

What Are the Psychology Scientific Discourses About Adolescence?

**Major Research Paper by:**

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## 1. Introduction

Adolescence is a “normative age status” and a modern concept that was created recently (Côté, 2016, p. 83). The historical definition of adolescence in the field of psychology has been associated with adolescents’ behavioral characteristics, such as: “emotional volatility and behavioral unreliability” (Côté, 2016, p. 81). Accordingly, Bucholtz (2002) states that Western psychologists describe adolescence according to social and biological transitions that influence their trajectory to adulthood. As Bucholtz states: “Western psychologists, who understand adolescence primarily as a preparation for adulthood, theorize this period as a time of potential crisis brought on by uncertainties of the physical and social transitions between life stages.” (p. 528). The language employed to describe adolescents has social implications in adolescents’ lives. Moreover, socially constructed ideas about adolescents can impact the social, political, cultural, and economic domains in which adolescents are involved (e.g., Resta, 1998, p. 1).

This research aims to sociologically analyze the language employed by psychology to describe adolescents and the social implications of such language in the experience of being an adolescent. The research questions will be the following: how does scientific psychological discourse define adolescents? And how can these discourses impact adolescents’ representation in society?

I chose the field of psychology for four reasons. First, it was chosen due to the knowledge constructed by influential scholars, such as G. Stanley Hall, who created a negative representation of the adolescence period, which impacts the social structures in society (e.g., education institutions, health, and criminal institutions). This representation will be further explained in section 2. Secondly, new theories are emerging from the field of psychology that concern adolescents, such as the Emerging Adulthood Theory by Jeffrey Arnett (which I will explain further in section 2). Although this theory is not directly related to adolescence, its

introduction in the life course influences the conceptualization of adolescence as a life stage. Therefore, I intend to explore the discourse of scholars in this field to analyse how adolescents are being represented.

Additionally, psychologists support the mainstream scientific discourse, which influences the scientific knowledge of human beings. Ultimately, the psychology's perspective is often the perspective that domains in society rely on to build policies and define their relationships with adolescents. As a result, psychology's point of view impacts adolescents' experience in society. Lastly, the research in the field of psychology influences and determines the approach and content of medical and social practice (e.g., psychologists; social workers), as well as policy makers in the legal system, criminal system, educational system, and others (Oliver & Cairney, 2019, p. 5).

In addition, although the term "youth" is more common in the field of sociology (Côté, 2016, p. 81), the term "adolescent" will be employed in this research. The choice of the term "adolescent" is driven by the political implications that such terms have for government policies, education policies and social policies for adolescents, among other policies. Also, whereas "youth" refers to a broad age group, "adolescent" refers to a smaller one. For example, The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) distinguishes the age stage for youth and adolescence. According to them, "youth" is between the ages of 10 to 24, whereas "adolescence" ranges from 10 to 19 years old (Côté, 2016, p. 81). Therefore, I will consider the age group 10 to 19 to define adolescence, as it is considered by The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), World Health Organization (WHO) and The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (Côté, 2016, p. 81).

The structure of this study will be divided into seven sections, including the introduction. After this section, I will contextualize the adolescents' representation in psychology, referring to the work of G. Stanley Hall and introducing Jeffrey Arnett's theory that influences the

conceptualization of adolescence. Finally, in the third section, which is the literature review, I will present the origin of the word “adolescence”, the main difference between the fields of sociology and psychology, and some scientific and social discourses on adolescence. Further, I will present this study’s conceptual framework and methodology. Then, in the fifth section, I will analyze the selected data, subdivided into four different themes emerged from the data. These themes are the adolescence as a life stage discourse, “at-risk” discourse; emerging adulthood discourse; and a youth-centred perspective. Afterwards, in the sixth section, I will discuss whether these discourses contribute to stigmatization or a positive perspective on youth to understand if these discourses can influence adolescents’ experiences. Lastly, I will conclude with a reflection on the study, building on some observations of the results of the analysis, the limitations of this research and how this study can contribute to further research on adolescence.

## **2. Contextualization of The Adolescents Representation in Psychology**

As mentioned above, this study intends to discover through a sociological analysis how scholars in the field of psychology are socially representing adolescents. This is important in reflecting the social implications of these representations, which will allow us to analyze if scholars adopt an approach that stigmatizes adolescents. In this section, I will contextualize the importance of this study and briefly discuss the adolescents’ representation in the field of psychology from Hall’s work on adolescence, and Arnett’s recent work on Emerging Adulthood Theory, which influences the conceptualization of adolescence as a life stage.

The object of this research is the psychology’s conception of adolescents. The purpose of the study is to broadly understand how adolescents are represented in the literature, specifically in psychology. This field was chosen because of its significant influence on how society

observes adolescents and makes policy decisions in the academic, criminal, and health systems, as well as others, based on its observance that is studied and published in scientific papers. Furthermore, analyzing how scholars in the field of psychology socially represent adolescents with a sociological perspective allows us to understand further the social implications of the representation of adolescents in the literature, such as how it affects the daily life of adolescents in different institutions (e.g., academic and health institutions, and the job market).

There are a few reasons why this research's object and purpose are necessary. First, the concept of "adolescence" as a developmental phase in the human life course is recent in Western culture (Condon, 1990, p. 267), and with the pace of social change and its impacts in the development of life stages, "adolescence" remains an ambiguous concept that differs across disciplines, theories, international organizations, along with others. For example, Côté and Levine (2016) indicate that some international organizations that belong to the United Nations use the concept of "adolescence" and "youth" to define the life stage of young people. UNESCO defines "youth" according to an age stage, from 15 to 24; whereas the United Nations Habitat defines it according to 15 to 32 years old; and the UNICEF, WHO, and UNFPA state that young people are from the ages of 10 to 24, in which adolescence and youth overlap, so adolescence being between the ages of 10 to 19 (Côté and Levine, 2016, p. 81). From this example, some ambiguity and lack of clarity can be glimpsed about the concept of adolescence. Adolescence as a developmental phase can be considered socially constructed. This means that how we interpret and label human beings living in the puberty phase is socially constructed. In this case, the biological changes in the human body are objective reality, but how we interpret and relate to them is socially constructed.

Moreover, the term "adolescence" as a social category was developed by G. Stanley Hall (1904), who influenced the scientific literature (Kipke, 1999, p. 4; Dornbush, 1989, p. 233), mainly with his work "Adolescence" in 1904 (Arnett, 2006, p. 186) that shaped the modern

representations of adolescence (Côté and Levine, 2016, p. 69). Hall described adolescence genetically as a period of “storm and stress” (Hall, 1904, p. 534), which are biologically driven until they reach adulthood (Arnett, 2006, p. 186). He described the transition from adolescence to adulthood as a period “when human ancestors went from savagery to civilization” (Lerner and Steinberg, 2009, p. 4). In his book, he explains how adolescents’ representation changed from Greek to Christian literature (Hall, 1905, p. 524). For example, Hall (1905) refers to Aristotle’s work, who described adolescents as passionate, spontaneous and impulsive human beings who are not as evil as adults due to their innocence in life (p. 522). In contrast, Hall explains that the Christian Church represented adolescents as the following: “Instead of the harmony between them that pervaded Greek thought, soul and body were now violently sundered” (p. 524). The Greek and Christian representations differ drastically, and we can notice that Hall’ conceptualization of adolescence is similar to the latter, describing adolescents as uncivilized and dramatic.

