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Reframing Obesity: a Critical Discourse Analysis of the UK's first Social Marketing Campaign

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## **Abstract**

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of the UK government's 'Change4Life' anti-obesity social marketing campaign, which uses colourful cartoon characters and simplified messages to 'reframe' the issue of obesity, and encourage the public to take an active role in addressing this policy problem. It stems from a wider political context in which insights from behavioural economics ('nudge') are increasingly turned to for solutions to policy problems. The approach particularly emphasises the importance of carefully crafted communication in securing public compliance with desired policy outcomes, and has gained considerable attention in political science, economics, and health research. This paper contributes to that growing debate by offering a systematic textually-oriented critical analysis of the *discourse* of nudge. It maps the public, private, and third sector practices comprising this campaign, and critically examines the underlying balance of power and vested interests. Detailed analysis of the launch advert and surrounding policy documents reveals how scientific claims about obesity are recontextualised, simplified, and distorted in this campaign. It is further argued that the use of behavioural psychology legitimate individualised policy solutions, squeezing out public deliberation over the complex structural causes of obesity.

## **Keywords**

Critical discourse analysis, framing, intertextuality, nudge, obesity policy, recontextualisation

## **Acknowledgements**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents findings from a project investigating the rise of behavioural economics (popularly known as 'nudge'<sup>1</sup>) in UK politics. Politically defended under the label 'Libertarian Paternalism' (Thaler and Sunstein 2003), this technique emphasises the importance of carefully crafted communication and subtle interventions, in order to secure

public compliance with desired policy outcomes, while retaining freedom of choice. Its insidious potential and increasing importance in the statecraft of advanced economies has been widely debated in political science, economics, and health research. This paper contributes to that growing debate by offering a systematic and theoretically informed critical analysis of the *discourse* of nudge, examined through the lens of health policy.

The paper analyses the UK government's 'Change 4 Life' social marketing campaign, designed to steer individuals towards making healthier lifestyle choices in relation to diet and exercise. My aim is to demonstrate the value of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a rigorous and theoretically informed tool with which to critically examine the origins, execution, and normative implications of this, the UK government's first ever social marketing campaign. CDA is inherently interdisciplinary, combining a theory of discourse and a range of (always variable) text analytical methods with social and political theories relevant to the object of inquiry in order to contextualise and interpret its findings. Thus the historical social context of the data under investigation is always crucial to the interpretive process. The first two sections of this paper outline the wider health policy context of this campaign, and assess its status as a 'nudge' by examining the psychological theories which underpin it. Social uses private sector techniques to accomplish public sector goals and thus necessarily brings together potentially competing values, relations, forms of knowledge, and vested interests. The third section of the paper examines the nexus of social practices in Change4Life as well as the accompanying multimodal brand used to frame this policy nudge across multiple social sites. Then I analyse in detail the TV advert used to launch this social marketing campaign. Focussing on patterns of intertextuality, legitimation, and representation I investigate how this advert recontextualises and simplifies particular understandings of obesity, presenting individualised solutions to what I argue is a complex and collective social problem.

### **What is Change4Life?**

Launched in 2009, Change4Life (Jarvis et al. 2009) is an ongoing social marketing campaign designed to complement a cross-government strategy for England to tackle the problem of childhood obesity as set out in the report 'Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives' (Department of Health 2008). UK has among the highest levels of obesity in the EU, with childhood levels peaking in 2004 at 25% for 11-15 year olds and in 2005 at 17% for 2-10 year olds (Public

Health England, 2015). Moreover findings show a marked correlation between higher obesity and social deprivation (Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2007).

The strategy should be understood in relation to growing awareness and concern across developed nations with so-called ‘lifestyle’ diseases (diabetes, cancer, and heart disease). These emergent problems sit alongside population ageing and declining birth rates in a changing landscape of public health. The ethical and practical challenges this poses for the modern liberal state are discussed in detail in the Nuffield Council’s 2007 report on public health. Drawing on the World Health Organisation’s ‘stewardship’ model for public health policy, the report advocates the use of behaviour change interventions as part of a spectrum of policy instruments: ‘the stewardship framework ... encourages the provision of services through which risks are minimised and people are helped to change their behaviour’ (Nuffield Council on Bioethics 2007, 27). In essence this stewardship model in health policy can be characterised, rather like security policy, as a form of pre-emptive politics designed to intervene now in order to act upon future risks (Coleman 2014; Evans 2010).

Pre-emptive policies involve identifying those social groups who are most ‘at risk’ and thus most in need of tailored behaviour-change interventions. In the case of obesity the primary targets are children who, as Evans (2010) observes, are paradoxically treated not only as children in the present but also as future, potentially obese, adults. Thus despite the acknowledged uncertainties about the implications of childhood obesity for later life (Foresight 2007), this policy intervention places children centre-stage in its framing of obesity as a threat to society. Similarly Evans et al (2011) point to contradictions within the Change4Life (C4L) strategy wherein its claims to move away from ‘blaming individuals’ belie the persistence of a model of obesity premised on identifying and measuring ‘at risk’ individuals and groups. This is most evident in the fact that the main instrument for evaluating the intervention as a whole is the (ongoing) National Child Measurement programme, wherein children are routinely weighed in school and parents furnished with the C4L ‘Top Tips for Top Kids’ leaflet, repeating the highly simplified lifestyle messages conveyed throughout the campaign.

While such programmes satisfy the demand for population-level ‘calculative devices’ for obesity risk-management (Coleman 2014), they also risk alienating their intended ‘targets’. Perhaps for this reason the implementation guidelines recommend that a ‘motivational approach should be used with an awareness of the sensitivities surrounding the subject.

