University of Zurich[UZH]

Department of Economics – Neuroeconomics Seminar

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How Eating Changes Effort-Based Decision-Making in Health and Bulimia Nervosa

Deciding whether to exert control requires predicting how much effort control will require and evaluating whether that effort is worth expending. Yet little is known about how these computations change after we eat. This question may be especially important in eating disorders such as bulimia nervosa (BN). Individuals with BN often rigidly control eating between binges, yet once eating begins, many describe finding it unexpectedly difficult to stop and a shift in their cost-benefit analysis (e.g., “Now that I’ve done it, I might as well go all the way”). I will present findings from two complementary studies that offer initial insights into how eating affects effort valuation and prediction in women with and without BN. First, I will present a laboratory study in which women with and without BN completed a cognitive effort discounting task in fasted and fed states. I will show how eating affects the valuation of cognitive effort and, using sequential sampling modeling, the dynamics of effort-based decisions. I will then turn to daily life, presenting ecological momentary assessment data on the effort women with and without BN expect versus experience when controlling their behavior, allowing us to examine effort prediction errors across real-world fasted and fed states. Across both settings, I will show that the effects of eating observed in healthy women are absent or reversed in BN. Finally, I will situate these findings within broader research on how physiological states shape decision-making and discuss their implications for understanding eating disorder symptoms.