



Experiments show people who feel socially inferior yearn for fattier foods

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Credit: Maliz Ong

(Medical Xpress)—A pair of researchers affiliated with Nanyang Technological University in Singapore and the Chinese University of Hong Kong has found that when people are made to feel socially inferior, they tend to crave fattier foods. In their paper published in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Bobby Cheon and Ying-Yi Hong describe four studies they carried out that led to the same conclusions—feelings of social inferiority can cause people to want to eat more food and food that has a lot of fat in it.

Prior research has shown that people on the lower end of the economic spectrum tend to be more obese than those higher up, the researchers note, but there has been little consensus regarding the actual cause of it. In this new effort, the pair conducted experiments that showed that the likely factor was feelings of inferiority.

The four studies consisted of asking [volunteers](#) to imagine their place on a social/economic ladder—some were asked to see themselves as residing at or near the bottom while others were encouraged to see themselves as existing near the middle or top of the ladder. The volunteers

were then asked to fill out a questionnaire regarding their desire for [food](#) at a buffet and to describe what types of food they most wanted to eat. One of the studies involved inviting volunteers to an actual buffet and allowing them to eat from a choice of foods.

The researchers report that those volunteers who were asked to imagine themselves at or near the bottom of the social ladder not only imagined themselves eating more at the virtual buffet, but actually ate more when offered the real thing. In addition, the same group was also found to both desire fattier foods and to consume them when given the chance compared to other volunteers in the study. These findings, the researchers claim, show that it is often feelings of inferiority that cause economically challenged people to eat unhealthy foods, which leads to weight gain. The researchers suggest such a reaction could derive from an adaptive history when it made more sense for people without a reliable food source to eat more when it was available and to focus on those foods that were the fattiest because it would be the best choice for adding fat that could later be burned during lean times.

More information: Bobby K. Cheon et al. Mere experience of low subjective socioeconomic status stimulates appetite and food intake, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2016). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1607330114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1607330114)

Abstract

Among social animals, subordinate status or low social rank is associated with increased caloric intake and weight gain. This may reflect an adaptive behavioral pattern that promotes acquisition of caloric resources to compensate for low social resources that may otherwise serve as a buffer against environmental demands. Similarly, diet-related health risks like obesity and diabetes are disproportionately more prevalent among people of low socioeconomic resources. Whereas this relationship may be associated with reduced financial and material resources to support healthier lifestyles, it remains unclear whether the subjective experience of low socioeconomic status may alone be sufficient to stimulate consumption of greater calories. Here we show that the mere feeling of lower socioeconomic status relative to others stimulates appetite and food intake. Across four studies, we found that participants who were experimentally induced to feel low (vs. high or neutral) socioeconomic status subsequently exhibited greater automatic preferences for high-calorie foods (e.g., pizza, hamburgers), as well as intake of greater calories from snack and meal contexts. Moreover, these results were observed even in the absence of differences in access to financial resources. Our results demonstrate that among humans, the experience of low social class may contribute to preferences and behaviors that risk excess energy intake. These findings suggest that psychological and physiological systems regulating appetite may also be sensitive to subjective feelings of deprivation for critical nonfood resources (e.g., social standing). Importantly, efforts to mitigate the socioeconomic gradient in obesity may also need to address the psychological experience of low social status.

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