Furthermore, in recent years Jeffery Arnett (2006) introduced a new term to the developmental phase in the life course, the “emerging adulthood.” Arnett points out five main characteristics of emerging adulthood as a developmental stage. He describes it as a time when young people explore and dwell in life through different experiences, live in uncertainty and instability, develop their identity, are self-focused, and feel in between adolescence and adulthood (p. 5). Emerging adulthood was developed to be distinguished from adolescence and adulthood and reflects a new socially structured age stage. Nevertheless, there are some differences and similarities between these two life stages. The main difference between adolescence and emerging adulthood is in legal rights and duties, such as voting, driving, and willingly studying in school (as school is only mandatory for children and adolescents), among others (p. 18). On the other hand, some commonalities are identity development, discovering different possibilities in life and increasing independence and autonomy. Some scholars also

refer to the period of emerging adulthood as a time of undergoing different travelling experiences, such as international exchanges through school, volunteering work and gap years (a time dedicated only for travelling, usually between school and work) (e.g., Amit, 2011; Arnett, 2006).

Moreover, Arnett (2006) observed that due to social change, young people were changing their needs, aspirations, and lifestyle. For example, he states that “for today’s young people, the road to adulthood is a long one. They leave home at age 18 or 19, but most do not marry, become parents, and find a long-term job until at least their late twenties.” (p. 3). In the past decades, there has been a tendency for young people to undertake more years in school, which influences when they begin their career and become financially independent, have a stable relationship, and become parents. Therefore, there is the argument that young people are taking longer to reach adulthood, hence the introduction to a new phase in the life course called emerging adulthood.

The relevance of this theory in this study is that since Arnett’s introduction of emerging adulthood as a developmental phase, scholars have been questioning its significance as a life stage (e.g., Amit, 2011) and eventually rethinking the conceptualization of “youth” and “adolescence” (e.g., Bynner, 2005; Côté and Bynner, 2008; Amit, 2011). For example, Amit (2011) defends that the introduction of a new life stage “allows the phase of youth to be redefined” (p. 79). The adolescents’ development and transition to adulthood involve social, cultural, economic, and psychological trajectories. According to Herman (2012), the adolescents’ path is the following: “Most youths complete their education, undergo cultural rites of passage, develop economic and emotional independence from parents, and develop the capacity for intimacy with peers.” (p. 41) However, Arnett (2006) believes there is a new phase of emerging adulthood since adolescents are not considered in the direct transition to adulthood, since it is taking longer. Therefore, the analysis of the concept of adolescence as a

developmental phase needs to be taken into consideration as new theories emerge and impact other life stages, such as adolescence.

To summarize, as referred to in the previous section, how knowledge is constructed through the scientific discourse impacts policy-making in social institutions and their social relationship with adolescents. As demonstrated above, Hall's discourse on adolescence contributed to a negative representation of this life stage. Therefore, I intend to analyze the current discourses about adolescents in psychology.

In the following section, I will examine the origin of the term "adolescent," the main differences in the fields of psychology and sociology, and the conceptualization of adolescence from two leading scholars in psychology.

### **3. Literature Review**

The concept of adolescence is intrinsically connected with the term adulthood. From the Latin etymology, *adolescent* derives from *adolescere*, which means "to grow up." This corresponds to the period of transition from childhood to adulthood. Whereas *adult* derives from the Latin word *adultum*, referring to the past participle of the verb *adolescere*, which signifies completeness (Bucholtz, 2002, p. 532).

In sociology, "adolescence" is a socially constructed concept in which its study focuses on cultural and social institutions that adolescents go through. As Côté (2016) defines it: "a life stage is a product of cultural conditions and the ways in which it is structured are culturally relative" (p. 69). Whereas, in the field of psychology, the study of adolescence focuses mainly on the intellectual and physical developments that influence the cognitive functions of human beings. According to Piaget (2008), the study of adolescents focuses on the "cognitive function and structure at adolescence" (p. 40) and the impact on adolescents' behaviours.

Sociology is primarily concerned with institutions such as the home, school, work, and others, as well as social institutions (Herman, 2012). The social environment is the primary focus of the field of sociology, such as the environment in which a social group functions. Concerning youth studies in sociology, it involves the study of youth in the context of “home, family, peer group, school, neighbourhood, work, houses of worship, and extracurricular activities” (Herman, 2012). With regards to the social representation of adolescents, they are portrayed in Western societies as emotionally irrational and unstable, in which “emotional turmoil” is a common experience during adolescence (Allen, 2013, p. 41).

Moreover, sociology and other fields often rely on scientific research conducted in psychology on human beings. For example, G. Stanley Hall’s discourse on adolescence significantly influenced youth research in the field of sociology. As explained in the previous section, Hall defended that “adolescence was a period during which everyone experiences adolescent storm and stress as part of a hereditary recapitulation of the ‘barbaric’ phases of human evolution.” (Côté, 2016, p. 69). This discourse, in which Hall’s ideas were related to biological understandings, influenced several fields, including sociology, which impacted the social representation of adolescents in society. Nowadays, sociologists assume that the experience of “emotional turmoil” is mainly due to living circumstances, without discrediting biological realities. As Côté (2016) explains: “Some behaviours during adolescence can be linked to biology, but research has shown that if emotional turmoil is experienced by a person during this period of life, that experience is far more likely to be situationally stimulated than as a result of biology.” (p. 69)

Whereas sociology is focused on the social context of human beings as a whole, psychology focuses on the mind and behaviours of human beings. For instance, Jean Piaget (2008) is a psychologist whose work on adolescence has contributed significantly to research on this developmental stage. His discourse on adolescents has dominated the field for many years.

Although some of his theories are outdated, some essential explanations on adolescents provide an intriguing understanding of their descriptions. Piaget (2008) explains the stages of human development, between childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. A distinction of the life stage of adolescence is that adolescents are under the development of a “formal reasoning process” (2018, p. 43). At this stage, the adolescent is able to develop a more complex thought process than the child, which marks the beginning of the social debate and the creation of ideologies.

As Piaget elaborates:

(...) the individual who becomes capable of hypothetical reasoning, by this very fact will interest himself in problems that go beyond his immediate field of experience. Hence, the adolescent’s capacity to understand and even construct theories and to participate in society and the ideologies of adults; this is often, of course, accompanied by a desire to change society and even, if necessary, destroy it (in his imagination) in order to elaborate a better one. (p. 43)

Additionally, John C. Coleman (2011) also elaborates on adolescent cognitive development, acknowledging the difficulty of its observance since it is not visible to the human eyes. However, physical transformations are manifested during adolescence. For example, as Coleman explains, “alterations in intellectual function have implications for a wide range of behaviours and attitudes.” (p. 40). The intellectual function corresponds to the reasoning process and the adolescents’ capacity to develop world hypotheses beyond what is seen compared to children. As Coleman further adds: “changes in thinking, in reasoning and in information-processing determine not just school performance, but among other things they also affect moral thought, interpersonal problem-solving, political decisions and risk-taking.” (p. 40). Following this idea, the prefrontal cortex, which corresponds to the reasoning capacity,

problem-solving skills, and “risk-taking” decisions, is not fully developed until a person reaches their twenties (O’Driscoll, 2019, p. 5). Understanding O’Driscoll and Coleman arguments can be relevant when studying adolescents’ behaviours and practices in their daily lives. Indeed, before making assumptions based only on their behaviours and attitudes, one must consider biological developments in the human body during adolescence.

As mentioned before, scientific psychology knowledge builds an understanding of human development concerning the mind and its cognitive functions. This is the developmental process of the human body during the period of adolescence. From Piaget’s (2008) and Coleman’s (2011) description, we can glimpse how to develop a social analysis based on a scientific understanding of the human body during adolescence without building on assumptions about this period that can impact the representation of adolescents in social institutions and shape adolescents experience as adolescents, as the discourse of G. Stanley Hall did in the literature (Côté, 2016, p. 69).

From this section, we could glimpse three different discourses on adolescents. The first discourse was from Jean Piaget (2008), who focused on the scientific development of the mind in human beings during adolescence. Then, John C. Coleman (2011) conceptualizes adolescence socially based on scientific understandings of the human body during this period. In the next sub-chapter, I will discuss the conceptual framework of this study and how it will help in the discussion of the results found in the data analysis of this study.