Otherwise parents may feel that their parenting skills are being criticised' (Public Health England 2016, p28). Piggan and Lee's analysis (2011, p1153) focuses on this decision to eliminate all linguistic and visual allusions to fatness from the marketing campaign, highlighting the contradictions which arise from a policy intervention whose core purpose is to influence public understandings of health and yet 'does not mention the very 'problem' it is trying to solve'. Chan (2014) argues that the campaign relies heavily on inflated expectations about the motivating and mobilising power of its brand. He cites the example of a failed local initiative involving the branding of convenience store refrigerators with the C4L logo, in the hope that this would steer shop owners and customers alike away from the junk foods which drive convenience store profits. In fact, this points to a deeper paradox in pre-emptive policy strategies. Neoliberal regimes seek to reframe problems of social welfare as a matter of future-oriented individual risk-management, and yet at the same time impose austerity measures targeted at the here and now which exacerbate the very socioeconomic conditions which caused the problem in the first place. The analysis which follows demonstrates that the government recognises the complex social, economic and commercial factors which correlate with increasing obesity (Foresight 2007), and yet it obfuscates this causal complexity in favour of a simplified behaviour-change message, leaving market freedoms largely unchallenged. Some of these contradictions can be explored in relation to a common concern in policy studies: how is the policy issue (obesity) being problematized? Who (or what) is to blame? Who should be responsible for dealing with it? One approach to these questions is 'framing'. For Entman (1993), framing is a matter of selecting certain representations of a problem and making it more salient and thus more persuasive. He identifies four key functions of frames: to define problems; diagnose causes; make moral judgments; suggest remedies. Given its focus on problematization, it is unsurprising this approach has enjoyed considerable attention in the policy studies literature. Indeed, its influence is seen across numerous disciplines (Edelman 1993; Gamson 1992; Goffmann 1974; Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Pan and Kosicki 1993). This paper applies the systematic text analytical categories of Fairclough's (2003a; 2005) discourse-dialectical approach to critical discourse analysis to explore the framing of obesity in current UK policy, drawing insights from Lawrence's (2004) frame analysis. Lawrence (2004) offers a particularly helpful application of frame theory in a study of public debates about obesity in the US between 1985 and 2004. She draws a basic distinction between 'individualising' frames, which assign blame and responsibility to individuals, and 'systemic' frames whose broader focus encompasses government, business and larger social forces. The way in which

policy problems are framed shapes the landscape of possibilities for political intervention: ‘Defining a problem in individualised terms limits governmental responsibility for addressing it, while systemic frames invite governmental action’ (Lawrence, 2004 p57). In broadly neoliberal political environments, there is strong cultural and political resistance to claims of systemic causation for public problems like health, crime, poverty, etc., and thus little support for the idea of government responsibility for dealing with them. When it comes to the specific framing of health problems, the question of risk is central to the debate. The more a health risk is seen to be voluntarily acquired, a problem only for some, and arising from individual behaviours, it is framed in individualistic terms. By contrast, where a risk is seen to be universal (relevant to everyone), and arising from environmental factors, it is framed in systemic terms and is thus ‘more amenable to public policy solutions that burden powerful groups’ (Lawrence, 2004 p59). In my analysis of C4L I ask to what extent obesity is framed in individualistic or systemic terms..**Change4Life and ‘Nudge’**

The stated goal of the Change4Life campaign is to use *social marketing* to target at-risk groups, change their attitudes through a communications campaign, and thus help them change their behaviours (Jarvis et al., 2009: 5). Success is measured by numbers signing up (to the website) and through a Customer Relationship Management programme which will ‘nudge people along the behaviour-change journey and track their behaviours over time’ (Jarvis et al. 2009, 28). The use of the term ‘nudge’ is a reminder of the wider political and intellectual context of this campaign. Nudge is the popular label under which ‘softer’ forms of governance have become prominent in the last couple of decades, and most particularly since the 2008 financial crisis. It has been most closely associated with the work of the American academics Richard Thaler and Cass Sunstein, authors of *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (2008). Such is its influence in UK politics that the government now has its own Behavioural Insights Team or ‘Nudge Unit’<sup>2</sup>.

One of the distinctive features of nudge and the behaviour change agenda in contemporary politics is its underpinning concept of ‘bounded rationality’, which depicts us as poor decision-makers, impeded by the problems inherent in information processing. Based on the work of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky (Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Tversky and Kahneman 1981), Thaler and Sunstein (2009) argue that we operate with two cognitive systems: the Reflective and the Automatic, with the latter being the dominant force shaping decision-making processes. The former is smart, disciplined, rational, deliberative, and reflective. The latter is none of these. Instead it tends to base decisions on *biased*

*heuristics* (decision-making ‘rules of thumb’), unfounded *optimism* (“it won’t happen to me”), *framing* (how salient information relating to the decision is presented to us), *loss aversion* and consequently *status quo bias*. The question of *framing* is particularly significant to the critical discourse analyst and is worth examining in a little more detail. Thaler and Sunstein go on to explain framing thus:

choices depend in part on the way in which problems are stated. The point matters a great deal for public policy [...] framing works because people tend to be somewhat mindless, passive decision makers. Their Reflective system does not do the work that would be required to check and see whether reframing the questions would produce a different answer. (2009: 36-7).

In fact, framing is routinely used in public discourse to re-describe reality in a way that is rhetorically and even ideologically convenient for the arguer (Edelman 1993; Entman and Rojecki 1993) and in doing so presupposes a particular set of social values whose acceptance is required as a condition of ‘the communication game’ (Lakoff 2004; Macagno and Walton 2010). This is variously realised through argumentation schemes, metaphors, analogy and persuasive definitions (Fairclough 2016). For example, the Catholic Church’s opposition to the legalisation of gay marriage largely centres on the word ‘marriage’ itself. Thus it recognises that if it accepts this redefinition or reframing of marriage, it must also accept the social practices and (renegotiation of) moral values it entails. Information-framing, viewed as a type of nudge, clearly opens up a number of ethical considerations. Indeed Thaler and Sunstein acknowledge that in public policy ‘frames are powerful nudges, and must be selected with caution’ (2009, p 37).

In public policy nudges are legitimated in the name of a particular version of (asymmetrical) paternalism designed to ‘help the less sophisticated people in society while imposing the smallest possible costs on the most sophisticated’ (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009 p252). This commitment to reducing the redistributive burden of policy interventions perhaps holds a clue to the increasing popularity of nudge. In the wake of a global crisis in capitalism (and its mode of governance), nudge arguably offers a way of mitigating some of the problems associated with neoliberalism.. In short, nudging is considerably cheaper than alternatives like increased state spending on welfare alongside market regulation, since it emphasises the power of consumer choice to bring about social change and deliver societal wellbeing Nudge thus offers a political solution to policy problems which is amenable to an individualising



(rather than systemic) framing of risk and which does not ‘burden powerful groups’ (Lawrence, 2004: 59).

### **A CDA approach to Social Marketing**

Social marketing is defined as ‘the application of commercial marketing technologies to [...] programs designed to influence the voluntary behaviour of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of society’ (Andreason, 1995: 7, cited in Gordon et al., 2006: 1134). As such it acts as a conduit between the commercial sector and government. Its operationalisation involves importing or ‘recontextualising’ (Bernstein, 1990) consumer-based social practices, relations and values into the public sphere. This relies on interdiscursive borrowing (Fairclough, 2003) from the linguistic technologies (promotional genres, discourses and styles) of consumer marketing. However, the social reach of C4L is wider than this and does not simply involve presenting health policy messages in consumerist ways. A critical analysis of its sociocultural and political significance is impossible without examining the range of material and discursive links it shares with other *social practices*.

