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Health

By Rebecca Tan

## Feeling Inferior Makes People Eat More

Feeling socially inferior made people prefer unhealthy food and eat 65 percent more, study says.



*AsianScientist* (Dec. 28, 2016) – Feeling socially inferior is enough to make people eat more, according to a study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*. These findings suggest that apart from financial deprivation or stress caused

by poverty and low socioeconomic status, simply feeling poor is sufficient to trigger over-eating.

In social animals, being low on the pecking order is linked to an increased intake of food and fat accumulation, a strategy thought to compensate for the additional stress of having low social status. Interestingly, poor socioeconomic status in humans is also linked to adverse health outcomes such as obesity and diabetes.

“As a social psychologist, questions of how people navigate status hierarchies and made sense of their own social standing were always of interest to me,” said Bobby Cheon, an assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University’s School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

“In this study, we questioned whether the relationship between low socioeconomic status and obesity required an actual deficit in social and economic resources, or whether the mere perception or feeling of a deficiency was sufficient.”

To provoke the feeling of inferior social status in the test subjects, Cheon and his co-author Professor Hong Ying-yi from the Chinese University of Hong Kong showed them an image of a ladder representing society and asked them to compare themselves to either people at the top of the ladder or the bottom of the ladder. Following the comparison, the subjects were then asked to think and write about what it would be like to interact with someone from that rung of the ladder.

“The idea is that most people are going to feel relatively lacking or deprived of these resources that represent status when comparing themselves with the top rung of the ladder, which produces a feeling of being low in social class or rank,” Cheon explained.

“This manipulation doesn’t seem to produce the feelings of stress and insecurity that is associated with actual low socioeconomic status or poverty. Yet this makes the manipulation even more appropriate since we are seeking to demonstrate that increased appetite associated with feelings of low socioeconomic status is not simply a result of eating in response to stress.”

Study participants that were made to feel socially inferior were more likely to associate food like pizza and fried chicken with pleasant words, showing that they subconsciously preferred high-calorie foods. Furthermore, when offered snacks after the experimental manipulation of socioeconomic status, the low socioeconomic status group consumed 65 percent more calories than the high socioeconomic status group. These results suggest that feeling socially inferior not only changes the perception of food but can trigger actual food intake.

“One snacking or meal session in a laboratory may not be especially meaningful. But, for people who chronically feel low subjective socioeconomic status, this may translate to a modest but persistent increase in caloric intake that may gradually develop into obesity over an extended period of time,” Cheon told *Asian Scientist Magazine*.

Cheon intends to further investigate the impact of feeling socially inferior on the body's appetite regulating systems by studying appetite-related hormones such as leptin and ghrelin.

“Our research suggests that, independent of actual financial deprivation or stress associated with poverty and low socioeconomic status, simply feeling poor is a potential risk factor for excess caloric intake,” Cheon added.

“Interventions targeting obesity among people of lower socioeconomic means may need to address these psychological factors in addition to facilitating access to healthier diets.”

The article can be found at: [Cheon and Hong \(2016\) Mere Experience of Low Subjective Socioeconomic Status Stimulates Appetite and Food Intake.](#)

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