Her Majesty's
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Probation

Adultification bias within child protection and safeguarding

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Foreword

HM Inspectorate of Probation is committed to reviewing, developing and promoting the evidence base for high-quality probation and youth offending services. *Academic Insights* are aimed at all those with an interest in the evidence base. We commission leading academics to present their views on specific topics, assisting with informed debate and aiding understanding of what helps and what hinders probation and youth offending services.

This report was kindly produced by Jahnine Davis, highlighting adultification bias, its links to racialised discrimination, and how it can impact upon child protection and safeguarding practices. Crucially, application of adultification bias results in children's rights being diminished or ignored, with notions of innocence and vulnerability displaced by notions of responsibility and culpability. The Professional Inter-Adultification Model is introduced which emphasises the importance of professional and organisational curiosity, critical thinking, and reflection. The model includes the further concept of intersectionality to encourage professionals to explore how the intersections of race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender, dis/abilities, and wider lived experiences may have impacted upon the lives of individual children. At an organisational level, it is imperative that leaders model equity, diversity and inclusion, and embrace both critical challenge and accountability. To assist leaders, the inspectorate has included examples of effective leadership in its [2021 effective practice guide for working with Black and mixed heritage boys in the youth justice system](#).

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Author profile

Jahnine Davis is the UK's foremost researcher and thought leader in adultification bias in child protection and safeguarding. A specialist in the safeguarding of Black children, Jahnine's PhD research explores safeguarding responses to Black children when harm is outside of the home. Jahnine is a care-experienced professional with over 20 years practice experience working in both charity and statutory safeguarding arenas. This includes her appointment on the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel.

Jahnine is Director of Listen Up, an organisation established to amplify lesser heard children in child protection research, policy and practice.

The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the policy position of HM Inspectorate of Probation.

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to increase awareness of adultification bias and to improve child protection and safeguarding practice by introducing the Professional Inter-Adultification (PIA) Model. This requires a willingness from individuals, agencies, and organisations to acknowledge that discrimination, in particular racism, exists within all safeguarding systems, at individual, institutional and systemic levels.

As such, this paper is intended to invite the reader to move beyond thinking about uncomfortable topics and instead take responsibility for the origins of this discomfort and its implications in relation to the safeguarding of Black[1] and Black mixed heritage children[2].

Recently, the concept of adultification bias has increasingly become a main point of discussion in child welfare arenas and the wider public space. Notably, the Child Q Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2022) is one of the first reviews in England to explicitly refer to adultification as factor influencing the safeguarding of a Black child. Furthermore, the Commission on Young Lives (2022) identified adultification bias as a contributing influence shaping Black children's experience of education. While in criminal justice, Black and Black mixed heritage children point to the challenges of this bias when interacting with the police (HM Inspectorate of Probation, 2021). The hallmarks of adultification were also identified in two serious cases concerning the deaths of criminally exploited 14-year-old Black British Caribbean boys in England (Davis and Marsh, 2020).

However, this form of adultification bias is not a new phenomenon; over the past decade literature and research in North America and the United Kingdom (UK) has highlighted that for many Black children, this type of racialised discrimination continues to impact their daily lives across welfare services, education, health, and criminal justice. Literature also suggests that adultification bias can feature in other contexts, which leaves all children at risk of this form of discrimination.

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[1] Black is capitalized throughout this paper to recognize it is 'a specific cultural group that requires use of a proper noun', as argued by Ferdinand Lee Barnett in his 1878 editorial 'Spell it with a Capital B'.
[2] The term child will be used to re-emphasize who by definition and status are the victims or beneficiaries of adult actions (Cunningham, 2006).

2. Understanding and counteracting adultification bias

2.1 Adultification – what is it?

While adultification is discussed across literature (Stephen, 1999; Burton, 2007; Goff, 2014; Ocen; 2015; Smitz and Tyler, 2016; Epstein et al., 2017), there is only one explanation which explicitly defines adultification in the context of children's rights. Davis and Marsh (2020) define adultification as:

> 'The concept of adultification is when notions of innocence and vulnerability are not afforded to certain children. This is determined by people and institutions who hold power over them. When adultification occurs outside of the home it is always founded within discrimination and bias.
>
> There are various definitions of adultification, all relate to a child's personal characteristics, socio-economic influences and/or lived experiences. Regardless of the context in which adultification take place, the impact results in children's rights being either diminished or not upheld.'