CDA offers a useful analytical framework for approaching this problem since it brings a detailed account of the role of semiosis in mediating and structuring social life<sup>3</sup>. In particular it offers a dialectical theory of discourse that recognises its socially constitutive potential without reducing social practices (and their analysis) to ‘mere signification’. Moreover, through detailed textual and contextual analysis it highlights ways of using language that variously reproduce and transform social practices, and in doing so help privilege certain ways of doing, thinking and being over others. The analytical approach I adopt in this research is influenced in particular by Fairclough’s dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough, 2005). This approach starts from a dialectical understanding of the dynamic and mutually constitutive relationship between the discourse and non-discursive elements that comprise any object of social research. It is this dialectical approach which leads CDA to engage explicitly with social scientific theory, since it seeks to correlate its close textual analyses with a view of social practice as something which people actively produce on the basis of shared norms of behaviour that are partly constituted in language (Mulderigg 2015). Within this view social practice is thus something which people actively produce, and this is achieved partly through language (and other semiotic modes). Thus CDA draws on a range of discourse analytical methods, in dialogue with other disciplines, in order to explore the (trans)formation of social structures and thus social change. In particular the investigation of

social change requires analytical consideration of different levels of context. Following Fairclough, I distinguish between levels of abstraction, such that texts figure within discourse practices - the semiotic element of social practices - which in turn mediate the possible (social structures) and the actual (social events).

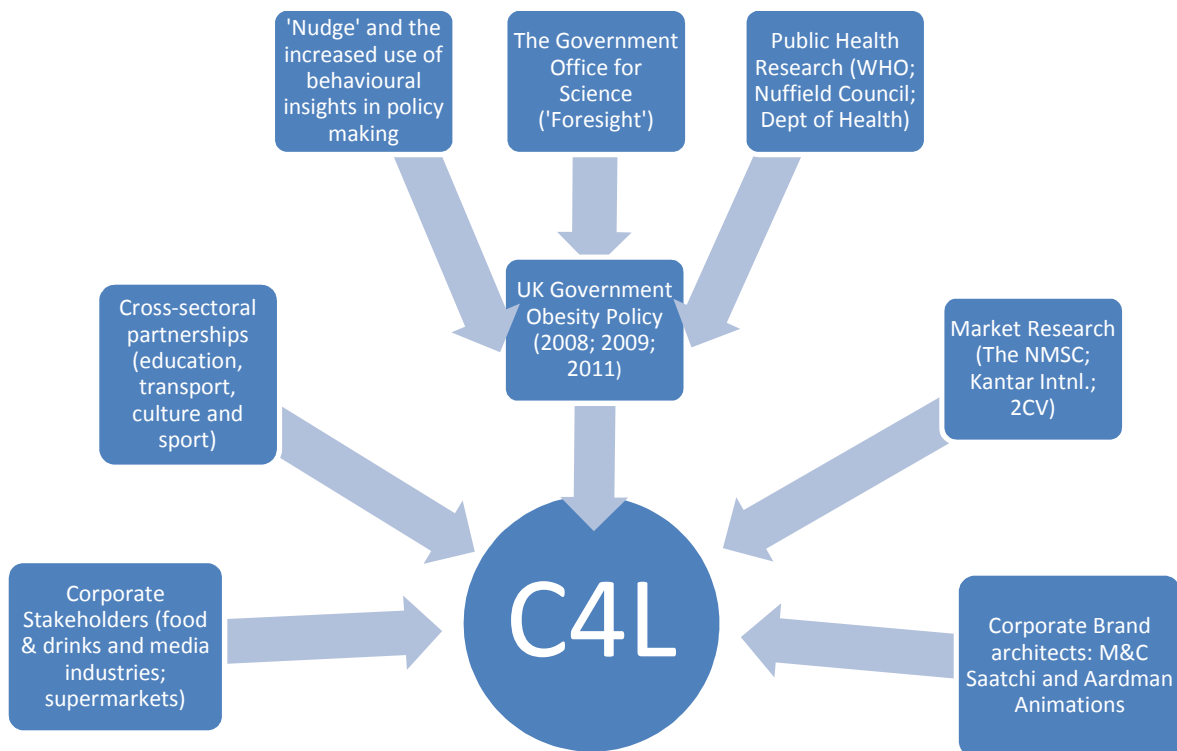
In a study of policy discourse the following are thus relevant to the analysis:

- 1) the properties of the individual text
- 2) its intertextual and interdiscursive properties
- 3) its relation to the range of more or less stable, conventionalised forms of communication that help structure the particular institution or social field from which it stems
- 4) the wider landscape of sociocultural and political economic norms and values

The Change4Life social marketing campaign announces itself quite explicitly as being concerned with bringing about social change. This paper analyses a set of key documents which fed into the C4L campaign, maps out the range of social practices with which it intersects, and finally examines in detail how the launch advert recontextualises scientific research within a new, hybrid policy genre, social marketing. In doing so it seeks to assess the degree to which this policy intervention frames obesity in individualising or systemic terms, and to critically examine the sources of its claims.

### **Social Practices in C4L**

Analysis of the documentation surrounding C4L revealed a diverse range of social practices associated with the development of this policy strategy at different times and in different ways. These are outlined schematically in the diagram below.



**Figure 1: Key social practices linked to the C4L campaign**

The policy demand for C4L ultimately stems from public health research into population level obesity commissioned by the Department of Health. One of the most influential pieces of research was by the ‘Foresight Commission’, a wing of the UK government whose remit is to carry out the scientific research to inform evidence-based policy. Among its authors are scientists working in the areas of genetics, genomics, and epidemiology, and the report also commissioned statisticians to model future population trends and potential risk factors. These are high profile, highly experienced scientists, yet it is worth noting that the range of expertise drawn upon necessarily implies a degree of bias in formulating understandings of and prescriptions for obesity (see further Evans 2010). The report produced by this commission in 2007 is the main basis for the government’s current policy on obesity prevention (Department of Health 2008; Cabinet Office (Dept of Health) 2011).

C4L was conceived from the outset as a multi-sector undertaking, involving a partnership between government, NGOs, and commercial sector organisations. Prior to the launch of C4L the National Social Marketing Centre was commissioned to use market research to identify at-risk families. They segmented families living in England into six different ‘clusters’ on the

basis characteristics including ‘demographics, attitudes, parenting style, food and activity-related behaviours and parental and child weight status’ (Mitchell, 2011: 30).

