

Fat Chances? The Obesity Problem in Tamworth

GARETH M. THOMAS



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A childhood friend recently told me Tamworth, a Staffordshire town which I've called home for the majority of my 25 years, had received the tragic honour of being the UK's 'fat capital'. This particular term was used by Joanna Moorhead in a [Daily Mail article](#) in March. I'd been aware of Tamworth's obesity problem for some time but have only recently stumbled upon Moorhead's contribution to the matter. Moorhead's article largely reflects wider (unhelpful) attitudes within both media and policy that vilify people for 'choices' they are seen as 'freely' taking. While the obesity problem facing Britain is very real, there is a tendency to oversimplify a complex issue in terms of personal responsibility, with commentators like Moorhead unproblematically claiming that the obese 'lack the knowledge – or the willpower – to do anything about it'.

Having grown up in Tamworth, I was pleased the issue was covered nationally. However, the headline '*The town where McDonald's counts as health food: Tamworth is named obesity capital of Britain*', highlights the prejudiced and parochial nature of recent accounts. Moorhead begins by suggesting 'the air of Tamworth is heavy with the pungent stench of frying food', and relies heavily on unfair and generalised anecdotes about specific local people supposedly representative of the whole. One example involves a local who suggests McDonald's counts as healthy food, leading Moorhead to conclude that the people of Tamworth have a 'shocking lack of knowledge about what constitutes a healthy diet'. Another example of Moorhead's belittling

account includes highlighting that ‘the calorific content of the average Tamworth schoolgirl’s daily diet seems to have rocketed’ since her short stay near the town around 30 years ago.

When contemplating why obesity has become such a public health issue, Moorhead openly denounces [genetic and policy explanations](#). For Moorhead, the reasons for obesity are simple – it’s a lack of knowledge among lazy people regarding a healthy diet. She later paints a picture of an entire community travelling on mobility scooters which become ‘chariots for townsfolk who have disabled themselves by eating too much’ (if we’re relying on anecdotes as evidence, I know not one Tamworthian who owns a mobility scooter). Moorhead supports her claims with observations such as people are becoming ‘more of a drain on the very state they blame for their weight problems’ and ‘weight management comes down to a simple equation — balancing the energy we consume in food and drink against the energy we expend in exercise’.

There is no such thing as a simple equation when contemplating the politics of obesity. Even accepting that individuals should take responsibility for their health, this should not be granted the status of ruling paradigm in concluding *why* individuals gain weight. Indeed, it is equally the *chances of choice*, of having opportunity structures available to achieve healthy living, which shape health and lifestyle preferences. Moorhead even identifies wider structural issues which may fuel Tamworth’s obesity problem, including insufficient access to gyms/leisure centres, the growth of retail units outside of the town centre only accessible via car or bus (and leaving empty town centre units to be filled by cheap food outlets), and the practicalities of managing a work/life balance.

However, whilst such developments are acknowledged, Moorhead dismisses these in favour of relying on sweeping and acerbic condemnations of ostensibly lethargic individuals choosing to be obese. Moorhead even suggests youth unemployment holds a direct relationship with the burgeoning trend: ‘perhaps the only thing more depressing than the people of Tamworth’s weight problem is the residents’ apparent lack of aspiration — and the two seem inextricably linked.’ Moorhead claims that ‘the locals’, whoever they may be, equate this absent aspiration to youth ‘signing on [the dole]’, drawing attention to the potential denigration of the young unemployed. These ideas reflect forms of class hatred as exposed in the recent televised exchange between [Holly Willoughby and Katie Hopkins](#) (see Owen Jones’ excellent [Chavs: The Demonisation of the Working Class](#) and the work of [Imogen Tyler](#) for more on the class dynamic). Moorhead continues:

[...] the Tamworth pig, which is unsuited to modern farming techniques, is listed as ‘vulnerable’ by the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. [...] I can’t help thinking it should be the overweight people of Tamworth, rather than its eponymous pig, who are on the endangered list.’

I certainly do not lay claim to knowing how the problem of obesity can be fully resolved, yet I suggest persons – especially those holding privileged positions in media and government – should not rely on simplified and vilifying censures that discount the complexity of this

problem. Obesity is invariably affected by a range of social, psychological, political, economic, cultural, and biological factors. The work of [Julie Guthman](#), notably, draws attention to this intricacy by suggesting that touting fresh/organic food as the solution to obesity further hides class/race inequalities and neglects other explanations of the problem including, interestingly, the potential effects of environmental toxins. Similarly, in her book '[Fat](#)' (2012), Deborah Lupton explores fat as a cultural artefact in which bodies are given meaning by complex and shifting systems of discourses, practices, objects, sensual experiences, and interpersonal relationships.

Sadly, similar to Moorhead, [recent policies](#) largely commit to person-based explanations which attribute health problems to illogical lifestyle choices (what David J. Hunter calls a '[lifestyle drift](#)'). Whilst this approach inevitably leads to the demonisation of alleged non-conformists, it further neglects the most pertinent issues, particularly the realistic opportunities available to people to achieve healthy living both effectively and permanently. Certainly, we should be developing health promotion interventions directed toward places *as well as* people; *where one lives* is as important as *who one is*.

Now, who knows how to get hold of Jamie Oliver?