The legacies of slavery and colonialism

As indicated in research and literature, Black children are most likely to experience adultification bias due to race, ethnicity and racism acting as compounding factors that hinder child protection responses and professional curiosity (Davis, 2019; Davis and Marsh, 2020, 2022; Farrer, 2022). This group of children are therefore at a heightened risk of their safeguarding needs being unmet.

To further extend Davis and Marsh's (2020) definition, I argue that the adultification of Black children is a manifestation of racism and must be situated within an historical context of devaluation and dehumanisation (Goff et al., 2014; Farrer, 2022). The preconditions of this form of bias are the legacies of racist tropes which stem from slavery and colonialism.

I define the adultification of Black children as…

> A persistent and ongoing act of dehumanisation, which explicitly impacts Black children, and influences how they are safeguarded and protected. This form of bias spans pre-birth and remains on a continuum to adulthood. Where at this juncture it becomes absorbed within the normative negative racialised experiences many Black adults encounter throughout their life course. Adultification may differ dependent on an individual's intersecting identity, such as their gender, sexuality, and dis/abilities. However, race and racism remain the central tenant in which this bias operates.

Key considerations are as follows:

- Black children are more likely to experience adultification bias
- racism is the core issue influencing the adultification of Black children
- Black children are more likely to be met with suspicion, assumed deviance and culpability
- adultification reduces professional and organisational responsibility to safeguard and protect children, yet increases a responsibilisation of children to safeguard themselves
- adultification bias is a breach of child safeguarding legislation and guidance.

2.2 Adultification in other contexts

While research indicates that Black children are most likely to experience adultification bias, it is important to understand the differing contexts in which it can feature, which places all children at risk of this discrimination. However, this should not mean a shifting of focus from Black children but instead a curiosity to understand how race/ethnicity and other aspects of a child's identity compounds these different contexts.

Domestic abuse

Stephens (1999) suggests children living in homes where domestic violence is present are more likely to be adultified, both within the home and externally. With limited support the non-abusive parent may seek support from the child/children. The child may feel a sense of responsibility to take care of their siblings, and the professional network may view this child as being more resilient and 'streetwise.' However, the potential implications is the vulnerability of the child being overlooked, leaving them at more risk and the child left to presume a forced sense of independence.

Socio-economic disadvantage

Burton (2007) highlights how 'social economic deprivation' may influence how children living in poverty may be expected to support the family purse and take on responsibilities which would normally be for adult parent and carers to hold. It is important to note that these responsibilities are not relating to 'chores for pocket money' and to support life skills, but instead a reliance and lack of choice to support the reproduction of income due to parental stresses and limited resource.

Transphobia

Stone (2017) argues that cisgender biases and oppressions lead to hostile attitudes towards transgender children. Consequently, overlooking the basic needs all children require, such as warmth, care, love and belonging (Maslow, 1943). Transgender girls are adultified by positioning them as presenting as adult like and as 'immutably gendered, confused and sexually predatory', where the needs of children become neglected.

