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REVIEW ARTICLE

Socio-economic Status, Forms of Capital and Obesity

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Abstract
Introduction While the relationships among socio-economic status (SES) and obesity are powerful and synergistic, the SES construct is insufficient to describe some of the cultural influences on status production in society, and therefore on obesity production. Socio-economic status has two closely related dimensions. The economic one is represented by financial wealth while the social one can incorporate education, occupational prestige, authority and community standing. These are, however, incomplete explanations for the relationships between societal inequalities and obesity.
Discussion Cultural factors associated with SES and obesity are examined here by using Bourdieu and Boltanski's theory of practice, which links economic, social and cultural forms of capital (or value) in an overarching category of symbolic capital. These represent categories through which power relationships within society are negotiated. This construct permits a more complete examination of societal stratification and its human biological consequences and amplifiers, since it incorporates the notion of cultural value in different groups of, for example, preferences in body size and shape. The focus is primarily on the USA, although it draws on literature from elsewhere in the industrialized world where appropriate. Differences in obesity rates across major ethnic groups are discussed, because this is an area in which forms of capital differ, and may offer new insights into obesity and factors that predispose to it, as forms of symbolic capital.

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Introduction

In industrialized societies, obesity is a characteristic of lower social and economic classes [26], having been associated with higher classes prior to widespread economic prosperity [43]. This is true in Italy [20] and across Europe [36]. Obesity and low socio-economic status (SES) are tied in a transgenerational vicious circle, such that obesity leads to low SES, and low SES produces obesity. Children and adolescents in households enmeshed in a physical and social environment configured by the low SES of their parents and caregivers are more therefore likely to develop obesity which persists into adulthood [20, 45]. Childhood obesity is also socially stigmatized [24, 35], and obese children usually face social disadvantages in education, healthcare and interpersonal relationships, as well as facing discrimination in employment when they become adults [9, 34].

While the relationships among SES and obesity are powerful and synergistic, the SES construct is insufficient to describe some of the cultural influences on status production in society, and therefore on obesity production. Socio-economic status has two closely related dimensions. The economic one is represented by financial wealth while the social one can incorporate education, occupational prestige, authority and community standing. These are, however, incomplete explanations for the relationships between societal inequalities and obesity. Cultural factors associated with SES and obesity are examined here by using Bourdieu and Boltanski's [7] "theory of practice", which links economic, social and cultural forms of capital (or value) in an overarching category of symbolic capital. These represent

categories through which power relationships within society are negotiated. This construct permits a more complete examination of societal stratification and its human biological consequences and amplifiers, since it incorporates the notion of cultural value in different groups of, for example, preferences in body size and shape. The focus is primarily on the USA, although it draws on literature from elsewhere in the industrialized world where appropriate. Differences in obesity rates across major ethnic groups are discussed, because this is an area in which forms of capital differ, and may offer new insights into obesity and factors that predispose to it, as forms of symbolic capital.

Symbolic Capital and Obesity

The SES inversion of obesity in western societies has been explained by generally increased purchasing power, decline in food price and of low material quality of food available to people of low SES [13]. A more nuanced explanation comes from Sobal [39], who places income, education and occupation as separate but interactive predictors of obesity. Neither explanation is complete, since neither accommodates cultural capital in, for example, differences in food choices and perceptions in ideal body size. A further explanation is put forward here, one that locates SES within Bourdieu and Boltanski's (31) framework of different forms of capital, most importantly economic, social and cultural.

Economic capital allows purchase of adequate food supply and technological means of transport and recreation, and some types of cultural capital. Social capital is a characterisation of group cohesion through social intercourse that facilitates cooperation for mutual benefit [3]. Groups considered of either high or low social status when compared with each other may possess equal levels of social capital, if they have equal levels of within-group social cohesion. While social capital can explain why obesity can persist within class formations, for example, through obesity networks [10], economic capital can help explain why overall obesity levels should rise with increasing economic prosperity, but only to levels where average individual food security is good. Three subtypes of cultural capital have been elaborated [7]. Embodied cultural capital consists of properties of the self that are either consciously acquired or inherited through socialization within the family and its social networks. Given differences in the cultural valuation of body size among different ethnic groups in the USA, obesity may carry greater embodied cultural capital in groups that value greater body weight than among groups that do not. Objectified cultural capital is represented by physical objects which can convey status symbolically, and can include such things as works of art, prestigious brands of motor car and designer-labelled clothes. If such objects carry monetary value, they may be bought and sold, and therefore economic and cultural capital may be traded. Institutionalized cultural capital consists of recognition of individuals by the state, most usually in terms of academic credentials, qualifications and honours.

