
Book Section:
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But you're not defending sugar, are you?

We never stop talking about food, and in many ways, it can be seen as the easiest conversation in the world. Food conversations are a ubiquitous feature of our everyday lives, through the media (Rousseau 2012), public health and marketing campaigns and in the mundane decisions of what and where to eat for sustenance and pleasure as we go about our daily business. But for all of the almost incessant talk about food that characterises the everyday, it is also simultaneously the most difficult of conversations, since food and eating are fundamental to our sense of who we are and how we want to be seen and known (Lupton 1996). Food is saturated with the moral weight of gendered, raced and classed assumptions about what constitutes 'good' eating (and by extension, a 'good' eater) (Coveney 2000, Guthman 2011), who should bear responsibility for the labour of food preparation and consumption (Charles and Kerr 1988, Cairns and Johnston 2015) and the ways in which the body operates as a visible moral measure of that consumption (Murray 2008). Furthermore, the relentless flow of easy conversation about food sweeps over those conversations less easily heard, or which disrupt the neoliberal narratives of informed choice and personal responsibility in which food conversations are so often embedded (Guthman 2011): for example, the voices of people of all sizes for whom the 'tyranny of slenderness' can render food an unspeakable and shame-filled daily trauma (Chernin 1994 [1981]); or the mother trying to feed her hungry children from a food bank parcel after being sanctioned for some small infraction of a benefits system designed for failure (O'Hara 2015, Garthwaite 2016, Patrick 2017). Conversations about food, therefore, are never straightforwardly benign, however easily they flow; indeed, the ease of flow is often the means by which those more difficult conversations are silenced. Sugar is a powerful exemplar of this simultaneous conversational ease and difficulty.

Sugar has increasingly supplanted fat as the dietary enemy *du jour,* and is the latest in the parade of food scares that marks the waxing and waning of consumption trends and the knowledge claims that underpin them (Levenstein 2012). Hidden inside everyday processed foods and packed with 'empty' calories, sugar is seen as wreaking havoc on bodies, and particularly those of children, disrupting metabolic functions, rotting teeth and laying down layers of fat which are seen as leading to expensive, productivity-damaging, life-shortening

health problems. It is a crisis about which *something must be done*– an urgency articulated in national and international policy documents (PHE 2015, WHO 2015) and public health campaigns (Action on Sugar 2014, Change for Life 2017), as well as in the proliferating roster of TV and film documentaries and popular science and 'wellness' tracts advocating low-sugar / no-sugar lifestyles (Gillespie 2008, Lustig 2009, Lustig 2014, Wilson 2014, Taubes 2017). The rapid proliferation of these texts signals the ease with which the anti-sugar conversation has gained purchase. This ease is facilitated by the dovetailing of anti-sugar with anti-obesity rhetorics and practices, which are driven by the same urgency to action (Boero 2012, Saguy 2013); to talk about sugar is always to talk about obesity, and the popularity of these responses speaks to the successful sedimentation of the 'wrongness' of sugar in the popular imagination, and the persistent demonization of the fat body as something that always must be apologised for and subjected to management and control, especially for women (Murray 2008).

For the last three years, I've been researching the contemporary social life of sugar[1], and in particular, its role in reviving a flagging 'war on obesity' which has consistently failed over the last two decades to achieve its own objectives of significant reductions in obesity rates. Informed by Fat Studies scholarship (Gard and Wright 2005, Rothblum and Solovay 2009, Tomrley and Kaloski Naylor 2009, Farrell 2011, Boero 2012, Saguy 2013), my research challenges the prevailing 'truths' of sugar, instead locating it in the wider social and cultural context of austerity and social inequalities within which the attack on sugar has come to make sense. I argue that rather than simply being a knowable and singular threat to health, sugar is a vector for social anxieties around deserving and undeserving citizenship, run through with gendered, raced and classed assumptions about what constitutes the 'good body' (Throsby 2018a, Throsby 2018b). As such, the aim of my research is never to intervene in, proscribe or prescribe eating behaviours, but rather, to ask what 'work' sugar is performing in the social domain, what the singular focus on sugar obscures and what inequalities it facilitates.

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Karen Throsby: But you're not defending sugar, are you?

