

## INTERVIEW WITH A PROFESSOR

# DR. TENNISHA N. RILEY

**Q: Sacha Sides, Editor-in-Chief, Emic Magazine**

A: Tennisha N. Riley, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor; Family, Youth, and Community Sciences at the University of Florida

**Q: Can you give a brief synopsis of your work?**

A: I am trained as a developmental psychologist. My research explores the emotional and psychosocial development of marginalized adolescents (ages 10-25 years), particularly with the focus of assessing variation across multi-racial backgrounds. Emotional development includes everything from how people begin to learn about [their] emotions to emotional regulation and emotional expression. Emotions as we understand them are largely defined by our social and cultural frameworks – emotions are communication tools that allow us to express our needs and desires. My work then explores how people's experiences shape the way they interact with emotions.

**Q: What methods do you typically use when conducting your research?**

A: I use a lot of different methods in my research – typically whatever best answers the question. Wherever people are and the needs of the community inform the different methods that I will use. Typically, I can use traditional methods like surveys, observations, and interviews. I also use physiological methods in my work that assess, for example, biological responses to stress. I emphasize that my research is community-engaged.

**Q: Your research surveys adolescent experiences while still empowering them to be the narrators of their own stories. You are very explicit in describing adolescents as the experts of their own lives. Can you share a bit more about this?**

A: I like learning about adolescents because they know a lot that we don't give them cred-

it for. A lot of the studies I originally wanted to do had 0 participants. When I began engaging youth in my research projects, [the projects] have been super successful. Trust is super important, and there is a lack in trust especially after the pandemic. [Researchers] think about research as something that [we] do, but when you're working with minoritized individuals... Why would they want to participate? My perspective was definitely inspired by student activists, too.

**Q: You defined adolescence as the stage of life between ages 10-25. I think most people tend to consider adulthood beginning at 18, and adolescence ending far before the age of 25. How do you define adolescence, and what is the reason behind this age range?**

A: This definition of adolescence, with this specific age range, is one that is thoroughly debated – some are even pushing to delay the end of adolescence until the age of 30. There are social conditions that influence the way we define adolescence. Normally the beginning is the onset of pubertal maturation. The end is hotly debated because the ways in which we normally think of adulthood – like marriage, and starting a family – have been changed and pushed back. We are less religiously focused, and not as content with just receiving a bachelor's degree; educational attainment is delayed. It's an advantage because if we can view adolescence as a time of rapid growth – even though we are always growing – if we give the opportunity to people in their early 20s to acknowledge that they are still coming of age, it allows them to expand on their own learning or their own identity during this time. It's disadvantageous to more people who want a cutoff age. We typically think of our 20s as a 'time that you should know better', and so this counters that.

**Q: What sparked your interest in your field?**

A: I was originally thinking that my future lay in medical school, but who wants to do

that? [laughs] I ended up studying psychology, and I really liked studying adolescence. The age range was interesting to me – it has a really unique perspective. I ended up working with parents of children in juvenile probation within a county known for their high juvenile incarceration rates. Policies and laws did not match up with what the research was saying, which also did not match up with my own observations. Adolescence is a time of immense social development, and using isolation as a punishment can destroy someone's emotional trajectory. I wanted to be more of an advocate. I wanted to facilitate real policy changes as a result of my work.

**Q: So, looking back at our theme. What do "foundations" mean to you, both in and outside of the context of your research?**

A: I tend to teach courses in developmental psychology – what we normally call "womb to tomb." So, when I hear 'foundations', I first think of an embryo. I start to think about what might happen to organisms in utero that would lead them to develop certain characteristics. I then think about the context in which [that embryo] develops. Context always has to be a thing you think about. Context of development can impact human genetic makeup, and can influence how children respond to stress when they are out of utero. It is not just about the beginning of the human body but also the context in which that [body] develops. My research [focus] starts at 6 years old (6-18), but along those lines there are several foundational events that impact people at certain ages. The foundation of adolescence is also about understanding your identity. If you understand who you are, then all my research starts to unfold. You begin to see your place in the world through your physical growth, academic trajectory, and social development. I would think about foundations as who you are and how you see yourself.