

COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES,
ARTS, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

Research Highlights 'Interview'



Self-Introduction

- Briefly introduce yourself, the department and school that you are in.

I am **Bobby K. Cheon**, a Nanyang Assistant Professor in the Psychology program of the **School of Social Sciences**. I am an experimental social psychologist studying psychological and social influences on appetite and eating behaviors.

Elaboration

- Share with us what is your research project.

This project seeks to test whether perceived inequality and feelings of having inadequate socioeconomic standing compared to others in society may stimulate appetite and unhealthy eating behaviors (e.g., preferences for high-calorie foods, larger portion sizes, and overeating). The experiments involve assigning people to situations where they are led to feel that they have a socioeconomically disadvantaged position compared to others (e.g., perceptions of having less money, status, and opportunities compared to peers). We then observe participants' subsequent eating behaviors, such as foods they select to eat or how much they eat during a meal, to investigate whether feelings of having low socioeconomic status alters one's relationship with food.

- What inspired you to embark on this research project?

There is a troubling trend that people who are poorer within modern developed societies are at greater risk of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases associated with poor diets. Yet some studies have shown that simply providing poorer people with more resources or access to healthier foods do not effectively correct these socioeconomic health disparities. This suggests that there may be other psychosocial factors that increase risk of unhealthy dietary practices of people with low economic means beyond a simple lack of access to healthier diets. My prediction is that the psychological experience of being poor, such as perceptions of being in a lower status position or being deprived of resources/opportunities others enjoy may influence eating behaviors independently of actual access to healthier foods.

- **What is/are the most interesting finding(s) of this project?**

My lab has found that subjective feelings of having socioeconomic disadvantage compared to others does indeed stimulate the desire to eat higher calorie foods, selection of larger portion sizes, and increased consumption of calories from meals and snacks – independent of a person’s *actual* socioeconomic status (e.g., income, education). An especially interesting finding is that these feelings of socioeconomic insecurity appear to influence hormones that regulate appetite. We observed that momentary insecurities about attaining insufficient socioeconomic status compared to peers produced an increase in circulating levels of ghrelin – a hunger hormone that stimulates appetite and the drive to eat.

- **How do you think your research can impact society?**

Promotion of healthier lifestyles and diets to combat the epidemic of obesity and diabetes is not only a priority of Singapore, but many societies across the globe. This research demonstrates how societal factors like social inequality may critically change people’s relationship with food to produce unhealthy dietary practices. This research also shows that socioeconomic disparities in these risks to health may not simply be due to limited ability to access or afford healthier lifestyles. Importantly, these findings suggest that addressing these health disparities may require targeting psychosocial experiences of poverty and inequality (i.e., the feeling of disadvantage and inadequacy compared to others in society).

Future Plans

- **Tell us about your future research plans and if you are looking for any research collaborators!**

Our lab has recently completed follow-up research that suggests building psychological resilience against perceived inequality and negative social comparisons with others may have positive effects on people’s eating behaviors. We will be continuing research to produce a psychosocial intervention to promote healthier eating behaviors and we welcome collaborators of all levels (undergraduates, postgraduates, faculty) on these projects.