The most common first response when I present the research is the alarmed question: "But you're not defending sugar, are you?"; or, in another manifestation of the same impulse, "But it *is* bad for you, isn't it?". At the heart of these questions is the imperative for me to acknowledge the 'wrongness' of sugar; that however marked by the troubling social inequalities and problematic assumptions about fat bodies that I have discussed, sugar *is* unhealthy and its consumption must somehow be curtailed. But this is not what I want to say. Instead, my work begins from the premise that the categorical presumption of 'badness' actively forecloses other, more pressing, conversations that cannot proceed from the foundational assumption that sugar is the primary cause of expensive health and social problems. As such, the difficulty of the conversation lies in the refusal to allow the discussion to be derailed into the narrow pathways of the health / unhealthy food binary. While for the questioner, the conversation cannot proceed without the assurance that sugar is 'bad', for me, it cannot proceed without refusing that conversational foundation. As such, sugar's difficult conversation is a disagreement about *which* conversation to have, rather than about the un/healthful status of sugar itself.

In this chapter, I argue that these difficult conversations create new spaces to move beyond entrenched discussions of the goodness / badness of particular foods and styles of eating, and that the difficulty of those conversations serves as warning against simplistic exhortations to think or behave differently without attending to the complex personal investments that always accompany talk about food and bodies.

Good food / bad food

Sugar is habitually and normatively positioned on the negative side of the good / bad food binary. Products that once trumpeted their 'fat-free' credentials now rush to declare their no-sugar / low-sugar status, and there is a thriving market in books, goods and services aimed at weaning people off sugar (Throsby 2018a). In 2014, as part of the launch of the campaigning group, Action on Sugar, Professor Simon Capewell – a clinical epidemiologist at the University of Liverpool – was widely reported in the media for his description of sugar as "the new tobacco", further sedimenting its increasingly unassailable position in the pantheon of enemies to good health (Action on Sugar 2014). Recent campaigns by Public Health England's *Change4Life* have invested heavily in the discourse of 'sugar as threat to

health' and have explicitly mobilised fear to drive that message home. For example, a January 2019 campaign ad showed monstrous and angry-faced sugar cubes bursting out of boxes of cereal and other snacks and drinks, overwhelming the terrified children who are eventually saved by their mother arriving home from grocery shopping having made a series of 'smart swaps' which drive the rampaging cubes away (Change4Life 2019).

Within this binary framing, the refusal to condemn sugar can only ever be cast as coming to its defence, hence the shocked concern that I might be defending sugar in my critical engagement with its social life. This draws the battle lines of sugar's difficult conversations, locking the discussion into a debate about whether or not it is healthy. In these moments, my refusal to join the chorus of voices denouncing sugar risks placing me in dangerous alignment with the forces of "Big Sugar", who staunchly position their products as part of a 'healthy' lifestyle governed by informed choice and the balancing of consumption with exercise and other practices commonly coded as healthy (Coca-Cola 2015) . Consequently, one of the challenges that I face in this project is finding ways to articulate my position without sounding like I am shilling for the food industry, and in particular, for "Big Soda", whose public demonization even exceeds that of sugar itself (Nestle 2015). This is part of sugar's difficult conversations – finding a language to express critique in a context where the terms of the debate are already firmly entrenched in ways that delimit that critique.

If I were to concede temporarily to the terms of the debate, I would argue that as much as any food can be categorised as 'good' or 'bad', sugar is not especially healthful, but that nutritionist approaches to food – that is, approaches the measure food entirely by its nutrient properties and perceived health effects (Scrinis 2015) – cannot begin to capture food's social meanings and values. It misses the pleasures and sociality of cooking and eating, and in relation to sugar, it dismisses as dysfunctional the deliciousness of sweetness and its fond associations for many with love and care. If forced to engage with debates about the health status of sugar, I would argue that the demonization of sugar as irretrievably health-damaging is contradicted by the fact that, apart from the most zealous of anti-sugar advocates, the moderate consumption of sugar is treated as legitimate. It is, however, important to note that this legitimacy is closely circumscribed by class, with middle-class 'treats' given approval that is not granted to foods associated with working

class consumption (Guthman 2003, Guthman 2007, Naccarato and LeBesco 2012, Johnson and Baumann 2015). And finally, I would argue that the case for the specific harms of sugar, and particularly those relating to obesity, lacks a firm evidentiary foundation. There is considerable uncertainty about the impacts of specific eating practices on health and bodies and their interactions with other factors (Gard and Wright 2005), and this is particularly true in the case of sugar, which is rarely consumed in isolation, but rather, is always incorporated into other foods.

