (Beirão *et al.*, 2017). In contrast to a dyadic relationship, such as between a service provider and a customer, a service ecosystem refers to “relatively self-contained, self-adjusting system[s] of resource integrating actors connected by shared institutional arrangements and mutual value creation through service exchange” (Vargo and Lusch 2016, p. 10–11). Thus, services (e.g., health care, transportation), service providers, and service processes (e.g., procedures, servicescapes) may work individually or together to influence the lives of individuals, societies, or the global community.

An inherent assumption in the service ecosystem approach (Vargo and Akaka, 2012) is that institutions, people, and technology work together with consumers, firms, or government entities to co-create value. Indeed, the service ecosystem broadens the service focus from merely a buyer and seller, to the availability of resources and relationships that are available within a particular service system. For example, a traditional TSR approach to exploring cancer care would focus on understanding how oncologists can best deliver medical services to patients, while a service ecosystem approach would consider how oncologists, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, and, perhaps, hospice volunteers and caregivers can work together to provide both medical and non-medical care to cancer patients in service settings such as hospitals and cancer resource centers (Rosenbaum and Smallwood, 2013).

Despite the reality that all services are delivered within a system, the entities that comprise a particular system are often unaware of their coordinated efforts. Further, research shows that service providers may often be aware that they are involved in a system; however, they inadvertently, or perhaps purposefully, fail to work with other entities that comprise a system. For example, in their study of cancer resource centers, Rosenbaum and Smallwood (2013) discovered that although oncologists understand the benefits of their patients participating in center activities and programs, most of them assume that their patients will discover these centers on their own. Indeed, the discovery of this chasm in the service system led to a Chicago-based hospital encouraging oncologists and cancer resource center social workers to work together to administer a positive cancer diagnosis and to design a medical and non-medical treatment strategy.

The social marketing ecosystem

The notion of an ecosystem is well-established in the social marketing field, with the three levels described as upstream, downstream, and midstream. Social marketing acknowledges that there are multiple factors that influence individuals’ behavior, and this is explained by the upstream, downstream, and midstream levels in social marketing. Upstream refers to the structural environment and includes influences such as policy and law; downstream refers to individual influences such as personality; midstream refers to the more immediate social environment such as family, peers, or community groups (Gordon, 2013). The use of various streams originates

from an upstream–downstream metaphor in public health, where the terms are used to describe two alternative approaches to addressing health issues in society (Donovan and Henley, 2010; Dorfman, 2003). Specifically, Wallack *et al.*'s (1993) metaphor about saving people who are drowning in a river identifies two approaches to solving and preventing this problem. The metaphor likens the use of clinical medicine to rescuing people who have fallen into a river (or stream), focusing efforts downstream. In contrast, the use of preventative medicine is likened to travelling further upstream, examining the surrounding area to understand why people are falling into the river and then deciding to alter the environment in some way, such as by erecting a fence, to prevent people from falling into it in the first place. This metaphor acknowledges that there are both internal, individual factors as well as external, environmental or situational factors that contribute to human behavior.

Much of the work in social marketing has focused on individual factors influencing behavior, emphasizing a downstream approach whereby individuals are held responsible for social change. However, individual behavior change requires a structural and policy environment that is supportive of that change, which has led social marketers to call for more focus on upstream social marketing (Gordon, 2013). Upstream social marketing seeks to influence the behaviors of those responsible for shaping the structural and environmental conditions of society (Gordon, 2013) and is very often associated with influencing governments, policymakers, and regulators, to name a few. This approach is intended to be used to complement the work in downstream social marketing, rather than compete with or be addressed separately from downstream social marketing efforts (Hoek and Jones, 2011). More recently, the concept of midstream social marketing has emerged, which focuses on more immediate social environments (Gordon, 2013) such as partner organizations and community groups (Hastings and Domegan, 2014). In describing the enactors and influencers in social marketing, Russell-Bennett *et al.* (2013) also identify service organizations as being an important stakeholder group in social marketing, situated at the midstream level. A broader perspective is the social marketing systems approach, which views upstream, midstream, and downstream approaches as intertwined and dynamic rather than separate and static (Brychkov and Domegan, 2017). This system approach to social marketing research is similar to the ecosystem approach in services research.

