

Big Food, Big Babies

Moral panics & the business of eating

Jacques Rousseau



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THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Orthorexia

A fixation on righteous eating.



But need this be at any cost?



Emotional dog, rational tail

We're deeply invested existing beliefs.

Social media & hyperbole closing off the space for debate & nuance.



The limits of scientific enquiry

Dara o' Briain:

"Science knows it doesn't know everything – else it would stop".



Science vs. Pseudoscience



Bellagio Declaration 2013

Countering Big Food's Undermining of Healthy Food Policies

Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of WHO (June 2013):

*'Research has documented **these tactics** well. They include... **industry-funded research that confuses the evidence and keeps the public in doubt.** Tactics also include... contributions to worthy causes that **cast these industries as respectable corporate citizens** in the eyes of politicians and the public. They include **arguments that place the responsibility for harm to health on individuals**, and portray government actions as **interference in personal liberties and free choice.**'*



Cryptids live in filter bubbles



Isn't thinking also healthy?

Food isn't moral. It's not immoral, either.
It's morally neutral.





The dose makes the poison

(Paracelsus, 15th Century)

Few substances have no safe dosages – and many of us eat sugar/carbohydrates without complications.



Avena (2007) Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews

Food is not ordinarily like a substance of abuse, **but intermittent bingeing and deprivation changes that.** Based on the observed behavioral and neurochemical similarities between the effects of intermittent sugar access and drugs of abuse, we suggest that sugar...meets the criteria for a substance of abuse and **may be “addictive” for some individuals when consumed in a “binge-like” manner.**



Avena, continued

This conclusion is **reinforced by the changes in limbic system neurochemistry that are similar for the drugs and for sugar**. It is not clear from this animal model if intermittent sugar access can result in **neglect of social activities** as required by the definition of dependency in the DSM-IV. **Nor is it known whether rats will continue to self-administer sugar despite physical obstacles**, such as enduring pain to obtain sugar, as some rats do for cocaine.