Homelessness

A study by Smitz and Tyler (2016) indicates 'early adultification' as a consequence of child homelessness. They argue that children at risk of, or experiencing homelessness, may be without choice but to adopt early 'adult like roles' (ibid). Subsequently, professionals may not always consider the impact of children having to assume adult like roles, without ample time to transition to adulthood (Jurkovic, 1997).
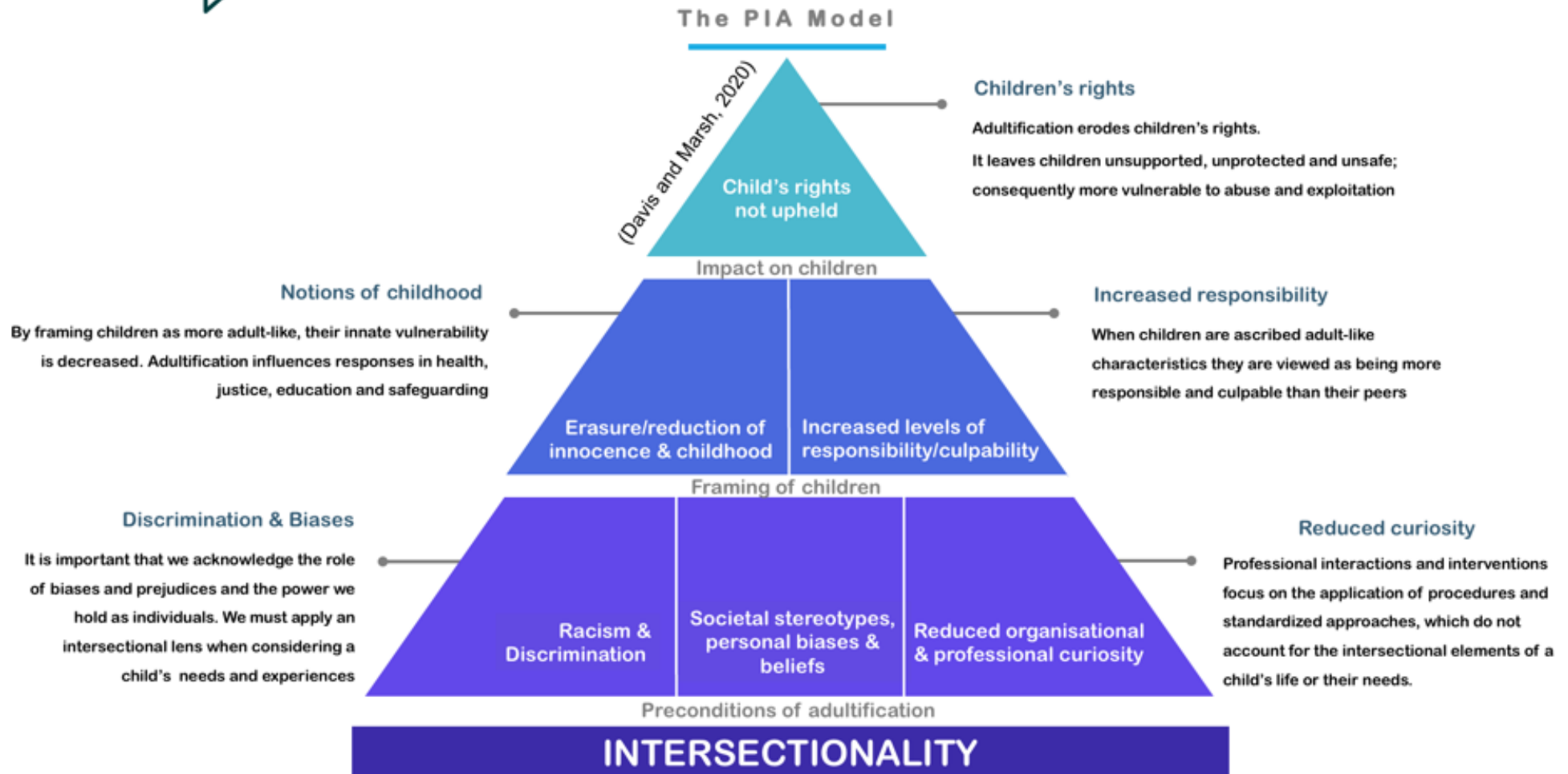
Further contexts

The above study also identified that young carers may feel 'overwhelmed in addition to their other life responsibilities' (Smitz and Taylor, 2016). Unaccompanied minors may also experience adultification bias (Puig, 2002; Hlass 2019), and care experienced children.

Professional Inter-Adultification

The PIA Model

(Davis and Marsh, 2020)

Children's rights

Adultification erodes children's rights.

It leaves children unsupported, unprotected and unsafe; consequently more vulnerable to abuse and exploitation

Child's rights not upheld

Impact on children

Notions of childhood

By framing children as more adult-like, their innate vulnerability is decreased. Adultification influences responses in health, justice, education and safeguarding

Increased responsibility

When children are ascribed adult-like characteristics they are viewed as being more responsible and culpable than their peers

Erasure/reduction of innocence & childhood

Increased levels of responsibility/culpability

Framing of children

Discrimination & Biases

It is important that we acknowledge the role of biases and prejudices and the power we hold as individuals. We must apply an intersectional lens when considering a child's needs and experiences

Reduced curiosity

Professional interactions and interventions focus on the application of procedures and standardized approaches, which do not account for the intersectional elements of a child's life or their needs.

