

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36489/saudecoletiva.2021v11i62p5038-5049>

# Public primary school students' and teachers' understanding of crack use in adolescence

Comprensión de estudiantes y profesores de una escuela primaria pública sobre el consumo de crack en la adolescencia  
Compreensões de estudantes e professores de uma escola pública de ensino fundamental sobre uso de crack na adolescência

## ABSTRACT

We aimed to understand students' and teachers' representations of crack use in adolescence. Action research was carried out in a public school in the city of Fortaleza, Ceará, with twelve students and seven teachers from June to August 2015. Data were collected from focus groups held with students and interviews with teachers using the recording technique. For data analysis, we used the interpretative analysis of the drawings made in the focus groups based on the theoretical framework of Jean Piaget. In order to analyze students' and teachers' statements, we transcribed the material verbatim and applied Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutical phenomenology. The results identified a contradiction between the participants' statements: on the one hand, there is a different idea of what is socially constructed about the user, and, on the other, there is a discourse linked to what they see in the media and to what they experience with family members who use crack in a disorganized way.

**DESCRIPTORS:** Adolescence; Crack; Education.

## RESUMEN

El objetivo fue comprender las representaciones de estudiantes y docentes sobre el consumo de crack en la adolescencia. Se trata de una investigación acción realizada en una escuela pública de la ciudad de Fortaleza, Ceará, con doce alumnos y siete profesores de junio a agosto de 2015. Para la recolección de datos, se realizaron grupos focales con alumnos y entrevistas con profesores utilizando la técnica de grabación. Para el análisis de datos, se utilizó el análisis interpretativo de los dibujos producidos en los grupos focales basados en el marco teórico de Jean Piaget. Para analizar los discursos de los alumnos y profesores, realizamos la transcripción íntegra y seguimos la fenomenología hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur. Los resultados identificaron una contradicción entre las afirmaciones de los participantes: por un lado, un reflejo diferente de lo que se construye socialmente sobre el usuario y, por otro, un discurso vinculado a lo que ven en los medios y lo que viven con los familiares que usan crack de forma desorganizada.

**DESCRIPTORES:** Adolescencia; Crack; Educación.

## RESUMO

Objetivou-se compreender as representações de alunos e professores sobre o consumo de crack na adolescência. Trata-se de pesquisa-ação, realizada em escola pública no município de Fortaleza-CE, com doze estudantes e sete professores, de junho a agosto de 2015. Para coleta de dados, realizamos grupos focais com os estudantes e entrevistas com os professores, utilizando a técnica de gravação. Para análise dos dados, utilizamos a análise interpretativa dos desenhos produzidos nos grupos focais com base no referencial teórico de Jean Piaget. Para analisar as falas dos alunos e dos professores realizamos a transcrição na íntegra e seguimos a fenomenologia hermenéutica de Paul Ricoeur. Os resultados identificaram contradição entre as falas dos participantes: por um lado, uma reflexão diferente do que é construído socialmente a respeito do usuário, e, por outro, um discurso atrelado ao que veem na mídia e ao que vivenciam junto aos familiares que fazem uso de crack de forma desorganizada.

**DESCRITORES:** Adolescência; Crack; Educação.

RECEIVED ON: 10/29/2020 APPROVED ON: 12/24/2020

## Aglay Galvão Francelino

Master in Child and Adolescent Health from Ceará State University, Specialist in Elderly Health from Ceará State University, Bachelor of Nursing from the University of Fortaleza.  
ORCID: 0000-0003-2626-0364

**Paulo Henrique Dias Quinderé**

Psychologist, PhD in Public Health, Prof. the psychology course and the postgraduate program Professional Master in Psychology and Public Policy at the Federal University of Ceará - Campus Sobral.

ORCID: 0000-0002-8470-1909

**Thalita Soares Rimes**

Nurse. Master in public health. Specialist in urgency and emergency. Coordinator of the nursing course at Faculdade Vidal de Limoeiro do Norte.

ORCID: 0000-0002-1591-8522

**Aline Teles de Andrade**

Psychologist, Specialist in Mental Health from the State University of Ceará-UECE, Master in Public Health from the State University of Ceará - UECE, Doctoral Student of the Psychology Program at the Federal University of Ceará - UFC.