Comparing transformative service research and social marketing: a converging pathway

The fields of TSR and social marketing started forty years apart, however are converging in their interests (See Figure 1 for a chronology). While both social marketing and TSR share a holistic approach to the levels of social change and well-being, there is a different starting point for each of the two subfields. Social marketing commences with the goal of societal change/benefit, which is enshrined within multiple definitions of social marketing, while the starting point for TSR is individual well-being. There are six characteristics of the two pathways to social change that are elucidated as points of difference and similarity (as shown in Table 1). Each will now be discussed.

Figure 1 Chronology of the development of TSR and Social Marketing

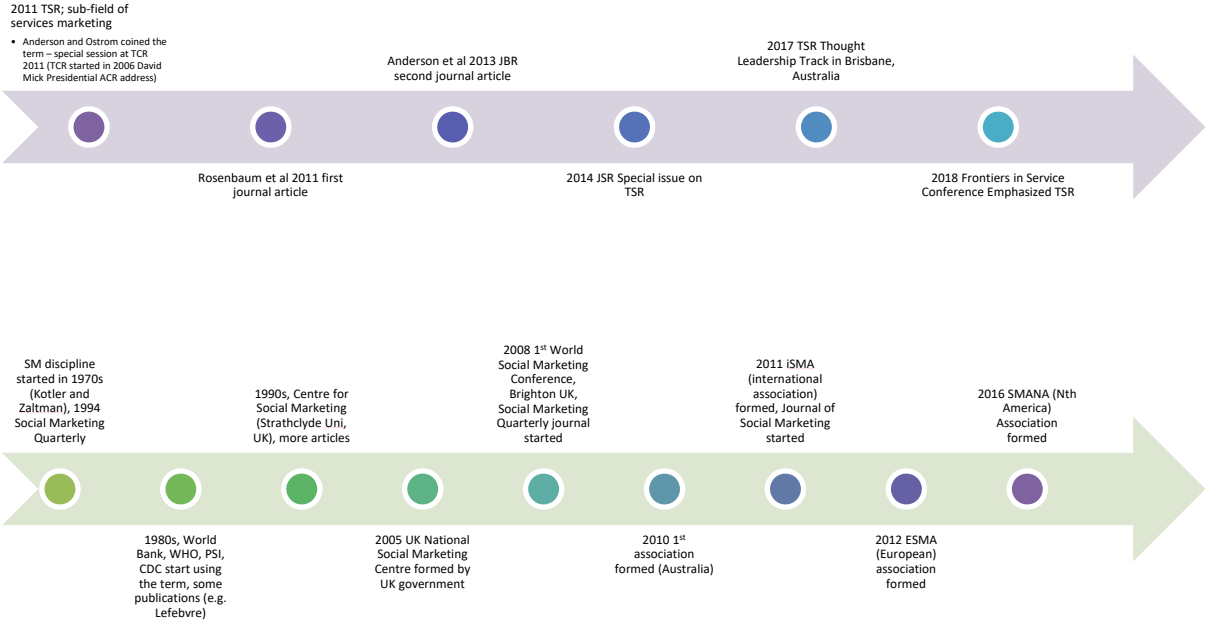


Table 1 Key characteristics of transformative service research and social marketing

Key characteristic	Transformative service research	Social marketing
1. Starting point	Individual well-being	Social good/societal benefit
2. Levels	Social system Economic system Biosystem Service system	Structural (upstream) Midstream Individual (downstream)
3. Sector and centrality	Commercial and non-profit service provider	Government and non-profit organization
4. Focal behaviors	Complex social behaviors, such as health, finance, energy, safety and environmental	Complex social behaviors, such as health, finance, energy, safety and environmental
5. Success metrics	Sales/profit Sustainability Quality of life Well-being (typically subjective)	Long-term behavior change Incidence/prevalence rates Prevention and return on investment (ROI) metrics Well-being (subjective and objective)
6. Activity type	Descriptive and prescriptive	Curative

The *starting point* for TSR is individual well-being, while the starting point for social marketing research and practice is the benefit to society. While the definition of TSR encompasses all three levels of the service ecosystem, the current empirical evidence in the literature is mostly focused at the individual level, with outcome variables such as well-being or quality of life (possibly due to the nascency of the field). Examples are customers of a financial counselling agency (Mende and Van Doorn, 2015), users of instant messaging services (Rosenbaum and Wong, 2012), and mental health service customers (Schuster *et al.*, 2015). However, there is growing evidence of empirical transformative research at the mid-range level of service ecosystems (organizational), such as Nasr *et al.* (2014), who researched the views of managers and employee perceptions of customer feedback, and at the community level, such as Loomba (2017), who investigated trafficking survivors, anti-trafficking agencies, and the community.

