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# Short horizons: food, poverty and obesity prevention

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# An ethnographic study of obesity risk in a disadvantaged community

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Warin M, Zivkovic T, Moore V, Ward P & M Jones (2015) Short horizons and obesity futures: Disjunctures between public health interventions and everyday temporalities. *Social Science & Medicine*. 128:309-15

# Background

- Few studies that examine community responses to public health obesity interventions, and most of these are quantitative and based on general population surveys.
- Lack of recognition of how the social context shapes behaviours (Bambra et al. 2012; Lindsay 2010; Aphramor et al. 2013), and how social change occurs.
- Our research responded directly to growing calls for ethnographic work into obesity research (National Consultation on Childhood Obesity 2010).

# Research questions

- This ethnographic project investigated how families from low socio-economic communities responded to obesity interventions.
  - how do people understand risks associated with obesity (people do not share the same values and meanings around 'fat bodies' & perceptions of risk)?
  - do gender and social class intersect to influence responses to obesity intervention strategies?
  - what are the points of uptake and resistance to obesity interventions?
  - Are there challenges for families in this community to make 'healthy lifestyle' changes when futures are uncertain?

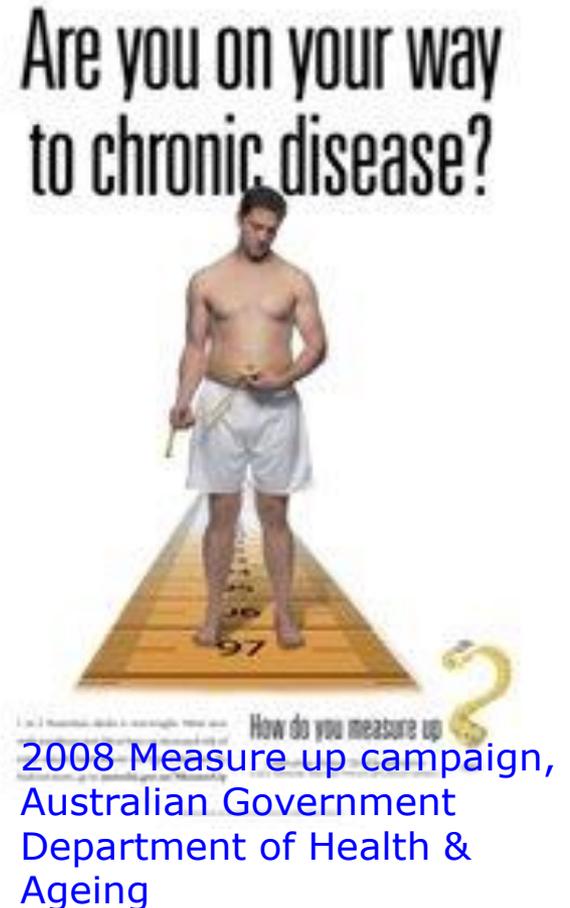
# The methodological approach of anthropology

- Eighteen months of fieldwork in the Playford Council area (2012-2013)
- Ethnographic research methods (of **participant observation, in-depth interviews and engagement in community life**) were used in order to understand how people responded to OPAL
- Purposive sampling techniques (snowball sampling)
  - 37 families involved (interviewees aged 16-65)
  - 10 stakeholder interviews (including community workers, local government employees and State government managers).



# Anticipating fatness: the pre-emptive paradigm

- Obesity described as a 'time bomb', 'time crunch'
- 'The habits we create determine our future' (Obesity Prevention Australia)
- Obesity is a 'threat to the future' (Evans 2010) as it leads to future illnesses (diabetes, coronary heart disease)
- Children are central to the management of obesity futures



# Uncertain futures

- *Do you tend to think about the future?*

**Not really. I haven't really thought about it.**

*What do you think the future might look like for you?*

**I don't know because I don't know what I'm going to be doing.**

**Life's always changing, anything could happen.**

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# Imagining 'the future' – short horizons

- 'the here and now',
  - 'one day at a time',
  - 'today and tomorrow and next week'
  
  - 'I focus on short term... I grew up on disappointment so I don't view the future as well as I should.' *Fred, age 24*
  
  - 'I really try to be healthy and to not eat crap but you know I've got a sweet tooth and sometimes when things really get under my skin, I'll think to myself *'go on then, have some chocolate.'* *Lyn*
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- Eating for pleasure and survival (and not for health) 'can be seen as a form of ballast against wearing out' (Berlant 2011 p. 116), providing 'a sense of well-being that spreads out for a moment, not a projection toward a future' (ibid, p. 117).
  - Zivkovic T, Warin M, Moore V, Ward P & M Jones (2015) 'The Sweetness of Care: Biographies, Bodies and Place' in Attala L., Abbotts E & A Lavis (eds) *Careful Eating: Embodied Entanglements between Food and Care*. Ashgate: Surrey.
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# Similar findings

- [Island time] means never planning too far ahead; this applies to life in general as well as to specific events. Ostensibly, it is about living for the moment, enjoying the here-and-now, and not worrying what the past held or what the future might bring. It is a counterpoint to being organised, risk averse, regretful about the past or stressed about the future.
  - (McLennan 2013, p. 104).
- McLennan, A (2013) An ethnographic investigation of lifestyle change, living for the moment, and **obesity** emergence in Nauru, unpublished PhD, University of Oxford
- Johns, S. (2011). Perceived environmental risk as a predictor of **teenage motherhood** in a British population. *Health and Place*, 17, 122-131.
- Spotswood, F., & Tapp, A. (2010). Sociocultural change – the key to social marketing success? A case study of increasing **exercise** in working class communities. *International Journal of Health Promotion and Education*, 48(2), 52-57.
- Graham, H., Inskip, H., Francis, B., & Harman, J. (2006). Pathways of disadvantage and **smoking** careers: evidence and policy implications. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 60, ii7–ii12.
- Graham, H. (1994). Gender and class as dimensions of **smoking** behaviour in Britain: insights from a survey of mothers. *Social Science and Medicine*, 38(5), 691-698.

# Different temporal orientations to health

- The experience of time depends on power and the [life] chances it opens (Bourdieu 2000, p. 223).
- Middle class people, with their **wide horizons** and confident choices from a vast range of activities, lifestyles and identities, contrasted starkly with our respondents from the deprived ward. Working class respondents' choices of possible activities was sharply limited by their *habitus* [everyday worlds].
  - (Spotswood and Tapp 2010, p. 54).



# Learning to 'live poor'



# Implications

- There is a disjuncture between notions of '**the future**' in public health obesity initiatives and the lived experience of time.
  - The concept of **short horizons** expresses how situations of disadvantage can impact on, and curtail how people experience time.
  - Surviving in the 'here and now', rather than eating or exercising for the future was a priority for many participants.
  - **Understanding the cultural patterns of daily life** around a behaviour is essential before sustainable change can be made (Spotswood and Tapp 2010).
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