Different societies and subgroups of societies vary in the value they place on different types of capital. If obesity and fatness carry cultural capital in a society or ethnic group, as for example, among African Americans, this may represent embodied capital which is valued in a context where other forms of capital are hard to acquire. Different forms of capital flow into each other, and there are upper levels to the amount of different types of capital that can be accrued. The limits of embodied capital probably lie in socially exposed extreme pathologies. Low body mass associated with anorexia nervosa to an extent that is externally visible becomes socially stigmatizing, as does high body mass when associated with extreme obesity. When set in a broader frame of symbolic capital, the relationships between obesity and SES are opened up to cultural factors such as embodied capital, which is constituted differently by different groups, as defined, for example by national, ethnic, racial or migratory characteristics, and which is formed across the lifespan with the acquisition of symbolic capital.

Ethnicity, Symbolic Capital and Obesity

In the USA, Zhang and Wang [49] found inequality in the distribution of obesity according to SES to vary enormously according to gender and ethnicity. They found a consistent inverse association between SES and obesity among European Americans of both genders, but not among non-European Americans. For example, a positive relationship between SES and obesity was found for African American and Mexican American men, but not for women. Among African American children and adolescents, SES is positively associated with obesity in both boys and girls, this effect persisting into adult life for males. Among European Americans, a negative association between SES and obesity in childhood disappears in adolescence and reappears in adult life for males, while for females a positive association between SES and obesity in childhood becomes inverted in adolescence, remaining so into adult life. Among Mexican Americans, more children of lower SES are obese than those of higher SES, these differences largely disappearing in adolescence. A positive association between SES and obesity emerges among adult male Mexican Americans, but not in females [44]. What these disparities reveal is that either the socio-economic environment affects different ethnic and age groups differently, or that low SES means different things in different groups.

Some of the ethnic variation in obesity rates by SES among children and adolescents has been attributed to

disparities in the availability of food stores across neighbourhoods inhabited by different groups [44], with African Americans and Mexican Americans generally having access to fewer chain supermarkets than Europeans [33], and lower SES and minority groups having restricted access to physical activity facilities [21]. Childhood obesity has been linked to neighbourhood of residence, with characteristics such as walkability [40], differentials in socio-economic mix [15], and disadvantage and relative safety [31] being cited as the dominant environmental causes.

Life course differences in obesity rates and variation by SES among Mexican Americans and European Americans may reflect the inadequacies of the SES construct in capturing ethnicity factors [47]. They may also suggest that either social life in childhood, adolescence and adulthood takes place in discrete social fields or cultures, or that the social groupings embedded in particular ethnic groups are in transition. Media representations in the USA encourage a separation of social fields between childhood, adolescence and adult life, although the boundaries across such fields is porous and varying according to how much of everyday life is negotiated among people of different ages within the intersecting fields of the household, work, school and social and religious groupings. Mexican American society is much more in demographic and geographic transition than that of the majority of European American or African American society, with the number of people of Latin American origins in the USA more than doubling between 1980 and 2000 [38].

The capital framework of Bourdieu and Boltanski [7] can offer other reasons for these differences. In childhood, the social and economic capital of an individual is largely that of the social grouping and of parents and caregivers, and children of low SES carry much less of either type of capital than do children of high SES. In adolescence, some children of low SES may acquire more economic capital than their high SES equivalents simply because they may leave school early and take on jobs. And in the absence of paid employment, higher engagement in criminal activity by low SES adolescents serves the same ends. Among African American men, obesity adversely affects wages and labour force participation, and increases incentives for participating in criminal activity. While children and adolescents of higher SES are also likely to attain more institutional cultural capital than their lower SES counterparts, if embodiment ideals are towards larger body size among the low SES group, then they can acquire more embodied cultural capital in this way. And while objectified cultural capital may depend on the economic circumstances of parents and caregivers, some forms of such capital can also be acquired relatively cheaply in industrialized society, for example through the purchase of branded fast food. Embodied capital reflects the values of the dominant forces in society. Thus, bodily ideals of greater body weight might come to carry less embodied capital among migrants than in their country of origin, as cultural ideals of thinness are promoted more heavily in industrialized countries.

Alternatively, obesity may be favoured by groups that seek to resist a dominant ideology, as perhaps among some African American groups. Among African American children and adolescents, embodied capital associated with larger body size (stopping at the level of pathological obesity) has persisted even among those of higher SES [44] and this may reflect resistance and the maintenance of ethnically dominant cultural capital ascriptions to large body size. Adult African American women prefer body size which is larger, on average, than similar groups of European American women [19]. Furthermore, overweight and obese African American women perceive themselves to be healthier, more attractive and more attractive to the opposite sex than white women of similar weight and age [4, 42]. European Americans, on the other hand, experience dissatisfaction with their own body size at lower body weight than either Mexican or African Americans [18]. Obesity rates among African American children and adolescents are similar to those of African Americans, and higher than those of European Americans [44]. Among Hispanic groups, for example, women are more satisfied with their bodies than are white women despite having higher weights [11], are less concerned with weight than whites [25] and are more likely to rate themselves as attractive [1]. Furthermore, while white women report body dissatisfaction below the criterion for overweight, Hispanic women do not do so until they are overweight [18] nor do they endorse thin beauty ideals [37]. And Mexican Americans, while being heavier than whites, engage in less dieting behaviour [41] and report higher desired body weights than whites [48].