ORCID: 0000-0002-6456-8282

**Lourdes Suelen Pontes Costa**

Master in Public Health, Bachelor of Nursing from the State University of Ceará.

ORCID: 0000-0001-8589-0214

**Sônia Samara Fonseca de Morais**

Nurse. PhD in Public Health from UECE. Assistance Nurse at Leonardo da Vinc Hospital.

ORCID: 0000-0002-0146-4611

**INTRODUCTION**

The emergence of new drugs, especially crack, has been the subject of studies in Brazil and around the world. This fact raises questions about the secondary outcomes inherent to users, the efficiency of public policies to deal with the issue and the traditional approach to prohibitionism, especially for the adolescent public.<sup>1</sup>

The trend towards increasing drug use among young people can be understood by the physical, hormonal and social changes observed during adolescence.<sup>2</sup> According to some authors<sup>3</sup>, risk factors for starting drug use are related to contextual aspects - low socioeconomic status, availability of the drug, lack of family ties, little involvement in religious activities, low adherence to school activities and influence of friends - as well as to endogenous aspects, that is, psychopathologies, low self-esteem, lack of perspective on life, interest in new sensations, including the search for pleasure and curiosity.<sup>4</sup>

In support of the idea, Costa<sup>5</sup> et al. identify that situations capable of attracting or distancing adolescents from drug use are related to both influencing and protective factors, including: family, so-

cial group, school, life in a high-risk area and the media.

Regarding the panorama of illicit drug use among adolescents, the one detected in the VI National Survey on the use of Psychotropic Drugs by elementary and high school students in the 27 Brazilian capitals stands out<sup>6</sup>, that is, 25,5% of students have already used some illicit drug, including inhalants, marijuana, anxiolytics, cocaine and amphetamines. According to the study carried out by the Ceará Economic Research and Strategy (IPECE - Instituto Instituto de Pesquisa e Estratégia Econômica do Ceará)<sup>7</sup>, 9th grade students in the city of Fortaleza consumed crack ten or more times during their lifetime, which placed the capital in the 2nd position in the ranking, compared to other capitals in the country.

In this context, given the possibility of adolescents being a vulnerable group to drug use and having contact with crack, directly or indirectly, it becomes relevant to think about the co-responsibility of the health and education sectors, in order to improve their articulation to work this theme in schools, health units, homes, religious communities.

The applicability of this study proposal with the research line focused on the ado-

lescent's health situation is aimed at building solid and reflective knowledge for both health services and teaching spaces, since it will serve as a contribution to work this theme with the teenager.

Therefore, it is questioned what representations do these adolescents have about the use of crack? How do teachers represent teenagers' use of these substances?

Given the above, this article aims to understand the representations of students and teachers of elementary school in Fortaleza about the use of crack in adolescence.

**METHOD**

It is an action research with a qualitative approach, defined by Thiollent<sup>8</sup> as a type of social research that requires intense engagement between participants and researchers in order to investigate or solve a particular problem. Thus, we sought to follow the cycle of action research and identified the main problems: reports of drug use in schools by 6th grade students, lack of information from students about crack and difficulties faced by teachers to work on the theme in the classroom. In this context, mention is made of the development of an educational booklet to address the issue in schools and health

education during the focus groups as part of the study stage entitled action.

As mentioned, the study was carried out in the city of Fortaleza, in a school located in the Regional Secretariat VI. The selected school has a student population of 1,000 students, 30 teachers, 2 pedagogical coordinators, 1 director and 1 deputy director.

Data collection was carried out from June to August 2015, with a sample of twelve adolescents aged 10 to 13 years, including five boys and seven girls. In addition, seven teachers were interviewed, including four women and three men.

The inclusion factors were students enrolled in the 6th year and the exclusion factors were students who were not enrolled in the 6th year. For teachers, those who were in pedagogical planning were used as inclusion criteria, and teachers who were developing activities in the classroom on the day of data collection were used as an exclusion factor.

As a collection instrument, we opted for the semi-structured interview with the teachers, and for data collection with the students, we chose two focus groups with 12 adolescents.