In addition to health, C4L also has strong ties to other policy sectors - notably education, transport, culture and sport – and encourages local sponsors (schools, health clinics, crèches, sports facilities) to run events (breakfast clubs, cookery classes, sports days, antenatal aerobics) under the ‘C4L brand’. Media partners include the UK’s best-selling tabloid newspapers The Sun and The Mirror. Corporate partners include the supermarkets Asda and Tesco, and manufacturers Pepsico, Kelloggs and Unilever (all of whom have a very large stake in producing some of the unhealthy products targeted in these campaigns). The C4L policy is quite clear about the value of commercial sector involvement because it has ‘influence with and can reach our target audiences in ways that we cannot’ (Jarvis et al. 2009, 36). The stated role of the supermarkets is to promote healthier foods and exercise, while the food and drinks partners will invest in and help promote Swim Active projects (Kelloggs) and Breakfast clubs (Pepsico). In addition to these commitments to marketing activities, the strategy calls for the Food Standards Agency to ‘continue to work with industry on labelling, advertising and reducing salt and saturated fat’ (p37), although no attempt has yet been made to impose regulations on manufacturers to curb unhealthy food content. Given the advertising power wielded by these manufacturers, the government has set a challenging target for itself, placing social marketing (rather than, say, regulation) at the forefront of its attempts to tackle obesity. Indeed as the document acknowledges, the £25 million annual spend on social marketing is competing against an annual spend of £335 million by industry on marketing unhealthy foods and drinks (p40). The initial three year C4L advertising contract (later renewed) was worth £75m and was awarded to the advertising agency M&C Saatchi.

Thus the UK government’s first social marketing campaign involves a complex coalition of diverse social practices. While this ‘joined up’ approach may bring advantages in disseminating and adding weight to the government’s message, it also potentially yields tensions and contradictions as it attempts to reconcile the knowledge, interests, values and vested interests of these different practices. One vehicle for eliding some of those fissures is the C4L brand itself, which comprises a set of distinctive primary colour texts and cartoon images designed to recontextualise the core policy message across the various social practices in which it was to be operationalised.

### **The Change4Life Campaign Adverts**

At the heart of the C4L strategy is its ‘communication campaign’, an (ongoing) series of cartoon adverts broadcast periodically on prime time TV since 2009. Their purpose was to

act as a catalyst for a societal shift in English lifestyles, resulting in fundamental changes to those behaviours that lead to people becoming overweight and obese [...] and reframe[e] obesity in terms of behaviours and consequences rather than obesity as an outcome itself. (Jarvis et al. 2009, 39)

Persuasive success is partly a question of viewers accepting the ‘problematic’ framing of their lifestyle behaviour(s) depicted in the adverts and being convinced by the evidence offered to support this evaluation. Thus, critical engagement with this social marketing campaign involves assessing the source and validity of this evidence.

One way of approaching this question is through the analytical lens of interdiscursivity, examining how the text weaves together different discourses and genres (Fairclough, 2003) in constructing its message. In particular the adverts contain fragments of the government’s own obesity policy discourse, which is itself an *interpretation* of obesity as *potential future risk* and *economic threat*. As I demonstrate below, this policy discourse simplifies and inflates scientific evidence and statistical projections made in the Foresight report (Butland et al. 2007) in order to legitimize its policy intervention (Evans, 2010).

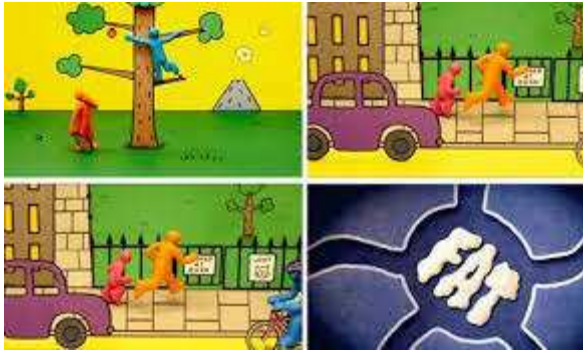
In my analysis of the launch advert I ask:

- Does the ad frame obesity in individualising (behavioural) or systemic (environmental) terms?
- What is the source of its claims?

To whom does the ad assign responsibility for tackling obesity and how? I explore these questions through the lens of dialogicality (interdiscursivity and intertextuality) and heteroglossia (representation and point of view).

### **Textual Analysis of ‘Change4Life’ Launch Advert**

This advert contains a narrative delivered by an adult male with an Estuary English accent, the disembodied government ‘spokesperson’ voiceover. Its core message is that modern urban lifestyles have led to a situation where children will grow up obese and at risk of disease, potentially early mortality, and that we should therefore embrace a Change4Life by adopting healthier habits.



**Figure 2: Stills from the launch Change4Life advert**

The accompanying images involve the C4L animated figures moving through a simple 2D cartoon environment. The opening scenes depict ‘hunter-gatherer’ figures hunting wild animals, with later scenes moving into a modern urban environment and eventually ‘peeping’ into a family home where bad dietary habits and sedentary lifestyles are modelled, and ultimately problematized.. To aid the reader paralinguistic information as well as a commentary of actions and images are included in square brackets in the transcript below:

1 One upon a time life was pretty simple. It could be hard: the food was pretty fast, but it could  
2 be fun, if we got our mammoth or bison, or whatever.  
3 [*Cheers as a monster is clubbed*].  
4 [*Images moving towards an urbanised environment and a 'window' into modern family life*  
5 *eating fast food and snacking in front of the TV*]  
6 Then, gradually life changed. In many ways it got easier: nobody had to run around for their  
7 food. Or anything else much for that matter.  
8 [*Images of child's 'insides' and fat build-up*]  
9 Until one day we woke up and realised that 9 out of 10 of our kids would grow up to have  
10 dangerous amounts of fat build up in their bodies, which meant they're more likely to get  
11 horrid things like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer.  
12 [*Computer game on-screen exterminates figure of child, parent and child exclaim in horror*]  
13 And many can have their lives cut short.  
14 [*Cut to the picnic in the park scene. Figures adopt acrobatic poses to form the words 'eat',*  
15 *'move' and 'live', then run into the final scene to form part of the brand logo*]  
16 So we thought that's not MORE of a life, that's LESS of a life, and that's TERRIBLE, cos  
17 we love the little blighters  
18 Maybe we should get together with our kids and eat better, move more, live longer, and  
19 change for life  
20 And we all lived happily, not exactly ever after, but more ever after, than we had done.  
21 To find out how you can change for life, search online for Change4Life.

### ***Interdiscursivity and Intertextuality***

This advert launches the campaign by defining the nature of the policy problem it aims to address. It does so through a historical narrative that essentially locates the source of the problem in modern consumer lifestyles. It presents to the public for the first time some of the key assumptions underpinning the C4L strategy about the causes, health risks, and solutions to societal obesity. The intertextual origins of these health claims can be traced to a series of policy texts and scientific reports. A concept originally developed by Kristeva (1986), intertextuality refers to the more or less explicit presence within a given text of other texts. Interdiscursivity, on the other hand, captures such intertextual borrowing at a higher level of abstraction: the mixing of different genres and discourses within a text. Fairclough (2003) observes that intertextuality accentuates the dialogicality of a text, in effect rendering salient the presence of different voices (and thus potentially different ideas, claims and values). In my analysis I identify what I see as different discourses and voices in these texts, tracing their intertextual origins to preceding policy and scientific texts, and then assess the ideological implications of their recontextualisation in this advert.

