

# **The rise of psychological governance: a critical discourse analysis of 'nudge' tactics in UK health policy**

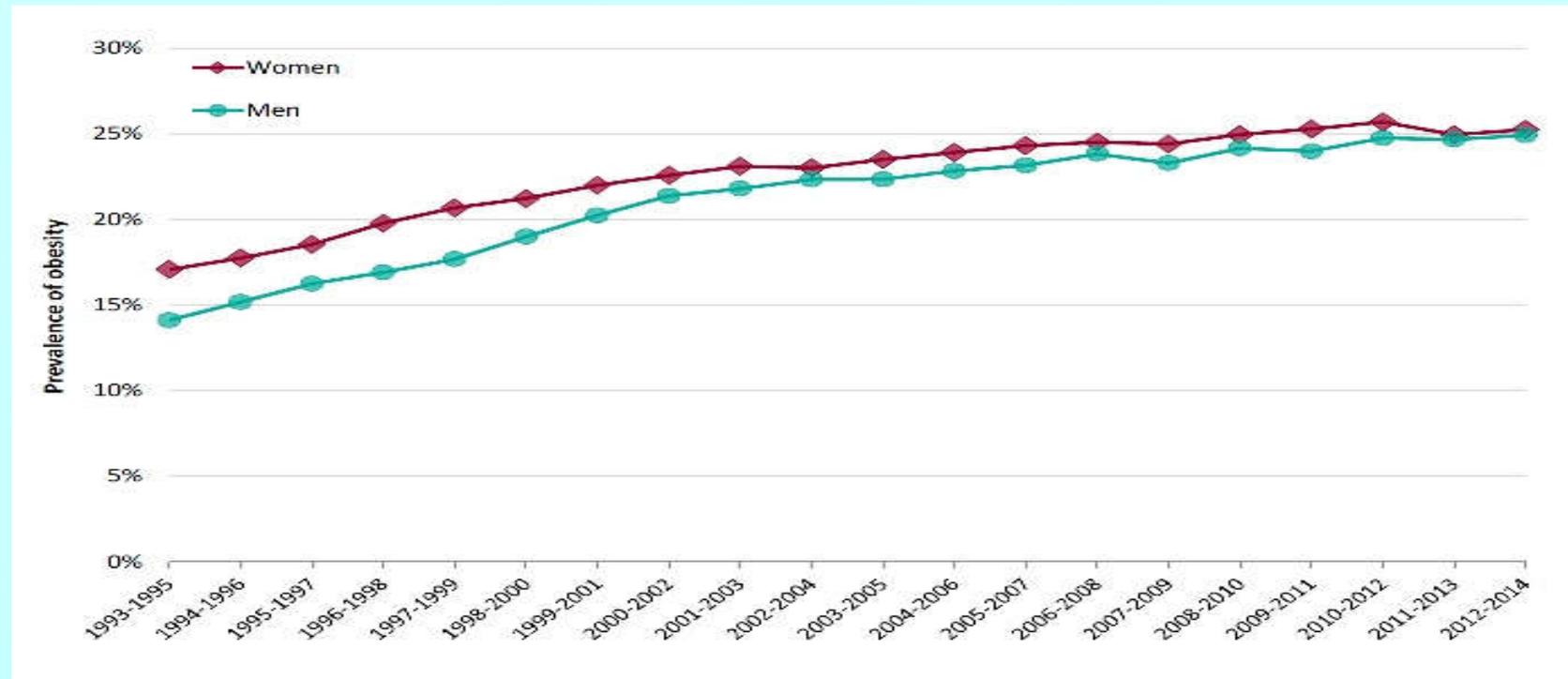
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# The Policy Problem

'The greatest public health crisis affecting the UK'

Obesity Prevalence in the UK



Obesity is **Socially Stratified**

'Obesity prevalence in the most deprived 10% of the population is approximately twice that among those in the least deprived 10%'

(Public Health England, 2015)

Existential  
Presupposition.  
construing 'truth'

# Theoretical Framework

Emotive  
metaphor:  
mobilising fear

## Neoliberalism and the 'Affective' Politics of Risk

- Identify, calibrate, and manage environmental, geopolitical, biopolitical threats
- 'The felt reality of threat legitimates preemptive action' (Massumi, 2010)  
e.g.: 'The obesity epidemic'

## Biopower and the 'calculated management of life'

(*Biopower Today* Rabinow and Rose, 2006)

1. Forms and sources of expert knowledge
2. Strategies of intervention
3. Modes of subjectification 'by means of practices of the self, in the name of ... life [and] health'

## Critical Discourse Analysis

What discursive practices of governmentality construe/ct compliant, self-disciplinary subjects?

