

Fed Up with the Personal Responsibility of Obesity:

A Pentadic Analysis of *Fed Up*

Rebekah Peterson

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### Abstract

*Fed Up*, the *An Inconvenient Truth* documentary about obesity, aimed to create a call to action against the food industry's involvement in causing the United States' obesity epidemic. This essay uses Kenneth Burke's pentadic criticism to examine the reality *Fed Up* wants its audience to accept about the obesity epidemic in the United States and why. The first half of the documentary frames the obesity epidemic as scene-act in order to change the audience's reality of the issue because the obesity epidemic has been framed in society as agent-act, portraying obesity as the individual's fault. The second half shifts to an agent-scene ratio to answer why *Fed Up* attempts to change the audience's reality. If the environment has an agent causing it, then agency is given to the audience to take action. The implications of the pentadic ratios and shift are discussed in relation to creating new advocacy surrounding the obesity epidemic.

## Introduction

The obesity epidemic in the United States is more than three decades old and shows no signs of slowing down. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2017), nearly 40 percent of adults and 19 percent of youths are obese as of 2017. If lack of physical activity is a major factor in causing obesity, then the existence of an ever-present fitness industry and “let’s move” narrative should correlate with a decrease in the rates of obesity among the American public. However, rates of obesity continue to rise. Dr. Jody Zylke and Dr. Howard Bauchner said, “it is time for an entirely different approach, one that emphasizes collaboration with the food and restaurant industries that are in part responsible for putting food on dinner tables” (Fox, 2016). Clearly, the popular diagnosis of American obesity has overlooked a key factor: rather than connecting American’s waistlines to the fitness industry, waistlines should be connected to what people eat.

In this essay, I will argue that the documentary, *Fed Up*, works to change how Americans view the causes of the obesity epidemic and connect the issue to the food environment, rather than to physical activity or personal responsibility. First, I will review the existing scholarship that analyzes how organizations construct obesity rhetoric, how rhetoric dominantly frames different issues to the public as personal responsibility and how rhetoric has been used in obesity related artifacts. Second, I will discuss the method I will use to analyze the documentary — pentadic criticism. Third, I will review the context regarding *Fed Up*. Lastly, I will use pentadic criticism to analyze *Fed Up* and discuss the contributions this analysis has to creating new obesity advocacy and societal change around the obesity epidemic.

## Literature Review

Discourse surrounding the obesity epidemic generally emphasizes either environmental factors or personal responsibility as the cause of obesity. Environmental factors, as a frame, blames the government, business or other social or economic contexts as the main cause of obesity. The personal responsibility frame blames the individual for their own choices in causing obesity — poor diet, lack of physical activity or laziness. Studies have shown that between the two frames, the main narrative as the cause and solution for obesity is the personal responsibility frame (Cloud, 2009; French & Brown, 2011; Shugart, 2014; Thomson, 2009). First, I will go over how different organizations construct rhetoric around the issue. Next, I will examine how rhetoric has been used to make claims of personal responsibility vs. systemic or institutional factors. Lastly, I will examine past scholarship on how rhetoric has been constructed in mediated artifacts, such as television shows and documentaries.

### **Organization's Construction of Rhetoric**

The food and beverage industry has constructed the dominant societal narrative of personal responsibility through the framing of food products and ad campaigns. The Sugar Association positioned sugar as the better option for consumers compared to high fructose corn syrup or other artificial sweeteners because sugar is considered “natural” by the Federal Drug Administration (Heiss, 2015). Companies whose products contain sugar can be labeled as “natural,” therefore creating seemingly healthier options for the public. This contributes to the personal responsibility narrative because if companies supply healthier or natural options to the public, then it is the individual's fault for not sustaining a healthy diet and weight. The top American food and beverage companies collectively formed the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI) to self-regulate their advertisements to children and create healthier messages (Asquith, 2009). Asquith (2009) found that the initiative's texts —

company's pledges to the CFBAI, press releases to launch the programs and the websites for each program — are ambiguous and vague, but still convince the public and policymakers that the industries are responding to the obesity epidemic. If companies are creating initiatives and responding to the obesity epidemic, that reinforces the personal responsibility narrative because it positions companies as acting on the issue, so therefore, it is the individual who is not acting.

