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'The Fat Gap': Discourses around *Social Class* in UK Press Coverage of Obesity

Abstract: This study examines how discourses around social class contribute to representations of obesity in the British press. A sample of articles explicitly mentioning social class is subjected to a qualitative, critical approach to discourse analysis and newspapers are compared in terms of both their formats (broadsheets and tabloids) and political orientations (left-leaning and right-leaning). Left-leaning broadsheets present social class as central to the development of obesity, with individuals' life circumstances and lack of means framed as causing it. On the other hand, right-leaning newspapers (including tabloids and broadsheets) mitigate the influence of social class on obesity, for example presenting it as something that affects people at all class levels and foregrounding instead the importance of factors connected to lifestyle 'choices'. It is argued that the right-leaning press's discourses are intended to uphold, and to inflict as little harm as possible upon, the neoliberal agenda that characterises its more general coverage of obesity. This chapter considers the potential for such discourses to contribute to the further stigmatisation of society's already least-fortunate, with class-based discrimination compounded by weight stigma, all of which can lead to internalised shame.

1 Introduction

This chapter examines discourses around social class in British press coverage of obesity. The starting point for this chapter is the view that language and discourse have the power to shape the ways in which health and illness are experienced and understood by societies. As Fox (1993: 6) puts it, "illness cannot be just illness, for the simple reason that human culture is constituted in language [. . .] and that health and illness, being things which fundamentally concern humans, and hence need to be 'explained', enter into language and are constituted in language, regardless of whether or not they have some independent reality in nature" (see also Brookes/Hunt 2021). In this sense, I take a broadly social constructionist view of discourse, following Burr (1995: 48) who defines a discourse as "a set of meanings, metaphors, representations, images, stories,

statements and so on that in some way together produce a particular version of events" (see also Foucault 1972: 49).

The discursively constituted nature of health and illness is arguably most clearly evident in the case of so-called "contested" illnesses (see Brookes 2018; 2020; Hunt/Brookes 2020), such as obesity, which as we will see is subject to a range of competing explanatory discourses within society. For as Baker et al. (2020: online) contend, "our understanding and experience of contested health issues like obesity are based not just in their so-called biological 'realities' but, crucially, in the language used to talk about them, including in (print) media portrayals". Social class is, as will be seen, one of a number of social factors that are put forward by some as an explanation for differing rates of obesity, while others contest such a notion and instead locate obesity's causes with the individual, as arising due to individuals' genetics or personal lifestyle choices, for example. The aim of this study is to examine how discourses around social class contribute to press representations of obesity, taking a corpus-based approach to critical discourse analysis (introduced later).

This chapter is divided into five sections. Following this brief introduction, the next section introduces the central concepts of obesity and social class in more depth, and considers the role of the media in generating and circulating discourses around these. Section 3 introduces the corpus data assembled for this study and the corpus-based approach to critical discourse analysis that is taken to studying it. The analysis of social class discourses is then reported in Section 4 and discussed in the concluding Section 5.

2 Obesity, the British Press and Social Class

Obesity is a diagnostic label that is applied to people who are severely overweight and have a Body Mass Index (BMI) score of 30 or above. Almost two-thirds of adults in the UK have either overweight or obesity, with prevalence being higher amongst people aged 55–74, in some Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups and, of most relevance to the present study, people who live in more deprived parts of the country (Public Health England 2020). Although the conceptual and diagnostic practices surrounding obesity are, as noted, fiercely contested (see Lupton 2018) for a discussion), many public health authorities around the world (including in the UK) regard obesity as a disease of 'crisis' or 'epidemic' proportions (Boero 2007). This is because, in addition to its high global prevalence, particularly in so-called 'developed countries', obesity has been attributed to

heightened risk of diseases like diabetes and some types of cancer, as well as reduced life expectancy overall (Public Health England 2020).

Media representations of health and illness topics have been found to have the potential to alter audiences' health-related attitudes and behaviours, as well as influencing and garnering support for Government policies in this area (Atanasova/Koteyko 2017). This is because, when creating news, journalists and editors make motivated choices respecting their use of language and discourse, with such choices often serving to prioritise certain perspectives on a given issue over others (Richardson 2007). Indeed, experimental evidence indicates that different media discourses around obesity can lead to different ways of assigning responsibility for it, including creating support for particular policies (Liu et al. 2019).

Any exploration of the societal discourses surrounding a health issue like obesity can therefore benefit immensely from taking into account the discourses that characterise (print) media coverage of that issue. Indeed, media representations of obesity have been examined from a wide range of disciplinary and methodological perspectives (see Atanasova/Kuteyko/Gunter 2012 for a review).