- How is risk identified and construed?
- How are individuals targeted?
- How is individual self-disciplinary control ('active citizenship') enlisted?

# How is risk identified and construed?

Policies rest on political 'imaginaries'

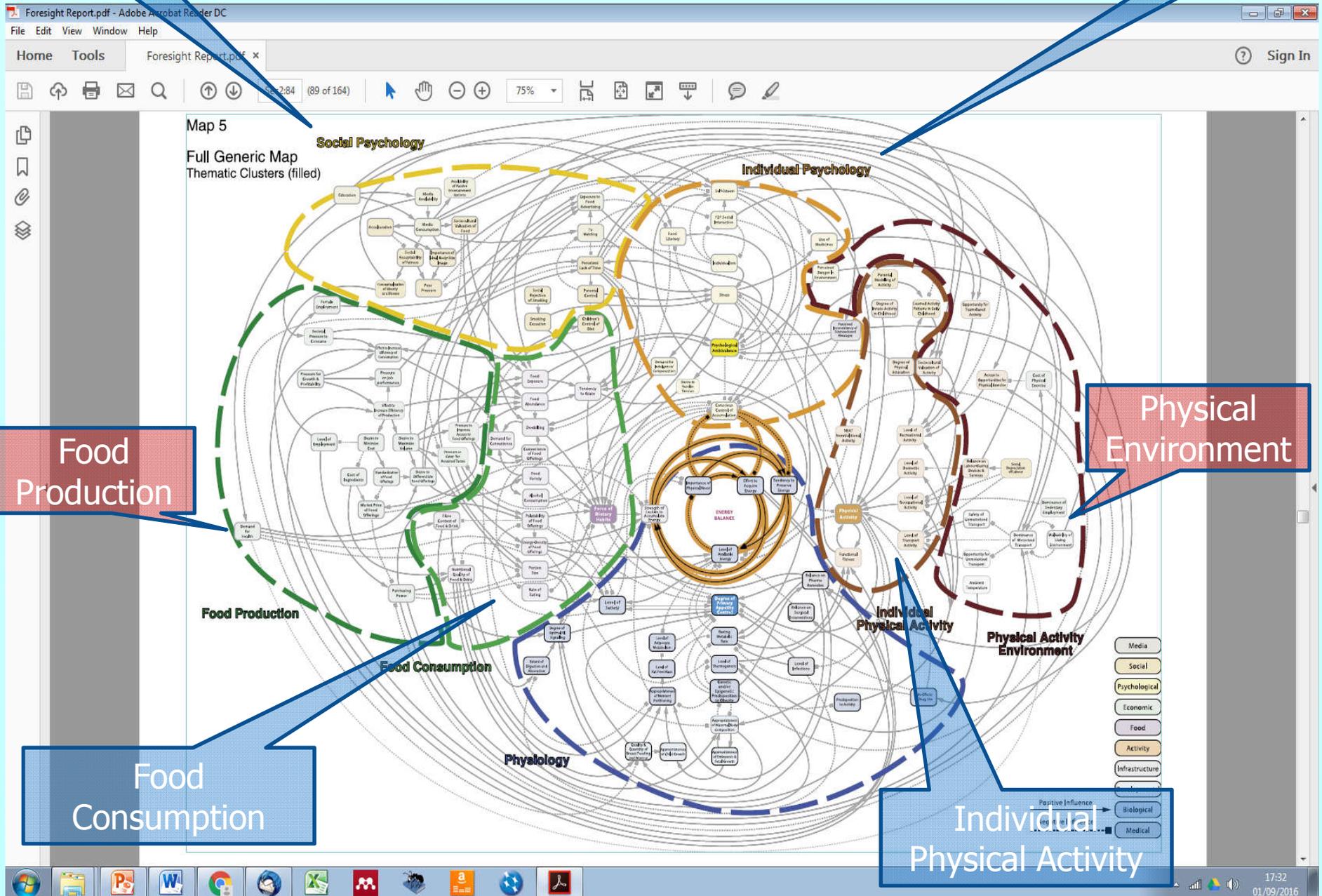
*'Economic and political relations are so complex that any action oriented towards them requires some **discursive simplification**'*