Ostensibly there is just one narrative voice in this advert, that of the government ‘spokesperson’, although as I discuss in the section on ‘heteroglossia’ the narrative point of view shifts in complex ways. This advert draws on some of the classic linguistic conventions of the fairy tale genre: It presents a past tense narrative framed with typical opening and closing moves ‘once upon a time’ and ‘lived happily ever after’, . This interdiscursive strategy permits a rather complex causal definition of obesity to be distilled into a simple story, while at the same time invoking children as the primary addressees. According to the government the intended target of this initial intervention are young families. It seems clear that the choice of visually appealing cartoons and colourful merchandise is a deliberate strategy to address children (as future potentially obese adults) and enlist their ‘pester-power’ to transmit the C4L message to their parents.

#### *From Cavemen to Consumers: lines 1-7*

The opening of this advert depicts events a long time in the past; the representation of hunting and now-extinct mammals suggests this is around the Stone Age. In lines 6-7 both the text (*then, life changed*) and visual images depict the transition to the modern era. A contrast is



drawn between these two periods by means of particular grammatical and lexical pairings. The phrases ‘once upon a time’ and ‘then, gradually life changed’ frame these two periods, with each evaluated differently - ‘then’ life was *simple* but *hard*; ‘now’ it is *easy*. The function of this ‘scene-setting’ opening is to reproduce the currently prevalent policy understanding of the causes of increasing population level obesity: modern consumer lifestyles. We can trace the source of this causal analysis to the Foresight report, the government-commissioned scientific research on obesity which underpins current anti-obesity policy. In contrast with historical understandings of obesity as a matter of individual willpower, the Foresight report offers a more complex analysis, which is reproduced in simplified form in the C4L campaign. This important intertextual source therefore warrants close inspection.

*The Foresight Report: obesogenic environments and biological determinism*

In what appears to be a systemic (environmental) framing of obesity, the Foresight report (Butland et al., 2007: 7) argues that

At the heart of the issue of excess weight lies a homeostatic biological system, struggling to cope in a fast-changing world, where the **pace of technological revolution outstrips human evolution**. Research clearly indicates how human biology gives many people an underlying propensity to accumulate energy and conserve it because of genetic risk [...] The technological revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has left in its wake an ‘**obesogenic environment**’ that serves to expose the biological vulnerability of human beings (original emphasis).

Given that the report’s seven authors include two geneticists, a genomics specialist, and an epidemiologist, it is unsurprising that the report should emphasise the role of biological predisposition in explaining obesity risk. This stems, they argue, from the intersection of four key factors: primary appetite control in the brain; entrenched dietary habits; levels of physical activity; and the ‘psychological ambivalence experienced by individuals in making lifestyle choices’ (p8). Drawing insights from neurobiology, they argue that humans are powerfully influenced by the variety and appeal of modern foods, creating a set of psychological and emotional forces with which our innate biological system cannot compete. They characterise this as ‘passive obesity’, requiring ‘more active coping strategies to prevent weight gain’ (p9). The report produces what it terms an ‘obesity system map’, identifying diverse environmental and biological factors in obesity prevalence. Distilled into ‘thematic clusters’

these include both individual (behavioural) and systemic (environmental) explanations of obesity. From the centre to the periphery these clusters are: energy balance; biology; food consumption; individual psychology; individual activity; food production; societal influences (media, education, culture); and the activity environment (built environment, transport, largely sedentary work patterns) (p121).

It is significant that although the report explicitly acknowledges the complexity of the problem, and acknowledges the role of wider environmental, economic, and societal factors - thus a 'systemic' framing of obesity 'more amenable to public policy solutions that burden powerful groups' (Lawrence, 2004 p59) - these are narrowly conceived and relegated to the periphery both conceptually and practically. The 'obesity map' identifies these as largely external factors which form part of a 'positive feedback cycle' which potentially lock us into behaviours leading to 'passive obesity'. Thus, ironically, in its attempt to define the complex nature of this 'obesogenic environment', the model locates the *individual* biological and psychological system at the centre, where the fat person is cast as a victim of this 'obesity system', locking them into psychologically entrenched unhealthy behaviours (see also Evans, 2010). Paradoxically this 'systemic' framing of obesity limits governmental responsibility for addressing it by placing individual behaviours at the heart of that system.

Moreover, the model is uneven in the environmental factors it includes. For example, on the one hand it rightly includes certain key factors like 'macro-economic drivers' fuelling the production of cheap, highly diversified, and vigorously marketed food and drinks commodities, as well as the wider 'societal pressure to consume' (Butland et al., 2007: 83-4). However, equally significant causal factors, like longer working hours, poor urban planning, uneven public transport infrastructure, class-based ghettos in the built environment (Pykett et al., 2011; Whitehead et al., 2012), inadequate *regulation* of food and drinks manufacture, marketing, and retail, are notably absent from the map. Such factors are particularly important given the fact that the report also demonstrates that obesity prevalence in the UK shows marked correlations with (lower) social class, and that comparisons of populations internationally suggest that obesity prevalence can be an outcome of increasing social inequality. This is a highly significant observation since it suggests that no matter how cleverly social marketing messages may be tailored to specific (northern, working class) sections of society, they are unlikely to tackle the problem of obesity without first addressing social inequality. Why might obesity be more prevalent among lower classes in developed (and socially unequal) societies? One possible answer is that obesity correlates

with levels of education (and social mobility) on the one hand, and the growth-driven logic of capitalist societies on the other. In this context a weakened state reduces investment in the built and institutional environment (green and pedestrianised spaces; cycle lanes; public transport; socially mixed urban planning; school meals and physical exercise, etc.) while failing to address the crippling hold which powerful corporations have over the production of (cheap, processed) food, its marketing and distribution (where profit margins outweigh all other considerations), and retail (where for example the most accessible local stores are typically franchises with little choice but to stock the cheap-to-produce junk food which drives profits). In short, obesity prevalence has complex systemic causes rather than individualistic behavioural ones.