The present chapter is part of a wider, ongoing programme of research which explores UK media representations of obesity based on an (approx.) 36-million-word corpus of obesity-related newspaper articles published between 2008 and 2017 (Brookes/Baker 2021). This research has found that press representations of obesity largely rely on discourses of personal responsibility. Such discourses constitute a neoliberal tactic, underpinned by the key notion of individualization, whereby health issues such as obesity are framed as a moral failing by individuals to take 'responsibility' for themselves and their families by preventing and/or eradicating their risk of developing obesity through their lifestyle choices (in this case, relating to diet and exercise). This discourse was found to be particularly prominent in the tabloids (especially the right-leaning ones), which were also likely to stigmatise and shame people with obesity through, for example, euphemistic and humorous language. The broadsheet newspapers, or 'quality' press, meanwhile, were more likely to frame obesity as being caused by wider socio-political factors, with more responsibility being placed with powerful institutions like the Government, food marketers and manufacturers, and supermarkets (For more on the distinction between broadsheet and tabloid newspapers in the UK, see Baker/Gabrielatos/McEnery 2013: 7–8).

This chapter contributes to this ongoing research by analysing discourses around social class in this corpus of UK press articles about obesity. Social class is a complex phenomenon which has its intellectual basis in social and political economic theories advanced by figures such as Karl Marx and Max Weber during the nineteenth century (see Savage 2000 for a discussion). For this chapter,

I adopt the definition of social class put forward by Meyerhoff, who describes it as "a measure of status which is often based on occupation, income and wealth, but also can be measured in terms of aspirations and mobility" (2006: 295). Since social class can be considered a "function of the intersection of a whole lot of different social (and sometimes even personal) attributes" (ibid.), it can be measured in numerous ways. Thus, while traces of Marx's and Weber's influence are evident in contemporary treatments of social class, such treatments also take a broader perspective (Block 2013). Bourdieu (1984: 102), for example, who is influenced by both Marx and Weber, argued that

> class or class fraction is defined not only by its position in the relations of production, as identified through indices such as occupation, income, or even educational level, but also by a certain sex-ratio, a certain distribution in geographical space (which is never socially neutral) and by a whole set of subsidiary characteristics which may function, in the form of tacit requirements, as real principles of selection or exclusion without ever being formally stated (this is the case with ethnic origin and sex).

Relative to other aspects of identity, such as gender, ethnicity and sexuality, social class has received less interest from discourse analysts. As Rampton (2010: 1) points out, "there is a great deal of contemporary work on discourse, culture, power and social inequality, but this generally focuses on gender, ethnicity and generation much more than class". Savage (2000) contends that an initial focus on social class has been usurped by increased interest in other social variables, such as race/ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, while Mills (2017) suggests that the decreased focus on social class may be a consequence of the difficulties associated with categorising individuals into particular class groups, as well as the problems that arise from discussing class differences in terms of deficit.

Another factor that is likely to be relevant is the sense in which social class is no longer as relevant to societies, including British society, as it once was. Indeed, as Charteris-Black/Seale (2010: 23) point out, "[c]lass is often, in the popular imagination, pronounced to be 'dead' and class-based politics rejected". These authors and others attribute this notion, in the UK at least, to the rise of centrist politics and political parties, notably Tony Blair's New Labour and its political legacy evident in recent Governments which have sought to "eliminate class-based discourse through concepts such as 'hard working families'" (ibid.). A consequence of this, Charteris-Black/Seale contend, is that "public and political awareness of the objective importance of social and income inequality has declined" (ibid.). More recently though, Jones (2012: vii) and others have argued that although the true nature and extent of socioeconomic disparities in the UK were previously obscured by the wide availability of cheap credit, the economic crisis of 2008 has since served to "refocus attention on the unjust distribution of

wealth and power in society" and that, as a result, class, or at least our aware-
ness of and societal discourses around class, are now "back with a vengeance".
Likewise, Mills (2017: 81) points out that while some argue that class is no longer
relevant to British society, it is also true that society has become more unequal,
with lack of employment, precarious zero hours contracts, and reliance on food
banks, now all norms for certain sections of society. Mills (2017: 81) describes so-
cial class and inequality as "inextricably linked", while Guy (2011: 159–160) ar-
gues that [c]lass divisions are essentially based on status and power in a society',
where '[s]tatus refers to whether people are respected and deferred to by others in
their society (or, conversely, looked down on or ignored), and power refers to the
social and material resources a person can command, and the ability (and social
right) to make decisions and influence events.

The underlying motivation for this analysis, then, is the view that unequal
class relations may contribute to obesity incidence and wider health inequalities
in the UK. As Bissell et al. (2016: 14) put it, "obesity shows a well-established so-
cial gradient in its prevalence, with the most socio-economically disadvantaged
having the highest rates" (see also: Ulijaszek 2014). Bissell et al. also note how
evidence increasingly points to "material lack and precarity which are increas-
ingly features of daily life across many countries", with "rising levels of material
and financial hardship [. . .] clearly impact[ing] the food decisions of many"
(ibid.). It is with this in mind that Marsh (2004: online) argues obesity to be a
"symptom of social impoverishment".

