

Trapped within a cycle? An in-depth exploration of the experiences of yo-yo dieters

H. I. A. Qazi, Y. M. Jeanes and H. C. Keval
Roehampton University, London, UK

Yo-yo dieting is a very common and widespread phenomenon in the Western world, yet little research has been carried out on the experiences and impact yo-yo dieting has on individuals. There is no precise definition of 'yo-yo' dieting, as it is quite a vague term. Weight lost and then regained can be described as a single weight cycle. Nevertheless, the number of cycles required to satisfy the criteria of weight cycling varies across studies, which in turn makes it difficult to ascertain the occurrence of yo-yo dieting. However, because dieting is so prevalent, and relapses are likely to occur, yo-yo dieting is assumed to be widespread⁽¹⁾. A very general and broad definition of weight cycling or yo-yo dieting is: going on and off a diet at various times, which consequently causes the weight to be lost and regained^(2,3,4,5). Studies carried out to evaluate psychological effects in yo-yo dieters have shown contradictory results^(1,2,6–12).

The aim of the present study was to investigate the effects of yo-yo dieting on social and psychological well-being and to explore and analyse the dietary, psychological and socio-cultural experiences of yo-yo dieters through the use of qualitative methodology. Literature on physiological, psychological and sociological factors and the media and its influence on yo-yo dieters has been reviewed in this research. Data were collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with women who yo-yo diet. The semi-structured interview was aimed at examining the impact of yo-yo dieting on individuals, and if the impact was negative, why they continued yo-yo dieting. Amongst the various analyses available in qualitative research, this research made use of thematic analysis^(11–15) to derive themes from the data.

Analysis identified the following themes:

1. Socio-cultural influence and pressure for going on diets frequently: '... There is a social thing going on and people expect women to be thinner, they don't expect us to be fat. Fat is ugly in our society ... and in the Western world, fat is even looked down upon ...' (Ann);
2. Influence of media's exposure in trying out new diets: '... I think the media plays a big role. Programs such as the American Idol are all basically saying that you have to have the looks, you have to be skinny ... if you're someone who sits a lot in front of the TV, that's the message that you're getting unconsciously the whole time and whenever you look at yourself in the mirror, you see something completely different from what you've been seeing on the TV ...' (Sue);
3. Perceived pressure from the opposite gender for going on diets frequently: '... In some cultures, you have to be thin if you want to be in a relationship. Men only like thin people. They don't like fat women so I do feel I have to be a certain image' (Rose);
4. Dissatisfaction with one's body image: '... I would look at myself in the mirror and see myself as fat and that's when my dieting started' (Ann);
5. Outcomes of the study were that many yo-yo dieters exhibited symptoms normally displayed by those that have been diagnosed with eating disorders: 'I think it is a kind of eating disorder behaviour ... But I am not sure which eating disorder it is ... some people when they get upset, they eat a lot so that's bulimic behaviour. But then it could be anorectic behaviour ... I just hope that I won't go further than this point' (Veronica);
6. Furthermore, there appears to be a link between yo-yo dieting and depression: 'I think you are depressed as you're doing the yo-yo dieting as you're desperate to do anything just to lose that weight quickly and you get even more depressed because of the fact that you falsely raised hope to yourself and there was no quick result there so you tend to get depressed and you start blaming yourself' (Sue);
7. Other outcomes were that childhood experiences played a role in influencing some women to go on diets repeatedly: 'I've been doing this kind of dieting since I was 15 or even younger because I was an athlete and I was doing athletics and because I was also doing ballet so I was getting criticised all the time about my weight plus my dad is diabetic so he was always scared that we would get diabetes as well so he was quite judgemental on our body weight so it has kind of grown into me for a very long time to be like that' (Veronica);
8. Yo-yo dieting affected women physically and/or mentally: 'I get very low about myself sometimes and I do get quite depressed. Actually, I take it out on my family ... I shout, get angry sometimes, because I am not actually sticking to something ...' (Jenny).

1. Lahti-Koski M, Männistö S, Pietinen P & Vartiainen E (2005) *Obes Res* **13**, 333–341.
2. The National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity (1994) *JAMA* **272**, 1196–1202.
3. Brownell KD & Rodin J (1994) *Arch Intern Med* **154**, 1325–1330.
4. Muls E, Kempen K, Vansant G & Sais W (1995) *Int J Obes Relat Metab Disord* **19**, Suppl. 3, S46–S50.
5. Ronzio RA (1997) *The Encyclopedia of Nutrition and Good Health*, p. 463. New York: Facts on File Inc.
6. Wadden TA, Bartlett S, Letizia KA, Foster GD, Stunkard AJ & Conill A (1992) *Am J Clin Nutr* **56**, 203S–208S.
7. Simkin-Silverman LR, Wing RR, Plantinga P, Matthews KA & Kuller LH (1998) *Int J Eat Disorder* **24**, 175–183.
8. Venditti EM, Wing RR, Jakicic JM, Butler BA & Marcus MD (1996) *J Consult Clin Psych* **64**, 400–405.
9. Foster GD, Wadden TA, Kendall PC, Stunkard AJ & Vogt RA (1996) *J Consult Clin Psych* **64**, 752–757.
10. Foreyt JP, Brunner RL, Goodrick GK, Cutter G, Brownell KD & St Jeor ST (1995) *Int J Eat Disorder* **17**, 263–275.
11. Bartlett SJ, Wadden TA & Vogt RA (1996) *J Consult Clin Psych* **64**, 587–592.
12. Friedman MA, Schwartz MB & Brownell KD (1998) *J Consult Clin Psych* **66**, 646–650.
13. Boyatzis RE (1998) *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
14. Foss SK & Waters W (2003) Coding qualitative data. <http://www.abdsurvivalguide.com/News/020603.htm> (Accessed February 2008).
15. Fereday J & Muir-Cochrane E (2006) *Int J Qual Meth* **5**, article 7 http://www.ualberta.ca/~iiqm/backissues/5_1/html/fereday.htm (Accessed May 2008).
16. Attride-Stirling J (2001) *Qual Res* **1**, 385–405.
17. Braun V & Clarke V (2006) *Qualitative Res Psychol* **3**, 77–101.