Food and beverage companies have also created ad campaigns that construct the obesity epidemic as personal responsibility. The National Restaurant Association and the Center of Consumer Freedom created publicity campaigns that used visuals to ridicule the obese body and verbal statements that suggest values of “consumer choice” and “common sense” (Thomson, 2009). These ads reinforce victim blaming and the personal responsibility narrative around obesity because the grotesque visual alongside verbal print suggests the obese body is a result of poor personal choices. Public health campaigns, constructed by organizations or practitioners, have also been found to frame personal responsibility narrative (Guttman & Ressler, 2001). Victim-blaming or shaming rhetoric was found, suggesting that individuals are responsible for their health issues.

### **Rhetoric's Usage of Personal Responsibility over Institutional or Systemic Factors**

Rhetoric has been used to claim personal responsibility as the dominant narrative, which ignores institutional or systemic factors. Western culture values agency, the ability to act over one's situation. French and Brown (2011) found that people use linguistic choices that argue that human actions should and can overcome biological factors, such as genetics, in the case of “overweight” or “obesity.” This communicated belief frames personal responsibility because people are seen as lacking the willpower, or agency, to take control of their bodies. The personal

responsibility rhetoric ignores other socioeconomic and systemic factors that could cause or contribute to one being obese.

Rhetoric has also been used to ignore systemic and institutional inequalities that create individual hardship. Cloud (2009) analyzed Oprah Winfrey's, an American media proprietor, biography and found that the narrative serves to blame the oppressed for their failures and upholds a meritocratic vision of the American Dream. The narrative in Winfrey's biography prevents readers from seeing structures of racism as a factor for individual hardship. In another research article, Cloud (1998) found that the rhetoric of "family values" used in the 1992 presidential campaign concealed widespread economic inequality and structural racism in favor of personalistic explanations of hardship and failure. Rhetorical construction of messages that frame personal responsibility ignore systematic and institutional problems such as economic mobility and social issues. Personal responsibility is the dominant societal narrative surrounding many issues, not just obesity.

### **Rhetoric in Obesity Mediated Artifacts**

Rhetoric has also been used in television and documentaries to construct the personal responsibility or environmentally-caused narrative regarding obesity. A narrative portrayed through television weight-loss struggles, such as with Oprah Winfrey, promotes the idea that obesity cannot be overcome without confronting and resolving the "real" reasons why one is obese (Shugart, 2014). Obese individuals are presented with two notions: Their body situation is their fault, and they must either act through medical means or begin the journey of self-actualization to overcome their situation.

The narrative surrounding the obesity epidemic may be largely constructed through the personal responsibility frame, but there are also popular culture artifacts that aim to shift the narrative towards the environment as the main cause of obesity. The documentary *Supersize Me*, directed by and featuring Morgan Spurlock, constructs the argument that it is the environment (scene: act) of unhealthy fast food, and the constant messages telling consumers what they want and need is food, has caused the obesity epidemic (Bloomberg & Sangalang, 2014). Spurlock's use of the rhetorical body through grotesque visuals connects him with the viewers of the documentary to show that the obesity epidemic is a corporate issue and that fast food is bad for you (Singer, 2011). The juxtaposition of the before and after images of Spurlock's body construct a strong argument that it is indeed the environmental factors that are responsible for the obesity epidemic, not the individual.

Lastly, the term "obesity epidemic" shapes the public health issue and directs what action should be taken regarding the issue. Mitchell and McTigue (2007) found that the term "obesity epidemic" has three functions: it imparts urgency into the situation by tapping into society's memory of devastating infectious plagues, it leverages obesity as a health issue, rather than a cosmetic concern, and finally, it signals how frequent usage of the term "epidemic" facilitates the understanding that this is a problem that demands a collective response. Not only does framing obesity as a personal responsibility or environmentally-caused impact how the issue is acted on, but labeling the issue as an epidemic impacts it as well.

