Evaluation of the perception and experience of Iranian adolescents of overweight and obesity using a qualitative approach

**Background:** Childhood obesity has reached epidemic proportions and has become one of the most important public health issues globally. Yet for prevention of obesity among adolescents, few intervention programs have been designed and implemented especially in developing countries such as Iran and they fail to achieve desirable impact. Conventional approaches about overweight and obesity prevention in children and adolescents and complexity of the issue has resulted in modest impact from previous interventions. The process of obesity among Iranian children and adolescents has also previously been poorly explored using qualitative approaches. Given the different sociocultural contexts of Iranian families, it seems that more qualitative studies are required to determine the process of childhood obesity among Iranian adolescents. Thus, the aim of the current study was to explore the perception and experiences of Iranian adolescents from being overweight and obese using a qualitative approach. It is envisaged that such a study would be indispensable toward designing and implementing interventional studies for childhood obesity prevention.

**Methods:** This qualitative study was conducted based on grounded theory in 2016–2018 in Mashhad and Isfahan, two large cities of Iran. Ten parents and 52 overweight and obese adolescents were selected through purposeful and theoretical sampling. To obtain perceptions and experiences regarding the cause and consequences of obesity, in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Data were analyzed based on Strauss and Corbin’s (1998) approach through open, axial and selective coding using MAXqda software.

**Results:** After analyzing the data, eight main categories which contributed to overeating were identified as "Disorganized Family," "Inaccurate Information Management and Nutrition Behaviors," "Social Psychosocial Overeating," "Passive Interaction in Friends' Social Networking," "Difference Generations," "Emotional Eating," "Inducing Needs," and "Media Seduction." Six major categories were determined which result in physical inactivity including "Prison House," "Social Constraint," "Loneliness," "Computerization," "Garrison School," and "School Shock". With regard to overweight and obesity four categories were identified "Inertia of Parents," "Passive Child," "Social Inefficiency," and "Negative Self-concept" which caused unhealthy behaviors. This analysis led to the hypothesis that individuals are facing a vicious calamity called the “Obesity Crisis.” The emergent theory from this study is the cycle of defective childhood obesity that is entitled "Childhood obesity crisis: Interaction of passive child, irresponsible parents, single-dimensional schools, and heterogeneous culture."
Conclusion: The findings suggest that childhood overweight and obesity is influenced by the interaction of several individual and environmental factors. Overeating and physical inactivity cause childhood obesity and then obesity leads to a myriad of negative perceptions and experiences. This situation poses several problems and challenges for children and adolescents that lead them to a vicious obesity crisis. Finally, the child or adolescent succumbs into the defective cycle of obesity.

Keywords: Adolescence; Grounded Theory; Overweight and Obesity; Qualitative Research.