The study reported in this chapter answers the call, from the likes of Ramp-
ton (2010: 1), for research to "resuscitate" the issue of social class in linguistics.
It does so by examining how discourses around social class contribute to press
representations of obesity. In doing so, the present study will contribute to a re-
cent revival in the interest in social class from discourse analysis (see e.g., the
studies by Bennett 2013; Baker/McEnery 2015; Toolan 2018; Paterson/Gregory
2019; as well as the collection of corpus-assisted discourse studies of economic
inequality representation assembled by Gomez-Jimenez/Toolan 2020). Rampton
(2006: 222–223) avers that class can be studied in terms of "primary realities"
(i.e., accounting for individuals' material conditions and everyday experiences,
activities, practices and discourses) and/or in terms of secondary or "meta-level"
representations (including the various ideologies and discourses that surround
social class and social class groups). The present study clearly orients to the lat-
ter level identified by Rampton. Nevertheless, such "meta-level" representations
can have ramifications for the "primary realities" of people belonging to these
different groups – a point which will be revisited at the end of the chapter.

3 Data and Analytical Approach

The data examined in this chapter is a sample of articles about obesity taken from a large corpus representing general British press coverage of obesity (described in Brookes/Baker 2021). This corpus comprises all articles, from all UK national newspapers, mentioning either *obesity* or *obese* published between 1st January 2008 and 31st December 2017. For the purpose of the study reported in this chapter, I used the corpus analysis tool, *CQPweb* (Hardie 2012), to extract a sub-sample of all articles in this corpus mentioning the phrase social class* (where the asterisk acts as a wildcard to include cases like social classes). This retrieved two terms: social class (n= 101) and its less frequent plural variant, social classes (n= 37). Articles in which social class is referenced explicitly represent a very small subsample relative to the size of the corpus overall (112 articles; 0.26 per cent). I considered broadening the search by removing the term 'social' from the query, leaving just 'class*'. However, while this search term gave considerably more results (3,646 total occurrences), the vast majority (98 per cent) were false positives, for example referring to school and fitness classes, so weren't relevant for my purposes. For this reason, I proceeded with the more restrictive search-term (social class*), with the comparatively lower frequency at least able to facilitate a qualitative, more granular critical discourse analysis of the social class discourses in the corpus. Tab. 1 gives a breakdown of mentions of social class* across the newspapers, also expressed as normalised frequencies, along with their distributions across texts.

Tab. 1: Mentions of social class* by newspaper, ranked by relative frequency.

Newspaper	Frequency	Frequency per million words	In texts
Times	25	6.52	21
Express	16	4.90	12
Independent	12	4.47	10
Guardian	22	4.20	19
Telegraph	20	4.16	17
Mail	37	3.11	28
Star	1	2.70	1
Mirror	4	1.82	3
Sun	1	0.92	1

As this table indicates, in terms of relative frequency the *Times* mentions social class* more than any other newspaper. In terms of raw frequency, the *Mail* actually mentions *social class** more than any other newspaper. However, because this newspaper contributes so many more words than any other, the relative frequency of this search-term is not as high as it is for the *Times* but also for the *Express*, *Independent*, *Guardian* and *Telegraph*. Notably, the bottom half of this table, which represents the newspapers that tend to talk about social class the least, is occupied by tabloids, with the bottom three newspapers – the *Star*, *Mirror* and, *Sun* – all being so-called 'popular' newspapers. This is consistent with the more general observation that tabloids tend to engage in less political commentary than the broadsheets (see Baker/Gabrielatos/McEnery 2013), so this trend is perhaps to be expected. However, given that social class is an inherently political issue, it is important to consider press discourses of social class not just in relation to newspaper format but also political leaning. If we group the newspapers according to political leanings as well as format (i.e., Broadsheet-Left, Broadsheet-Right, Tabloid-Left, and Tabloid-Right), we see the distinction between (relative) frequencies in the tabloids and broadsheets more clearly.

Tab. 2: Breakdown of frequency of *social class** by corpus section, ranked by relative frequency.

Section	Frequency	Frequency per million words	In texts
Broadsheet-Right	45	5.21	38
Broadsheet-Left	35	4.10	30
Tabloid-Right	55	3.31	42
Tabloid-Left (the *Mirror*)	4	1.77	3

As well as demonstrating more clearly the tendency for the broadsheets to explicitly address the topic of social class more regularly than the tabloids, the ranking in Tab. 2 also suggests that the right-leaning publications are more likely to discuss social class than those situated on the political left. However, political orientation also appears to be less significant to this trend than publication type, as the left-leaning broadsheets were still more likely to discuss social class than the right-leaning tabloids.