### **Method**

So much of persuasion is unconscious; it cannot be recognized as influencing receivers' thoughts or actions. However, Kenneth Burke's method of pentadic criticism equips rhetorical critics with the ability to identify and analyze the persuasion that usually goes undetected. First, I

will explain the pentadic method and how it is used to analyze artifacts. Then, I will discuss how rhetorical critics have used the pentadic method in past scholarship and why this method is the most useful method for analyzing the artifact, *Fed Up*.

Language is a “reflection...selection...and deflection” of reality (Burke, 1969a).

Whichever names, terms or objects a person gives or doesn't give presence to is a reflection of their reality and the reality they attempt to construct for the audience. Words are selected and deflected through “terministic screens” in order to construct a reflection of reality. Terministic screens emphasize certain words over others, which shows how “people can view the same situation and yet describe it in different, even contradictory ways” (Eskew, 2014).

Terministic screens construct a reality, but the reality can only influence an audience if they align themselves with the persuader or reality. For Burke, the persuasive act of influencing someone's thoughts and actions is all through identification. Burke (1969b) said that, “you persuade a man only insofar as you can talk his language by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea, identifying your ways with his.” It is through the construction of language that a speaker may create an unconscious process the audience will align with. Through identification, the speaker can have the audience accept a certain reality or worldview.

To understand why the speaker constructs a reality and uses identification, we must consider Burke's questions: “what are people doing and why they are doing it?” (Burke, 1969a). Burke developed the pentad out of the need to identify and understand the motivation of the speaker so that an audience can accept a certain worldview. There are five elements involved in the pentadic method: act, scene, agent, agency and purpose. Burke explained these elements as:

“The *act* (names what took place, in thought or deed), and another that names the *scene* (the background of the act, the situation in which it occurred); also, you must indicate what person or kind of person (*agent*) performed the act, what means or instruments he used (*agency*), and the *purpose*.” (Burke, 1969a, p. xv)

Identifying these terms gives people the ability to analyze and understand public questions on their own or resist manipulative persuaders (McGeough & King, 2016). A specific perspective, or worldview, can be created by giving presence to two elements of the pentad.

Two elements of the pentad can be analyzed in relation to each other, creating a ratio, and can produce individual or separate meanings (Burke, 1969a). Which ratio a speaker decides to give presence to determines the specific motive of the speaker. For example, if a speaker emphasizes the scene-act ratio then they see the environment as controlling all other elements, emphasizing the lack of free choice due to the controlling scene. However, if the speaker emphasizes an agent-act ratio, then the individual is seen as having control of any action and they do have free choice. For instance, different politicians may use either of these ratios to construct a speech about a government policy. If the politician sees the agent as controlling, then they may persuade others that no policy is needed. Differently, if the politician sees the scene as controlling, then they may persuade others that policy is needed to address it.

Burke’s pentadic criticism is a popular method for rhetorical critics. As any other rhetorical method, it could fall into the pitfall of being “cookie-cutter.” Rhetorical critics could simply identify the five elements and dominant ratio, but critics know the pentad is meant to recognize, analyze and change. Many have used the pentad to examine political speeches (Fay & Kuypers, 2012; Kaylor, 2011; Ling, 2009), some have looked at the effectiveness of identification in campaign rhetoric (Kelley, 1987; Nelson, 2009) and others have explored the

competing controlling elements and why one was ultimately accepted (Eskew, 2014; Miller, 2004; Rendhal, 1999). The amount of previous scholarship shows the range of the method in its ability to identify and understand human motives in different circumstances. It also enables audiences to draw comparisons between current persuasive tactics and past scholarship so they can resist similar manipulative messages, which is what Burke intended for people to do with his pentad. Pentadic criticism recognizes persuasive attempts to reconstruct an audience's worldview, analyze how this reconstruction was attempted and judge its appropriateness or adequacy so that change is possible with future attempts. This method is the most useful for analyzing *Fed Up* because its range of applicability and focus on construction of specific worldviews.