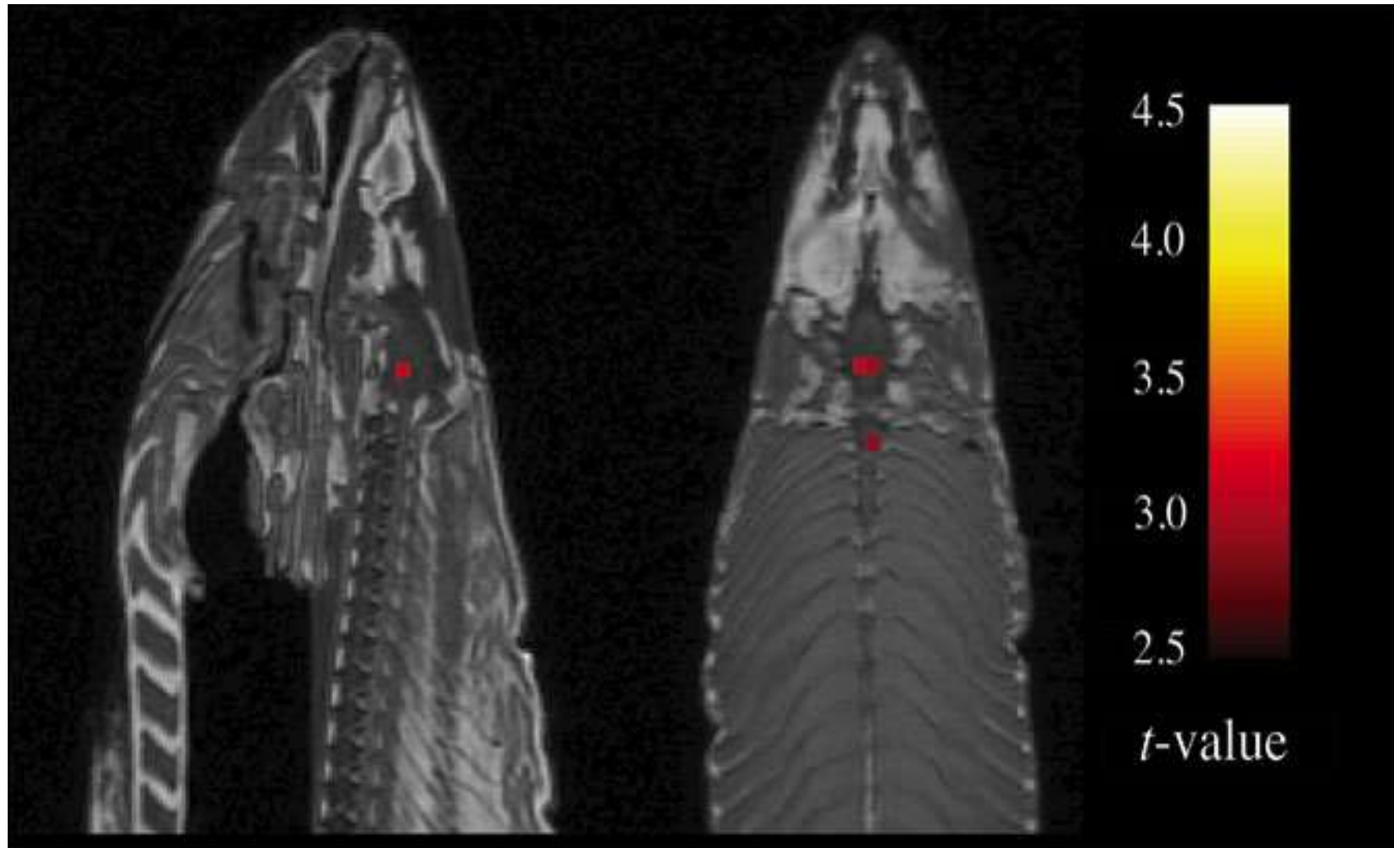
Johnson & Kenny (2010) – Nature Neuroscience

“Notably, **it is unclear** whether deficits in rewards processing are constitutive and precede obesity, or whether excessive consumption of palatable food can drive reward dysfunction and thereby contribute to diet-induced obesity.”

“Common hedonic mechanisms may underlie obesity and drug addiction.”



It wasn't him, it was his brain!



Expectations of agency

Easier to make choices when you believe there's a choice to make.



Brain-disease model of addiction

- Addiction has fundamental elements of voluntary behaviour.
- Predictable responses in the brain don't mean hijacking.
- Everything changes the brain – and we can tweak responses.



Neurocentrism

- Implies that solution always a medical one – diminishes our agency.
- Most addicts quit on their own, by their early 30's.
- *Confirmation bias* in hearing about the cases that don't.
- A remitting condition.



Operation "Golden Flow"