Another way of looking at the newspapers in the corpus which is relevant to the analysis of social class relates to which social class groups tend to make up the newspapers' respective readerships. This is because newspaper articles are written, or 'designed', in ways that their editors think will appeal to the perceived sensibilities and worldviews of their 'imagined' readerships (Bell 1984).

With this in mind, it is likely that articles will be written in ways that are designed to appeal to the social class groups that make up the newspapers' perceived readerships. Tab. 3 gives the daily circulation of the newspapers in the data, divided by social class using the NRS social grades system (a system of demographic classification developed by the UK National Readership survey to classify readers). The column ABC1 represents readers in the categories A (upper middle class; higher managerial, administrative or professional occupation), B (middle class; intermediate managerial, administrative or professional occupation) and C1 (lower middle class; supervisory or clerical and junior managerial, administrative or professional occupation). The column headed C2DE represents readers in the categories C2 (skilled working class; skilled manual workers), D (working class; semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers) and E (non-working; state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only).

Tab. 3: Daily reach of UK national newspapers (2000s) (Pamco) (Statistics reflect circulation through phone, tablet, desktop, and print from July 2018 to June 2019. Figures for Sunday and online editions combined).

Category	Newspaper	ABCI		C2DE	
		N (000)	%	N (000)	%
Broadsheet-Left	*Guardian*	4,140	75.55	1,340	24.45
	Independent	2,035	68.33	943	31.67
Broadsheet-Right	*Telegraph*	3,563	71.81	1,399	28.19
	Times	1,830	81.66	411	18.34
Tabloid-Left	*Mirror*	8,093	54.96	6,631	45.04
Tabloid-Right	*Express*	3,652	58.80	2,561	41.20
	Mail	7,345	63.52	4,219	36.48
	Star	874	45.95	1,028	54.05
	Sun	7,654	52.99	6,789	47.01

It is important to note, from Tab. 3 that all newspapers are read more by the higher social class groups than the lower ones, except for the *Star*, which is read more by people in the lower groups. Proportionally, the gaps are tighter between the tabloids than the broadsheets, which indicates that readers at the lower end of the class spectrum make up a much bigger proportion of the readerships of the tabloids compared to the broadsheets. Specifically, readers in the C2DE categories account for an average of 25.66% of broadsheet readerships but 44.76% of tabloid readerships.

The sample of social class-related articles represented in Tab. 2 was then subjected to a manual, qualitative critical discourse analysis which set out to

identify the presence of social class- and obesity-related discourses. According to Mills (1997: 17), the linguistic manifestations of discourses can be identified through the "systematicity of the ideas, opinions, concepts, ways of thinking and behaviours which are formed within a particular context". Thus, this analysis focused on linguistic choices that contributed to recurring ways of thinking about and conceiving of social class and its relationship with obesity in the articles. All 112 texts mentioning 'social class' and/or 'social classes' were analysed. While concordance output for the phrase social class* was used as the analytical entry point, in all cases the examination of discourses went beyond the solitary concordance line to interpret the discourses and the functions these performed within the wider contexts of the entire articles.

The analysis reported in this chapter orients to Fairclough's (2015 [1989]) three-tier approach to critical discourse analysis, which incorporates interpretation of discourse at the levels of: i) text, ii) discursive practice and iii) social practice. At text level, discourses are identified through their linguistic manifestations and interpreted in terms of how they contribute to local (i.e., text-level) representations of social class and obesity. The creation of the news texts is then interpreted as a discursive practice in which particular discourses are drawn upon by the text creators on the basis that such discourses fulfil their ideological motivations and reflect the views of their 'imagined' readers. Finally, as a form of social practice, the discourses identified in the analysis will be interpreted in terms of their possible ramifications for readers and wider societal understandings of obesity, in this case as it relates to social class. The readership statistics presented in Tab. 3 are therefore important to understanding news discourses as forms of discursive and social practice, as the choice of discourses is driven by editors' imagined audiences and will, if reaching these groups, likely have particular ramifications for their understandings of, and attitudes towards, obesity. The analysis is reported in the next section. To facilitate comparison of the different sections of the press, the analysis is structured according to the categories in Tab. 2, beginning with the left-leaning broadsheets.

4 Analysis

4.1 Left-leaning Broadsheets

As a reminder, the left-leaning broadsheets were ranked second in terms of normalised frequency of *social class*. Analysing the uses of this term, I observed an overwhelming tendency, accounting for 27 of the 35 uses, for obesity and

poor diet to be framed as consequences of social class, with social inequalities construed as the cause not only of obesity but also of health inequalities more widely. Such representations also paved the way for criticism towards the media for idolising slender bodies, as well as towards public health strategies underpinned by a neoliberal logic for failing to address the fact, as the articles' authors see it, that a person's ability to lose weight and maintain a slender physique are contingent on their ability to afford, for example, nutritious food and a gym membership, as the examples below demonstrate.

