
The article in on Slate.com presents one individual's thoughtful, if emotional, response to a study on the heritability of obesity. The scientific study which was developed addressed statistics of body mass index and waist circumference of monozygotic and dizygotic twins between the ages of eight and eleven years in the United Kingdom of Great Britain. The data gathered was used to analyze statistical significance in correlations between individuals of twin pairs and between other individuals.

The study was developed to address "shared environment" variables which had limited the utility of former studies on the heritability of obesity, as well as the impact of the "obesogenic environment" created in and sustained by modern society. Past studies had shown a high correlation (55-85%) in regard to the heritability of body mass index values. The results of the new study show that body mass index is approximately 77 percent heritable. Also, contrary to common belief, "shared environment" analyses between siblings accounted for only 10 percent, thus implying that diet and exercise habits defined by the home environment ultimately have little impact determining obesity.

One of the conclusions made in the study was the claim that the study's findings reject the desire of many to blame obesity on bad parenting. The researchers state that, "excessive weight gain in a child is unlikely to be the fault of the parents and is more likely to be due to the child's genetic susceptibility to the obesogenic features of the modern environment". In addition, they propose that, while the epidemic of obesity in Western nations is "predominantly environmental" or a product of a
sedentary society which is fed by both fast food and the television, the variation in obesity between children presently is best explained by genetic difference.

The author of the response on Slate.com provides a short summary of the nature of the study's purpose, quantitative findings, and conclusions. Beyond summary, he discusses the inherent struggle in modern medicine to pit genetics and the environment as mutually exclusive causes for current realities and that the complex interplay of the two rejects such a simplistic formulation. Ultimately the thrust of his commentary is that the language provided in the conclusions of the scientific article present obesity as something akin to alcoholism or allergies, namely "an unevenly distributed biological predisposition to seek or suffer harm from common environmental factors".

I found the article and the study that it commentaried to be both informative and interesting. I think the author very clearly elucidated the problem of attempting to propose genetic heritability and environment as two disjoint causes for making up the human body on a case by case basis. There is not much to debate in terms of the study's findings, though I think that the study's authors perhaps overstepped reasonable bounds in saying that, "blaming parents is wrong". I feel that while genetic difference between individual children in a family may be an explanation for obesity in one or more children of a family, it is also the result of a lack of purposeful planning in a distinct diet/exercise for those children who need it. While obesity may be explained by genetic difference, it cannot be justified by such. As with the example of phenylketonuria described in both articles, a condition can be effectively dealt with if properly addressed. That being said, it is somewhat comforting to recognize that part of my physical makeup is derived from my genetic traits, rather than a lack of purposeful diet/exercise.