

Hunger makes your brain hungry (towards an explanation and easy cure of the obesity economic)

dahtah.wordpress.com (<https://dahtah.wordpress.com/2011/11/24/hunger-makes-your-brain-hungry-towards-an-explanation-and-easy-cure-of-the-obesity-economic/>)

Alex Harrowell at a Fistful of Euros has an interesting take (<http://fistfulofeuros.net/afoe/economics-afoe/dont-make-decisions-about-money-when-you-are-poor/>) on a (less interesting) piece of cognitive neuroscience reported here (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/2011/nov/16/hunger-primed-brain-junk-food>) by the Guardian. You know how we all tend to buy more/junkier food when hungry? Apparently some people replicated that effect in a MRI scan, and a blob lit up in the brain. The blob is linked to motivation and reward, which the Guardian informs us “points to ways of overcoming the temptations of the food aisles and throw fresh light on the rise of obesity over the past 30 years.”

Now it’s not the credulous reporting that has Alex annoyed, but rather the suggestion that people shouldn’t make choices about food when hungry: “No, you should never make decisions about food when you are starving. By the same logic, I suppose, you should never make decisions about money when you are poor, or about charity when you are rich. Of course, if you’re hungry it is rational to want calories. You do, in fact, want calories in the old sense of the word “want” – you need more of them. Presumably, you should wait until you aren’t as hungry before deciding what to eat?”

He’s essentially saying that blaming the obesity epidemic on poor decision-making completely misses the point, because if people could avoid going to the supermarket on an empty belly, they would. When you work late hours or, worse, work two jobs, that’s a problem.

There’s always been a tendency in science to mistake social problems for technical ones, which might play a role in the proliferation of happy pills. I think Alex Harrowell has identified a new incarnation of that tendency: social problems being recast as faulty decision-making.

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