Enacting knowledge, power, and equity: understanding the public appetite for preventive obesity regulations

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

School of Public Health
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The University of Adelaide
March 2018
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Abstract

This thesis critically examines public views about the use of preventive obesity regulations in Australia. An extensive body of social science scholarship has demonstrated that the dominant neoliberal ideology of healthism has engendered anxiety in the public imagination about the obesity epidemic, as well as perpetuating an intensely moral discourse of personal responsibility for obesity. How public support for regulatory interventions is generated in this ideological and emotionally-charged climate has not yet been established.

This is important in the context of increasing calls from public health advocates for regulatory interventions to address obesity and attenuate the disproportionate burden on those of lower socio-economic circumstances. As regulations are controversial in the prevailing neoliberal political context, public support is wielded by advocates as valuable political currency.

A mixed-methods research program within a critical public health framework was undertaken to examine public views. First, the role of emotions in shaping the discourses that underpin public views were examined through an affective-discursive analysis of comments attached to online news articles about preventive obesity regulations. Focus groups were then conducted to identify how dominant ideological and discursive framings of regulations reflect the experiences of disparate socio-economic groups, which are differentially configured as ‘at risk’ of obesity in public health scholarship. Finally, a representative cross-sectional survey was conducted to ascertain levels of support for specific regulations, and to interrogate socio-demographic variations in views.

Extending Wright and Harwood’s (2009) concept of biopedagogy, I argue that in the prevailing neoliberal context obesity is widely read as a morally reprehensible embodiment of ignorance. As such, broad public support for preventive obesity regulations is generated through the capacity of these measures to correct perceived knowledge deficits and to institute moral culpability. My findings demonstrate that public support for regulations is enmeshed with classed and gendered norms that actively (re)produce ignorance as the cause of obesity, by legitimising and privileging certain lifestyles and forms of knowledge.

Key to my argument is the ways in which neoliberalism and healthism have created an environment in which ‘the public’ as a collective body are positioned as victims of the obesity epidemic. I show how this collectivisation, in concert with expert public health knowledges which locate the obesity problem in the problematised behaviours of those from low socio-economic conditions, engenders support for interventions which incite people to behave in ways that align with distinctly classed and gendered imperatives around body weight and diet.
Through a critical examination of public views, this thesis provides new knowledge about how preventive obesity regulations extend the responsibilisation and moralisation of individuals in relation to obesity. I argue that the deployment of claims of public support for regulations in public health advocacy is contingent upon a constellation of knowledge/ignorance/power that precludes the insights of those from low socio-economic conditions from obesity policy development. This forecloses consideration of possibilities for effective and equitable resolution to the obesity problem, and thereby undermines the emancipatory potential of preventive obesity regulations.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name, in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission in my name, for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

_______________________________  __________________
Lucy Farrell                      Date
Acknowledgements

I have been fortunate to undertake this PhD with the supervision of Jackie Street, Vivienne Moore, and Megan Warin. You have challenged and encouraged me throughout the course of this project, and I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to learn from you. It was Jackie's passion for public health and public engagement that enabled this project, and this has continued to be a source of inspiration throughout my candidature. Thank you for your support and the opportunities for professional growth you have provided. Vivienne's expertise at the nexus of quantitative and qualitative social inquiry has contributed greatly to the development of my ideas. Thank you for the time you have dedicated to my research, and for sharing your unique wisdom. Megan's theoretical insights have pushed my thinking further than I thought possible. Thank you for your generous and thoughtful feedback, and for encouraging me to set my sights high.

This work was made possible because of the HealthyLaws project. Thank you to Jackie, Annette, and the other members of the HealthyLaws team for bringing this study to life, and for your input into the development of my work. Thank you also to the participants in the study for your time and interest in the research.

I am grateful for the financial support I received through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship, as well as from the Australian National Preventative Health Agency and Healthy Development Adelaide. I also wish to acknowledge conference funding support from the Public Health Association of Australia, Healthy Development Adelaide, and the British Sociological Association.

Thank you to the postgraduate students in the School of Public Health who have helped to make this journey fun. Thank you in particular to Edi, Ali, Jana, and Ash for the ideas and laughs shared, and for always being up for a trip to the chocolate shop. I am fortunate to have gained such wonderful friends along the way.

To my parents Penny and Brian. If it takes a village to raise a child, it certainly takes one to raise a child and finish a PhD. Thank you for keeping our lives on track while I was with my research. I really could not have done this without you. It was your belief in me and the value of education that set me on this path, and I am so grateful for your ongoing support. I hope that I have done you proud.

To my husband Reilly. This has been a journey for us both and your love, support and encouragement has been an inspiration to both start and finish this thesis. Thank you for your interminable belief that I could do it. I guess you were right. And finally, to my son Austin. You are the most wonderful distraction. Thank you for your beautiful smile, and for giving me the patience and perspective I needed to see this through to the end.
Abbreviations and acronyms

The following is a list of frequently used abbreviated terms. All terms are written in full the first time they appear.

ABS  Australian Bureau of Statistics
AFGC  Australian Food and Grocery Council
ANPHA  Australian National Preventive Health Agency
AoIR  Association of Internet Researchers
BMI  Body Mass Index
COAG  Council of Australian Governments
FSANZ  Food Standards Australia and New Zealand
GST  Goods and Services Tax
HSR  Health Star Rating
IRSD  Index of Relative Socio-economic Disadvantage
LGA  Local Government Area
NHMRC  National Health and Medical Research Council
OBPR  Office for Best Practice Regulation
OECD  Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
Opal  Obesity Prevention and Lifestyle
PEACH  Parenting, Eating and Activity for Child Health
RIA  Regulation Impact Assessment
SNAP  Smoking, Nutrition and Physical Activity
WHO  World Health Organization
WPR  What’s the Problem Represented to Be?