### 3.1 Conceptual Framework

Twenty years ago research mainly represented adolescents as dangerous, influential, and a concern to society (Weller, 2006, p. 104). For instance, from the APA PsycInfo (OVID) database, some common themes from the last decade that emerged about the definition of

adolescents are the following: adolescent substance use disorder, binge drinking, and sexual risk behavior. However, in the last decade, the approach used has focused on adolescents as contributors to society in various ways and their capacities as adolescents, such as the following: adolescent's ideas on time, meditation practices among adolescents, the influence of music on the socialization of adolescents with autism, among others.

In the first example, we can observe an approach more oriented and focused on concerns, whereas in the second one, we observe an approach focused on adolescents' contributions and capacities. Inevitably, these approaches contribute to adolescents' social representation. Eventually these research subjects create labels on adolescents that end up categorizing an entire stage of human development, which has two main consequences. The first consequence is how adolescence is socially constructed, which can negatively or positively portray this stage. For example, as Weller (2006) states: "The past two decades [from 1980 to 2000] have witnessed a period of demonization and negative image, where teenagers are either presented as 'at-risk,' 'in trouble,' or 'in need.'" (p. 104). The second consequence is how adolescents might perceive themselves, taking into account their negative or positive social representation and the period of adolescence.

Concerning the impact of negative attributes society applies to adolescence, Goffman (1986) identifies these attributes as stigmas. He elaborates on the theory of stigmatization, arguing that: "Society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members in each of these categories." (p. 2). The Stigma Theory introduced and developed by Erving Goffman (1986) will be the conceptual framework for this study, in which I will use it as a sensitizing concept. Sensitizing concept was developed by Blumer (1954), which means the researcher will conduct the analysis with attention to particular aspects of the data that serves as a guidance in the research process. As this study aims to grasp how scholars represent adolescents in the literature, stigma, as a sensitizing

concept, allows us to create a discussion on whether the themes emerged from the data apply negative attributes to adolescents. In other words, it will be a tool to synthesize if scholars from the field of psychology are stigmatizing adolescents. This analysis is significant in understanding and grasping the consequences of attributing stigmas to a group of people. Although this is not the focus of this research, I intend to reflect on this matter in the discussion and conclusion if I find stigmas in the themes emerged from the peer-reviewed papers I review.

Goffman (1986) explains that stigma is an attribute that characterizes a social category (p. 3). He defines stigma as the following:

The term stigma, then, will be used to refer to an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm that usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself. (p. 3)

Society tends to categorize groups of people by adding attributes to them, which we often describe as developing stereotypes for groups of people. The characterizations developed to describe a group of people are usually based on attributes that make them different from another group of people. Goffman (1986) explains, “Such an attribute is a stigma, especially when its discrediting effect is very extensive; sometimes it is also called a failing, a shortcoming, a handicap.” (p. 3). The stigma is then an attribute that differentiates a person from another person, diminishing the stigmatized person as a human being. This effect can significantly impact peoples’ life experiences, such as discriminating against a person in a manner that impacts them by “reducing his life chances” (p. 5). Goffman gives some examples of stigmas: “cripple, bastard, moron” (p. 5). In the literature, adolescence, as a period in the life course, has been represented as a period of “storm and stress,” characterizing young people as

emotionally unstable and likely to conduct violent behaviour, which derived from G. Stanley Hall's theories and other scholars in psychology (Côté and Levine, 2016, p. 69), as mentioned in section 2. These are stigmas applied to adolescents that impact their experience in society. They can influence young peoples' experience in medical, social, and political structures, such as in policymakers in the legal, education, and health system, among others. (Oliver & Cairney, 2019, p. 5). Therefore, understanding if adolescents are being stigmatized in scientific discourse and what those stigmas are is fundamental to researching the implications of that stigmatization.

Furthermore, Goffman (1986) explains some consequences of stigmatizing persons, such as developing an idea of a group of people that is considered inferior and despised compared to another group. As he describes: "By definition, of course, we believe the person with a stigma is not quite human. On this assumption, we exercise varieties of discrimination, through which we effectively, if often unthinkingly, reduce his life chances." (p. 5) From his explanation, a socially constructed idea that stigmatizes a social category is elaborated on a group of people, which will impact the living experiences of the people who are stigmatized. For instance, according to Côté and Levine (2016), the consequence of adolescents' social representations is the following:

By relegating "adolescents" and "emerging adults" to being "others" from adults, social scientists contribute to negative stereotypes about young people as persons, rather than providing more in-depth understandings of underlying social and economic causes of behavior patterns. (p. 91)

This example demonstrates how the stigma on adolescents and the social representation can influence stereotypical notions and increase discrimination against adolescents. Moreover,

Abrah (2019) has a study on how criminals are seen by their friends, family, and society and what the implications of their adverse reactions are. He explains that “stereotypical images of criminals in the mainstream culture are driven to the forefront of the person’s life” (p. 180). As there are images of criminals in the mainstream culture, Abrah explains, there are also images of adolescents that impact their lives. He further develops: “Becker (1963), Goffman (1963), Lemert (1951), and Simmons (1965) have also observed that stereotyping of social deviants is usually negative, in the sense that deviants are often thought of as irresponsible individuals lacking self-control.” (p. 180). Abrah’s explanation is an example of the stigmatization of a group of people as being harmful and impacting their lives through the assumptions of the labels created about “deviants.” This study will look at some of the stigmas created about adolescents in psychology that are used to define them.

In the following section, I will discuss the methodology chosen to answer better the research questions of this study and the methods I will apply in this study, explaining why I find them helpful to this research. In addition, I will explain in detail the data selection process, such as the database chosen, the keywords applied to find the data, how it will be analyzed, and a presentation of the chosen data.

#### **4. Methodology**

The methodology applied in this research is a systematic literature review. A systematic literature review involves selecting and analyzing published content (such as peer-reviewed academic publications) that intends to respond to a specific research question. The research question of this study is: how does scientific psychological discourse define adolescents? And how can these discourses impact adolescents’ representation in society? For this study, a systematic literature review will allow us to analyze the knowledge produced to define and

represent adolescents in the field of psychology. The purpose is to acquire a comprehension of the knowledge about adolescents that was previously established in the field of psychology and that influences our social representation and discourse about adolescents. A systematic literature review's benefits are studying previous research results on a particular scientific subject. As Xiao and Watson (2019) state: "Fundamentally, knowledge advancement must be built on prior existing work." (p. 93). Therefore, a systematic literature review synthesizes and examines published research to elaborate on new ideas and theories. This method includes answering the research questions determined, using a specific methodological approach and conceptual framework for the study, which will include the review and analysis of some contents chosen to evaluate to answer the research question (Rother, 2007, p. 7). A systematic literature review differentiates from a classic literature review, because the primary purpose of a classic literature review is to summarize and review content on a particular subject (Knopf, 2006, p. 127) from a "theoretical and contextual point of view." (Rother, 2007, p. 7).

The purpose of this study is to conduct a research exploration on what and how adolescents are being represented through the language and words applied to describe the social category "adolescence." To accomplish this, I will employ an interpretive understanding that *discourse* is associated with social realities (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p. 2). According to Uwe Flick (2014), discourse is focused on unfolding the meanings of the language employed to define and describe social realities.

I employed a grounded theory method to select, interact and conduct an inductive analysis of the data. One of the characteristics of grounded theory is interacting with data, which means that the conception of ideas, concepts and theories develop as the data is analyzed. Inductive analysis is the main technique used in ground theory (Bowen, 2006, p. 13), it means that themes will emerge from the data, without preconceived theories. So, the data analysis process is "fluid, interacting and open-ended" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 320).