(1) Education, income and **social class** all have a bearing on the diseases we get and how long we live, but a study like this can make allowances for all these factors to get a clear and unbiased picture of the effects of particular aspects of one's lifestyle. (*Guardian* 2009)

(2) No public health campaign could begin to compete with the message sent out every day in every way that thin is beautiful, and fat is ugly, undesirable and a sign of moral uselessness. That's not a nudge, it's a daily knock on the head with a cudgel. 'You can't be too rich or too thin,' said Dorothy Parker. What no one says explicitly enough is that fat is a **social class** issue. Most of the seriously obese are poor. This is tiptoed around, but those with a body-mass index in the red zone, those whose children risk swelling up at a young age, in danger of losing limbs and eyesight to diabetes as they grow up, are the poorest. The hyper-rich are called 'fat cats', but privilege is usually thin and sleek, its body well-exercised by gyms and personal trainers on diets of kale and goji berries. (*Guardian* 2016)

In a minority of cases, the newspapers in this category presented a counter argument to this position that social class influences obesity risk, and the association between obesity and the lower classes in particular, by presenting obesity as something that affects people equally, regardless of social class. However, this only appeared in 4 of the mentions of *social class** in this section of the data and, overall, the left-leaning broadsheets were much more likely to construct social class as something that has profound influence on obesity incidence.

4.2 Right-leaning Broadsheets

Moving on now to the right-leaning broadsheets, which exhibited the highest relative frequency of *social class**, and the representation here was less decisive, with no clear overall pattern. Here, the relationship between social class

and obesity appears to be conceived in a way that is less straightforward and more variable. For example, where articles which constructed obesity as something that affects people regardless of social class were in the minority in the left-leaning broadsheets, such stories account for a larger proportion of the right-leaning broadsheet sample, found in 10 of the 45 mentions of *social class**. As this and the forthcoming examples will demonstrate, a characteristic of the right-leaning broadsheets' discourses on social class is that they are recontextualised from scientific research articles.

(3)   It's not just poor children who have a poor diet. The findings come from a team of nutritionists who tracked the food intake, from birth to the age of eight, of 4,000 children. They took into account **social class** and access to books and toys, and other brainboosting environmental factors, before concluding that poor diet alone leads to a deficit of five IQ points. (*Telegraph* 2011)

Such studies and their findings are not selected and recontextualised at random but are likely selected for coverage because they have been deemed to be newsworthy and/or because they support an argument or position that the particular newspaper is interested in advancing. In this case, the findings from such studies could be newsworthy because their findings are surprising, assuming that readers would likely associate obesity with those at the poorer end of the social class spectrum. However, it is also in these newspapers' interest to publish such stories, since they confer the authority of expertise to legitimise (van Leeuwen 2008) the potentially contentious notion that all social class groups are affected by obesity. Or more precisely, to legitimise the logical implication that social class is not a decisive factor in the development of obesity.

In a further four articles, obesity was construed not just as something which affects all people regardless of social class but was even framed as something which affected people in the 'middle classes' more than people lower down the socio-economic ladder. For example, this extract from the *Times* reports on a study suggesting that obesity affects middle class girls more than girls from 'poor' or 'very rich' families. Note how, as well as legitimating this position by again invoking the authority of scientific knowledge, the newspaper places particular stock in this finding by describing the study from which it originates as 'more reliable than other studies', perhaps placing it above that majority of other studies which imply a connection between obesity and the lower social classes.

(4)   The findings of the report are published in the International Journal of Obesity and suggest that results drawn from a three-year study of 13,000 11-year-olds in Leeds, using data on the wealth of neighbourhoods to assign **social class** [. . .], may be more reliable than previous studies. Middle-class girls, it found, were fully twice as likely to be fat as those from poor (or very rich) families. (*Times* 2013)

Obesity was also depicted in this section of the press as being contingent on factors other than social class, with factors such as marital conflict, genetics, gender, time of birth, number of siblings, and a child's rate of development all put forward instead. For example, the extract below reports on a study which found that people with obesity had especially low levels of vitamin D.

(5)   The Aberdeen study did indeed find that obese people had lower levels of vitamin D than those of healthy weight, after other controlling for factors such as diet and **social class**. It is also true that sunlight is the primary source of vitamin D (though it is also found in foods such as oily fish and eggs). This association led much of the media to make the jump to a simple headline that absolves obese people from some responsibility for their shape, while indulging our national obsession with the weather. (*Times* 2008)

In addition to mentioning twice that this study controlled for social class (helping to background the effects of this variable), it is also worth noting that the article is critical of other sections of the media for utilising the attested link between obesity and vitamin D to 'absolve obese people from some responsibility for their shape', touching on a theme of responsibility which looms large in this section of the press.