(Jessop, 2002: 7)

# Expert Knowledge: the Obesity Systems Map

Social Psychology

Individual Psychology



## How are individuals targeted?

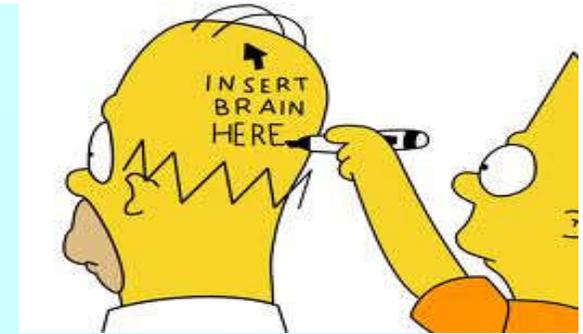
'Solutions to address the obesogenic environment such as changes in transport infrastructure and urban design... can be more **difficult** and **costly** than targeting intervention at the group, family or individual'

(Foresight, 2007: 11)

(Modern biopolitics) relies on 'instrumentalising anxiety and shaping the fears and hopes of individual families for their own biological destiny' (Rose, 2001: 17)



# 'Nudge'



## Bounded rationality

2 cognitive systems: logical 'Reflective' vs irrational, emotional 'Automatic'  
Decisions largely determined by cognitive flaws of our 'Automatic System' (poor reasoning, inertia, emotional bias, mental shortcuts)

**Homer Simpson's response to being told of mandatory waiting period before buying a gun: *'Five days? But I'm mad now'***

## Choice architecture

Strategic, subtle interventions to steer individuals towards 'better choices' (e.g. changing default options, reframing messages, providing incentives)

## Ancient reason-emotion dualism

Jeremy Bentham's 'axioms of mental pathology' identified loss aversion, status quo bias and laziness ('the interest of the pillow') as mechanisms determining happiness

## 'Libertarian Paternalism' claims to

'help the **least sophisticated** people in society while imposing the smallest possible costs on the **most sophisticated**' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2009: 252)

# Identifying 'the least sophisticated'

The National Social Marketing Centre (NMSC) demographic psychological profiling

<b>Automatic System's 'cognitive flaws'</b>	<b>Dispositions of subpopulations 'at risk' of obesity</b>
<i>Unreflective</i>	'recognises childhood obesity is a problem but does not believe their own child is overweight'
<i>Short-termist</i>	'prioritises their child's immediate gratification over their long term health'
<i>Uses bad heuristics</i>	'routinely underestimates amounts their children eat and overestimates how much they exercise'
<i>Influenced by social stereotypes</i>	'perceives healthy living to be a <u>middle class</u> aspiration'

These 'calculative devices' serve as mechanisms of 'segregation and social hierarchization... guaranteeing relations of domination and effects of hegemony' (Foucault, 1976)

