

Sociocultural Factors Influencing Eating Practices Among Office Workers in Urban South Korea

Sohyun Park, PhD¹; Eunju Sung, MD, PhD²; Yuni Choi, MS³; Seungho Ryu, MD, PhD^{3,4}; Yoosoo Chang, MD, PhD^{3,4}; Joel Gittelsohn, PhD⁵

ABSTRACT

Objective: To understand the sociocultural factors affecting the eating behaviors of South Korean employees.

Design: In-depth individual interviews.

Setting: Two metropolitan areas of South Korea.

Participants: Thirteen male and 9 female office workers.

Phenomenon of Interest: The effects of sociocultural factors on office workers' eating behaviors.

Analysis: The researchers transcribed and analyzed audio-recorded interviews using thematic analysis.

Results: Among social and economic factors, participants with a family described a connection between female employment and lower frequency of home-cooked family meals. Working parents felt guilty about their need to depend on eating outside the home and eating processed foods because of their schedules. In addition, competitive and stressful working environments negatively affected workers' nutritional choices. Regarding cultural factors, given the powerful influences of collectivism and Confucianism on daily life, hierarchy and group harmony clearly had an important role in workers' everyday food choices. These included choosing menus that were most suitable for group meals and having to miss dinnertime while waiting until higher-position workers to leave work in the evening.

Conclusions and Implications: In this sociocultural setting, targeting office workers and changing social norms for healthy eating may be more effective than providing individualized interventions. These findings may be transferable to other, similar Asian countries.

Key Words: social influences, cultural influences, eating behavior, food intake, qualitative research, family meals (*J Nutr Educ Behav.* 2017; ■:1-9.)

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INTRODUCTION

South Korea has experienced a drastic epidemiological transition since the

1970s as the country's income level has increased.¹ Formerly prevalent undernutrition and different infectious diseases have been replaced

with obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cancer, and coronary heart disease.² Recent data have shown that 1 in 3 adults is overweight or obese and that approximately 30% of adults are hypertensive.³ Furthermore, changes in nutritional intake and dietary behaviors have emerged: the consumption of animal-based foods and fat has increased as the consumption of plant-based foods has decreased.¹ In addition, the prevalence of skipping breakfast continues to increase, with a quarter of working South Koreans reporting skipping breakfast in 2014.²

These changes in eating practices provide opportunities for improving the diet and health behaviors of the South Korean population. However, few studies have sought to understand the underlying causes of unhealthy eating practices or ways to promote a healthier diet among South Korean workers. Previous studies specifically examined a few aspects of office worker nutrition and health

¹Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Hallym University, Chuncheon, Republic of Korea

²Department of Family Medicine, Kangbuk Samsung Hospital, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea

³Center for Cohort Studies, Total Healthcare Center, Kangbuk Samsung Hospital, Seoul, Republic of Korea

⁴Department of Occupational and Environmental Medicine, Kangbuk Samsung Hospital, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, Seoul, Republic of Korea

⁵Department of International Health, Center for Human Nutrition, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, MD

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Address for correspondence: Eunju Sung, PhD, Department of Family Medicine, Kangbuk Samsung Hospital, Sungkyunkwan University School of Medicine, 22 Saemunan-Ro, Jongno-Gu, Seoul 110-746, South Korea; Phone: +(82-2) 10-3834-1363; Fax: +(82-2) 2001-1404; E-mail: eunjusung68@gmail.com

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behaviors.³⁻⁷ For instance, 1 study showed that >30% of office workers in metropolitan areas had engaged in binge drinking >4 times in the past month.³ Individual factors such as gender and one's position at work and organizational factors such as the size of one's company and the drinking climate at work dinners were shown to be associated with the prevalence of drinking and binge drinking among employees.^{3,4} Another study showed that perceived stress was related to preferences for spicy, salty, and sweet foods.⁵ Furthermore, a few small-scale cross-sectional studies among workers explored food intake practices such as skipping breakfast, consuming healthy foods, and participating in family meals.^{6,7}