    The representation of social class was not straightforward in the right-leaning broadsheets, though, and in 8 of the mentions of *social class** obesity was represented as something that affects people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder more than those at the top, reflecting the type of discourse that dominates in the left-leaning broadsheets. However, in contrast to their left-leaning counterparts, claims around the lower classes being disproportionately affected by obesity were mitigated in the right-leaning broadsheets, orienting again to other factors such as those which are presented as being more influential above. For example, in the extract below, although fathers' social class is presented as influencing health inequalities, this is reframed through a biomedical perspective and reduced to as a 'hormone profile':

(6)   Professor Diana Kuh, of the Medical Research Council's Unit for Lifelong Health and Ageing at UCL said the hormonal differences showed how societal factors literally 'get under the skin' and affect health. 'In the UK, substantial health inequalities exist; those in less socioeconomically advantaged circumstances have worse health,' said Prof Kuh. 'We found that socioeconomic disadvantage across life, based on father's **social class** and on the study member's education, social class and income, was associated with an adverse hormone profile.' (*Telegraph* 2015)

At other points, articles alluding to a link between obesity and low social class did so in the wider context of a neoliberal discourse which responsibilised individuals into managing their obesity risk. For instance, extract (7) below, taken from the *Telegraph*, constructs "poor nutrition" as a "result of poverty" which is "itself closely related to social class". However, rather than take this opportunity to explore and critique the social conditions leading to poverty, the article then develops a decidedly neoliberal flavour, citing doctor Dame Sally Davies to contend that physical unfitness results from "mental unfitness, since the obese refuse to do anything about it", before seemingly advocating a more judgmental approach to public health to address this.

(7)   Many 'obesity-related conditions' are caused by limited exercise capacity resulting from pre-existing medical conditions, or from poor nutrition as a result of poverty, itself closely related to **social class**. Dame Sally implies that physical unfitness is caused by mental unfitness, since the obese refuse to do anything about it. In the meantime, the NHS actually promotes promiscuity with its studiously 'nonjudgmental' approach. (*Telegraph* 2014)

Similarly, in this extract from the *Times*, overall health in old age is construed as being contingent on both social class but also "whether you have taken responsibility for your health". Perhaps in an attempt to preclude either age or social class from being used as an excuse for individuals failing to fulfil this neoliberal obligation, the author then describes how they chat with "*older* folks" at their "*council* gym".

(8)   A recent report by Help the Aged (now part of Age UK) Future Communities, remarks that the division between the rich and poor will be starker than ever in old age. As the Big Society shrinks the State, the quality of your final decades will be starkly defined by **social class** and whether you have taken responsibility for your health. At my council gym, I often

chat with older folks who were referred by GPs after strokes or heart attacks. (*Times* 2011)

4.3 Right-leaning Tabloids

Staying with the right-leaning newspapers but moving on to the tabloids, the first thing to note about this section of the corpus is that, in raw terms, it contained the most mentions of *social class** (55 across 42 texts). However, this is the largest section of the corpus, and in relative terms this translates to 3.31 mentions per million words, which is less than in both the left- and right-leaning broadsheets. The second thing to note is that the mentions of *social class** in the popular newspapers in this section of the corpus (i.e., the *Star* and *Sun*) were not relevant to the representation of obesity. The analysis here is therefore based on the other two newspapers in this quadrant (i.e., the *Express* and *Mail*), of which 33 of the 53 mentions of *social class** were relevant to the representation of obesity. Here, we can observe a striking similarity between these tabloids and the right-leaning broadsheets, including drawing extensively on scientific studies. Like the right-leaning broadsheets, obesity's relation to social class, and the lower social classes in particular, was frequently obscured or mitigated. For example, in ten cases, obesity was constructed as something that affects not just people from lower down the social class scale (referred to here as 'the ignorant'), but all people regardless of social class:

(9)   It isn't just the ignorant affected by obesity, it goes across all **social classes**. (*Mail* 2009)

Like the right-leaning broadsheets, in eleven cases the tabloids also framed other factors as being more relevant to the development of obesity, such as diet, gender, mothers' age, the low price of alcohol, hormones, season of birth, and mental health. This also presented an opportunity for social class to be backgrounded in favour of more individualising, personal responsibility factors, specifically physical activity and, as in extract (10), diet.