Moreover, as mentioned above, this research aims to analyze the language that represents adolescents and discover the impact of that language that could be implicit in the content published in psychology about adolescents. Grounded theory as a research method is helpful in this study because of the following reasons: the process of analyzing data is flexible and interactive; it focuses on developing new ideas based on ideas created; and it does not have “preconceived ideas and theories in our data” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 32). However, I will support this method by using a sensitizing concept to guide the research design and empirical analysis. As explained before, I used Goffman’s concept of stigma as a sensitizing concept to guide the analysis and develop a social construction of the impact of negative representation if it emerges from the data analyzed. The grounded theory method will help analyze and interact with the data, and I will work with stigma as a sensitizing concept to understand if there is a relation between the discourses found and stigma. Therefore, this framework will allow us to understand in the data analyzed how scholars are contributing or not to developing stigmas of adolescents, depending on how scholars describe adolescents in their studies.

The data consists of peer-reviewed academic papers collected from the APA PsycInfo database. The PsycInfo database was chosen because it is one of the central databases in the field of psychology. Therefore, my research method’s first step was collecting the data. For the collection, some questions were primarily reflected on, such as:

1. What is the object of research I am looking for in the data?
2. What are some of the keywords I am looking for in the data related to my research questions?
3. What are the criteria for selecting and organizing the data intended to be analyzed?
4. How will I interpret the data?

5. What are "taken for granted and hidden assumptions" (Charmaz, 2014, p. 35) about the research object?

Regarding the first question, I looked for peer-reviewed academic papers in the field of psychology, in which the object of research is adolescents. The strategy to find the academic papers that corresponded to the definition of adolescents was to apply some keywords to the discourse on adolescents. The keywords I applied were the following: adolescent(s); adolescence; teenager(s); teenage; young people; and youth. I also combined those keywords with keywords related to discourse, such as definition, description, representation, and discourse.

Some keywords were combined using the tool "OR" from the database. The combination was decided according to the relatability of the keywords, such as "adolescence" with "adolescent" and "adolescents;" "teenage" with "teenager" and "teenagers;" "young people" with "youth;" and lastly "adolescent development" and "adolescent characteristics." The last keywords emerged when searching for the keywords "adolescence." Thus, I added them as they helped me find peer-reviewed articles describing and defining adolescents. In the category adolescence, which includes the keywords "adolescence," "adolescents," and "adolescent," about 499 847 results emerged. In the category teenage, which includes the keywords "teenage," "teenager," and "teenagers," appeared 15 198 published contents. With the keywords "young people" and "youth" from the category youth, about 135 189 cases emerged. Lastly, in the category adolescent characteristics, with the keywords "adolescent development" and "adolescent characteristics," 70 695 content were published.

After combining those keywords and observing the number of published contents for each one, I decided to combine each category with the following keywords: "discourse," "definition," "representation," and "description," using the tool "AND" in the database. In

these combinations, the keywords “adolescence *or* adolescent(s)” with “description” resulted in a significantly high number of 5320 published contents compared to other combinations. From that category, the combination with the keyword “discourse” was the lowest, with about 2070 results. Interestingly, the combinations with the category “teenage” were the lowest, which could mean that this term is not as recognized in the literature as youth and adolescence.

Some criteria were used to refine the selection of the peer-reviewed articles, as the number of results was significantly high. The following table allows us to visualize the criteria excluded and included.

<b>Included</b>	<b>Excluded</b>
Peer-reviewed articles	Books, book chapters and dissertations
Last 5 years	Before 2017
Scholars in the field of psychology or related (such as psychiatry and psychoanalysis)	Scholars in a field not related with psychology
Keywords: adolescence; adolescent; adolescents; teenage; teenager; teenagers; youth; young people; discourse; representation; definition; description.	Papers that did not included adolescent, youth, or teenager in their study.

*Table 1: Criteria Included and Excluded*

In Table 1, we can observe the criteria included and excluded in the PsycInfo Database. The first criteria were defined as the specification of analyzing only peer-reviewed articles, which meant excluding books, book chapters and dissertations. Secondly, I collected only articles from the last five years, as the scientific work is developing rapidly, and the intention is to understand data from the most recent years. The third criteria were the selection of papers that

had at least one author from the field of psychology and its branches (such as social psychology, educational psychology, health psychology, and others) or any other field that focuses on the human brain and mind, such as psychiatry, psychopathology, and others. Finally, another criterion essential to this study was the inclusion of a general definition or description of adolescents or adolescence. As I aimed for a general definition of adolescence and description of adolescents, I excluded articles that focused very specifically on a particular population, such as adolescents with specific diseases (such as diabetes) and specific communities (e.g., Latin community in the United States). Also, I focused on published articles written in English, Portuguese, and Spanish, so papers written in other languages were excluded. Lastly, I excluded papers that conducted studies in non-Western countries because the social realities differ and because the epistemologies I am using are Western epistemologies, such as Goffman's stigma theory as my conceptual framework.

In total, I selected 30 peer-reviewed articles. I read each article's abstract and introduction carefully to choose which would be more compelling to my research. The purpose was to select six peer-reviewed academic papers to analyze in this study, which is a small sample due to time constraints. In selecting the papers, I focused on whether the author/authors would describe or define adolescents. The ones that did not meet these criteria were not selected.

During the analysis process, I carefully examined the selected peer-reviewed papers. This examination included reading the article, taking detailed notes as I read and analyzing commonalities and differences between articles. This process helped me discover and identify the themes from the data to compare them, underline the similarities and differences, and evaluate them critically. As explained previously, I applied the grounded theory method to interpret the data, which allowed me to conceptualize the discourse implemented in the studies as the data was being analyzed. The language used to describe and define adolescents was carefully analyzed and interpreted. Afterwards, using the analytical tool of stigma as a

sensitizing concept, I analyzed how the meanings of the language employed to define and describe adolescents and adolescence could create or maintain stigmas previously developed on adolescents and adolescence as a developmental stage in the life course, which is the ultimate objective of this study.

In the following sub-section, I will introduce the peer-reviewed articles analyzed in this study. Then, I will present a table in which the authors, title, publication site and date of publication will be displayed.

#### 4.1. Selected Peer-reviewed Papers Presentation

The following table will present the final selection of peer-reviewed papers chosen to be analyzed in the Systematic Literature Review. Table 2 presents the article’s authors, its title, the date, and the publication location.

Author	Title	Publication Site	Date
Aguirre Velasco, Antonia; Cruz, Ignacio Silva Santa; Billings, Job; Jimenez, Magdalena; Rowe, Sarah	“What are the barriers, facilitators and interventions targeting help-seeking behaviours for common mental health problems in adolescents? A systematic review”	BMC Psychiatry	2020

Miller-Slough, Rachel L.; Dunsmore, Julie C.	“Emotion socialization by parents and friends: Links with adolescent emotional adjustment”	Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology	2020
Gimore, Karen	“Is Emerging Adulthood a New Developmental Phase?”	Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association	2019
Lomas, Tim; Garraway, Ellie, Stanton, Chloe; Ivtzan, Itai.	“Masculinity in the Midst of Mindfulness: Exploring the Gendered Experiences of At- risk Adolescent Boys.”	Men and Masculinities	2020
Rosenbaum, Gail M.; Venkatraman, Vinod; Steinberg, Laurence; Chein, Jason M.; Worthy, Darell A.	“Do adolescents always take more risks than adults? A within-subjects developmental study of context effects on decision making and processing”	PLOS ONE	2021
Newcomb-Anjo, Sarah E.	“Applying What is Known About Adolescent Development to Improve School-Based Mental Health Literacy of Depression Interventions: Bridging Research to Practice”	Adolescent Research Review	2019

*Table 2: Papers Presentation*

## **5. Data Analysis**

The selected peer-reviewed papers were analyzed using the grounded theory method. In applying this method, I undertook a thematic analysis, in which the analysis was driven by the themes that emerged in the data. This method allows us to discuss some commonalities and differences between the articles. The purpose is to analyze how scholars in the field of psychology describe, analyze, and represent adolescents. Ultimately, this study intends to understand if there is a relation between the themes emerged from the data and stigma, which will be explored in the following section. During the analysis process, I focused on the following: the analytical framework applied in their study; the definition of adolescents they presented; the representation of adolescents that scholars referred to primarily in their literature review and in the discussion of their study findings and conclusions. Afterwards, I analyzed some common themes between the articles and some differences. Overall, there are similarities in the purpose of their research study and the representation of adolescents in their literature review. However, some differences will be discussed in this section.