In fact, Foresight calls for a national debate on how to achieve the societal ‘paradigm shift’ which it claims is necessary to adequately address the complexity of the problem. At the same time, however, it openly acknowledges that in practical terms individualised solutions to collective problems are easier:

Solutions to address the obesogenic environment such as changes in transport infrastructure and urban design... can be more difficult and costly than targeting intervention at the group, family or individual (Butland et al., 2007: 11)

The biological determinist perspective on the idea of an ‘obesogenic environment’ is distilled more clearly in the ensuing Change4Life policy document:

Obesity is not increasing because today’s generation is more gluttonous or lazy than previous generations. It is increasing because human biology has evolved to favour weight gain. Human beings find it hard to ignore hunger signals but easy to override the signals that they are full. This was an advantage in a world where food was scarce; however in the modern world, where food is abundant, convenient and cheap (with little physical effort required to obtain it), allowing our biology to dictate our food consumption will result in ourselves and our children gaining weight (Jarvis et al., 2009: 13).

The wider environmental forces producing this obesogenic environment are glossed over, instead representing obesity as a matter of an individual’s battle with ‘our biology’. Despite Foresight’s more nuanced aetiology of the problem (compared with previous policy understandings of obesity), when recontextualised in C4L there is a return to individualised

prescriptions, exhorting us to take active control and wrest agency back from ‘our biology’ by tackling individual lifestyle habits (‘move more’, ‘me-sized meals’, ‘cut back fat’, ‘sugar swaps’). In typical neoliberal fashion, the policy discourse surrounding obesity is thus readily distilled into a simple choice between feckless passivity and active agency.

*The Science: lines 9-13*

The next section of the advert introduces the problem: this modern easy lifestyle is producing weight gain which in turn can cause disease. Temporal conjunctions (*Until one day*) and continued use of the past tense (*we woke up and realised*) mark the next stage of the narrative. The policy problem is then introduced through a biomedical discourse, invoking expert knowledge and authority as a form of legitimacy through which to lend weight to the central message (Van Leeuwen 2007). This biomedical discourse is marked linguistically by very different lexis and grammar. This is textured both visually, through a cartoon anatomical illustration of fat storage and the circulatory system, and linguistically, through statistical predictions (*9 out of 10 of our kids would grow up*) to present future possibilities as known facts; scientific lexis (*heart disease, type 2 diabetes, cancer*); and the representation of biological processes and hedged claims about risk factors (*dangerous amounts of fat build up in their bodies; more likely to get; many can have their lives cut short*). Thus through hedged predictions and generalised claims about statistical prevalence this section of the ad frames obesity as being ‘relevant to everyone’ (Nathanson, 1999). The key intertextual source for these claims is the Foresight report, following which they were progressively recontextualised in a series of related policy documents and other media, as shown in the table below.

Foresight Report, 2007	<p><i>By 2050 approximately <u>25% of under-20-year-olds</u> are predicted to be obese (p36)</i></p> <p><i>Being overweight or obese increases the risk of a wide range of chronic diseases, principally type 2 diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease including stroke, as well as cancer (p5)</i></p>
Foresight ‘Summary of Key Messages’, 2007	<p><i>By 2050 [...] about <u>25% of all children under 16</u> could be obese (p2)</i></p>

	<i>Obesity increases the risk of a range of chronic diseases, particularly type 2 diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease and also cancer and arthritis (p2)</i>
Healthy Weight, Healthy Lives, 2008	<i>[the numbers of people either overweight or obese] could rise to almost nine in ten adults and <u>two-thirds of children</u> by 2050. (pvii)</i>  <i>This trend [obesity] increases has a <u>severe impact</u> on the health of individuals, increasing the risk of diabetes, cancer, and heart and liver disease (pvii)</i>
Change4Life Website	<i><u>9 out of 10 kids</u> today could grow up with <u>dangerous amounts of fat</u> in their bodies. This can cause <u>life-threatening</u> diseases like cancer, type 2 diabetes and heart disease.</i>
Change4Life Launch advert, Jan 2009	<i>One day we woke up and realised that <u>9 out of 10 of our kids</u> would grow up to have <u>dangerous amounts of fat</u> build up in their bodies, which meant they're more likely to get <u>horrid things</u> like heart disease, diabetes, and cancer</i>
Change4Life Strategy (policy statement), April 2009	<i>By 2050 only <u>one in ten</u> of the adult population will be a healthy weight</i>  <i>Being overweight or obese increases and individual's chances of developing (among others) type 2 diabetes, cancer and heart disease, reducing both quality of life and life expectancy (p13)</i>

**Table 1: Recontextualisation of Biomedical Facts about Obesity across Policy Texts**

There are three notable transformations in the way the scientific claims of the Foresight report are recontextualised.

*1 Exaggerated statistics:* Firstly the predictions about future prevalence are progressively exaggerated. The Foresight report uses statistical modelling in order to predict obesity levels among adults and children. It includes predictions for 2025 and 2050. However, it also acknowledges that ‘attempting to make projections so far into the future is always compromised by lack of evidence’ (Butland et al., 2007: 34). Despite this caveat, in its own follow-up Summary document it narrows the scope of its subjects from children under 20 to those under 16, thus in effect strengthening the claim. The Healthy Lives document presents an even stronger claim, increasing the figure from a quarter to two-thirds, by including the category of ‘overweight’. The Change4Life campaign website and the first TV adverts were officially launched on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, three months *before* the publication of the accompanying policy document. Both the website and launch advert make a much more shocking and epistemically forceful claim ‘9 out of 10 kids would grow up to have dangerous amounts of fat in their bodies’. Such a statistic is possible because it does not specify the age range involved and does not define ‘dangerous levels of fat’. Presumably, however, if 90% of children (of whatever age) were predicted to reach (or exceed) a level of weight gain which is medically accepted to be a disease risk factor (and therefore ‘dangerous’), this claim would have been made in the Foresight report, the main source of scientific evidence quoted throughout the C4L documentation. Finally, the C4L policy document does not in fact include a comparable statistic specifically pertaining to children. Instead it presents a prediction for adults, which is framed so as to emphasise the small number of adults who are predicted to be a ‘healthy weight’ (*only one in ten*). As the Foresight report acknowledges, ‘the classification of obesity in children is controversial because of the difficulties stemming from variation in normal patterns of growth, weight gain and changes in body composition’ (Butland et al., 2007: 26). Moreover, predictions restricted to the adult population will always permit the use of more shocking statistics of the kind used in the C4L policy statement. These statistical predictions play an important role in C4L, by providing evidence in support of the central campaign message. They provide what Cochran-Smith and Fries (2001: 5) call an *evidentiary warrant*, ‘the set of justifications and grounds that are offered for conclusions and policy recommendations’. These grounds take the form of putatively objective empirical facts and statistics which offer the legitimacy foundations of evidence-based policy. However, as Hyatt (2013) observes, evidence is not neutral but rather refracted through the decisions, biases and interests of the researchers. Given that this evidence is offered as the indisputable grounds for policy claims, it warrants close examination. CDA offers the analytical

framework to do this by examining the recontextualisation of policy evidence through the genre chains that underlie the policy process.