TSR and social marketing each adopt a multi-level system approach, with nuanced differences. While social marketing has understood that a systems approach is necessary to understand the complex behaviors and problems that are the focus of social marketing research and practice, the notion of systems and complexity are underexplored in the TSR subfield from an empirical perspective. While there is a growing literature base of conceptual work on systems and network approaches in TSR (see Finsterwalder *et al.*, 2017; Black and Gallan, 2015) the

empirical evidence is still emerging. Social marketing has a rich base of empirical research in systems and networks that illustrates a multi-level approach to societal problems (see Brychkov and Domegan, 2017; Domegan *et al.*, 2016).

The *sector and centrality* of the two approaches vary based on the nature of the organizations responsible for the approach. Social marketing operates within the public and nonprofit sectors (French *et al.*, 2017), while TSR operates across the three sectors: public, nonprofit, and commercial. The societal motive combined with the public or nonprofit sector results in an organization-centric approach. While there is a customer-orientation in social marketing, the starting point for any research, campaign, or program is the public sector/nonprofit goal of societal benefit (e.g. increasing preventative health behavior, reducing violence, increasing recycling behaviors). In contrast, TSR is essentially service-centric in nature, with the provider primarily responsible for the transformation in well-being rather than the customer (Finsterwalder *et al.*, 2017). Commercial organizations can enact transformative services; however, they cannot enact social marketing (French *et al.*, 2017). This sector limitation is based on the outcomes of the subfield; in social marketing the goal is social – not profit – outcomes, while in TSR the goal can be both.

The *focal behaviors* of both social marketing and TSR are typically difficult and complex, with oftentimes hard-to-reach consumers. The types of behaviors that are focal for social marketers are classified based on their societal outcomes: altruistic, personal health, and social betterment (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971). Changing a lifetime of poor dietary habits is more challenging than selling a bar of soap. Consider the system for food relief for those without access to nutritious, affordable food; there are multiple actors (food charity and relief organizations, governments, nonprofit organizations), community and social norms about food, cultural standards about food, family and peer practices about food, and individual factors about food (Lindberg *et al.*, 2015). Enabling a person to eat healthily is not as simple as communicating messages about the importance of eating healthily or even teaching food preparation skills, there is also a need for access and affordability to quality food. Focal behaviors in TSR include access to services, literacy, reducing service disparities, healthy behaviors, and happiness (Anderson *et al.*, 2013). Essentially, the focal behaviors of both social marketing and TSR are complex behaviors, as the social issues that drive the behaviors can be wicked problems (Parkinson *et al.*, 2016).

In terms of *success metrics*, social marketing research focuses on the social and economic cost to the community and society as the starting point, and has outcome variables such as lives saved or reductions in carbon emissions. Examples include research on drink-driving campaigns that have reduced accidents or deaths (Cismaru *et al.*, 2009) and sun safety campaigns to reduce cancer in children (Peattie *et al.*, 2001). TSR metrics include evidence of improvements in individual, community, and even global welfare. Therefore, metrics may focus on how services influence a person's perceived subjective well-being, quality of life, or measures such as stress, depression, or social support. In terms of community metrics, researchers may show how services influence groups of individuals housed, or present, within a specific context, such as a residential locale, senior center, dementia village, or even a so-called “third place.” Finally, in terms of global metrics, researchers may demonstrate how services influence many communities from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, researchers may demonstrate how service practices encourage large swaths of consumers with disabilities, vulnerabilities, and aging issues to lead a better life.

The type of activities in the research and practice of a field can be described using a medical metaphor of descriptive, prescriptive, and curative activities. While descriptive and prescriptive research is a well-discussed continuum in fields ranging from ethics to learning and organizational behavior, this paper offers a third type of activity drawing on the field of medicine, the aim of which is to improve the lives of humanity through health. Descriptive research focuses on *what is* occurring, while prescriptive research involves establishing boundaries and rules, and setting out best practice – *what should be* (Tsang, 1997). The term curative means healing, remedy, improve or eliminate problems; this paper proposes the term curative research activities – *what might be* (Torrey, 2018). Typically, these activities emerge as a field matures, with each type of activity building on the previous activities in a hierarchical manner. Science at its early stage focused on description, for instance categorizing life forms into different classifications and groups (sometimes called the tree of life) such as bacteria. Then, as medicine developed as a field, the next stage of development was prescription, including methods and research on prediction, for instance the invention of injectable insulin as a means of controlling diabetes. Now that medicine is a well-established field, research seeks to address and solve problems to cure the patient. For instance, cancer treatments such as radiotherapy and angiogenesis inhibitors.