Four themes emerged from the data; some were similar, and others differed from the papers. The first theme is the identification of adolescence as an age stage and a social age. The age stage is based on a developmental and biological perspective, whereas social age refers to social institutions' requirements and cultural expectations. The second theme is the "at-risk" adolescents' discourse, identified in three papers. In some papers, the meaning of that discourse was explicit, whereas, in others, the meaning was ambiguous and open to interpretation. Thirdly, the emerging adulthood theory was mentioned in one paper. Although this subject was only mentioned in one article, emerging adulthood is a significant theme due to its focus on youth research, as discussed in section 3 of this paper. The fourth theme is the difference

between an analysis focused on adolescents' circumstances and an analysis focused on adolescents' assumptions. In this subject, we will observe how one approach is susceptible to stigmatizing people compared to the other. Lastly, two papers recognize the problematics of stigmatization and refer to Stigma Theory. This observation is interesting to analyze if the scholars create stigmas on adolescents while acknowledging the consequences of stigmatization.

### 5.1. Adolescence As a Life Stage Discourse

Most scholars analyzed adolescence based on stages of the life course recognizing life stages based on a developmental period with its basis in biology, which was Newcomb-Anjo (2019), Gilmore (2019), Velasco et al. (2020), and Lomas et al. (2020). However, these scholars also recognized adolescence as a social age - a period influenced and shaped by social institutions' demands. For example, Velasco et al. (2020) define adolescence as the following:

Also, we considered this age range more homogenous and comparable in terms of lifecycle experiences and challenges that would be reflected in help-seeking behaviours and intentions. (p. 3)

According to Velasco et al. (2020), "lifecycle experiences and challenges" are the key characteristics to define a development category. In addition, scholars also refer to adolescence's age stage, referring the data from international institutions, such as World Health Organization. For example, Newcomb-Anjo (2019) explains the following "Temporal definitions of adolescence vary, with the World Health Organization (WHO) defining adolescence as the period between the ages of 10 and 19 (WHO 2017)." (p. 236). The age-stage

theory corresponds to the social developmental category that society chooses based on age (Gilmore, 2019, p. 634). However, the age defined can vary in different societies. For example, the United Nations Habitat considers the youth period from 15 to 32, whereas the African Youth Charter considers it until age 35 (Côté and Levine, 2016, p. 81).

In addition, Gilmore (2019) explains that culture is critical in defining and describing cohorts. She explains that “age-stage theory encompasses both maturation and environment” (p. 635), claiming that culture is responsible for denominating cohorts, building social expectations and defining their roles in society (p. 634). On the other hand, Lomas et al.’s (2020) definition of adolescence is versatile, ranging different changes representing this period. They describe adolescence’s age-stage as the following: “So far, the themes align with existing literature in this area, which has tended to present adolescence as a challenging period of change (e.g., in terms of biology, identity, and social relationships).” (p. 139).

Other descriptions of adolescence were related to emotional and social challenges, and identity exploration. Miller-Slought and Dunsmore (2020) state that “Youth navigate many new social and emotional challenges in adolescence” (p. 3). These challenges refer to biological changes, such as puberty, their role in school and the family that includes new responsibilities, managing their social life and focusing on extra-curricular activities (p. 3). Relatedly, Newcomb-Anjo (2020) believes these challenges present great developmental opportunities to grow, also acknowledging the “difficulties with mood and wellbeing” (p. 236).

Gilmore (2019) also explains that adolescence is perceived as a period of closure in terms of identity, as she states: “It implies resistance to the pinnacle achievement of *adolescent closure*: the final reconfiguration of personality, crystallization of character, and consolidation of a stable identity, which in turn create the core of the adult personality, including the adult neurosis.” (p. 637). However, Gilmore disagrees with this belief because of the differences

noted in cohorts with social changes occurring, consequently postponing identity consolidation. As she explains:

I justify this assertion because I believe that adolescence has also changed; given the pace of social change, identity consolidation during the psychosocial moratorium is neither promoted nor desirable, careers are not settled, autonomy is not secured by confidence in the self as-agent, values are unstable and often reactive, and the establishment of sustained adult relationships is not a conscious goal. (p. 628)

Thus, Gilmore (2019) states that adolescence as a life stage needs to be rethought according to the current cultural patterns and social demands (p. 644). Lastly, in terms of age, some scholars mentioned at the beginning of this section (specifically Velasco et al., 2020 and Newcomb-Anjo, 2019) stated their representation of adolescence according to age in reference to international institutions, such as WHO, OMS, UNICEF, along with others.

## 5.2 At-Risk Discourse

Four papers out of six mentioned the term “at-risk” (Newcomb-Anjo, 2019; Velasco et al., 2020; Lomas et al., 2020; Gilmore, 2019); however, their approach to this term differs from each one. For example, Newcomb-Anjo (2019) mentions this term in reference to adolescents who are susceptible to suffering from mental health disorders. As she mentions: “Nevertheless, adolescence is a unique developmental stage that is especially at risk for depression, which not only poses exceptional burden to depressed adolescents, but also to the surrounding economy and social networks and systems.” (p. 245) Similarly, Velasco et al. (2020) reflect on this term

concerning health risk. They state, “One of the biggest challenges in adolescent mental health is ensuring that at-risk individuals are linked with the appropriate support.” (p. 2).

Lomas et al. (2020) explain that “at-risk” adolescents are a risk in society, particularly adolescent boys who have been labelled “at-risk.” For example, as Lomas et al. (2020) state in their study:

Teenage boys are a source of considerable concern in society, with generally poorer health, educational, and social outcomes than their female counterparts. Of particular concern are “at-risk” adolescents, who by definition are liable to poorer outcomes than peers not deemed at-risk. (p. 127)

Lomas et al. (2020) provide a definition of the term “at-risk” in their study. In quoting Swahn and Bossarte (2009), Lomas et al. (2020) defined “at-risk” as the following: “adolescents who face disadvantage or adversity narrowly or broadly defined.” (p. 129). In Gilmore’s (2019) study, she mentions the word “risk” about “risk behaviours,” emphasizing that its peak has changed to the mid-twenties (p. 641). Further, Lomas et al. (2020) explain that there are a few reasons for youth “at-risk” being subjected to poor outcomes. These are a result of violent attitudes and behaviors that are influenced by “peer delinquency” (p. 129), economic status and “masculinity” (p. 129). A possible interpretation of these authors’ broad explanation of “at-risk” youth is that peer influence, economic status, gender, and biological developmental factors determine who is to be considered “at-risk.”

Lomas et al.’s (2020) study approach is based on adolescents’ assumptions, particularly about adolescent boys. For instance, to explain gender-based health issues, the authors argue that “Men and boys are often regarded as a source of concern in society, seen as troubled or deficient relative to their female counterparts.” (p. 128). This narrative is based on the social

construction that adolescent boys are a danger in society. They further relate “masculine behavior” (p. 130) with negative behaviours by stating that “It is particularly at this “threshold” in adolescence that boys are liable to adopt forms of masculine behaviour that later may prove harmful, like emotional toughness.” (p. 130). This discourse could stigmatize adolescent boys considered “at-risk” in different ways. First, the group of adolescents chosen for this study was selected by the school, which chose the students according to their “at-risk” definition, which turned out to be a different definition by the researchers. As Lomas et al. (2020) explain:

More specifically, it transpired that when the school selected these participants as being at risk, they did so on the basis of the boys principally being at risk of failing academically and/or being excluded. (The researchers had simply asked the school to select boys who they considered to be “at risk,” and who they felt would benefit from the intervention, without specifying the nature of the risk). (p. 137)

Secondly, the “at-risk” discourse portrays adolescent boys deemed “at-risk” who develop their masculinities as dangerous and emotionally unstable, as observed in the previous paragraph. It can be understood from these examples that the “at-risk” discourse derives from a negative connotation applied to a particular group of adolescents. The particular group of adolescents deemed “at-risk” are often considered to be those with underprivileged social, economic and cultural status.

