The language of ‘nudge’ in health policy: pre-empting working class obesity through ‘biopedagogy’

Focusing on a long-running health campaign, this paper examines the UK government’s use of a relatively new, subtly manipulative policy technique known as ‘nudge’, which draws on behavioural economics in order to shape civic behaviours towards more desirable ends. Public health campaigns tend to be immune to critique because of assumptions that their goals are laudable and that they are purely and ‘unproblematically’ educational. Here I argue that the use of ‘nudge’ tactics helps legitimate a narrowing of the sphere of governmental responsibility for this complex and classed social problem, shifting responsibility onto children as future, potentially obese, adults. I explore the textual strategies through which a corpus of TV adverts enacts a ‘biopedagogic’ discourse and construes particular (classed, ‘self-disciplinary’) subjectivities. Viewers are invited to identify with colourful cartoon characters who ‘confess’ their unhealthy lifestyles, problematize them in relation to expert discourses of health risk, and then model healthy forms of ‘biocitizenship’ by actively engaging in a ‘change for life’. Through subtle semiotic markers (register and regional accent) these adverts target a northern English, working class demographic, and shift responsibility onto certain individuals while glossing over the deeply entrenched and escalating forms of social inequality which lie behind the problem.