### **Context**

Before *Fed Up*, Morgan Spurlock's documentary, *Supersize Me*, aimed to connect the obesity epidemic to what people eat. In 2004, Spurlock captured his social experiment investigating the effects of fast-food on the body. The film depicts Spurlock gaining weight with his energy levels plummeting, and his cholesterol increasing through his month of eating McDonald's (Spurlock, 2004). Although Spurlock consumed the fast-food by choice, he wanted to make the statement that corporate companies share the responsibility because of the deceptive messages they send the American public about food (Singer, 2011). *Supersize Me* threatened the food industry because it directly combated the dominant narrative of personal responsibility for obesity and instead suggested the environment the food industry creates is to blame for the epidemic.

*Supersize Me* was the first popular culture artifact that aimed to change the narrative around obesity, but 10 years later, someone else wanted to continue to add to the changing

narrative around obesity: Katie Couric. Throughout her nearly 4 decade long career as a journalist, Couric noticed the increasing amount of news stories around obesity over the years. Director Stephanie Soechtig was interviewed by Couric about her documentary, *Tapped*. After the interview, she told Couric to give her a call if she ever wanted to do a documentary (Webley, 2014). Couric took the offer and asked Soechtig if she could take a closer look at the obesity epidemic because the public was missing a comprehensive look at the issue. After nearly three years of investigating and filming, *Fed Up* was released in 2014.

The documentary was produced by Atlas Films, which has produced other documentaries, such as *Tapped*, *Under the Gun*, and *The Last Animals* (Atlas Films, 2017). *Fed Up* premiered at the 2014 Sundance Film Festival in January, and then was released to select theaters later that year in May. The documentary has three components: a narration of facts and heavy hitting questions by Couric, interviews with obesity specialists about the dangers of sugar consumption and the interwoven stories about obese pre-teens and their struggle to lose weight.

*Fed Up* begins with the premise that acceleration of the obesity epidemic in the United States can be traced back to 30 years ago — after the publication of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) first dietary guidelines in 1980. One of the recommendations in the report was that Americans should consume less sugar and fat-laden products. This recommendation by McGovern received severe backlash from both the food industry and science community over the scientific validity of the guidelines (Sifferlin, 2016). From this point on, the documentary continues to point out historical instances when the food industry intervened in government legislation and continues to frame the solution to obesity as exercise, equaling calories in to calories out and eating lower fat options.

*Fed Up* negates the food industry's framed solutions to obesity throughout the documentary. It discredits the idea that all calories are the same and that exercise is the main solution to obesity. Additionally, it claims sugar has driven the obesity epidemic. While sugar might be causing the obesity epidemic, *Fed Up* argues that the food industry is the culprit for creating products with outrageous levels of added sugar and then relentlessly pushing these products on the unsuspecting public (O'Sullivan, 2014). The documentary then portrays how the food industry has created a food environment that drives obesity through marketing, framing products as "natural," supplying products to school lunches and continuing the narrative in society that obesity is a matter of personal responsibility.

The documentary may not have done as well in the box office compared to *Supersize Me*, but it is shown on Netflix and continuously makes the list of top documentaries to watch on the streaming site (Duca, 2015). While *Supersize Me* led the way for combating the personal responsibility narrative of obesity, *Fed Up* brings to light vast ways the food environment filled with sugar is the main cause of obesity. *Supersize Me* focuses on fast food, which people generally know is not healthy for you, while *Fed Up* focuses on how even "healthy" food is sugar-laden and can potentially make people sick (Alder, 2013).

The documentary received praise for its view on the obesity epidemic and identifying the culprit. The *New York Times* said that *Fed Up* is "the most important movie to be made since 'An Inconvenient Truth,'" and *The Washington Post* said the film "succeeds in firing up the choir" (Bittmann, 2014; O'Sullivan, 2014). While there was a lot of praise, the documentary also received backlash through claims of scientific inaccuracy and other similar deflections the food industry has used before. The Grocery Manufacturers Association said that film is short-sighted and provides a "misleading approach by cherry-picking fact to fit a narrative" (MacVean, 2014).