### 5.3. Emerging Adulthood Discourse

Gilmore (2019) explores the question of emerging adulthood as a new developmental phase from a psychoanalytic perspective. She explains that emerging adulthood is a developmental phase emerging from cultural and societal changes in society (p. 630) that creates the need to classify a new generation. The period of emerging adulthood is characterized by living a phase of instability (p. 630), a transition between adolescence and adulthood (p. 630), uncertainty (p. 629), and identity exploration (p. 629). Emerging adulthood as a developmental phase is influenced by social change, as adolescence is, according to Gilmore, “Similar to adolescence in the last century, emerging adulthood is the product of changing requirements and defining features of adulthood in a new century.” (p. 635).

In psychoanalytic developmental theory, Gilmore (2019) explains that adolescence is understood to be a period in which young people develop and define their personality and identity (p. 638). This period also includes developing “stable gender identity and sexual preferences, belief systems, moral standards, ambitions, work ethic, and reliable ways to manage anxiety” (p. 638). According to Gilmore’s explanation of adolescence, once these factors are completed, adolescence has concluded. However, from the emerging adulthood theory’s point of view, and as Gilmore further explains, the factors mentioned above, those characterizing the conclusion of adolescence, have not been completed until young people reach their twenties (p. 638). Thus, emerging adulthood would be the period in which identity formation is further developed until adulthood. In agreement with the emerging adulthood theory’s arguments, Gilmore states that “full identity resolution in adolescence is today culturally unsupported and near impossible.” (p. 640), adding that “adolescence is only the first phase of identity exploration that now seems to require more time and immersion in

contemporary culture to ‘figure out;’ and personality consolidation (...) is now the accomplishment of the third decade.” (p. 641).

From Gilmore’s explanations, adolescence is a period in which young people start developing their identity and defining their personality; however, this is not concluded in adolescence. *Emerging adulthood* is a new developmental phase that was socially constructed based on circumstances that resulted from social change and cultural demands. These circumstances include career instability, limited autonomy, not determined values and unstable romantic relationships. Similar to “at-risk” discourse, emerging adulthood discourse can contribute to stigmatizing adolescents, which I will explain later in the discussion section.

#### 5.4. Youth Centered Perspective

Furthermore, an intriguing theme emerged from three studies analyzing adolescents’ circumstances from a youth-centred perspective (Newcomb-Anjo, 2019; Miller-Slought and Dunsmore, 2020; Rosenbaum et al., 2021). Youth-centered perspective can be defined as the study of youth that focuses on young people’s context and circumstances without developing attributes based on cultural, social and economic factors. This perspective acknowledges youth experiences and frames of reference. For example, Newcomb-Anjo (2019) explains that adolescence is a period in the life course when a high number of young people experience depression and that it is observed that adolescents do not seek mental health support. She explains that the first reason could be “practical and financial constraints” due to the inaccessibility and costs of treatment. The second reason could be: “health access limitations, where adolescents are prevented from accessing services without parental knowledge or consent” (p. 236). Her explanations are based on youth experiences and the circumstances they live in that prevent them from seeking health support. As a result, Newcomb-Anjo does not

develop attributes for adolescents that can negatively impact them. Instead, her analysis can contribute to social and health institutions considering these factors and develop a better strategy to help adolescents who experience mental health issues.

Similar to Newcomb-Anjo, Rosenbaum et al. (2021) studied adolescents' and adults' decision-making, using laboratory risk-taking tests, such as decision-making tasks, and eye-tracking, among others (p. 7). As mentioned in sub-section 5.2., one of their analysis observes that "in adolescents, higher pupil dilation was predictive of more risk taking when the rare outcome was favorable, whereas the opposite pattern was found when the rare outcome was unfavorable." (p. 13), which was similar to adults: "This pattern also held true in the adult sample, although the effect was not as strong." (p. 13). Rosenbaum et al. base their arguments on their test results without applying attributes to adolescents based on their choices, attitudes, and behaviours.

Lastly, to better understand the youth centered perspective, I will contrast with a different approach that will be explained further in the discussion section. This approach is the adultcentristic perspective that we can observe from Gilmore's (2019) discourse. First, her arguments are not fact-based on science but focused on cultural expectations and social changes that influence social circumstances, such as the career instability in young people, or changes in social institutions, such as marriage. For example, Gilmore explains that "indeed adolescence and then emerging adulthood were linked to technological advances in society, associated educational opportunities, and sociocultural trends (...)" (p. 635). Further, Gilmore generalizes adolescents' experiences in terms of identity, and interpersonal abilities, such as the following:

(...) many late adolescents no longer manifest signs of intrapsychic consolidation of personality, including stabilization of defenses, superego content, interpersonal

capacities, and overall selfsameness as they enter their twenties. They seem to be engaged in ongoing identity “tryouts.” (...). (p. 646)

Additionally, Gilmore explains that adolescents are not rationalizing “adult” long-term commitments yet because they will be living a decade in discovery (p. 646). As she states:

On a behavioral level, they are not making the conscious choices that foreshadow the likely direction of their future adulthood, because what is coming up next—ten years of figuring it out—does not demand long-term commitments now and in fact may never do so. (p. 646)

These arguments are socially constructed according to the lifestyle of the last generations in Western countries. The problem with these arguments is that it misses a contextual background that leads young people to make those choices in life, making their choice not entirely free but a consequence of institutional demands (such as the labour market demands). This approach differs from the youth-centered perspective because in considering adolescents’ context and the circumstances they live in, the scholars do not create assumptions mainly based on culture (as the emerging adulthood discourse focuses on). Therefore, the youth centered perspective contributes to a positive representation of adolescents.

## **6. Discussion**

This study focused on analyzing the discourse applied to define and describe adolescents in the field of psychology. My analysis aims to understand how scholars represent adolescents and how they contribute or not to stigmatizing them. The research questions of this study are:

how does scientific psychological discourse define adolescents? And how can these discourses impact adolescents' representation in society? For this section, I used stigma by Goffman as a sensitive concept to interpret the results of the data analysis. I analyzed if the discourses discussed in Section 5 contribute to the stigmatization of adolescents or if it contributes to a positive perspective about them. We could observe that two discourses, the "at-risk" and emerging adulthood discourse, contributed to stigmatization in different manners, which will be discussed further. Further, the life stage discourse does not relate with stigma, as well as the youth centered perspective. However, the youth centered perspective contributes to a positive representation of adolescents, which will be further explained in this section. Therefore, not all themes found in the data contribute to stigma, and, one theme contributes to a positive representation of adolescents. This observation is fairly recent in research, because twenty years ago adolescents were mainly represented negatively in psychology, as we saw in the literature review section.

Moreover, Stigma Theory was identified in two papers (Newcomb-Anjo, 2019; and Velasco et al., 2020), in which the scholars acknowledged the consequences and challenges of stigma. According to Velasco et al. (2020), obstacles to accessing health services are created due to the stigma generated by adolescents who seek mental health services (p. 2). Although some did not relate specifically to adolescents, the scholars who acknowledged this factor did not apply stigma in their description of adolescents. Their discourse was focused on youth-centered perspective, which will be elaborated further in sub-section 6.3 of this section.