This metaphor is now applied to understanding the types of activities conducted by TSR and social marketing researchers. Describing the phenomenon through models of prediction, prescriptive research identifies rules and ways of enacting a phenomenon, while curative research seeks strategies and solutions for the phenomenon. In many ways, these types of research can be considered stages of research that align with the evolutionary approach to the development of a field, as outlined by Fisk *et al.* (1993). The descriptive approach involves defining and conceptualizing the approach, developing models of processes, and equates to the first services evolutionary stage of “crawling out.” The second stage of the prescriptive approach involves establishing boundaries and rules, and setting out best practice (Tsang, 1997), and aligns with the “scurrying about” stage. Finally, the curative stage involves developing ways that the approach can solve the problems in creative and unique ways and equates to the “walking erect” stage. Given the nascent nature of TSR, with less than ten years of literature, and the largely conceptual but emerging empirical evidence-base, the stage would be either descriptive or prescriptive compared to the four-decades-long experience of social marketing as a discipline that is now at the curative stage.

At its inception in the early 1970s, social marketing relied on communication tools to generate behavior change but has since expanded to include all elements of the marketing mix and, more recently, the area of services marketing (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2013). The introduction of service thinking to social marketing has paved the way for service concepts to be used when developing social marketing programs. Given that social marketing is the domain of governments and non-government organizations, and these organizations typically deliver services rather than manufacture goods, the use of services thinking for social marketing is a natural progression. There is much that can be achieved when these two subfields converge, with each subfield drawing from the knowledge and experience of the other.

Research agenda for transformative services research and social marketing

Human service systems evolved to solve human problems. The earliest service systems (families and tribes) were fundamental to survival. As the human population has grown, the nature and

complexity of human service systems have grown as human problems have grown. The most complex of human problems have been labeled “wicked problems” (Kolko, 2012). “Wicked problems” is a term used to describe problems that are complex and often intractable in nature, necessitating interdisciplinary perspectives and inputs (Rittel and Webber, 1973; French and Gordon, 2015; Gordon *et al.*, 2017). Solving such wicked problems will require collaborative ecosystem solutions never imagined before.

For TSR and social marketing to continue converging towards social change, the two fields need to begin focusing collaborative teams of researchers from each subfield on specific wicked service system problems. This includes building projects around different ecosystem system levels from micro-individual levels to meso levels to macro-societal levels. Such solutions will also require convincing the different entities (public, private, and nonprofit) in a service system to work together in pursuit of improving human well-being. A research agenda is proposed based on three opportunities: breaking boundaries, customer-oriented approaches, and a non-linear approach to theory development.

1. Breaking boundaries

Wicked service system problems are independent of many human boundary systems. This includes that they are much larger than any academic discipline. This means that transdisciplinary research is needed. TSR and social marketing need to learn from each other and work together, along with collaborating with other fields that have similar aims. Social marketing is, in itself, an interdisciplinary discipline (Brennan *et al.*, 2011), drawing from sociology, psychology, anthropology, public health, behavioral theory, and communications theory to name a few (MacFadyen *et al.*, 1999). Combining perspectives from social marketing and TSR is a step in the right direction toward solving complex issues like wicked service system problems. Indeed, Gordon *et al.* (2017) argue that it is disingenuous to expect single disciplinary perspectives to understand and solve such complex problems.

Although traditional definitions of interdisciplinarity refer to the combination of two or more academic disciplines in a research project (Klein, 1990), Gordon *et al.* (2017) have sought to broaden this definition by including non-academic stakeholders into the notion of interdisciplinarity. TSR could work with practitioners in closer ways like social marketers do to ensure that theory has impact. More research is needed to understand the interactions and challenges of service systems at different levels – from customer value constellations, to service systems, to service interactions. An especially important aspect of breaking boundaries is working together across sectors – public, private, and nonprofit. These three sectors need to work together to counterbalance the limits of public, private, and nonprofit agencies. Such partnering would create more holistic approaches to the many wicked service system problems. This acknowledges the important role that non-academic stakeholders play in challenging academic thinking, helping facilitate the creation of meaningful and real-world solutions that can be implemented and enacted in practice to have real impact on people’s lives.