## Inculcating the 'right' Subjectivities through Social Marketing

5 a day

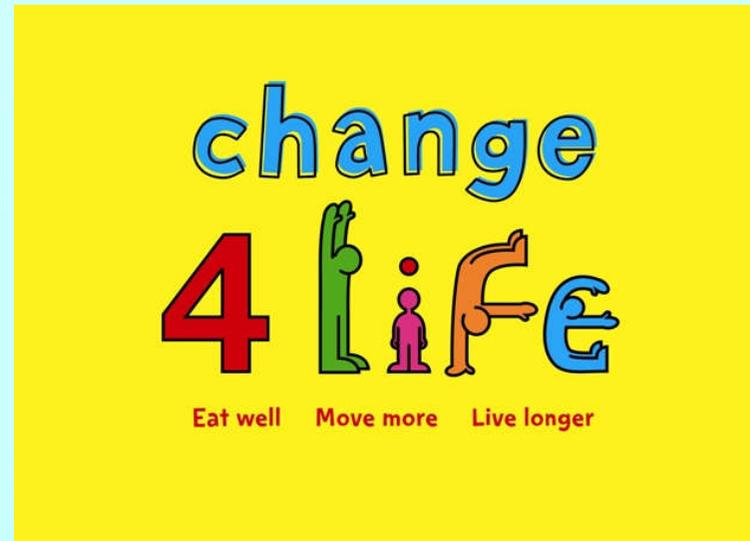
Cut back fat

Choose less  
booze

Watch the salt

Sugar Swaps

Get going every  
day



**Cross-party Initiative:** launched 2009 under New Labour; continues under Conservatives

- Diverse discourse practices: TV ads, You Tube videos, Website, Community Events, Branded 'merchandise', Supermarket vouchers...
- These coalesce under the '**C4L** brand' (© Crown Copyright)

### Corporate Stakeholders:

- M&C Saatchi, Aardman Animations, Kantar International
- Asda, Unilever, Pepsi (& Mars, Danone, Dole, Kelloggs, Tesco...)



Disney C4L merchandise

## Overview: multi-modally construing the target family



Low modality: simple 2D background, saturated, warm, bright, unmodulated colours

Featureless plasticine figures in flat, primary gender-coded colours. Their genericity invites identification

Viewer engagement: invited through direct gaze (here symbolically directed at the TV); power-neutral horizontal angle invites involvement

The fantasy world of fairytales and cartoons allows 'the protagonist increased space for agency'

(Machin and Thornborrow, 2003: 460)

Manipulation  
of Affect

# Overview: corpus of TV Adverts

**Genre:** Confessional 1<sup>st</sup> person narratives delivered by child cartoon character

**Style:** Yorkshire accents and dialect features subtly invoke working class targets

**Discourse:** Three main discourses textured into problem-solution pattern

## 1. everyday 'lifeworld' discourse

*'after school we're right little monkeys; we love pop; we're always hunting down the sweet stuff; mum's ace...but I know how to get around her, get the snacks I want; if they gave out gold medals for sitting around doing nothing then I would win one'*

## 2. fragments of biomedical and scientific discourses, often framed as the reported speech of a parent or teacher (expert knowledge source)

*'we could grow up to have heart disease, cancer or type 2 diabetes; eating too much causes fat to build up in mi body; too much sugar means extra calories; ...can lead to the build-up of harmful fat on the inside... [which] can cause serious diseases'*

## 3. the branded marketing discourse devised for this campaign offering a behaviour change benchmark (nudge principle: 'status quo bias')

*'Me sized meals', '60 active minutes', 'Snack swapper', 'Smart swaps',*

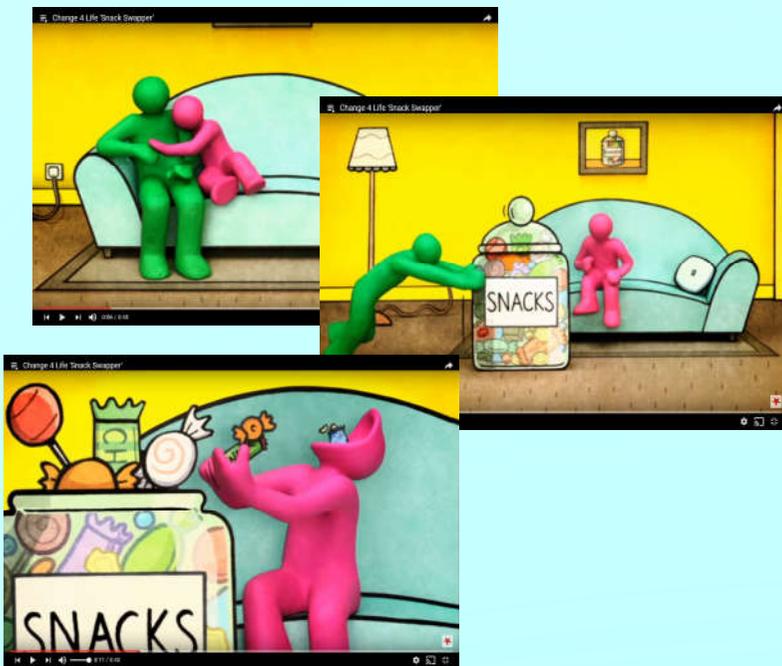
Discourse of  
'Smartness'