### 6.1. How At-Risk Discourse Contributes to Stigmatization?

On Stigma theory, Goffman (1986) believes a stigma is an attribute applied to characterize a social category (p. 3), which has the effect of discrediting and diminishing that group. In

Section 5.2. we observed the “at-risk” discourse in different papers, in which scholars referred to “at-risk” as deviant behaviour in adolescence. This discourse contributes to stigmatizing adolescents considered to be “at-risk” for the following reasons. First, from Lomas et al. (2020) study, they describe “at-risk” adolescents as individuals with “poor outcomes than peers not deemed at-risk” (p. 127). In other words, this could mean that adolescents with “poor outcomes” are considered “at-risk” compared with their peers who do not have poor outcomes. Nevertheless, there is a lack of clarity on the meaning of “poor outcomes” in this description. For example, in the Cambridge Dictionary, 19 possibilities of what poor outcomes could mean emerged (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Those examples were linked with: mental and physical issues; research results that led to poor outcomes; and the use of drugs considered a poor outcome. From this example, we can observe an ambiguity with the term “at-risk.”

However, Velasco et al. (2020) provide a glimpse of who is considered to be “at-risk.” They start by stating that “One of the biggest challenges in adolescent mental health is ensuring that “at-risk” individuals are linked with the appropriate support” (p. 2). From this statement, the authors claim that “at-risk” adolescents receive the necessary support. They further add the following: “Understanding barriers and facilitators to help-seeking is fundamental for the development of interventions and programmes to support adolescents with mental health problems.” (p. 2). One possible interpretation from this statement is that Velasco et al. consider “at-risk” adolescents those experiencing mental health issues.

From the language applied in referring to “at-risk” adolescents, it can be interpreted that adolescents “at-risk” are considered a risk to themselves because of poor health and social outcomes they experience in life. According to Lomas et al. (2020), in referencing Swang and Bossarte (2009), they usually have “poorer health and social outcomes” (p. 129). However, the consequences of the effects of this risk are unclear, as well as its consequences on society. By labelling a group of adolescents “at-risk” and referring it to negative behaviours in adolescence,

scholars are stigmatizing this social category, which results in how society interacts with adolescents and how they relate to themselves.

Moreover, in Lomas et al. (2020) explanation of the term “at-risk,” they explain that it corresponds to adolescents who experience disadvantage and difficulties in society (p. 129). According to them, these difficulties were related to, for example, poverty and crime (p. 129). Additionally, Lomas et al. (2020) add that masculinity is considered a risk factor in the literature (p. 129). In referencing Gough (2006), they state that “masculinity is widely viewed in the literature as a “risk factor” for poor health and social outcomes” (p. 129). This statement could stigmatize adolescent boys who are a risk because of their sex.

Overall, the “at-risk” label for adolescents who lack resources and face poverty can undermine them as human beings and contributors to society when applied to them negatively. Nonetheless, the “at-risk” attribute could also be applied in a way that would not contribute to stigmatizing. For example, Velasco et al. (2020) explanation of “at-risk” adolescents are those with poor mental health, with the intent of claiming the support of those individuals, is not stigmatizing the group of adolescents with mental health problems. On the other hand, Lomas et al. (2020) comparison of masculinity as a risk factor and a propensity to be considered adolescent boys “at-risk” could create stigmas on adolescent boys because of their sex. In this sense, from this interpretation, besides socio-economic and health circumstances, adolescents’ sex also influences whether they are “at-risk.”

In the following sub-section, I will discuss the second discourse, the emerging adulthood discourse, analyzed in sub-section 5.3. I will make some observations of Gilmore’s article, mainly if this discourse contributes to stigmatizing adolescence or a particular group of young people.

## 6.2. How Emerging Adulthood Discourse Contributes to Stigmatization?

The Emerging Adulthood Theory as a life stage only applies to young people in a specific social and economic class (such as youth who study at a post-secondary institution), with a high level of academic background, according to Gilmore (2019). This theory neglects young people who follow the traditional path of completing their compulsory education before the age of twenty, starting a full-time job, and entering marriage and parenthood institutions by the age of twenty-five. As mentioned at the beginning of section 6.1., according to Goffman (1986), a stigma is an attribute that applies to a social category in comparison to another (p. 3). Therefore, based on Goffman's explanation of stigma, emerging adulthood stigmatizes a particular group of young people that follows the traditional path. This social category is determined by individuals' culture, economic possibilities, and educational level, which characterizes the emerging adulthood theory as centered on young people's cultural and economic factors.

Emerging adulthood as a life stage only considers young people who have the privilege to study at a post-secondary institution. It excludes those start working when they finish high school and decide not to study at a college or university. Young people who follow the traditional path (explained before) do not participate in the knowledge-based economy. A *knowledge economy* is an economy that demands services requiring a high level of knowledge to contribute to social, scientific, and technological innovations. There are four pillars of a knowledge-based economy according to the World Bank: "education and training; information infrastructure; institutional regime; and innovation systems" (World Bank, n.d.). In her research, Gilmore (2019) does not consider the group of adolescents that do not participate in the knowledge-based economy. As she explains:

The theory of emerging adulthood insists that these fruits of adolescent closure—“second individuation” and the potential for enduring intimate relationships outside the family of origin, intrapsychic consolidation and stabilization of defenses, identity resolution, and so on—have not been achieved as contemporary generations move into their twenties. (p. 638)

In observing Gilmore’s argument, she excludes young people who follow the traditional path (mentioned above) by participating in the traditional economy; therefore, they would not be considered in the life stage of emerging adulthood. Thereby, neglecting this group of adolescents contributes to a negative representation of them in society as being undervalued compared to young people who are considered emerging adults.

Furthermore, Gilmore (2019) explains adolescence in relation to the emerging adulthood theory as the following:

(...) adolescence the designation not merely of a time of life but of a complex phase: developmental tasks and maturational changes “unveiled” by liberation from traditional cultural constraints and transformed by the ascendant culture achieve the status of a widely recognized period of development. (p. 635)

It could be interpreted that Gilmore (2019) is basing her analysis on an adultcentric perspective. Adultcentricism is a phenomenon of adult superiority over young people. The adultcentric perspective refers to the distorted social construction of the needs and experiences of young people through the adults’ perspective; without acknowledging the youth’s point of view. Petr (1992) defines it as “the tendency of adults to view children and their problems from a biased, adult perspective, thus creating barriers to effective practice with

children.” (p. 408). In addition, Campbell (2021) defines it as “an inherent feature of the social fabrics comprising most resource-rich countries in the twenty-first century that undermines the capacities, value, and voices of young people in various ways.” (p. 569). Therefore, we can understand the adultcentristic perspective as a point of view constructed by adults concerning young people without considering youth perspectives. Adultcentrism can consequently undermine youth’s capacities and values, as Campbell explains.

In the following section, I will explain the youth-centered perspective in opposition to the adultcentristic perspective as two different approaches in research. I will also explain the benefits of youth-centered perspective in terms of contributing to a positive perspective of youth.

