A Bold and Comprehensive Treatise on the Obesity Pandemic

A review of

The World Is Fat: The Fads, Trends, Policies, and Products That Are Fattening the Human Race

by Barry Popkin


Reviewed by

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Both media and academia abound with reports of the frighteningly sharp rise worldwide in rates of overweight and obesity and the resulting health impact. Heated debate continues over the cause of this increase and the approach most likely to produce a leveling off or reversal of this trend. Is food or physical activity to blame? Is the environment driving behavior, or are people just plain lazy? What is the role, if any, of government intervention? How might corporate responsibility fit in?

The World Is Fat: The Fads, Trends, Policies, and Products That Are Fattening the Human Race by Barry Popkin will be invaluable to anyone interested in understanding the history and trajectory of the obesity pandemic. He describes how the pandemic maps onto global technological advances, food industry growth and proliferation of nutrient-poor foods,
and government inaction and/or government policies that impel, rather than reduce, factors that promote energy imbalance.

Popkin does a wonderful job characterizing how globalization has impacted the world’s collective waistline—its inhabitants have unprecedented access to a broad range of unhealthy foods that played no part in the history and culture of its people. Anyone wishing to participate in efforts to reverse the alarming trends Popkin describes, and anyone who questions the need for government involvement in a solution, will find this book instructive.

Popkin has conducted extensive research on the shifts and trends in dietary intake over more than three decades across several countries including India, China, Mexico, and the United States, thereby documenting the “nutrition transition.” There has been widespread, fast-paced change in the availability of frequently imported, inexpensive, unhealthy foods throughout the world, leading developing nations to follow closely on the heels of the United States and other developed nations in suffering obesity and related comorbidities.

Popkin draws upon his and others’ empirical work and his qualitative observations of families (including his own) in these countries from the 1950s to the present day to illustrate the dramatic changes that have taken place in the environment—first in the United States and later throughout most of the rest of the world. His descriptions of four composite families from his research panels—one Caucasian American family, one Mexican American immigrant family, and two Indian families from different time periods—provide the reader with a concrete and disturbing image of the impact of this health crisis at the individual level.

Not insignificantly, the comparison of the Caucasian and Mexican American families highlights the multiplicative effect of the poverty–obesity interaction. Popkin contrasts the food and activity environment of 1950s’ America, in which it was exceedingly difficult for the average person to become obese, with today’s obesogenic environment. In the year 2010, perhaps most surprising is that anyone at all remains at a normal weight. Readers born well after the 1950s will feel nostalgic for conditions that were so protective of our health.

Beverages to Blame

One recently proposed strategy to prevent obesity is taxation of sugar-sweetened beverages. Not surprisingly, the proposal has met with fierce opposition from the food and beverage industry, and lukewarm public response. Taxes are a controversial and contentious issue, despite the potential for a tax to generate substantial health care revenue and to improve public health (Brownell et al., 2009).

While there is clear scientific evidence linking sweetened beverage consumption to risk of weight gain, diabetes, and heart disease, critics purport that a soda tax would
undermine individual rights and responsibilities and is therefore ill-advised. Chapter 2 provides an interesting and informative history of beverage consumption that may help readers gain perspective on this issue.

Popkin explains that throughout most of human history water was the only beverage available beyond the first few years of life. In very recent history beverages with caloric content were introduced into the diet without concomitant change in calories consumed from solid foods. Popkin argues that if water consumption alleviated hunger, humans would not have sought out food and thus would have perished.

Thus, liquid calories are not satiating—and experimental research confirms that we do not compensate for their calories through reduction of food intake. This is problematic because, as Popkin points out, more than 450 of the average adult’s daily calories now come from beverages. Popkin views the increased consumption of sweetened beverages as a major factor in the global rise in obesity prevalence, a view shared by a majority of public health and nutrition experts (Vartanian, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2007).

**Value for Psychologists**

*The World Is Fat*, with its clear public health policy message, may seem an unusual choice for psychologists who are traditionally focused on individual behavior; the author argues vehemently against individual responsibility, favoring instead corporate responsibility and government intervention. Increasingly, though, psychologists are recognizing and writing of the societal determinants of individual behavior; seen in that light, this book is a natural fit to the field.

For research and practice psychologists studying or providing individual-level treatment for overweight and obesity, this work will provide a new level of understanding as to why it is so difficult for clients and participants to lose and maintain weight loss. Further, the book offers early career professionals and students an impassioned entrée into the world of public health, where increasing numbers of psychologists (including one of the authors of this review) find their professional home; some readers may even find themselves fired up enough to redirect their career aspirations.

**Limitations**

*The World Is Fat* is not an encyclopedic reference: There are very few footnotes or direct citations. Thus, those looking for a review with every finding rigorously referenced will be disappointed. However, we hesitate to mention this as a limitation, as the accessibility of the material is bolstered by the storylike tone; thus, it will likely reach more readers than a
denser, slower going read would. And, after all, a primary aim of the book would seem to be to reach and inform the lay reader. Further, while each fact is not specifically referenced, Popkin does provide a list of excellent references for each chapter, divided into thematic areas, so the reader may certainly further pursue a topic of interest.

Popkin includes one chapter on physical activity, but it is brief (18 pages) in comparison with the rest of the book, which is primarily focused on dietary intake. Proponents of physical activity as the remedy to the obesity crisis may note this shortfall. The majority of experts in the field currently look to diet as the agent of change, so the book does reflect current thinking on the issue, but it should be said that there is not complete consensus here. *The World Is Fat* definitely favors the food side of energy balance.

The final chapter in the book is, appropriately and optimistically, a call to action. Given the weight of the data presented supporting the overwhelming impact of the environment on individual choice, we were somewhat surprised to read on the opening page of this chapter: “Clearly, we can all make better choices that will help us to be thinner and healthier” (p. 145), followed by “another option . . . is to eliminate desserts and chocolates” (p. 146).

While these statements are not inaccurate, they detract in a small way from the message of the need for large-scale change that carries *The World Is Fat*. Popkin does continue in this final chapter to lay out large-scale recommendations, but the individual responsibility piece seemed a little out of place at the start of the denouement.

Finally, a small thing, but we as readers were left wondering about the four families we met at the outset of the book. What became of the Joneses, the Garcias, the Desais, and the Patels? Perhaps, though, the course of their composite lives does depend on the global response to Popkin’s call to action, in which case to “leave us hanging” is perhaps appropriate.

**Conclusion**

The last decade has seen the publication of a number of popular books addressing the obesity epidemic and nutrition crisis with a similar message (e.g., Brownell & Horgen, 2004; Critser, 2003; Finkelstein & Zuckerman, 2008; Nestle, 2002; Pollan, 2008). What makes *The World Is Fat* unique is a combination of its truly global perspective—most other works are focused primarily on the United States—and the author’s decades of hands-on research experience in the fields of global nutrition, agriculture, and economics; he is able to document the history of the problem with true authority and depth of knowledge and understanding.

Even for those of us working in the field of obesity, new information and perspectives are presented in this work. For example, Popkin argues cogently for Mexico’s possible
future position as a leader in government regulation vis-à-vis the food environment. Similarly, he presents the case of South Korea, which has maintained a healthy collective diet in the face of the global obesity crisis. Neither case is oft cited in the literature. Popkin’s weaving of research, politics, national- and individual-level case studies, and personal narrative has rendered a compelling and educative work.

References