The theoretical dimension followed in this analysis phase was attributed to Paul Ricoeur who is guided by phenomenological hermeneutics, who describes how to conduct the analysis of a text. Hermeneutics can be used as a reference to interpret and analyze any type of text. Paul Ricoeur considers hermeneutics as a system of interpretation used as a method to understand manifest or hidden contents and meanings. In this research, the object of interpretation will be the text, produced through the transcripts of the interviews.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the debates, we sought to create other strategies to stimulate discussions among adolescents. Among them, the drawing up of drawings by the participants themselves stood out to represent the topic under discussion.

In this sense, an attempt was made to interpret symbolic constructions (drawings) based on Piaget's theoretical assumptions.

The questions of both the interview

and the focus groups, together with the construction of drawings by the students, sought to stimulate the discussion about the use of crack in adolescence and its repercussions.

Thus, the following theme was highlighted: "Killing class is like crack, you try it once and never stop": understandings about use in adolescence - the discussions were based on stigmatization about the crack user, identified by the pattern of problematic use - and the following subthemes: crack as a symbol of self-affirmation and challenge and patterns of consumption and stigmatization.

As required, the project was submitted to Plataforma Brasil generating a Certificate of Presentation of Ethical Appreciation (CAAE) nº 44320015400005534, being approved after analysis by the Research Ethics Committee of the State University of Ceará (UECE) with the opinion of 1.115.302.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

"To skip class is like crack, you try it once and never stop": understandings about use in adolescence

Initially, we sought to understand the phenomenon of crack use and what representations are built about the user. As noted, both positive and negative repercussions emerged based on the speeches.

The positive representations interpreted in the statements and drawings pointed to the need for affirmation, for the personal challenge attributed to crack, for the well-being and for the pleasant sensations associated with the use.

Based on the ideas of some authors<sup>10,11</sup>, the individual is the result of his experiences, and thus, there is no sense in interpreting the drawing in isolation, without paying attention to the individual's context. Understanding the design and interpreting it in isolation from the context in which it was performed is meaningless.

There was a contradiction between the statements. As it was possible to identify, a part of the teachers and students brought a different representation of what is socially constructed about the user, while the other presented a speech linked to what was exposed in the media and the experiences with family members who use crack in a disorganized way.

### Crack as a symbol of self-assertion and challenge

Necessarily, the consumption of crack imposes risks and challenges that end up being attractive to adolescents. In the drawing, the idea of the crack user was portrayed by the image of a man who can represent someone from his own life - a friend, a family member or someone else in your community or school.

Desenho 1: Elaborado pelos adolescentes estudantes, no primeiro grupo focal. Fortaleza-CE 2015



Given this context, depending on the symbolism present in the image, it is possible to understand, adolescents also signal that their idea about crack goes beyond the physical and chemical effects caused by the drug. However, they also associate the idea that crack is as challenging as skipping classes. As they imply, these events are pleasant and to experience them, it is necessary to have the courage to circumvent the socially constructed norms.

According to Quinderé<sup>12</sup>, the man's relationship with the drug is expressed in the construction of an experience that can become positive at a certain moment, but can become negative at another time in the individuals' lives.

This substance is seen at the same time as a synonym for destruction and disorganization and also a symbol of challenge and curiosity, fueled even by propaganda that tries to denigrate the image of those who use it, in order to remove the young person from the "world of drugs". This initiative, however, seems to generate even more curiosity. As is known, it is in adolescence that the subject seeks to experience new sensations, face new challenges and test his own limits. In this way, they approach crack and see it as a way of confronting what is socially imposed on them and opposing what is put to them as a rule.

As noted, the image of the well-dressed, sanitized and good-looking young man contrasts with the image exposed by the media about the crack user, who, in most cases, is characterized by his careless appearance, in the face of a context of violence. This image brings a direct perception of what they experience in their daily lives, someone similar to anyone else, who lives, enjoys their physical health, and uses the drug without major social complications. Such an image contrasts with that displayed in the mass media.