Studies on workers' health from other countries identified organizational influences on employees' nutritional behaviors.⁸⁻¹⁰ In addition, a few intervention studies examined the physical and social environments that affect workers' food choices.¹¹⁻¹⁴ These previous studies showed several positive results of modifying the nutritional environment at worksites; however, few of them specifically explored social and cultural influences on workers' nutritional behaviors.^{9,15} Environmental interventions that mainly target the physical environment may be less successful because they do not account for important facilitators and barriers in the social environment.⁹ This lack of understanding of the social and cultural aspects of eating may hinder the development of more appropriate, efficient, and sustainable nutrition interventions.

Cultural factors that influence worker food choices were not well explored. The principles of Confucianism have long influenced the East Asian cultural sphere, including South Korea.¹⁶ Since the 20th century, its influence has decreased as society and cultures have changed; however, the emphases on respect for the elderly and on social harmony continue to have an important role in forming modern South Korean customs and culture.¹⁷ Another key influence on South Korean culture is collectivism, which emphasizes the group and its interests over individuals.¹⁸ These influences shape modern Korean society and corporate culture, in which workers make daily

behavioral choices that can affect their health.

Most workers have additional roles in their family and other social groups, and these various roles interact. Working parents were shown to employ food choice-coping strategies to manage competing demands at work and home.^{19,20} Time scarcity is 1 reason for the observed corresponding decreases in family meals and both the consumption of processed foods and eating out among employed mothers.²¹ Those previous studies found that job conditions and working environments may influence food intake practices at home. Because parents have a key role in shaping their children's eating habits, the underlying factors that affect food choices inside and outside the workplace deserve further examination to improve nutritional problems not only among adults but also in younger populations.

The purpose of this research was to understand the social and cultural factors affecting the food choices and eating patterns of employees. Specifically, in-depth interviews were conducted to answer the main research question: How do office workers describe sociocultural factors associated with their dietary intake? The following subquestions were also addressed: What key social influences are related to office workers' food choices? What cultural factors are associated with participants' food choices?

METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

Using purposive sampling to maximize variability,²² the researchers recruited a convenience sample of 22 office workers (13 male and 9 female) from 12 companies for the interviews, which were conducted in January to June, 2014. All participating companies were part of 1 corporate group. A flyer was posted on the company's Web bulletin boards that explained the objectives of the research and the brief interview process. The inclusion criterion regarding job characteristics was office-based work, regardless of field. From approximately 40 volunteers, 20 workers were selected based on their age, sex, and job characteristics. Because 2 volunteers were

unavailable for the scheduled interviews, a total of 18 workers ultimately participated in the one-on-one interviews. Using snowball sampling,²³ an additional 4 participants were recruited who had higher job grades, were in their forties, and had flexible working hours. These participants, footnoted in Table 1, were underrepresented among the initial volunteers and were included to maximize the variability of the experiences collected. Participant recruitment was discontinued when the data that were gathered reached saturation. All participants lived in metropolitan areas and were full-time office workers with at least a college degree. Participants received \$10 (US) gift certificates to local stores and a pedometer. All participants signed consent forms and the study protocol was approved by the institutional review board of Gangbuk Samsung Hospital.

Study Design

Qualitative in-depth interviews were the primary data collection method used. An ecological perspective based on the bioecological model¹⁹ was used to develop the interview guide (Table 2). Applying a constructivist approach, participants were asked open-ended questions that mainly addressed various environmental influences on daily eating behaviors and focused on how they perceived these environments. The data collection and analysis process used emerging design, context-dependent inquiry, and inductive data analysis.²⁴ In this way, it was possible to explore various influences on workers' eating behaviors that had not been documented in previous studies.

Data Collection

Most interviews occurred at or near the participant's workplace during lunch hours or directly after work. Two interviews were conducted at cafes near participants' homes during the weekend. Interviews lasted approximately 50–60 minutes and were digitally recorded with the approval of participants. A trained interviewer with a graduate degree in qualitative methods (the lead author, SP) conducted the interviews in

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