(10)   OF COURSE, comparisons like this don't factor in **social class**, or whether you eat chocolate or take a run after work, but that's the whole point – compared with factors like what we snack on, hard manual labour just doesn't make as much of a difference. Even if your day is spent shovelling

gravel, you're still going to develop a pot belly if you lunch on pizza and fizzy drinks every day. (*Mail* 2009)

Again, in parallel with their broadsheet counterparts, of the sixteen cases when the right-leaning tabloids *did* present a link between social class and obesity, half were infused with a neoliberal discourse which once more framed individual responsibility as being more influential than social class. For example, although this excerpt from the *Mail* acknowledges the presence of an 'increasing social class divide in health', lexical choices respecting the representation of members of the lower social classes help to convey a sense in which they are actively "choosing" to lead unhealthy lifestyles; decisions which are framed as having implications not only for their health but also for the health service.

(11)   Meanwhile an influential health think tank has said NHS efforts to tackle the obesity epidemic are failing to impact on less well-off Britons – creating an increasing **social class** divide in health that will put 'unavoidable pressure' on the service. The King's Fund report said that while the middle-classes are getting healthier by giving up bad habits, many poorer people are still choosing to smoke, eat junk food, and live a largely sedentary lifestyle. (*Mail* 2012)

Likewise, extract (12) from the *Express* positioned people from the lower social classes as being most affected by rising obesity rates, before alluding to causes such as a lack of material means to afford healthy food but also the "resistan[ce]", as the article put it, of people from this group towards health advice – a lexical choice which constructs them as actively disregarding and thus failing the obligations on them to maintain a healthy weight.

(12)   Epidemiologist Dr Emmanuel Stamatakis, of University College London, said: 'If trends continue as they have been between 1995 and 2007, in 2015 the number and prevalence of obese young people is projected to increase dramatically – and these increases will affect lower **social classes** to a larger extent. [. . .] The 'fat gap' between rich and poor is the result of food poverty – a term used to explain why those on low incomes often can not provide a healthy diet for their children. Poorer families are also sometimes resistant to health messages aimed at changing their lifestyle.' (*Express* 2009)

Another way in which this neoliberal, responsibilising discourse manifested in the right-leaning tabloids' treatment of social class, but which could not be

seen in the broadsheets, was the provision of health advice to readers as a resolution to class-related differences in obesity prevalence.

(13)   The family appears blessed with good genes and their love of horse riding and other outdoor pursuits provides a health boost but Office for National Statistics Figures show that **social class** counts for a lot when it comes to health. Their neighbours in upmarket Kensington and Chelsea enjoy the highest life expectancy in the UK. Residents can expect to live to 86.7 years, 10 years more than those living in Manchester, where the Royle family holds court in front of the telly. Predominantly working-class Glasgow has the lowest life expectancy in the UK, with an average of just 74.3 years. Here we look at some of the ways **social class** affects our health and what we can do in order to swing the odds in our favour. (*Express* 2011)

This extract is taken from an article about the British royal family. It begins with a description of the good health of the royal family, which is initially attributed to their genetics and enjoyment of outdoor pursuits. The article then segues into a discussion of the disparities in life expectancy across different social class groups, pointing out that people in Kensington can expect to live ten years longer than people in Manchester and even longer than people in Glasgow. However, this passage (extract (13)) is interwoven with hints at a responsibilising, blaming discourse, with reference the Royle family (a British sitcom based on the lives of a working class family) "hold[ing] court in front of the telly" arguably indexing a sedentary lifestyle that contrasts with the actual royals' "love of horse riding and other outdoor pursuits". This subtle nod is then followed up with an invitation to readers to take responsibility for their health by considering what they can do in order to "swing the odds in [their] favour". The gambling metaphor invoked here serves moreover, to obscure the unequal social systems that lead to these health disparities, presenting life expectancy instead as a game or sport, individuals' success at which depends on their ability and willingness to exercise and diet. One explanation for why we see this kind of explicit, reader-directed health advice in articles concerned with social class in the tabloids and not the broadsheets is perhaps that the former is aware of and thus targeting more consciously its largely lower social class readership, who in such cases are at more acute risk of developing obesity.

4.4 Left-leaning Tabloids (the *Mirror*)

There is only one left-leaning UK tabloid that mentions *social class** (the *Mirror*). Of these, only one mention has direct relevance to the representation of obesity: an article discussing the impact that having an allotment and gardening can have in terms of addressing obesity at all levels of class.

(14) This week a study has found that just 30 minutes a week working on an allotment can improve mood and self-esteem as well as physical fitness. Researchers from the Universities of Westminster and Essex said the positive impact was found across all **social classes** and suggested that allotments could help cut back growing NHS costs caused by lack of exercise and obesity. (*Mirror* 2015)

This extract could be interpreted as echoing some of the themes identified across different sections of the press, including the employment of a neoliberal, responsibilising logic to overcome obesity (i.e., by being physically active through gardening), and also points out that the benefits of this can be felt by people across all social class groups, thereby potentially flattening out class differences on this issue. However, this is just one article and what is perhaps more telling here is the general absence of explicit discussion of social class, as it relates to obesity at least, in the 'popular' press.

