This commentary is in response to the publication of Child C’s serious case review, published in May 2020. Child C was a victim of child criminal exploitation. He was murdered on the streets of London at 14 years old. Using an intersectional lens, together with and the concept of ‘adultification’, this article reflects on professional and societal attitudes towards Black boys and notions of vulnerability. We argue that in order to provide meaningful and effective support to Black boys, both the use of an intersectional lens and an awareness of adultification is necessary.

**Key words** criminal exploitation • intersectionality • child protection • adultification • Black boys


**Introduction**

This commentary is in response to the publication of Child C’s serious case review (SCR), published in May 2020. Using an intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1991), together with and the concept of ‘adultification’ (Goff et al, 2014), this article reflects on professional and societal attitudes towards Black boys and notions of vulnerability. We argue that in order to provide meaningful and effective support to Black children, both the use of an intersectional lens and an awareness of adultification is necessary.

Throughout this article, ‘adultification’ is used to describe how preconceptions of children (specifically Black children) may lead to them being treated and perceived as being more adult-like (Goff et al, 2014). If Black children are seen as less vulnerable and more adult-like, services may overlook their needs and disregard their legal rights to be protected, supported and safeguarded.

**Criminal justice or child welfare?**

The notion of adultification is not often considered in child protection and safeguarding practice in England (Davis, 2019), yet its hallmarks have recently been evidenced in Child C’s SCR, published by Waltham Forest Safeguarding Children Board (Drew, 2020). The SCR details many occasions when Child C came into
direct and indirect contact with services and professionals, and how his vulnerability to exploitation was overlooked. Child C was 14 years old and a victim of criminal exploitation. He was murdered on 8 January 2019. Although it is important to note that the SCR found ‘no evidence’ that Child C’s murder could have been predicted, Child C was known to children’s social care, the police, the local education authority and the local authority housing service.

The SCR cites four occasions where it was recorded that Child C was ‘in possession of firearms’. This includes one occasion when Child C was 13 years old and was stopped by police officers, who found him ‘to be in possession of an air gun [and] a large “Rambo” style knife in a sheath on his waistband’. It should be emphasised that the SCR agreed with the response and interventions provided by the Youth Offending Service (YOS), as well as the decision of children’s social care to take no further action given YOS involvement. Nevertheless, we urgently need to reflect on how we have arrived at such a situation where a 13-year-old boy receives a youth conditional caution for ‘possessing a firearm, a knife and some cannabis’ and the response is not one of welfare, but one of youth justice.

At the time of his death, due to delays in housing decisions, Child C was not living with his mother, but sleeping on his grandmother’s sofa. Child C had also only been in education for three of his last 22 months. This information does not indicate a coordinated and child-centred response from services; rather, it signifies a system that did not fully respond to the importance of stability and structure in a young person’s life when he was known to be a victim of criminal exploitation.

As distressing as Child C’s experience is, it is regrettably not unique. Just two years earlier, in the London borough of Newham, Chris, also 14 years old and of Black Caribbean heritage, was also murdered. Chris’ SCR paints a similar picture (Hill, 2018) to that of Child C’s: housing and educational instability, and support being provided by the YOS as opposed to child welfare. The report indicates that from the time Chris was 12 years old, the police were aware that he might be a target for gangs and was associating with known gang members. Additionally, Chris was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorder, which suggests an increased level of vulnerability (Hill, 2018).

At the time of their deaths, both Chris and Child C were excluded from mainstream education. This is of significance, not only because exclusion from school is considered to increase risk of exploitation (The Children’s Society, 2019), but also because Black Caribbean boys are more likely to experience permanent exclusions (Timpson, 2019).

The circumstances of their lives and deaths suggest that perceptions of vulnerability apply to some children more than others, implying that agencies do not view age as an obvious indicator of vulnerability, especially if the young person is Black and male (Goff et al, 2014), and the harm is outside of the home. Opportunities to effectively support Chris and Child C may have been overlooked due to a unquestioning culture that appears to have lost sight of the innate vulnerability of all children. When reviewing both SCRs, it seems that services and professionals focused on actions and risks, neglecting the fact that there were two children at the centre, both of whom had unmet basic needs, such as housing security, education and protection from harm. This was potentially further compounded by conscious and unconscious beliefs and stereotypes of Black boys, resilience and criminality (Welch, 2007).

Adultification occurs when Black children are perceived as being less innocent and less vulnerable, and subsequently not afforded the same protection as their non-Black
peers (Goff et al, 2014; Epstein et al, 2017). At 14 years old, Chris and Child C were still children and therefore remained the ‘victims or beneficiaries of adult actions’ (Cunningham, 2006), whether these were the actions of the adults who abused and exploited them or of those who made decisions about the services they provided or withheld.

The interactions of Black boys and services

Both Child C’s and Chris’ SCRs raise a number of questions, principally in relation to multi-agency responses to children who are criminally exploited. However, what cannot be separated from this dialogue is the over-representation of Black boys reported to be caught up in this form of abuse and exploitation (The Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel, 2020).

A reading of both SCRs indicates that professional responses still have some way to go, especially for those young people who are entangled within the victim/offender debate. While it is acknowledged that this complexity is not just limited to Black boys, the findings from the SCRs demonstrate a lack of nuance in understanding the interplay between factors such as race, ethnicity, class and gender. These intersections are important to understand if we are to appreciate the realities of how Black children experience services, including education, criminal justice and social care.

Crenshaw (1991) identified that people’s interactions with the world are not just solely based on one aspect of their identity, but layered and multifaceted interactions in which racism, sexism, ableism, classism, homophobia and so forth are experienced simultaneously. Both adultification and intersectionality have their origins in North America and, as such, are less well known in the UK in relation to child protection.

Using intersectionality as a tool to counteract adultification

It is also important to emphasise that while we have referred to the lives and tragic deaths of Child C and Chris, adultification applies to both males and females and, in this context, was originally reported in relation to African-American children (Goff et al, 2014; Ocen, 2015; Epstein et al, 2017). More recently, Davis (2019) has identified features of adultification present in child protection and safeguarding responses in the UK in relation to Black girls and child sexual abuse.

Although the concept of adultification has significance in welfare settings (Davis, 2019), only a handful of researchers in the UK appear to have made use of it in their inquiries (Hayward, 2012; Goldson, 2013; Bernard, 2019; Davis, 2019). It remains unclear to what extent, if any, it is applied in safeguarding practice.

Improving responses to Black children

In understanding the connections between adultification and intersectionality lies an opportunity to explore and recognise the lived experiences of Black children in the UK. In Chris’ and Child C SCRs, adultification possibly presented itself in professionals losing sight of their overall well-being as children and responding to them through a criminal justice lens. This potentially led to professionals erasing their childhood innocence (Goff et al, 2014; Epstein et al, 2017), which resulted in their overall welfare losing paramountcy, in contrast to the Children Act 1989.
To ensure that lessons are learnt and we provide effective welfare responses to Black children vulnerable to exploitation, we must consider adopting an intersectional approach. Using such an approach provides a framework for professionals to better understand the oppressions Black children may experience. It may also support a cultural shift in safeguarding practice, where Black boys are treated with care rather than suspicion.

Notes
1 Black is capitalised throughout this article to recognise that 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’. Grant, D. and Grant, M. (1975) Some notes on the capital ‘N’, Phylon (1960–), 36(4): 435–443, doi:10.2307/274643
2 Children aged 10–17 years old can be given a youth conditional caution if they admit to a criminal offence (Youth Justice Legal Centre, 2015).

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


Youth Justice Legal Centre (2015) Youth conditional caution, Available at: https://yjlc.uk/youth-conditional-caution/