But the more interesting – and difficult – conversation is whether we should even be talking about sugar and health at all, and instead, to ask what other conversations the desire for consensus around the health-damaging properties of sugar might be distracting us from. The next section begins this search for these alternative conversations by looking at another very common response to my sugar research: confession.

Confessing sugar.

The ubiquity of sugar as a familiar and appealing foodstuff, alongside its high profile as a 'problem' food, make it a research topic to which people relate both quickly and personally, and when they learn that I am researching the social life of sugar, I become a magnet for spontaneous confessions of a weakness for sugary foods, with people describing themselves as 'addicts', or laying claim to a hopeless 'sweet tooth'. Assuming that I am aligned with the attack on sugar and that my research aims at finding new (perhaps less discriminatory and shaming) ways to reduce sugar consumption, they apologise when eating sugary foods in front of me or make throwaway declarations of their intentions to eat less sugar tomorrow. This exemplifies sugar's easy conversations, with the familiar performances of guilt and shame flowing freely alongside the shared understanding of the delicious temptations of sugar.

Sugar does not have a monopoly on dietary confession, and sugar confessions are not unique, but rather, reflect its status as the latest in the catalogue of 'problem' foods whose consumption requires careful management and regulation (Levenstein 2012). The guilt and shame associated with the consumption of foods coded as 'bad' has a long history and is a core feature not only of the weight management industry but also of the wider social

context within which that burgeoning industry is made possible (Levenstein 2003, Biltekoff 2013). Dieters, for example, are urged to document their eating meticulously and minutely, publicly declaring slips, which are forgiven through those acts of confession and declarations of (re)commitment to the process (Stinson 2001, Heyes 2006), and this attention to detail extends far beyond the specific site of the weight loss meeting into the everyday. For example, nutritionist ideologies encourage consumers to maximise health by attending scrupulously to the micronutrients that comprise their meals (Scrinis 2015) and the recent proliferation of biosensing and self-tracking apps to monitor consumption and its impacts on the body extend, facilitate and intensify this monitoring, accounting and confessional imperative (Abril 2016, Lupton 2016). In the case of sugar, this minute accounting is reflected in contemporary demands to track the number of teaspoons or cubes we are consuming and to be 'sugar smart' by exercising meticulous economies, swapping out high sugar items for low sugar equivalents (Change for Life 2017). Sugar slips have to be confessed and errant consumption corrected in order to construct the self as the deserving dietary citizen.

But as with 'fat talk' more generally (Nichter 2000), being rendered the repository of those confessions in itself raises the prospect of a difficult conversation if I am unwilling to accept the role of confessor – a role which risks rendering me complicit in the circulation of guilt and shame that attaches so easily to food and bodies, but whose refusal may dismiss the very real concerns and struggles with food that people may be articulating through their confessions. Furthermore, in refusing the role of confessor and trying to avoid complicity with other people's body and food anxieties, I am also at risk of downplaying my own quietly rumbling, mundane insecurities around food and embodiment and of over-stating the ease with which those insecurities can be cast off (Throsby and Gimlin 2009).

The confessional response, then, is best understood not as a binary choice between complicity with, or repudiation of, embodied food anxieties, but rather, as an opportunity to consider the complex and multiple ways in which those confessions constitute confrontations with sugar. Sugar confessions rest upon the shared understanding that sugar is 'bad' and that its consumption should be curtailed. But they also expose our ambivalent relationship with sugar: it is desirable, even irresistible, even while being morally and

physiologically threatening; we give it to those we love as treats but feel guilt and shame when we eat sugary foods, and experience anger or disgust at the perceived (over-)consumption by others (and ourselves). This ambivalence plays a major role in sugar's difficult conversations; sugar can be eaten, enjoyed and regretted, but it can never be defended since restitution lies in renewed commitment to its repudiation. And yet, the inherent recognition of its pleasures (however delegitimised) and our affective attachments to sugar (however pathologized) opens up a space for thinking about sugar as always *more than* its nutritional content. And this 'more than' in turn opens up spaces for thinking about the social and cultural context of sugar and the conversations that are silenced in the rush to secure its place in the good / bad food binary.

Inequality matters, but….