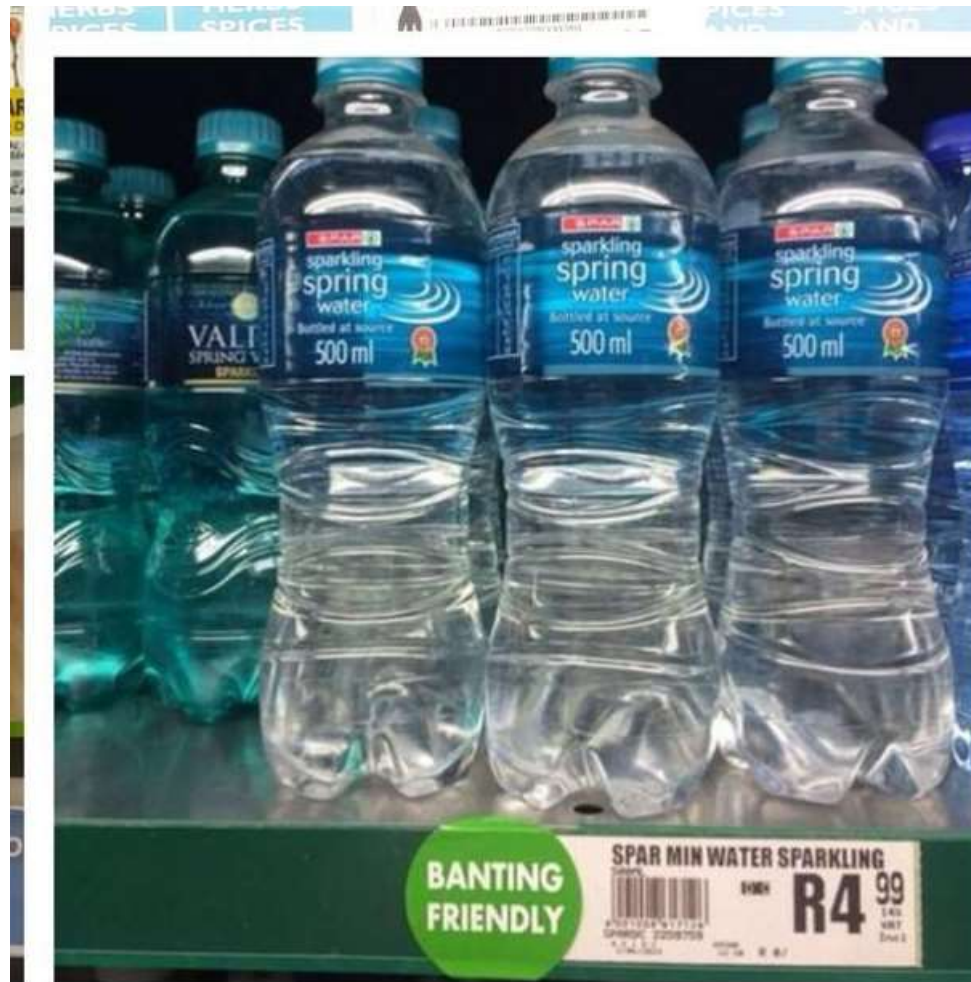
Motivation, context, bright lines

- Self-binding strategies can make a (large) difference.
- The brain level not YET level at which our interventions are the most useful.
- Addiction and impulse control issues are a human drama, occurring in a context



Middle-class moral panics?

Sugar and Carb Addicts Anonymous?



Is your food “real” enough?

Is there room for Golden Rice, or Norman Borlaug, in the “Real Meal Revolution”?



FairTrade: #middleclassproblem

SOAS report: "What did surprise us is how wages are typically lower, and on the whole conditions worse, for workers in areas with Fairtrade organisations than for those in other areas."



Likewise, "organic food"



Left unchecked, food = religion



Causing harm, with good intentions

No question that NCDs & obesity non-ideal – but is it necessary to address them through fearmongering and infantilization?

At some point, can we become well-trained enough to *welcome* paternalism?



Bullying, taxing, nudging

- When “science” is infused with scaremongering, state needs little more excuse for paternalism.
- Nudging often justified – but needs to be data-driven.
- “Fat tax” in Denmark ineffective (or worse), Bloomberg’s soda tax simply created perverse incentives.



Profits & predatory producers

- Why think that manufacturers need to be noble?
- They make the food that we ask for.
- Panic, tax, etc. absolve us of responsibility and blame them for doing a good job.



Slacktivism

Sharing is evidence of caring, whether that be an idea, or a panic.



Science, method & credibility

Real breakthroughs happen in journals,
not cookbooks.

And you hear about them on the news,
not on the Dr Oz show.



It's a little more complicated than that...

Value only partly vested in *conclusions* –
also in the manner in which we reach
conclusions.

Being right – if we are right – is the end
product of a process and a method.



As Oscar Wilde had it,
“the truth is rarely pure and never
simple”.

Thank you



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