*2 Simplified and emotive biomedical facts:* Secondly, each time they are recontextualised the claims about biomedical risk are simplified, reducing the list of cited diseases to diabetes, cancer and heart disease. These claims are also textured with a more informal register in the materials targeted at the public (*kids, horrid things, one day we woke up and realised*). This is also accompanied by emotive language (*severe impact, life-threatening, dangerous, horrid*) which carries an inherently persuasive pragmatic force (Macagno and Walton 2010). With its capacity to mobilise anxieties, emotionally loaded language is a powerful argumentative tool in neoliberal pre-emptive politics aimed at encouraging the public to take greater individual responsibility for managing future risk. Indeed, as Rose (2001: 6) argues, the governance of public health in modern liberal states is centrally about the management of risk, and this is accomplished ‘at a distance’. The role of the state is that of ‘enabler’ (cf. Mulderrig 2011), providing a health-promoting ‘habitat’ (sanitation, urban planning, regulation of food production etc.) while exhorting individuals to become ‘active partner[s] in the drive for health’ (Rose, 2001: 6). This modern form of health management sits alongside a consumer culture which commodifies desires and markets ‘solutions’ for our anxieties and aspirations for happiness, well-being, and ‘quality of life’, thereby blurring the boundaries between coercion and consent.

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century a new alliance formed between political aspirations for a healthy population and personal aspirations to be well: health was to be ensured by instrumentalizing anxiety and shaping the hopes and fears of individuals and families for their own biological destiny (Rose, 2001: 17)

The emotive language running through the Change4Life campaign provides a clear example of how private anxieties, parental concern, and hopes for a better future are manipulated in the public management of health risk. *3 Manipulated health categories:* A final observation relates to the way in which the core policy problem and object of biomedical measurement is itself manipulated in the C4L campaign. The original remit of the Foresight commission was to carry out the largest ever scientific investigation into the causes, prevalence and future management of obesity in the UK. While the report does also discuss overweight, its primary category of calculation when assessing health risks is ‘obesity’. However, the market research carried out prior to the C4L campaign found that using the word ‘obesity’ was potentially

alienating, therefore ‘the campaign did not talk about obese, overweight or fat people; it talked about ‘dangerous amounts of fat in the body’’ (Jarvis et al., 2009: 44). C4L then claims the same medical risks (cancer, heart disease, diabetes) are associated with these ‘dangerous amounts of fat’. This is however a vague and undefined category; medically speaking only obesity as precisely defined is a risk factor for disease. As we saw above, this linguistic vagueness permits a much more alarming statistic, expanding the health risk to 9 out of 10 children.

*The Policy Nudge: Lines 16-19*

Despite the (partially) systemic framing of the environmental causes of obesity, the final section of the advert presents an individualised (behavioural) policy solution. To do so it shifts to a lifeworld discourse of family relationships and everyday activities. Framed by the causal discourse marker ‘so’, the function of this section is to evaluate the preceding biomedical information and to suggest a response. Line 9 negatively evaluates the modern, easy lifestyles depicted earlier in the advert. Assumptions play a key role in achieving this and in mobilising guilt in relation to our children. The line invokes the assumption that an easier life is automatically better and then refutes it on the grounds of the preceding claim about children’s shortened life expectancy (*that’s not more of a life, that’s less of a life*). An affective evaluation of this (*that’s terrible*) is given grounds by drawing on a paternalistic discourse (*cos we love the little blighters*). The advert therefore challenges the assumption that the comforts and conveniences of modern life are always to be welcomed by demonstrating some of their unintended consequences. It also mobilises parental guilt in so far as the assumption that we love our children is the logical link that renders coherent this section of the advert. We can see this as a form of linear coherence; there are no logical cohesive markers like ‘so’ or ‘therefore’ linking this negative evaluation with the deontic claim for action in the next line. Instead the (entirely reasonable) assumption that we love our kids forces us to accept as a logical conclusion the core policy nudge: (if we love our kids) ‘*we should ...change for life*’. The nudge thus relies on emotional manipulation, mobilising anxiety about potential disease.

*Coda: Lines 20-21*

The advert ends with a further interdiscursive allusion to the fairytale genre in order to construe a vision of a better future of longer life expectancy (*we all lived happily...more ever after*) Throughout the viewer is ostensibly cast in the participant role of onlooker or audience



(Levinson 1983) listening to a story, and is not addressed directly until the final invitation to join the C4L campaign. Nevertheless the viewer is more subtly implicated in the discourse world (and framing of obesity) created in this ad through the use of personal pronouns.

### ***Heteroglossia***

The movement between different forms of interaction, and thus viewer participant roles, is a form of heteroglossia which is typical in advertising (Cook, 2001: 188). Two main categories of social actor are linguistically represented in this advert: ‘people in general’ and ‘*our kids*’. The referential patterns involve a slippage between the points of view of the government and that of the audience, realised through the pronoun ‘we’.

The use of ‘we’ in public discourse necessarily implies a particular – and often shifting – construal of participation in the ‘discourse world’ created. Because of its semantic vagueness it can construct social groupings, project shared values, assume common goals, and obfuscate responsibility for actions and claims (Costelloe, 2014; Cramer, 2010; author, 2012). A basic semantic distinction is between ‘inclusive’ (where the referential scope of ‘we’ includes the addressee) and ‘exclusive’ (where it does not). However, in some ‘ambivalent’ cases it is not possible to determine whether the reference is inclusive or exclusive. Here, slippage between these forms allows the government to claim a shared voice and perspective with the public, invoke parental guilt and anxiety, and then present its behaviour change policy as the necessary solution.

The advert opens with inclusive ‘we’ as the agent of material processes (hunting etc.). Line 9 introduces the government’s core campaign message about the health risks associated with modern lifestyles. This rupture in the narrative is linguistically marked in various ways (scientific discourse, temporal phrases). The deictic centre at this point also becomes blurred; ambivalent ‘we’ (*woke up*) and (*realised*). The predication here is the rather alarming and, as we have seen, factually questionable claim (*9 out of 10 of our kids would grow up to have dangerous amounts of fat*). If we scrutinise this sentence and bear in mind the preceding scientific and policy research upon which it is based, it is clear that the epistemic responsibility for this ‘fact’ must logically lie with the government, not the general public. However, this type of ambivalence and blurring of responsibility for the claims made, is an increasingly common feature of more ‘personalised’ styles of political discourse (Mulderigg 2012). The intended referent of ‘our kids’ is clearly the general public, the proximity of this inclusive reference in the embedded clause (*We realised that our kids*) further blurs the

referential distinction between the government and the public, thereby inviting us into the discourse world and the emotive claims it is making. I would argue it is precisely through this kind of subtle semantic slippage that it is possible for governments to ‘instrumentalize anxiety’ in the exercise of pre-emptive politics. When used with deontic policy claims ‘we’ represents the source of these claims as stemming not from the government but from common interests and concerns.