Racism & Discrimination

Societal stereotypes, personal biases & beliefs

Reduced organisational & professional curiosity

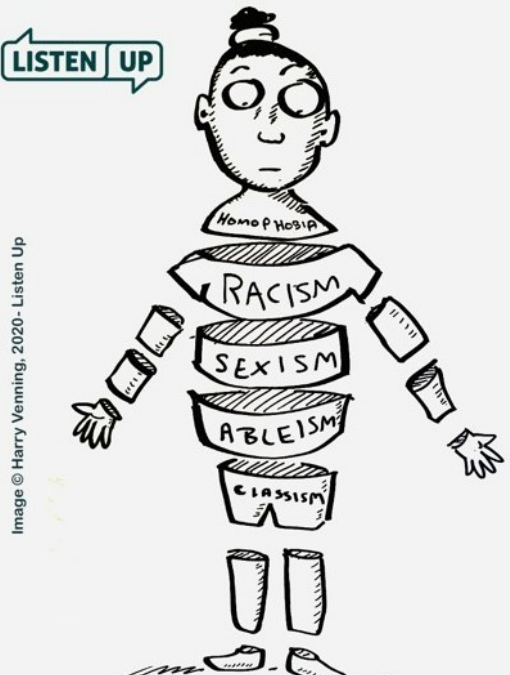Preconditions of adultification

INTERSECTIONALITY

The PIA model (Davis and Marsh, 2020) aims to illustrate the process of adultification and how it occurs. Thus, providing opportunities to identify early indicators of this bias and ways to counteract it. Key components of the model are as follows:

- **Professional**: the model draws on the adultification of children by professionals, agencies, and institutions.

- **Inter**: the theory of intersectionality must be the starting point to explore these phenomena, to ensure when considering the needs and experiences of children impacted by this harm, sufficient attention is given to how the intersections of race/ethnicity, sexuality, class, gender, dis/abilities, and wider lived experiences may further compound how and which children are afforded 'the deserving or underserving victim' status.

- **Adultification**: the model was developed to demonstrate how adultification can lead to the rights of children not being upheld, potentially leaving them more at risk of harm, due to a dereliction of safeguarding duty.

Understanding the whole picture

> *"There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives"* *(Lorde, 1982)*

To better understand the many ways in which adultification presents and how it is experienced by diverse groups of children, an intersectional lens is necessary in all child protection and safeguarding fields. Intersectionality is the social justice theory and concept which encourages professional and organisational curiosity to understand oppression and discrimination as inter-related, overlapping combined experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). The term itself was first coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) to amplify the combined oppressions Black women navigated in the workplace where racism and sexism collide as gendered racism. Yet, while intersectionality was founded in Black feminist activism over four decades ago, (Lorde, 1982; hooks, 1989; Crenshaw, 1989;1991; Hill-Collins, 1990), its application to child protection and safeguarding has only recently emerged (Bernard, 2020; 2022; Davis, 2019, 2020; Davis and Marsh; 2022).

LISTEN UP

Image © Harry Venning, 2020- Listen Up

Intersectionality

Crenshaw (1991) identified that a person's interactions with the world are not just solely based on one aspect of their identity, but are rather layered and multifaceted; interactions in which racism, sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia (and other forms of oppression) are experienced simultaneously.

Intersectionality can support professionals to move beyond universal child safeguarding frameworks which historically have been Eurocentric, heteronormative and ableist (Davis and Marsh, 2022; Choates et al, 2020). While it is important to not assume that all children's intersecting experiences are the same, applying intersectionality will encourage professionals to explore the individual (micro) and structural contexts (macro) of minoritised and marginalised children and families.

Let us consider Nathaniel, a neurodiverse 15-year-old Black Caribbean working-class boy. It is likely that Nathaniel's behaviour will not be understood as something potentially symptomatic of him being neurodiverse; instead professionals may interpret Nathaniel's behaviour as signs of aggression and poor conduct due to Black boys being stereotyped as angry and deviant (Smiley and Fauknle, 2014). However, if Nathaniel was a child from a White ethnic background, while he may still experience bias, assumptions about anger may be interpreted differently on the basis that he is a White child (Cooke and Halberstadt, 2021).

Racism, bias, and harmful societal attitudes create a foundation for this form of bias to exist (Goff et al., 2014; Epstein et al., 2017; Davis and Marsh; 2020; 2022). To understand how this bias determines professional (dis)engagement with children at risk of, or experiencing harm, the starting point must be an acknowledgement that racism and racialised stereotypes about Black communities are present in individuals and services which exist to promote child protection and safeguarding practice. While unconscious bias might inform perspectives and assumptions about various groups of people, it may also act as a cushion to safeguard individuals and services to resist accountability about conscious attitudes and behaviours (City and Hackney Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2022).

