

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF OVEREATING: FOOD AND THE CULTURE OF CONSUMERISM

BY KIMA CARGILL (LONDON: BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC, 2015).

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Cargill discusses food and eating and relates these topics to the culture of consumerism. From the beginning, the author clarifies that this book is not about obesity and not only about overeating, but about overconsumption. The rise of consumer culture is described and compared to individual psychology. The author introduces the *funnel of consumption*, in which overconsumption of food is embedded in a broader pattern of overconsumption and the culture of individual consumerism. For example, the author reflects on *imaginative hedonism* (i.e., disappointment when actual consumption does not satisfy the imagined desired) and illustrates how materialism and too many consumer choices lead to unhappiness.

The history of food processing is outlined and key terms like whole, processed, ultra-processed and hyperpalatable foods are defined. The association between food cost and nutritional quality is critically discussed as the author disproves the well-accepted myth that there are no inexpensive, nutritious foods. Here, the author illustrates the complex picture behind the association between poverty and intake of lower quality foods from a cultural perspective and argues that many people suffer from both financial and nutritional illiteracy. Three main drivers of overeating are described—palatability, variety and convenience—and it is explained how the food industry exploits these basic mechanisms by relating them to individual psychology. The history and current situation of sugar trade, production and consumption are also illustrated. Humans' preference for sugar and sweet taste, respectively, are briefly explained from a biological, evolutionary and psychological perspective. The negative health consequences of sugar in general, and of sugar-sweetened beverages in particular, are discussed.

Physiological mechanisms of hunger and satiety, for example, appetite-regulating hormones like insulin, ghrelin and leptin are presented. Along these lines, parallels between addictive drugs and hyperpalatable foods and between individuals with substance dependence and self-reported "food addicts" are elucidated. The author describes Binge Eating Disorder and critically discusses its inclusion in the current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. Specifically, the author points out a possible overpathologizing of eating behavior due to the blurry line between overeating, occasional binge eating and clinically-relevant binge eating. Overdiagnosis and overtreatment in the medical system are discussed in the light of consumerism, for example referring to the use of lifestyle drugs.



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The book closes by taking a look at the processes at work behind the food and pharmaceutical industry. Similarities between the two are presented, for example, that both industries constantly develop new products like flavors, packages and medications to create new markets. Furthermore, the regulatory purview of agencies in the food sector is examined and the author reveals failures of these agencies in the regulation of food, drugs and supplements. Finally, strategies for individual, cultural and governmental change are suggested to reduce overeating and overconsumption.

There are only few instances in the book where the author does not draw a complete picture of current research. For example, Cargill states that artificial sweeteners may actually increase caloric intake from other sources and are linked to diabetes and cardiovascular disease. However, there are also human studies showing that people do not compensate non-caloric sweetener intake by eating more (e.g., Anton et al. 2010) and that non-caloric sweetener intake appears to be helpful for losing weight (Rogers et al. 2016). When referring to possible addictive effects of hyperpalatable foods, the author misses the fact that researchers have actually discussed addiction-like consumption of foods long before the rise of ultra-processed, hyperpalatable foods in recent decades occurred (Meule 2015). Finally, at times, the cultural analysis may be restricted to US culture and may be not fully applicable to other countries.

Notwithstanding these minor limitations, the author excellently connects different levels of analysis (e.g., cultural versus individual) and sophisticatedly reveals parallels between, or even equivalence of, consumer culture and eating behavior. The main message of this book is to understand overeating not only as a problem of food and eating, but as a form of overconsumption. Throughout the book, these comprehensive observations are further elucidated by specific examples from the author's patients. To conclude, this book is a great read for everybody who wants to deepen their understanding of food and eating and extend it to a bigger picture in the context of consumer culture and, vice versa, for those who are already familiar with these cultural aspects, to deepen their understanding of the psychological mechanisms at work at the individual level.

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