Moreover, the ‘we’ of this advert is textured alongside a multimodal representation of the family, thus reinforcing the idea that responsibility for social welfare lies primarily within the family unit (Massey 2005 cited in Evans 2010). In line 17 this fearful vision of the future is evaluated by the only instance of exclusive ‘we’ (*we thought that’s not more of a life...*) which immediately slips into ambivalent ‘we’ textured with a parental discourse (*that’s terrible, cos we love the little blighters*), allowing the government to construe itself as a caring actor sharing ‘our’ parental concerns. This is followed by the main policy nudge wherein inclusive ‘we’ is the agent of deontic claims for action: *we should get together; eat better; move more; live longer; change for life*. Thus, the vague semantics of ‘we’ help elide a fundamental contradiction running through the C4L policy strategy; the (partial) *systemic* framing of obesity risk as environmental and relevant to everyone, while offering individuals a *behavioural* solution which ignores these structural causes.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have used critical discourse analysis to investigate the origins and enactment of the UK government’s anti-obesity social marketing campaign ‘Change4Life’, and shown how this forms part of a wider trend in recent politics to use insights from behavioural psychology in the development of public policy. Social marketing involves the merging of government and market-based social practices, and as such potentially creates contradictions and tensions as the assumptions, values, and interests of these different social fields are brought together. While enlisting as partners powerful commercial agents like Asda, Kelloggs, and Pepsico may secure some cosmetic modifications to their business practices (while enhancing their corporate responsibility credentials), C4L does nothing to address their role in creating the problem in the first place. Indeed, by relying on its own brand power to persuade us to become more discerning consumers it endorses the very consumer culture identified as forming part of our ‘obesogenic environment’. I also examined how obesity is framed in the campaign’s launch advert by recontextualizing knowledge across a series of policy chains. I

demonstrate how the abstract, child-like cartoon genre of the advert facilitates a simplification and distortion of scientific research on obesity, and helps obfuscate even further the complex environmental and political economic causes of obesity, and in particular its correlation with increasing social inequality. I also argue that this personalised marketing genre and its semantically ambiguous pronouns help gloss over a fundamental contradiction running through this policy: while (partially) framing obesity as a systemic problem, the behavioural solution it offers is firmly individualistic.

This social marketing campaign aims to involve corporate stakeholders directly in the government's obesity policy, partly in the hope that reform from within the food and drinks industry will follow. However, while global capitalism continues to exert downward pressure on production costs, at the same time as supermarkets see their profit margins narrowing to an unprecedented level (Ruddick, 2014), we might question the likelihood of genuine reforms of the food and drinks industry without government regulation of the kind it continues to eschew. The C4L campaign celebrates consumer power, as illustrated by this statement from the website 'Myth 1: Healthy food is just too expensive! Loads of people think this is true, but it's actually more likely you will find a lot of cheap healthy meal ideas that help save you money. You just need to be clever about it.' (NHS 2015; Coleman 2014) This is of course an implicit acknowledgement that obesity prevalence is closely correlated with social deprivation and social inequality (consumer power can only exist alongside spending power), and yet C4L places the solution firmly in the hands of the individual. One of the stated objectives of this first stage of the campaign was to present to the public a *reframing* of the problem because using the term 'obesity' was felt to be alienating. However, as the analysis shows the simplification of biomedical research resulted in a factually questionable set of claims whose emotive framing potentially heightens psychosocial anxieties around body image and eating, while leaving untouched the wider socioeconomic root causes of population obesity.

The C4L campaign should be understood in relation to a wider political climate in which advanced capitalist governments are seeking cost-effective approaches to public policy which are capable of meeting the responsibilities of social welfare without seriously challenging market freedoms. Within this context 'nudge' has emerged in the last few years as an approach to policy that claims to 'help the less sophisticated people in society while imposing the smallest possible costs on the most sophisticated' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009: 252). The approach is gaining a significant foothold in the UK, the US, Australia, Denmark and

numerous other EU countries. This paper presents a systematic linguistic analysis of its application to health policy. It demonstrates the value of critical discourse analysis as a rigorous and transdisciplinary framework through which to critically examine the complex intersection of social practices (and their respective values and vested interests) that comprise this multi-sector policy instrument. Political scientists have warned against the insidious potential of nudge. Through detailed textual analysis I offer insights into this by uncovering the subtle discourse mechanisms through which we are ‘nudged’ into personal responsibility for obesity prevention.

### **Postscript**

The C4L campaign began life under the New Labour government (1997-2010). Initially planned as a three year marketing strategy, it was subsequently extended under the Coalition (2010-2015) and now Conservative government. This continuity perhaps indicates the cross-party appeal of behaviour change policy strategies. At the time of writing C4L continues to be the most visible face of the UK’s anti-obesity strategy, with a new campaign ‘Sugar Smart’ launched on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2016, encouraging parents to take control of their children’s sugar intake. Over its lifetime C4L has progressively added new genres and sub-brands, the most recent being a ‘Sugar Smart’ app to scan barcodes on products to reveal their sugar content. Having repeatedly ruled out the possibility of imposing a tax levy on the food and drinks industry, the Prime Minister finally agreed to consider a 20% sugar tax as a ‘last resort’ if the industry fails to address the issue<sup>4</sup>. In a press statement on 7<sup>th</sup> January 2016 he promised a ‘fully-worked-up programme’ later this year. In his 16<sup>th</sup> March budget speech the Chancellor finally announced the introduction of a new tax to be levied on companies based on the volume of sugar-sweetened drinks they produce or import. Details on implementation, and whether this will mark the first serious attempt to address the structural complexities of this issue, remain to be seen.

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<sup>1</sup> I follow Thaler and Sunstein in using lower case when using the term 'nudge'.

<sup>2</sup> This began as a government policy unit but in 2014 was part-privatised, with the government retaining a one third stake, while selling the remainder for an undisclosed sum to the charity NESTA (whose remit is to promote innovation and science) and its employees.

<sup>3</sup> Among the most influential approaches are those of (Fairclough 2003b; van Dijk 2009; Wodak 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Matt Dathan (2016) David Cameron threatens to introduce sugar tax if industry fails to combat 'obesity crisis', *The Independent online*, Jan 7<sup>th</sup>. [www.independent.co.uk](http://www.independent.co.uk) (accessed 13<sup>th</sup> Jan 2016)