The PIA model highlights the necessity to encourage critical thinking and reflection to support professionals to consider individual bias and the impact on safeguarding practice. However, the context within which professionals are situated matters. Therefore, organisations must promote environments which embrace critical challenge and safer spaces for all professionals to engage in potentially new and uncomfortable conversations about racism and discrimination. It is incumbent that leaders model equity, diversity, and inclusion as both an ethical and legal requirement in child protection.

If discriminatory beliefs are not challenged, the impact may lead to a reduction in both professional and organisational curiosity (Davis and Marsh, 2020; 2022), resulting in a limited and biased understanding about the child and their experience.

2.4 Framing of children

Increased levels of responsibility and culpability

Without challenge and accountability, stereotypes about Black children may deter appropriate safeguarding and professionals may disregard the innate vulnerability all of children. For Black boys, some of these stereotypes include the image of the 'criminal', 'thug' and 'deviant' (Smiley and Fakunle, 2016). Goff et al. (2014) refer to the dehumanisation of African American boys as a direct consequence of the reproduction of manufactured racist tropes which stem from colonialization. Black boys are increasingly more likely not to be afforded the notion of innocence due to perceptions of being older and therefore more responsible for their actions (ibid).

Black girls have historically been depicted as 'hyper-resilient, sexual, and 'masculine', loud and aggressive' (Hill-Collins, 1990); these stereotypes acted to justify the abuse and harm Black women and girls suffered during slavery (Feinstein, 2019). The legacies of slavery and colonialism continue to feature in present day. Hill-Collins (1990) refers to these as controlling images; the angry, strong, and aggressive, promiscuous (Jezebel) Black woman.

The Child Q Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review (2022) is an example of how responsibility and culpability were the conditions which guided professional decision making. Concerns about potential substance misuse were not met with a child welfare approach whereby professionals provided a child-centred approach which focused on overall wellbeing. Instead, these concerns were addressed with a criminal justice response, where a 'secondary school aged Black girl' was treated with suspicion and assumed deviance by both education professionals and the police.

Davis and Marsh (2020) identified that in two separate serious case reviews, involving the deaths of 14-year-old Black boys, the hallmarks of adultification featured. In both cases, this resulted in the two young boys not being viewed as in need of protection but being deemed as a potential risk to others. This potentially led to missed opportunities to provide support to both children and their families. With Black boys at an increased risk of extrafamilial harm (Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020), understanding this bias is crucial.

In all three cases, 'age was not an obvious indicator of vulnerability' (Davis and Marsh, 2020, p.5). With increased suspicion and punitive approaches, adultification erases the essence of childhood innocence and replaces vulnerability with culpability. The three reviews indicate a lack of professional challenge across and between agencies, allowing for rubber stamping and a lowering of accountability.

Language is everything

Adultification bias can also be identified by the language used to describe children, such as a 'streetwise', 'resilient' and 'mature.' Such language may assume children have more agency and capacity to safeguard themselves. For Black children, such language may be normalised due to the stereotypes associated with them, and therefore it is important to scrutinise such terms. If children are perceived as being more adult like, the language ascribed to them may further reduce safeguarding responses (Davis and Marsh, 2020; Children Society, 2022).

3. Conclusion

Adultification erodes children's rights and leaves them at a greater risk of harm due to a dereliction of safeguarding duty from individuals and organisations. When adultification is present, child welfare is not of paramount concern and professional inquiries and interactions can actively and passively cause harm. Consideration must be given to how adultification may be in breach of child welfare and equalities legislation and guidance; public authorities have a responsibility to ensure discrimination does not hinder the identification of children in need or at risk, where no child should be 'treated less favorably' (Working Together, 2018; The Equality Act, 2010; The Children's Act, 1989).

If equity, diversity and inclusion is not centred in child safeguarding practice, regardless of the intervention and approaches taken, adultification is likely to occur.

If the starting point is to question the existence of racism and racialised stereotypes, instead of how its existence can misguide child protection and safeguarding services, Black children, including those from other ethnic minoritised backgrounds may have their needs overlooked and erased. The adultification of Black children must be understood as a manifestation of racism. This can result in the onus of children to safeguard themselves, rather than receiving the care and protection they have a right to receive. Adultification can lead to a victim-blaming narrative, which implies Black children are somehow complicit in the harm experienced. As Black children are less likely to be afforded care, compassion, and support, it raises a serious question of who are more likely to be categorised as deserving and underserving children when in need of safeguarding and protection?

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