Both positive and negative reviews aside, the documentary does get viewers to question what has been dominantly said about obesity and how they can solve this growing epidemic.

### **Analysis**

The analysis will begin by examining the scene-act ratio, which presents the obesity epidemic as environmentally-caused and dominates the first half of *Fed Up*. Next, I will examine the shift in the dominant ratio towards the end of the documentary, which then portrays the obesity epidemic as agent-scene. Finally, I will focus on the implications of the dominant ratios portrayed and narrative shift, and what broader lessons could be drawn from this study.

#### **Obesity Epidemic as Scene-Act**

Personal narratives, expert testimonies and visual graphics work to negate the dominant ratio of agent-act in U.S. society about the obesity epidemic, and shift the dominant narrative to recognize the obesity epidemic is scene-act. The food environment (scene) causing obesity (act) is the dominant tone in the beginning half of the documentary. By emphasizing the scene-act ratio, the film diminishes the other elements of the pentad, mainly, the agent (the individual) and agency. However, the scene-act ratio is controlling in the first half of *Fed Up* in order to shift preconceived notions of agent-act regarding obesity.

The documentary starts by negating the personal responsibility script, agent-act. It depicts media ads that reinforce the idea that a “calorie is a calorie,” suggesting that the individual has control over their obesity through exercise. Katie Couric narrates that the population is constantly being sold the message that, “our weight comes down to calories in versus calories out” (Soechtig, Singbeil, & Olson, 2014). During the narration, images of food advertisements play: Applebee’s ad of a steak dinner with the caption, ‘UNBELIEVABLY GREAT TASTING:

UNDER 500 CALORIES,' Dannon's yogurt commercial of their '80 calorie' light & fit yogurt circled in yellow next to a plain yogurt container with '100 calories' written above it, and Kellogg's commercial that features '27 chips' and '110 calories' while a woman eats them dancing. By emphasizing the importance of calories and burning them off, the individual is framed as having control over their obesity, so, their obesity is their own fault if they cannot equal calories in to calories out. The documentary presents instances in which our society has been pushed to accept the dominant narrative that obesity is agent-act in order to negate this construction of the issue and build a different reality around it.

Maggie Valentine, a 12-year-old girl struggling to lose weight, records herself on a video camera saying that her doctors have told her all she has to do to lose weight is, "eat healthy and exercise a lot more, which is what [she's] doing. [She] swims 4 times a week and walks [her] dogs on the weekend" (Soechtig et al., 2014). Maggie's emotional self-recording with following scenes of her at swim practice and walking her dogs negate the agent-act narrative of obesity because she is taking action to lose weight, yet she can't. This scene in the documentary also works to create identification with the audience because a majority of people know the feeling of frustration trying to lose weight and watching a young girl shed tears over the problem appeals to their emotions. Another instance of negating agent-act is when Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, says, "we are not going to exercise our way out of this obesity problem" (Soechtig et al., 2014). Wootan's statement suggests that no matter the amount of willpower an individual has, exercise alone will not solve the obesity issue, which directly negates the agent-act solution to obesity of getting calories into equal calories out. This statement also suggests there is another cause for the obesity problem: the scene.

Images of grocery store shelves filled like cereal, processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages play as Dr. David Ludwig, professor of pediatrics at Harvard Medical School, says there are, “600,000 food items in America and 80% of them have added sugar” in them (Soechtig et al., 2014). The visual image of the food products at the grocery store and Dr. Ludwig’s statement shift the obesity epidemic to scene-act because a food environment filled with sugar determines obesity, not the agent or their willpower. Following Dr. Ludwig’s statement, graphics are used to compare what the public would see as healthy to junk food to further demonstrate that the environment is saturated with sugar. The visual images show a package of Fruit Gushers and Yoplait yogurt pop-up side-by-side followed by ‘6.5 teaspoons of sugar’ above both products. Following these images, a normal-sized bag of M&M’s appear with ‘7 teaspoons of sugar’ above it compared to a Prego pasta sauce jar with ‘12.5 teaspoons of sugar’ above it. The use of these graphics portray the scene-act ratio because they uncover that even so-called healthy options are filled with as much or even more sugar than junk food. An individual cannot have the means to overcome their obesity if the scene is stacked against them with sugar-laden food products.