### Consumption patterns and stigmatization

Corroborating this symbolic repre-

sentation, the discourse emerged that it is possible for users to use crack and maintain their work relationships in a balanced way, without presenting violent and disorganized behavior, as is generally seen in the media in general.<sup>13</sup>

*I already had a student about seven years ago, an employee of McDonald's, who used heavy drugs and was a quiet student in the classroom, now he didn't have a good learning experience, but he was quiet, he didn't touch anyone. Another teacher said: look, he is a crack user, how can he be? He works and everything and is a non-violent student. (Teacher 4)*

Therefore, it is relevant to discuss that not all people who use a certain drug suffer from the propagated negative damages caused by it and not all become dependent on crack. According to Acserald<sup>14</sup>, for problematic use to occur, a number of factors must be taken into account, such as the personality of the user, the drug chosen, the environment and the moment in which one lives.

On the other hand, according to what was identified, reports about the disorganized use of crack were included in the speeches, involving people from the same community, that is, uncles, neighbors or friends.

*My uncle [user]. He says that I should stay away from it, that I should look for study, that this is something that has no cure. That the cure for him is death, because he cannot stop. (Teenager 2)*  
*I have an uncle who is addicted, he is very sorry because he is very skinny, thin in life. I'm like that, because I'm sick, you know? But he is like that because he smokes drugs. It puts an end to my grandmother's things, then she suffers, right?! (Teenager 6)*

The approximation of participants

to crack promotes visible unease, especially because they are exposed to drugs in their social and family environment. Therefore, as it is identified, the perception of the use of crack is built mainly, through experiences with the family itself or people from the same neighborhood.

*This drug issue is complicated in the sense that it is very accessible to them. Our students suffer a lot from this issue. I think most of them are in direct or indirect contact, as a user or not. You can ask, do they know someone they use or have someone in the family they sell. It is very close. We see this process very strong within these communities. (Teacher 5)*

As for the understanding of the crack phenomenon in adolescence, the following statements are emphasized, which are associated with dependence (addiction) and abortion.

*Because you want to smoke straight and you don't want to stop. (Teenager 1)*  
*It is a danger because it aborts a child. (Teenager 4)*  
*I find it kind of desperate compared to the other drugs. I have friends who are users of marijuana, cocaine, but who lead practically normal lives. They have their jobs, but I know they use them. I don't know any crack users who have this relationship. (Teacher 3)*

When associating the use of crack with abortion, it implicitly promotes the reflection that the use of this drug is not only a male practice and women who abuse it during pregnancy can suffer negative repercussions in this light.

In general, the interpretations around the speeches bring a marked association with the damage caused by crack when used in an abusive way. Thus, they fail to consider the other consumption pat-

terns, that is, the experimental and the occasional, patterns that, according to a professor, are not possible when the option to use crack is made.

The survey participants expressed more general opinions regarding the crack user. These may be anchored in experiences with users who face problems arising from the disorganized consumption of this drug or in a media trend and end up reproducing information similar to that shown in police programs and, thus, fail to promote a deeper reflection on this topic.

According to Acserald <sup>14</sup>, when any substance is used in a problematic way, consequently, damage to the organism occurs. However, the effects of crack are not always manifested in the same way in all users, as the sensations can vary from person to person when considering the context of the user, that is, the physical, psychological and social dimensions.

As the speeches show, the way of perceiving the student who uses drugs or crack is based, on the one hand, on the stereotyped view that changes the way of looking, behaving, modifies concentration, the way of speaking. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand that these changes, by themselves, do not justify the association with the use of crack, but open space for a deeper reflection on the context in which this student is inserted.

Based on these interpretations, it is urgent to reflect on the following: this perception should be stimulated through an attentive and careful monitoring of students, because other situations associated with emotional problems, transformations due to the period of adolescence, with hormonal and mood changes, nutritional deficiencies, possible disorders such as attention deficit or even depression, can be responsible for emotional or biological changes.

The beginning of crack use in adolescence was another point discussed by the participants. As evidenced, the speeches are linked to the invitation of friends and the reproduction of behavior aimed at

the use of crack, through the influence of people in their community or their own family members.

