



Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences

Proposed Title:

Exploring the influence of alexithymia and emotion dysregulation on emotional eating: a mixed-methods investigation and intervention

School: Social Sciences (Department of Psychology)

Proposed Supervisory Team: Dr Deborah Wallis, Dr Helen Egan, Dr Michael Mantzios

Abstract:

A growing body of evidence exists to support the proposal that stress and negative emotions affect health not only through direct physiological processes but also via changes in food choice and intake (e.g. Wallis & Hetherington, 2004; 2009). Emotional eating may be defined as the tendency to overconsume foods in response to negative emotions. Individuals who identify as emotional eaters using established validated measures are also at risk of weight gain, binge eating, and low mood (including anxiety and depression). Therefore, emotional eating behaviours have significant implications for health and wellbeing. Existing theories concerning emotional eating require extension in order to acknowledge the contributions of difficulties in processing and regulating emotions demonstrated by those who display disordered eating behaviours and emotional eating. The proposed research will examine, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the direct and indirect effects of alexithymia (difficulties in identifying and describing emotions) on emotional eating (in terms of both self-report and behavioural measures), with the aim of elucidating our understanding of the role of maladaptive emotion regulation in emotional eating cognitions and behaviours.

The proposed empirical investigations will inform the design of interventions to address and modify emotion regulation difficulties in those who display emotional eating. This is important to address, as these individuals have heightened vulnerability to weight gain and to developing clinically significant issues with eating behaviours. The aim of this research is to conduct comprehensive investigations, using qualitative and quantitative methods, to elucidate the contributions of alexithymia and maladaptive emotion processing to self-reported and behavioural measures of emotional eating. Informed by reviews of current findings and the results of empirical investigations incorporated into the proposed research, the ultimate aim is to design and test appropriate interventions to reduce emotional eating via modifying maladaptive emotion regulation.

Research Environment:

Three highly experienced researchers, all of whom have supervised a number of PhD students to completion, will supervise the research. The Department of Psychology has expanded significantly in recent years, and has the experimental facilities necessary to conduct the proposed laboratory testing methods. The PhD will also benefit from the specific expertise in qualitative methods offered by one of the co-supervisors. The research will be hosted within the Centre for Applied Psychology Research (CAPr) and is aligned primarily to the Applications and Interventions in Positive Psychology Cluster, of which all applicants

are members. It also fits clearly with the Health and Wellbeing Research Cluster, of which the lead applicant/ Deputy Director of Research in Psychology is a member.

Applicant Requirements:**Essential requirements:**

- Undergraduate degree in Psychology or cognate discipline (2.i or above)
- Proficiency in the use of MS Word and SPSS
- Evidence of good written and oral communication skills
- Proficiency in the use of experimental software or willingness to develop knowledge and understanding of experimental software
- Evidence of a genuine interest in the field and willingness to develop knowledge and understanding necessary to conduct the research

Desirable requirements

- Relevant experience in conducting similar research at UG and/or PG levels
- Master's degree in Psychology or cognate discipline (with evidence of advanced understanding of research methods and statistics)
- Experience in the use of experimental software (e.g. E-Prime, Gorilla, SuperLab)
- Experience with conducting data collection using online methods (e.g. Qualtrics)
- Evidence of an advanced understanding of statistical analysis and interpretation

The student should be expected to undertake the PG Cert in L&T and/or the PG Cert in Research Practice as part of their learning and development requirements.

Contact: Name, e-mail and telephone number:

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