Lastly, Dr. Lustig makes the statement that “sugar is eight times more addictive than cocaine” as a visual image of two brain scans depicts how a person’s brain lights up the same way when given sugar as it does when it is given cocaine (Soechtig et al., 2014). If sugar is addictive, than the agent has no control over becoming obese because personal responsibility does not work in the face of addiction. The scene causes the act of obesity because if the scene is filled with sugar laden products, which are addictive, then no amount of willpower, or agency, can overcome it. The reality of the scene-act ratio *Fed Up* constructs in the first half of the film, removes an individual’s willpower to overcome obesity because the scene is so vast. However,

the second half of the film gives the audience back their ability to take action against the obesity epidemic.

### **Agent-Scene as Means for Solving Obesity**

The scene may be filled with sugar, but there must be an agent responsible for it: the food industry. The shift in dominant ratios to agent-scene serves the purpose of empowering the audience to act. The act and agency to take against the agent are left to the audience to determine. The first half of the film shifts the audience's view of obesity to scene-act, however, in order to create a cause for action, the food industry (agent) causing the food environment (scene) must be controlling.

Katie Couric narrates how the food industry reacted to the McGovern Report and how the 1980s began a new health doctrine of eating low-fat products. After her narration, Dr. Lustig says:

When you take the fat out of the food, it tastes nasty, it tastes like cardboard, and the food industry knew that. So they had to do something to make it worth eating. So, what'd they do? They dumped in the sugar. (Soechtig et al., 2014)

This statement is the main shift in the dominant ratios in the documentary because it names the food industry as the agent who has caused the scene to be filled with sugar-laden products.

The documentary names the food industry as the agent, but it also demonstrates how vastly it controls the scene that leaves no power to individuals. The most prevalent case in which the agent-scene ratio is portrayed is through the food industry's involvement in school lunches. Student Maggie Valentine video records images of her school cafeteria lunches; her recording shows mostly greasy food, a rack of candy options and a slushie machine. Valentine also

discusses the student store at her school which, “every day they have a special, Monday is Papa John’s pizza, Tuesday is Chick-fil-a, Wednesday is Arby’s, Thursday is Pizza Hut, and Friday is McDonald’s” (Soechtig et al., 2014). Many students around the country rely on school for breakfast, lunch or both. The food industry is directly creating a scene that gives the individual no choice in what they consume, and sets them up for a lifetime of sugar addiction if they consume more sugar-laden products early on. Couric later narrates that, “in 2006, 80% of high schools operated under exclusive contracts with soda companies, and in 2011, 50% served fast food” (Soechtig et al., 2014). The agent has vast control in creating the food scene and leaves few options for where an individual could make healthy choices.

The food industry also creates a scene that favors unhealthy options through television, which Katie Couric narrates, “with corporate tie-ins and high price celebrity endorsements” (Soechtig et al., 2014). Next, a montage of ad campaigns are featured: Michael Jackson dancing with a group of children who are holding Pepsi cans that then shift to a boy striking a Jackson pose with the heading “Pepsi: The Choice of a New Generation;” a construction worker pulling out a hamburger from his Hardee’s bag as Henry Cavill as Superman slams into the ground; Tina Fey in *30 Rock* holding a diet Snapple saying “it tastes just like regular Snapple, doesn’t it?;” large Coca-Cola cups placed in front of the *American Idol* judges. Anything a person see on television features some sort of processed food product, creating a scene that pushes unhealthy options over healthier ones. Using well-known celebrities or television characters who audiences are likely to feel a sense of identification with, pushes the audience to accept the food industry’s reality. The food industry creates the scene directly through involvement in the case of school lunches and indirectly through persuading audiences through identification to buy their products and to accept their reality. The individual has little willpower in the environment the food

industry has created because sponsoring school lunches can cause sugar addiction early in life, having a vast selection of sugar-laden products leaves little choice in healthy options and developing television endorsements that reinforce individuals' current or future food purchases.