### 6.3. How Youth Centered Perspective In Opposition To Adulcentristic Perspective?

In section 6.1. we mentioned the adultcentristic perspective in research identified in one paper (Gilmore, 2019). However, another approach was identified in two papers, by Newcomb-Anjo (2019) and Miller-Slough and Dunsmore (2020), which we can describe as a youth-centered perspective. This perspective acknowledges adolescents’ experiences and perspectives. We can recognize the youth-centered perspective of Newcomb-Anjo (2019) and Miller-Slough and Dunsmore’s (2020) because they do not create characteristics of adolescence based on youth behaviours. For example, in Newcomb-Anjo’s (2019) definition of adolescence, she broadly characterizes some critical features without applying attributes to this phase; therefore, she is not stigmatizing it. For example, she describes it as the following:

Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by sweeping biological, emotional, cognitive, and social changes. It represents a period of positive

psychological growth, yet at the same time, psychiatric illnesses, especially depression, often begin during this life course period. (p. 235)

In this description, we can understand that social, biological, emotional, and cognitive changes occur; there is a positive representation of adolescence as a period of growth. However, we also see frequent health challenges in adolescence, which need to be analyzed and addressed. Further, Newcomb-Anjo (2019) adds that adolescence is a period in which individuals experience several “developmental changes, opportunities and challenges” (p. 236) in Western societies. In her study, she is concerned with the stigmas created on seeking help for mental health, as she claims that adolescence is the developmental stage when rates of mental health diseases are high, such as depression and anxiety. In her explanations of the reasons adolescents are not seeking mental health support, Newcomb-Anjo focuses on structural and contextual factors that might impact adolescents’ choices and attitudes in this matter. These factors are difficulties in the accessibility to therapy, lack of support from parents, limited freedom, and continuous restrictions in their lives (p. 243). Accordingly, Velasco et al. (2020) add other contextual factors that restrict adolescents from seeking support, such as family beliefs, autonomy, and confidentiality policies (p. 14). This way of analyzing and studying adolescents does not contribute to their stigmatization because it does not develop assumptions on why adolescents are not seeking health support; instead, they focus on adolescents’ circumstances, considering them as full personhood.

Furthermore, in Miller-Slough and Dunsmore’s (2020) study on adolescent emotional socialization and adjustment, their explanation of adolescents’ emotions derives from the education they receive from their parents. They explain that parents with a “coaching philosophy view adolescents’ emotions as valuable and a learning opportunity for emotional awareness and skill-development” (p. 2). However, parents with an opposite approach, such as

disregarding adolescents' emotions due to the belief that they are dangerous, they may reduce the significance and discredit adolescents' emotional experiences (p. 2). This explanation is interesting because recognizing youth agency does not create stigma on adolescents' emotional processes and developments. Instead, Miller-Slough and Dunsmore analyze the contextual factors influencing adolescents' emotional experiences.

In conclusion, in four discourses, only two discourses contributed to stigmatizing particular groups of adolescents. The first is the "at-risk" discourse that can stigmatize adolescents considered "at-risk." The second is the emerging adulthood discourse that stigmatizes young people who are not considered emerging adults due to their life choices and circumstances. Lastly, there is the discourse with a youth-centered perspective that considers young people's perspectives and experiences. This perspective contrasts with the adultcentristic perspective that analysis adolescents with a distorted representation of their needs and experiences through adults' understandings. The following section will review the process of this study and its results, adding some comments about the discourses discussed in this section. Lastly, I will reflect on the limitations and contributions of this research.

## **6. Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to understand what the discourse of adolescents in the psychology literature was. The research questions were: how does scientific psychological discourse define adolescents? And how can these discourses impact adolescents' representation in society? To answer this question, I undertook a systematic literature review and collected six peer-reviewed articles that included a definition and description of adolescents. This method allowed me to understand better the knowledge established about adolescents in the field of psychology.

Moreover, the method was ideal for this study because I could analyze the discourse on adolescents through the language applied to define them. I focused on the scholars' representation of adolescents through the words applied to describe adolescence. Additionally, I applied the grounded theory method to conduct an inductive analysis of the data. This method was helpful in the process of analyzing data due to its flexibility and openness to new ideas, without preconceived theories. Furthermore, during the discussion, I used stigma as a sensitive concept to analyze the themes emerged in the papers, to observe if there was a relation between the discourses found and stigma.

From this study, we understood that some themes discovered do not relate to stigma. The first theme was the life stage discourse. We could observe that this theme did not contribute negatively nor positively to the representation of adolescents. Thus, this discourse did not contribute to stigmatization, as it did not apply attributes to adolescents that could impact them negatively. Similarly, the youth-centered perspective did not contribute to stigmatizing them, but to represent adolescents positively. Instead of developing assumptions about adolescents' behaviours and attitudes, Newcomb-Anjo (2019) and Miller-Slough and Dunsmore (2020) focused on young peoples' circumstances considering adolescents' perspectives and experiences. This discourse contrasts with the adultcentristic perspective based on the social construction of being an adolescent according to adults' perspective, without considering youth's frames of reference.

Afterwards, two themes emerged relate to stigma. First, the "at-risk" discourse was demonstrated to be ambiguous and overused, without a clear meaning about the risk and to whom it applied explicitly. For example, as mentioned in sub-section 6.1., Lomas et al. (2020) state that "at-risk youth is a significant issue" (p. 129) without clearly stating to whom they are a risk. However, this statement stigmatizes "at-risk" adolescents and encourages the idea that adolescents (especially young boys) are a danger to society (as we saw in sub-section 3.1.)

without any clear evidence that they are. Secondly, the emerging adulthood discourse contributes to stigmatizing a particular group of young people who are excluded and not taken into consideration from the emerging adulthood theory. Emerging adulthood theory as a life stage only regards a social group of youth identified based on their culture, economic possibilities, and educational level. Those not considered emerging adults are excluded from this life stage, ultimately stigmatizing them by neglecting and undervaluing their contribution and importance in society.

From this study, we can conclude that some discourses negatively impact adolescents' representation in society by creating and developing stigmas that discredit adolescents. According to Goffman (1986), a stigma is a relation between an attribute to a social category and a stereotype (p. 4). Applying a stigma to a social category can influence their experience in society due to the discrimination of a group of people compared to another. For example, we can see a similarity between the "at-risk" youth discourse and G. Stanley Hall's discourse on adolescents. For example, as mentioned in section 3.1., the representation of adolescence as a period of storm and stress, emotional instability and dangerous behaviours has endured in psychology for several decades. The "at-risk" youth discourse could be interpreted as encouraging these conceptions of youth, which can influence the social, political, criminal and health institutions, such as schools, employers, and clinics, among others.

However, some discourses can contribute to a positive definition and description of adolescents. This study opens a discussion on the concept of adolescence. Gilmore's (2019) study demonstrated a need to rethink this concept (p. 644) as new life stages theories emerge. Therefore, in agreement with her and other scholars (such as Bynner, 2005; Côté and Bynner, 2008; Amit, 2011), we need to re-evaluate the meaning of adolescence and the contribution of adolescents to society. I believe a definition of adolescence needs to consider their perspectives and experiences as adolescents and their social structure. For example, Côté and Levine (2016)

define adolescence as the following: “adolescence as a life stage is a product of cultural conditions, and the ways in which it is structured are culturally relative.” (p. 69). From their interpretation, adolescence as a life stage is influenced by culture, which varies across societies. Additionally, based on the papers studied in this research, one way to define adolescence could be as a period in which human beings are experiencing biological changes, continuing to develop their cognitive reasoning and cognitive emotions, and acquiring social skills through social experiences. Jeffrey Arnett (2006) also defines adolescents as with institutional obligations, such as in studying until they finish their mandatory studies, and are legally dependent on their guardians.

To conclude, this study had some limitations. First, it could have been interesting to analyze the sample of each paper to understand the population included in the study’s samples. For example, in a paper written on emerging adulthood theory, it could be compelling to understand the background of the young people included in the sample. This could be significant in comprehending if there are biases in the research, propelled by the homogeneity of the group of people chosen. Secondly, the number of keywords chosen to find the peer-reviewed articles is low. A higher number of keywords could have given me access to more papers that could have helped answer the research question. Lastly, due to the small sample, it is not possible to generalize the scientific psychology papers. However, this sample is sufficient to understand the importance of the questions raised in this study. Hopefully, this study will invite other researchers that can inspire in pursuing this reflection by expanding the empirical data and knowledge about this topic. For example, in exploring the conceptualization of adolescence, understanding the discourses in youth research that could contribute to stigmatizing young people, and studying adolescents’ experience of being adolescents using a youth-centered approach.

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