# Pathologising working class lifestyles

## Children: out of control

*I love my mum, I know how to get the stuff I like*



*We're right little monkeys, always hunting down the sweet stuff*



## Parents: ignorant & manipulated

*Eating healthy can be confusing, it's hard to know what to buy*



## C4L as biopedagogic discourse: mobilising fear

When esoteric biomedical knowledge (Foresight Report) is recontextualised as pedagogic discourse (C4L) it is transformed according to the logic of the new context (Bernstein, 1990)

C4L represents the body as a site of battle

*'if we eat too much, food gets stored as fat in our bodies, which means we could grow up to have heart disease, cancer, or type 2 diabetes; too many hidden nasties can cause serious diseases as we grow older including type 2 diabetes, some cancers and even heart disease.*

'Technical modality' and visual metaphor 'translate' esoteric messages for children



# Inculcating self-disciplinary subjectivities

## Discursive and material technologies of calculation

*Over a year us kids eat a whopping five thousand five hundred and forty three sugar cubes; There's this much fat in that whole pizza; (there's) up to ten cubes in one can (of pop)*



## Towards 'smarter' consumers

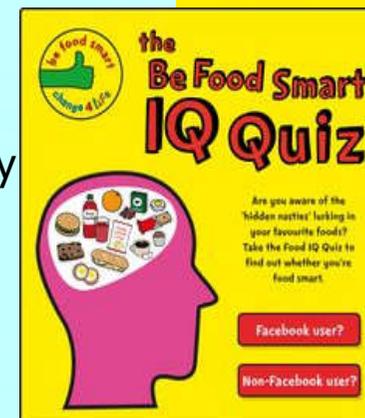
*Let's get sugar smart; download the sugar smart app; take the quiz and see how food smart you are'*