Portraying the agent-scene ratio at the end of the documentary agency for the audience to act. After the possible feeling of resignation that they have no power to change the vast food environment from portraying scene-act, concluding with agent-act restores a sense of power to change. Agent-scene gives the audience the industry that is causing the obesity epidemic and a sense of ability to act against them. While the documentary does not lay out specific steps the audience can follow to take action against the food industry, it uses the comparison of the tobacco industry to demonstrate that it can be done.

### **We've Been Down this Road before with Agent-Scene**

While attempting to re-shift how the audience views the obesity epidemic and what is at the hand of this issue, *Fed Up* compares the epidemic to how the tobacco industry acted 40 years ago. The ending of the documentary compares the agent-scene of the obesity epidemic to the agent-scene of the smoking era. To show the similarity of the agent-scene for the tobacco industry, the documentary depicts two commercials that use the Flintstones to market its products. The first commercial narrates that, "The Flintstones has been brought to you by Winston, America's best tasting filtered cigarettes," as a zoomed-in image of a Winston cigarette packet pans out to Fred Flintstone giving his wife, Velma, a cigarette and lighting it for her, then saying "Winston cigarettes taste good, like a cigarette should" (Soechtig et al., 2014). The next commercial immediately follows with a cartoon lion looking at Fred Flintstone saying, "I need those fruity pebbles," as it changes to a close up image of the fruity pebbles cereal box on a rock with Barney and Fred floating down a river in the background trying to reach the box (Soechtig

et al., 2014). Both commercials show how both the food and tobacco industry (agents) create a scene in which their products are seen as needed and they use beloved television characters to create identification with the audience. Both agents create an environment (scene) that undermines healthy options and pushes addictive and unhealthy choices.

I argue that this comparison gives the audience a starting point for the agency and act terms within the pentad because it gives the audience a course of action through the comparison of how the public demonized the tobacco industry. Dr. Kelly D. Brownell, the dean of public policy at Duke University, said, “we (the public) took them on, then the government took them on” (Soechtig et al., 2014). The documentary does not give specific details as to what act the audience could take, but the comparison still works as a beginning point for where to start looking for ideas on how to take action against the agent. The American public found the agency to act against the tobacco industry, so they can also find the agency to act against the food industry.

### **Discussion**

In this essay, I argued that portraying the obesity epidemic as environmentally-caused is important for persuading the audience to change their worldview on the issue, but it is naming the culprit who has created the sugar-laden and processed food environment that empowers the audience to act. Due to the salience of the personal responsibility narrative for not just obesity, but for evoking the American dream and personal hardships, portraying obesity as scene-act is essential for reframing how the American public views the issue (Could, 1998, 2011; French and Brown, 2011). An audience can't accept the conclusion that the food industry is creating an environment that promotes obesity without being primed to view obesity as being environmentally-caused. Further advocacy surrounding the obesity epidemic is thus twofold:

change the audience's view of how the obesity epidemic has occurred and shape the complexity of the issue, then name the main agent causing the toxic food environment in order to shape a course of action. Other advocates could also switch the order of the frame, so long as they are changing the reality of the issue and giving the issue a culprit.