5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The study reported in this chapter has examined the role of discourses around a complex social phenomenon, social class, in British press representations of obesity. Comparing newspapers along the lines of both their publication formats and political leanings, the analysis has identified a range of discourses which position obesity in relation to social class in various ways. The decision to compare the newspapers at these two levels of variation was beneficial in terms of better capturing the complexity of newspaper registers (and sub-registers) and the discourses that characterise their varying representations of two particular, equally complex, social issues.

This perspective was productive for the analysis, as the social class discourses identified varied according not only to their formats but also their political leanings. The left-leaning broadsheets presented social class as central to the development of obesity, as individuals' life circumstances and lack of means were framed as causing obesity. On the other hand, the right-leaning newspapers, including

both tabloids and broadsheets, offered discourses that mitigated the influence of social class on obesity. For example, both of these sections of the press presented obesity as something that affects people at all class levels (in some cases even affecting middle- and upper-classes more), and foregrounded other factors, most frequently those connected to lifestyle 'choices', as being more influential in the development of obesity. This was the case even when the articles acknowledged heightened rates of obesity prevalence among people from lower down the social class ladder, with these groups accordingly depicted as making poor decisions respecting diet and exercise and even as 'resisting' health advice. The only left-leaning tabloid that discussed social class with respect to obesity, the *Mirror*, did so in just a single article across ten years, and that article echoed some of the discourses associated with other tabloids.

Overall, then, the left-leaning press can be contrasted with those on the political right in terms of the relationship that is (or is not) constructed between obesity and social class. For the left-leaning newspapers, obesity tends to be framed as a social justice issue that is linked to, and indeed driven by, other forms of social and health inequality. On the other hand, for right-leaning publications obesity is not determined by social class but is first and foremost a failing of individual responsibility (and tenets of neoliberal political agendas) and, if people lower down the socio-economic ladder *are* affected disproportionately by obesity, it is only because they make poorer life choices and do not eat as well as, or exercise as much as, those belonging to higher social class groups. These distinctions largely reflect the differing ways in which obesity is reported on across these sections of the press (Brookes/Baker 2021).

I would argue that, in the case of the right-leaning press, the discourses identified in this chapter are intended to uphold, and inflict as little harm as possible upon, the neoliberal agenda that characterises its general coverage of obesity. To attribute obesity to social class, as the left-leaning press does, arguably has the potential to illuminate to readers the particular social and political systems (and powerful institutions) which, knowingly or otherwise, create and maintain health inequalities through the unequal distribution of resources within society. Instead, in this coverage focus is placed on individuals and their life choices, with "good" or "bad" choices framed as the cause of not just obesity but other forms of social inequality, too. Characteristic, though it is, of general coverage of obesity in the right-leaning press, the centrality of neoliberal ideologies to articles published by this section of the press can nevertheless be viewed as problematic when we consider, as we have seen, that these newspapers (and the tabloids in particular) are read mostly by people lower down the socio-economic ladder, who are also more likely to be affected by obesity. This is because the neoliberal, individualising discourses – and the related suppression or discrediting of social class-related

explanations of obesity – is likely to lead to individuals with obesity being blamed for having obesity and their other health challenges, which may be perceived by others as 'just reward' for making poor life choices and even actively resisting health advice. Such discourses could therefore contribute to the further stigmatisation of society's already least-fortunate, with class-based discrimination only compounded by weight stigma, all of which can lead to internalised shame (Obesity UK 2020).

A possible counterargument, and one in favour of the neoliberal discourses that characterise much press coverage of obesity and which underpin depictions of social class in the right-leaning press, is that such representations may motivate their audiences into changing their lifestyles and even advise them on how to go about it. However, such an argument can itself be swiftly countered. Not only are shaming strategies unlikely to instigate positive health change (see Brookes/Harvey 2015 for a discussion), but health policies predicated on personal behaviour and responsibility usually have limited success with people from poorer socio-economic backgrounds, mostly because they fail to grasp that

> when individuals behave in ways that may be damaging to their health, this may not necessarily be due to their lack of awareness about adverse health effects; rather the constraints of their life experiences and environments may mean that they are simply unable to change their behaviours (Atanasova/Koteyko 2017: 652)

In other words, lifestyle change is only really possible for those who possess the resources to do it. To conclude this study on a methodological note, it is important to acknowledge that the approach employed in this study will not have captured all instances where social class is indexed in press coverage of obesity, particularly as the search-term used focussed on explicit, rather than implicit, linguistic 'occasionings' of social class in the data. For complex social issues, like social class, any comprehensive investigation will require a more nuanced approach, and ideally one that is better able to account for cases where social class is indexed implicitly. This notwithstanding, the approach adopted in this chapter has afforded new insights into the ways in which discourses around obesity and social class intersect in the press.

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