Food and the Body as Two Types of Cultural Capital

Most approaches to obesity fail to acknowledge that the body is not just a machine for living in but also an object for negotiating the world and an individual's social identity. If obesity carries cultural capital in a low SES group, it may be one of the few forms of capital that a group may have. If people of low SES are surrounded by branded fast-food outlets, the selection, purchase and consumption of fast food may be another achievable form of cultural capital. If embodied capital is what particular ethnic groups or social classes have most of, and if large body size is valued, then the health implications of obesity may be peripheral to their struggle for what social position they can get. Within a low SES group, larger body size may endow status when in a broader societal context little else is available by which to mark status or symbolic capital. And within group, childhood obesity may be an outcome of such symbolic capital

acquisition. Where, among migrants, slimmer body size ideals emerge, as among Pacific Islanders in New Zealand [8] and young Mexican American girls [23], this may reflect a re-alignment of body size and shape preferences to minimize rejection, ostracism and negative social relations in the intersecting social fields of school and the workplace. In the USA, overweight and obesity have been stigmatized across the past hundred years or so [14, 34], the prevalence of such stigma having almost doubled since the mid 1990s [2]. Obesity stigma among adolescents shows similar patterns to that among adults [12].

The symbolic coding of food has been elaborated to a high degree across history in industrialized and industrializing nations, a process that has accelerated with the development of global food cultures and of diverse supermarkets and restaurants to deliver them. Using Europe as his example, Bourdieu [6] elaborated the view that social capital can be gained through food by using it as a vehicle for reproducing social class distinctions. As social class groupings are determined by a combination of varying degrees of social, economic, and cultural capital, they incorporate symbolic goods, especially those regarded as having the attributes of excellence, "as weapons in strategies of distinction". Excellence is shaped by the dominating class and is driven by cultural capital, which marks differences between the classes, and which is gained by learning the aesthetic dispositions of the class one is born to. Thus tastes in food are indicators of class, and trends in their consumption vary by class, with lower classes opting for cheaper, fat-rich foods that can be eaten plentifully, with higher classes opting for foods marked by originality and exoticism.

How can people of low SES acquire cultural capital through food? Not through buying expensive luxury items, because price and lack of local availability prohibits it; rather, fast food often provides such an outlet. The USA and other industrialized nations have seen fast-food consumption grow to a significant proportion of daily intake. For example, the proportion of daily dietary energy intake from restaurants and fast-food providers by USA adolescents increased threefold between the late 1970s and late 1990s, from 6.5% to 19.3% [29]. In a nationally representative dietary survey, fast-food consumption in the USA was reported for the day prior to survey among 42% of children and adolescents, and 37% of adults [30]. Fast-food manufacturers have developed product lines that carry images of originality, exoticism and often global power. These products attain value as cultural capital through branding and advertising, and objectified status can be accrued by an individual for at least the time it takes them to think about fast food, chose the brand, chose the items they want to eat, and to eat them. Such capital is price sensitive for adolescents but not younger children (largely because parents do the buying), with the probability of obesity being lower where fast food is more expensive for the former age group [32].

Although the use of food in the quest for status is universal among all societies, high-status foods vary enormously across societies [46]. Bourdieu [6] suggests that class distinction and preferences are most marked in ordinary choices of everyday life, with cooking and tastes in food. These, he suggests, are primarily learned in childhood. In the industrialized world, children identify the symbolic value of foods from an early age. For example, preschool children in the USA are aware of and can identify advertised food brands, and by the age of 7 years can shop independently and find information about what they want to buy, and show what they have bought to other children [28]. Again, where options for building cultural capital are limited, branded fast foods are an affordable option for the children of poorer groups in the USA and elsewhere.

An example of how cultural capital may be attributed to foods and their consumption is that of meat. Fiddes [17] has written extensively about the symbolic value of meat, particularly among elites, for whom it has been a means for demonstrating authority. Globally, the demand for meat remains impossible to meet and it remains a prestige good, and a form of objectified cultural capital through consumption. When, in industrialized societies, everyone can eat meat, the higher classes can distinguish themselves by consuming only the most aesthetically desirable types and cuts of meat, or by shunning it altogether, and consuming other types of prestige foods. The branding and advertising by fast-food companies of otherwise low-grade meat and animal tissue into meat products such as burgers and sausages separate them from their source within an animal, elevate their status and influence their consumption among lower SES groups [22] by keeping its price low. Again in the USA, fast-food consumption and neighbourhood fast-food exposure are both associated with poor diet [27]. Childhood food choices are flexible and are shaped primarily by parental and caregivers [16]. However, media-use influences consumption of media-promoted foods [5], through branding and advertising on television and the internet. Thus children's food choices are increasingly influenced by corporate interests and not solely their familial or local social fields.

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

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