2. Customer-oriented approaches

Neither TSR or social marketing are truly customer-oriented. Both originated from an organizationally-oriented perspective. Using Grönroos and Voima’s (2013) notions of spheres, more is needed in the customer sphere to understand how consumers’ lives can be transformed by service. A customer-dominant logic may assist this endeavor (Heinonen *et al.*, 2010). Success metrics that are both subjective and objective are needed to validate and compare

multiple types of outcome measures that fully reflect the customer's perspective. Indeed, the World Health Organization (2006) define health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity," suggesting the importance and relevance of both subjective and objective indicators of health and well-being. Currently, many definitions of well-being are written in organizational terms (e.g., body mass index means healthy, whereas most consumers define health in terms of social and emotional well-being). Customer-oriented approaches also require longitudinal research, with scholars advocating for the use of longitudinal research to improve our understanding of the customer experience in services (Russell-Bennett *et al.*, 2017) and to be able to definitively test for causal associations between interventions and outcomes (Gordon *et al.*, 2018). Longitudinal approaches can guide us toward developing long-term, meaningful solutions to complex and wicked service system problems.

Improving social impact is a customer-oriented approach to solving complex service system problems that is getting more attention. Within the UK Research and Innovation (2019) organization, the Economic and Social Research Council was formed, which is encouraging social impact research. Another example of social impact as a research priority is by the Australian Research Council (2019), which is encouraging research focused on social impact. Indeed, in both Australia and Europe, the definition of research impact goes beyond discipline boundaries of citations and impact factors to explicitly include social impact, "Research impact is the contribution that research makes to the economy, society, environment or culture, beyond the contribution to academic research" (Australian Research Council, 2019).

Service design has emerged as an essential tool in co-creating customer-oriented solutions. In particular, service design research has extensively studied service encounters through various applications of service blueprinting (Patrício *et al.*, 2008). More recently, service design research has climbed the ladder of complexity to address various service system levels from the micro level of the service encounter, to the meso level of the service experience, and the macro level of the customer-value constellation experience (Patrício *et al.*, 2011). In a recent article on service design and innovation (Patrício *et al.*, 2018, p. 11), the authors argue:

"There are so many service systems that need to become more human. They include cities as service systems, public service systems, nongovernmental service systems, transportation systems, health-care systems, education systems, energy systems, food and water systems, and shelter systems. Making service systems more human should be a primary goal of any service design and innovation effort."

3. *Non-linear approach to theory development*

Innovative and co-creative solutions to wicked service system problems will be more likely found by taking an iterative approach to theory development that combines linear and non-linear thinking styles. Indeed, there is evidence that a balanced approach that combines these styles yields higher levels of innovation (Ettlie *et al.*, 2014). Iterative approaches to theory development, such as the inductive–deductive approach (Fereday and Muir Cochrane, 2006), provide the dual benefit of rigor and rich understanding of a phenomena. Moving between descriptive, prescriptive, and curative activities in a non-linear manner can allow revisiting ideas and taking a fine-grained approach. Practitioners and researchers need to continue description but also look for cures. Also, it is essential to not assume that seminal research will still hold in the future. Different conditions may apply. For instance, do vulnerable service customers need different classifications or typologies that reflect the characteristics of the group? As another

aspect, research needs to be more holistic. There is more to well-being than health. For example, the Personal Wellbeing Index comprises eight domains: standard of living, health, achieving in life, relationships, safety, community-connectedness, future security, and spirituality/religion (ACQOL, 2018). More holistic perspectives on well-being can enable more holistic solutions.

Conclusion

Social marketing and TSR each emerged because marketing academics had become alarmed about unsolved social problems. This article argued that these two subfields are converging to enable social change. Social marketing began at a more general level and TSR began at the more specific level of improving human well-being. Together, these two subfields can and should make great strides toward social change that benefits all of humanity.

In particular, TSR and social marketing are well suited to pursue the difficult challenges of relieving suffering that were raised by Nasr and Fisk (2019). Human suffering is far too common in the service systems of families, cities, states, nations, corporations, nonprofit organizations, and governments. Working together the two fields can improve their chances of finding better solutions to reduce human suffering.

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