One of the primary effects of the accusatory question, "But you're not defending sugar, are you?", is to sediment the foundations of the 'problem' of sugar as lying within sugar itself rather than the social and cultural context within which sugar has found its way so thoroughly into our food systems. The 'but' here speaks volumes, often reflecting agreement with my critical points about the ways in which individual sugar consumption is used to distract from the vast social inequalities that characterise food and eating, while clinging to the certainty that sugar is 'bad'. This puts the *how* of sugar reduction up for grabs without dislodging the imperative to *do something* about it.

This same discursive strategy of treating one aspect of the attack on sugar critically without letting go of its foundational claims is also a familiar feature of mainstream attempts to address the many harms that arise from the stigmatising of fatness. For example, Latner and Stunkard (2003) highlight the intensifying and damaging stigmatisation of fat children and argue that we need to work to actively reduce stigma, but always *alongside* ongoing efforts to treat obesity in children. And while Puhl and Brownell's work on bias, discrimination and obesity offers a comprehensive account of the multiple ways in which fat people are discriminated against because of their size and presumed moral failings, they still maintain the importance of enabling access to weight loss programmes for people who are fat. This is justified on the grounds that "[denying] obese people access to treatment may have medical consequences, but also denies people an opportunity to lose weight, which may

itself reduce exposure to bias and discrimination" (2001: 795) – an extraordinary claim that places responsibility for managing bullying and discrimination on the victims rather than the victimisers and the social and commercial structures that facilitate those oppressions. Indeed, three years later, Brownell co-authored the popular text, *Fat Fight*, which, while laying blame for the 'obesity crisis' at the door of the food industry (rather than the consuming individual), remains unambiguous in its calls for *something to be done* (Brownell and Horgen 2004). Fatness may not be a matter of individual blame in these models, but the fat body remains unacceptable and the extent to which the problematisation of fatness itself is implicated in that stigmatisation is left unconsidered.

One effect of this failure to interrogate context is the erasure of the social inequalities that characterise our food consumption, choices and preferences. Campaigns that begin from the premise that we *all* eat too much sugar flatten out the classed nature of these programmes, obscuring the ways in which particular social groups become the targets of anti-sugar / anti-obesity campaigns alongside the 'bad' foods that they are presumed to eat (Evans, Colls et al. 2011). This is not to argue that social inequalities are absent from anti-sugar discourse. Indeed, social inequalities are commonly mobilised as *justifications* for the demonization of sugar. For example, in March 2016 as debates around the sugar tax were raging in the UK, the Guardian cited Simon Capewell, in his role as vice-president of the UK's Faculty of Public Health, as saying: *"If you apply a sugary drinks tax across the board and everyone consumes 10% less, that produces a 1% reduction in disease overall. But in poorer areas that would be a three-times-bigger reduction compared with more affluent areas, because poorer people are two to three times more likely to get heart disease, diabetes, cancer or have a stroke"* (Campbell 2016). These speculative figures position the targeting of the poor as a social and financial win-win, with interventions into poorer communities giving the biggest bang for their buck. Sugar here figures as both the cause of, and solution to, social and health inequalities and the neat circularity of the argument quietly shifts responsibility for resolving inequalities onto those already most disadvantaged who will be nudged towards the 'right' food choices by the sugar tax.

Arguments in favour of interventions such as taxation in order to reduce sugar consumption rely on understandings of the 'crisis' of sugar (and by extension, obesity) as rooted in so-

called obesogenic environments which limit our choices and expose us to endless temptation to eat foods commonly categorised as 'bad'. In particular, socially and economically deprived areas are singled out for their high prevalence of fast food outlets, a paucity of accessible stores selling affordable fresh food, limited space for exercise and outdoor activity and threats to personal safety which lead people to favour driving over walking or cycling. The self-interested behaviours of 'Big Sugar' and the food industry loom large in anti-sugar and anti-obesity campaigns as the creators of these obesogenic environments, leading to efforts to place restrictions on advertising or to regulate access to sugary (and other 'junk') foods in public spaces such as schools and hospitals.

