



Pie in the Sky? Another Run at a Public Health Approach to the Obesity Epidemic

A Review of

A Big Fat Crisis: The Hidden Forces Behind the Obesity Epidemic—And How We Can End It

by Deborah A. Cohen

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Reviewed by

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In *A Big Fat Crisis: The Hidden Forces Behind the Obesity Epidemic—And How We Can End It*, author Deborah Cohen does not spend much time trying to persuade the reader that there is an epidemic of obesity-related chronic illness affecting the health of the American population. She believes that everyone knows the statistics and appreciates the urgency of acting to reverse trends of the past 35 years.

This book is a quick read, with Part I relating in just over 50 pages the limits of human ability to resist highly palatable food. Although Cohen reviews a lot of psychological research, it seems she has not been introduced to the concept of denial or thought about how it may be operating at a population level. This allows her to be naïvely optimistic about the prospects of implementing a public health approach to the problem of obesity. Like the patients we see who manage not to notice as their weight climbs from 300 to 400 to 500 or even 600 pounds, Cohen seems to have barely noticed that her ideas have been articulated before in considerable detail by others and continue to meet with intense resistance from parties with vested interests in profiting from fueling the obesity crisis.

Part II discusses the food environment in just under 40 pages, introducing the concept of a “food swamp” that preys upon human weakness. Part III, about 100 pages, covers a variety of public health approaches to the obesity epidemic and makes a weak effort at suggesting how individuals can protect themselves from the obesogenic environment. Supplemental materials include meal guidelines for adults and children, a question-and-answer section, and extensive references.

Collective Versus Individual Responsibility

Cohen proposes a no-fault approach to the obesity crisis. She argues that the obesity epidemic is a consequence of hard-wired cognitive limitations and a food environment that sets people up for failure: People are covertly manipulated such that they are not truly responsible for the food choices they make. This is a rather strong position that may fuel pessimism, as most of the environmental factors that the author outlines are difficult to control.

Cohen argues that advertising of unhealthy foods and the increasingly easy availability of these foods (she uses the term *food swamp*) make it almost impossible to resist selecting them. We must eat and cannot avoid food, unlike alcohol and other substances. Cohen does not distinguish between types of food contributing to obesity. She appears to be from the "a-calorie-is-a-calorie" school of thought, in contrast with, for example, the filmmakers responsible for *Fed Up*, a documentary that argues that it is the added sugar in food that causes obesity (Marson, Olson, & Soechtig, 2014).

In fact, Cohen seems more concerned about the overconsumption of protein, mainly for environmental reasons having nothing to do with obesity. This material is poorly integrated and should have been omitted. (In one odd passage, p. 186, Cohen suggests that readers plan on adding leftover food from restaurants to a compost pile, which rather contradicts a passage elsewhere where she goes on about how discarded food is a major contributor to greenhouse gasses.)

The book covers a lot of material, and Cohen introduces many studies to back her theories. Studies are frequently described in just three or four short sentences. Several of the study descriptions do not provide adequate detail, such as descriptions of confounds or other potential limitations of the methodology (e.g., small sample size). This may be expected given the mass audience targeted. However, this allows a reader who may not be well versed in scientific inquiry to conclude that what the author is suggesting is absolute truth. For example, Cohen suggests that eating smaller bites and eating slowly are not helpful behaviors in reducing portions of food. She bases this suggestion on one study conducted by Spiegel and colleagues in 1993 that used a sample of 18 women. However, there have been more recent studies with larger sample sizes that have different results (e.g., Andrade, Greene, & Melanson, 2008).

Although Cohen makes the case for environmental factors affecting the obesity crisis, her recommendations for changing these factors are not helpful on an individual basis. For the majority of the book, the necessary action is presented as a systemwide approach. This is not entirely surprising, considering that the author is a physician and epidemiologist with the RAND Corporation. However, later in the book, she does provide suggestions for action on an individual and local level.

Cohen's policy recommendations certainly increase awareness related to this U.S. public health crisis. Her proposed recommendations are thought provoking, but this may come in the form of questioning how realistic many of them might be. Her ideas about how to reform supermarkets (Chapter 10) seem particularly radical and unrealistic, at least if supermarkets are to remain profit-making businesses, not a government-subsidized utility. These supermarkets would be one fifth the size of today's average supermarket, carry a limited

number of items, encourage cooking and shopping for healthy foods, and discourage sales of nonnutritious foods. Impulse purchases would be discouraged rather than promoted.

Cohen makes interesting comparisons between contaminated water and the glut of food, and also recalls for readers a time when all kinds of garbage, waste, and even animal carcasses were dumped on the street. However, a comparison with the fight against the tobacco industry would likely be a more realistic example for planning today's battle with the forces of the food industry.

In various parts of the book, the author lightly touches on possible evolutionary explanations of overeating. However, she never ventures into detail or elaborates on her theory. She notes that we are biologically designed to overeat for survival, but have we not evolved enough to know that we won't be deprived of our next meal?

Unconnected to a Science Community and a Movement

This is not the first book to suggest a public health approach to the obesity epidemic. Since the publication of the first edition of *Obesity Epidemiology: From Aetiology to Public Health* in 2005 (published under the title *Obesity Prevention and Public Health*; Crawford & Jeffery, 2005), various efforts such as New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg's effort to regulate the amount of soda that can be sold at one time have come and often gone, and the obesity epidemic has raged on. Cohen is not proposing anything new, nor is the political environment any more favorable toward enacting laws and regulations that would be seen as infringing on business or personal freedom. She has become a champion of bureaucracy and the nanny state, seeming not to recognize the forces marshaled against those, some for good reason.

Cohen made a brief appearance in the documentary film *Fed Up*. Interviewed many more times in the film is psychologist Kelly Brownell, the leading figure for taking a public health approach to the obesity epidemic. Brownell was a contributing author to *Obesity Epidemiology: From Aetiology to Public Health* (Schwartz & Brownell, 2010), where he argued that the personal responsibility approach to the obesity epidemic is a failure. He is also the coauthor of *Food Fight: The Inside Story of the Food Industry, America's Obesity Crisis, and What We Can Do About It* (Brownell & Horgen, 2004).

It is impossible to believe that Cohen, a Yale graduate, does not know about Brownell. (Brownell, currently dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, was a professor of psychology at Yale for most of his career.) She cites psychologists as diverse as Daniel Wegner and John Foreyt. But nowhere in *A Big Fat Crisis* does she acknowledge the leadership and important contributions of Brownell. Her failure to cite his work is puzzling and leaves the impression of poor scholarship or academic insecurity.

Science and scholarship require community, as do social movements. If public health reforms of any type are enacted to stem the tide of the obesity epidemic, many will share the credit, and Cohen's work will be one contribution to that effort. Cohen has some good ideas, but this book shows the limits of a solo-authored work. If she had a clearer focus and integrated more psychophysiology with a little help from friends, the book might have been

better and offered more ways to help individuals already affected by the limits of the human ability to resist the temptations of the food swamp.

This book is written for a lay audience not yet recruited in the battle against the food industry. Those already in the battle are passionate but might be perceived as extremist by those who accept the status quo. Cohen's book will help members of the public see that they are manipulated, and it may call some to action, but others may use this material as a reason to give up in their personal struggles with food. Societal changes that are needed, small and large, have tremendous resources lined up against them. A more balanced message that counterweights a public health approach with education about effective individual actions that do not blame but do empower might be what is needed to move this discourse to a level that helps the afflicted and gets serious attention from those who would otherwise blame the victim.

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