*There is the family that uses it and the child sees and tries to get it. Ah, it's already inside the house, then it ends up rolling one too, so to get out it's difficult! (Teenager 4)*  
*But I believe that what most influences are the user parents or even the absent parents. That what will educate them will be the street and sometimes the environment where they live has the drug and they end up being influenced by the environment where they live, right? Certainly, access is much easier. (Teacher 2)*

In support of this study, similar results were found in the study by Faria Filho <sup>15</sup> et al. regarding adolescents' conceptions about drugs. According to the authors, the meanings that adolescents construct in relation to the drug may possibly be associated with historical and socially constructed reproductions, upon hearing reports from people in their own society or from the media. In this way, they reproduce a socially established concept, and in this way, they fail to elaborate deeper reflections on the subject.

According to what is understood, the perception around the adolescent user must be constructed with a sensitive look at the real potential problems that may arise in this phase of life. Therefore, it is necessary to pay attention to other possibilities of suffering of which they can be victims, such as changes in self-esteem, in social and family relationships that are not always linked to the problematic use of crack.

Representations about suffering as a result of use, the need to steal, sell house objects or the relationship with trafficking were present in the students' statements and denote the consequences of the disorganization of crack use, culminating in a complex disruption by the user.

From this, there can be a socially installed suffering for those without the minimum assistance by public policies regarding problematic drug use. Furthermore, young people, not always drug users, live with people in a situation of illness and, consequently, may also suffer from this process.

According to some authors <sup>16</sup>, in their study on adolescence and the biopsychosocial factors related to drug use among the 229 adolescents surveyed, many said they lived with family members who used some type of drug (56,8%), and that this fact had negative repercussions on their school life.

It is reflected in the perspective that it is not the adolescent who absorbs crack, but it is the crack that ends up absorbing the socially constructed meanings, whether positive or negative. For certain adolescents, the dangerous use of this drug is due to several examples experienced in their social realities. People disorganized because of use, fighting, living in conflicts of different orders.

It is worth mentioning: in general, young people from the middle and upper social classes have access to leisure activities, to a school that promotes guidelines on drug use and that closely monitors educational activities; they are able to travel, play sports, have access to quality health and a structured family. It is evident, then, how much we live in an unequal society, since young people from less favored classes live in a situation of poverty without conditions to access quality leisure, education and health activities. They live on the margins of society and feel the need to assert themselves in their own context.

Due to this social inequality, it is the drug that promotes access to these consumer goods and guarantees the status that is so desired by many adolescents. Thus, crack ends up being interpreted as a means of socialization and reaffirmation in its cultural context. In contrast, the use of this drug can be denied due to all the prejudice created around the user. It is easier to assume the

consumption of alcohol or marijuana, which are more socially accepted substances, because in the view of students and teachers, crack is a heavy drug that generates profound repercussions in the lives of adolescents.

*They don't have that notion. Because the community is inserted in a very complex social context, where drugs permeate all their social nuances, they see it as a normal thing. I see it, the drug is normal. I've heard: "so-and-so" is an airplane, professor. (Teacher 4)*  
*They think it's cool [...]. It's status, it's important. It's normal. The natural thing for them is to use and most of the time, cover up what they use. (Teacher 5)*

This reality opens room for further

reflection on the intrinsic need of people to relate to one another, because if we are social beings, we need instruments that enable sociability. If young people feel the lack of instruments favorable to this social communion, consequently, they will find what is available socially, such as crack.

The environment and context in which adolescents live also influence their choices and behaviors. Thus, accessibility to the drug can be easy and they may find this relationship with crack natural, since they reproduce this type of behavior, which is often experienced inside the home.

## CONCLUSION

As the study demonstrated, it is easier to understand crack as an object that causes negative outcomes, including

violence, death and social confinement, with superficial and simple arguments, anchored in stigmas and prejudices. Nevertheless, in adolescence, crack is seen as an element of social communion, as a challenge and as an object of affirmation in your group of friends. Thus, it requires more attention since young people are more vulnerable to drugs.

It is necessary to encourage the development of strategies to promote adolescent health, which reduce the barriers of prejudice, and thus facilitate open communication on the problem of crack use. Above all, it is worth considering the residents of poorer communities, as they tend to experience, directly or indirectly, experiences with drugs. Therefore, to be silent on this issue is to deprive this population of relevant information for possible conscious decision-making. ■

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