*Fed Up* is persuasive in its attempt to get the audience to accept the worldview presented—the food industry has and is causing the obesity epidemic. The documentary had the challenge of constructing a reality that is more persuasive in what has caused obesity than the dominant personal responsibility constructed reality the American public is used to. If persuasion is accomplished through identification, then the audience is more likely to accept the reality *Fed Up* constructs if they can align themselves with the arguments being made and the people within the film. The strongest appeal is through the portrayals and self-recordings of the young children struggling with their weight in the reality of personal responsibility. The children use language, tonality and attitudes that the audience is likely to identify with. Their candid and emotional self-recordings identify with audiences that are struggling with weight themselves or who feel compelled to help them solve the issue. By portraying the failing view of personal responsibility to solve obesity through the lens of children, it makes *Fed Up*'s construction of the food industry and surrounding food environment as causing obesity more persuasive to the audience.

The reorientation of the audience's reality of the obesity epidemic is also successful because it gives those who want to solve the obesity epidemic a means to do so. In general, people want to solve the growing obesity epidemic, but the personal responsibility script has been used for so long that clearly it is not the way to address the epidemic. Reorienting the audiences' idea of the individual as the agent for causing obesity, to the food industry as the agent, gives the audience someone to act against. With the success of naming the perpetrator

Kony rather than the location of the crisis in the viral advocacy video *Kony 2012*, naming the food industry could indeed empower the audience of *Fed Up* (Brigham and Noland, 2014).

Reorienting the audiences' reality to an agent-centered approach to obesity advocacy will motivate them to take action.

“What are people doing and why they are doing it?” (Burke, 1969a). *Fed Up* is reorienting people's worldview on the cause of the obesity epidemic, and hoping the audience will take action against the food industry similar to how the American public did against the tobacco industry. The documentary is persuasive enough to reorient the audience and empower them to act, but the next question is, what success is the documentary attempting to accomplish? One documentary is not likely to empower the entire American public to act and radically change how society addresses the obesity epidemic, but it can begin to change how food companies view their role in the epidemic and begin to crack the status quo of personal responsibility. Any future obesity advocacy that adopts the agent-centered approach in constructed in *Fed Up*, would create a partial victory for reframing how the United States views the obesity epidemic and creating solutions to solve it.

*Supersize Me* did not get the entire American public to stop eating McDonald's or other fast food chains, but it did lead to better awareness of the impact of fast food on the body, caused McDonald's to eliminate the supersize meal option and led to fast food chains offering healthier options on their menus. Perhaps *Supersize Me* created a partial victory by reorienting how the public views fast food, and indirectly made *Fed Up*'s worldview easier to accept. If McDonalds causes obesity, then so could the food industry because both McDonalds and the food industry supply the public with processed foods. So, *Fed Up* could lead to a better awareness of the impact processed foods have on the body, force the food industry to react to claims made in the

film, or lead to the audience demanding that food companies must take responsibility for their role in the obesity epidemic. Portraying the obesity epidemic as agent-scene could lead to partial victories, and comparatively small victories could mushroom into successful societal change.

### **Conclusion**

If the obesity epidemic continues to be narrated to the public as the cause of personal responsibility, then no sufficient action can be taken to address and begin to decline the issue. First, I argued that the obesity epidemic narration must make the shift to environmentally-caused (scene-act). Then, the issue must be given the agent, the food industry, for causing the environment in order to create advocacy that can give audiences agency to take action. If the public took action against the tobacco industry, which is a similar agent-scene public issue, then the public has the ability to demonize the food industry as well. Through the agent-scene ratio, advocacy rhetoric can be constructed to shift the obesity issue narration to the public and address the issue.

Throughout this essay, I have shown how an artifact's rhetorical pentadic shift can be taken in order to apply it to other forms of advocacy for the obesity epidemic. *Fed Up*, on its own, cannot shift society's view on the obesity epidemic, but if it can influence a public health campaign, then it has won a partial victory in fighting against the food industry to tackle obesity. This can also be applied to other issues in which personal responsibility is used as a scapegoat to ignore larger systemic and institutional inequalities (Cloud 1998 & 2009). Agent-scene has the potential to address other issues in which the environment, and larger complexity, is ignored as a cause. After three decades of the obesity epidemic being scapegoated as a matter of personal responsibility, maybe *Fed Up* and the agent-scene worldview is one of the first cracks in the status quo.

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