## Denying social inequality

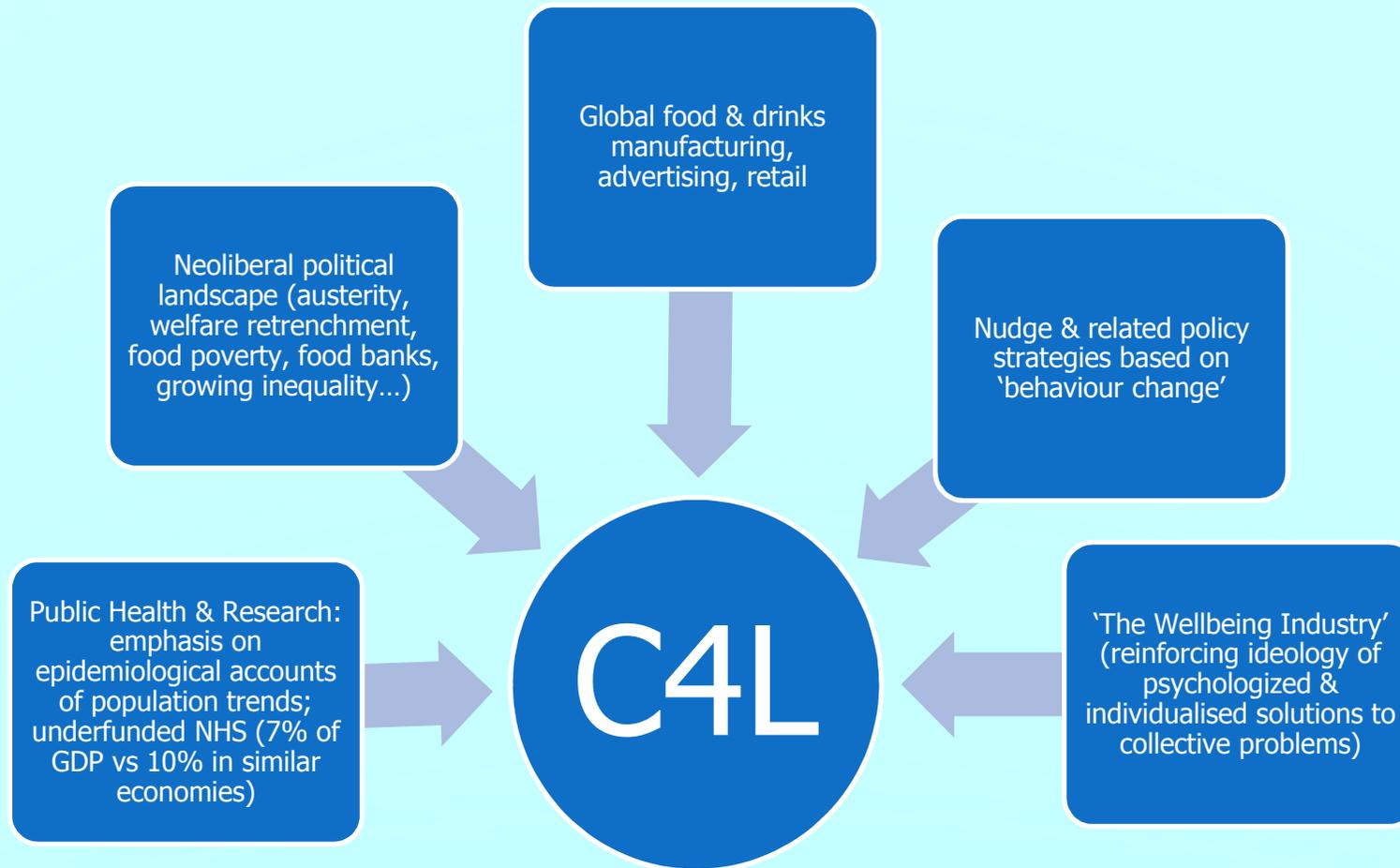
'Myth 1: Healthy food is just too expensive!

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 2017).



# Discourse practices: the political, economic, & cultural context of 'C4L'



Mulderrig (2016)

# Why do politicians like nudge?

**Economic:** nudge is (relatively) cheap and complements austerity policies

**Political:** efficacy is largely unprovable while allowing governments to be seen to be doing something

**Cultural:** draws on proven commercial technologies of discourse; likely to resonate with generations socialised in consumerist relations

**Ideological:** 'libertarian paternalism' claims to

- preserve individual freedoms and eschews regulatory interventions
- address core problems of the modern state (gambling, petty crime, ageing, binge drinking, obesity, pensions, energy consumption)
- 'help the least sophisticated in society while imposing the smallest cost on the most sophisticated'

**Why CDA?:** the 'soft compulsion' of nudge relies on (innovative) communication techniques; as it takes hold in public life its critique requires linguistic as well as political analysis

# Conclusions

## C4L

- Accepts 'obesogenic' environmental complexity and relegates \*structural factors to the causal periphery
  - \* (e.g.) poor regulation; urban planning; transport infrastructure; (food) poverty; austerity policies; food bank reliance)
- Pathologises working class behaviours as needing corrective guidance
- Functions as form of 'biopedagogy'
- Legitimises 'blame the victim' narratives and denial of health care to the 'irresponsible'
- Relies heavily on affect, mobilising (parental) guilt and fear

## NUDGE:

- Narrow utilitarian insistence on 'freedom of choice' overlooks the fact that what matters is not the *will* to be healthy but the *capability* to be
- Is a form of biopolitics using 'calculated devices' (e.g. NMSC) to psychologically profile 'at risk' sub populations
- Relies on 'consumerist resilience' as technique of governmentality

# Thankyou!



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