These food environment campaigns have a particular appeal to those committed to reducing inequalities, since they appear to offer a progressive alternative to stigmatisation and the individualising of blame. However, Kirkland argues that we should be sceptical towards seemingly benign commitments to the environmental argument since it "seems structural, but it ultimately redounds to a micropolitics of food choice dominated by elite norms of consumption and movement" (2011: 464). Environmental accounts, she argues, presume subjects duped by capitalist forces into health-damaging consumption, while at the same time presuming self-determining individuals who will make the 'right' choices once the proper context for those choices has been created (2011: 467). This replicates the conviction that elites are thriving *because* of their lifestyles (2011: 480) and returns the focus of attention back onto individual choices under cover of the more palatable target of the obesogenic environment and the capitalist giants whose profits depend on it.

This sleight of hand, however well intentioned, ignores the extensive evidence on the social determinants of health and the profound health impacts of social gradients (Wilkinson and PIckett 2010, Marmot 2015); as Guthman argues in her trenchant advocacy for food justice, "we cannot change the world one meal at a time", with meaningful change requiring different political rather than consumer choices (Guthman 2011: 194). This unpalatable claim pushes back against the neoliberal logics of meritocracy, whose 'justice narratives' "recognise structural injustice but then offer to sell neoliberal meritocratic solutions to them" (Littler 2018: 215). This pushing back displaces the easy conversations of informed dietary choices and just desserts with the more difficult conversations of middle class

complicity in the solidifying of social hierarchies of embodied consumption. Kirkland also warns that environmental accounts can be mobilised as a cover for other reforms that are directly against the interests of those who are already most disadvantaged. For example, she highlights the free market tying together of health care, insurance and rewarded statuses and behaviours that "keeps the focus on fat's costs and burdens to society and emphasises personal responsibility for one's body" (2011: 480). This is not to suggest that those endorsing environmental arguments are not acting out of genuine concern over health inequalities, but rather, that the privileging of fatness (or sugar) as *the* problem to be solved limits the terms of the debate and the solutions that can be imagined – for example, by focusing on facilitating 'better' choices rather than economic redistribution (2011: 481).

The recognition that there is genuine concern over health inequalities at work in the determined seeking of a consensus around sugar's 'badness' is an important contributor to sugar's difficult conversations. When I try to highlight what I understand as the harms of anti-sugar interventions and the conversations from which I think they distract attention, my interlocutor effectively stands accused of inflicting or endorsing that harm, however inadvertently. Similarly, to someone who is heavily invested at a personal level in the reduction of sugar from their diet, my argument can be experienced as devaluing the work they have put into that project and the feelings of empowerment that can come from exercising control over the body (Heyes 2006). I am also aware of my own privilege here as a white, middle class, middle aged academic on whom the burdens of gendered bodily surveillance weigh less heavily than they do for many. Conversely, Kirkland notes how, in making her argument against environmental accounts, she has been accused of a racist and sexist refusal to help poor minorities (2011: 464), and that refusing to ground her arguments in the 'wrongness' of obesity (or, in my case, sugar) can be construed as wilful complicity in the degradation of the health of those already made vulnerable by poverty and discrimination. This echoes King's observation in her research on pink ribbon campaigns that raising critical questions about the foundational assumptions of those campaigns risks being cast as mean-spirited, or even as opposing the search for a cancer cure (2006: 79). The urgent question – "But you're not defending sugar, are you?" – follows a similar pattern, re-casting the refusal to condemn sugar as complicity in the harms that sugar is presumed to inflict, particularly on its poorest and most disadvantaged consumers. Sugar's

difficult conversations, therefore, always have the potential to wound sincerely held convictions about who we see ourselves to be and how we want to be seen in the world.

Conclusion

In spite of the ease of conversational flow about food, food conversations are saturated with difficulty. Sugar, as the most recently targeted food enemy, is no exception to this. While conversations premised on the shared understanding of sugar as 'bad' can flow with relative ease, the refusal to found an understanding of sugar upon its 'badness' constitutes a major disruption to that flow that exposes the tensions already present but subsumed by that foundational consensus. Contemporary attacks on sugar raise important questions about food justice and health inequalities, while simultaneously speaking to individually-held (and socially endorsed) concerns about food, embodiment, responsibility and citizenship. These are bound up with the feelings of guilt, shame, pride and pleasure that characterise our complex relationships with all food, including sugar, and in which we are all to some degree implicated. Consequently, the difficult conversations triggered by the accusatory question, "But you're not defending sugar, are you?", are never really about whether or not sugar is bad for you. Instead, the most difficult, and important, conversation to have about sugar is deciding which conversation to have.

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