THE ADULTIFICATION
OF BLACK GIRLS IN
STATE CARE:
PERSPECTIVES

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2023 CHURCHILL FELLOW

Disclaimer

Cover Image

The image was developed by Samantha James during her observation of my workshop on the adultification of Child Q (a Black girl who was strip searched by police officers in a school in Hackney) on 8th June 2023.

In loving memory of Ma'Khia Bryant

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I thank God for coming this far. I would not have survived my own experience of adultification as a child and have been in a position to write this report without him, so I give all the glory and honour to him.

I would like to thank the Churchill Fellowship for the support and encouragement that it has given me at every stage of my Fellowship process: from the application information stage, to the interview stage (even with me being out of breath from going to the wrong building) and the post-research visit dissemination stage. I owe the Fellowship an enormous debt of gratitude.

I would like to thank CoramBAAF for their support at every stage of my Fellowship: from the application approval stage to the post-research visit dissemination stage. Their support has been instrumental to the delivery of this report and continues to be instrumental to its impact.

I would like to thank Prof Carolette Norwood and her colleagues at Howard University's Sociology and Criminology Department for being an excellent host (that even provided me with English tea) and for their commitment to engaging their students with the topic of the adultification of Black girls. Change begins with education. I would like to extend the same gratitude to Prof Fran Buntman (who also gave me tips on fun things to do while I was in Washington DC) and her colleagues at George Washington University's Department of Sociology. I chose an immensely busy time of the academic year to be hosted by both universities and they went above and beyond to support me despite the constraints on their time. I would also like to thank their students for their interest in engaging with my research and the dynamic discussion that followed my presentations of my case study of the adultification of Child Q. I would like to thank the students at Howard University for sharing their thoughts on how my presentations impacted them and how it struck a chord in relation to their own experience. Feedback like this makes this work worthwhile and inspires me to keep going.

Last but not least, I would like to thank Prof Nick Emmel, Dr Anne Luke and Prof Gill Main for giving me their approval and support to take the time required to complete the study. I would like to thank Dr Delyth Edwards for all her support with my interview preparation.

Table of **Contents**

About the Author

Sylvia Ikomi

Sylvia Ikomi has an MA in education. She is a recipient of an Economic and Social Research Council Stuart Hall PhD studentship. She is an early career researcher, Higher Education lecturer and qualified teacher. Her PhD research is on the adultification of Black girls in local authority care. Sylvia delivers Continuous Professional Development training for teachers and social workers that is aimed at raising their awareness of the adultification of Black girls within the education and social care sectors and on strategies to improve the lived experience and life outcomes of Black girls in state/local authority care.

Executive Summary

The adultification of Black girls leads to them being perceived as being older than they are and held to behavioural expectations that go beyond their age. This issue is particularly acute for Black girls in state care who often experience adultification in their dynamic with their parents prior to entering state care, in the form of adultification-bias from professionals and foster parents during their time in state care and in the form of an adultified transition from state care. I embarked on a Churchill Fellowship that enabled me to explore this issue with experts in the USA and Canada in 2023.

This report aims to explore this grossly under-explored topic and enrich our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the adultification that Black girls in state care often experience. It explores experts' perspectives on measures that could potentially be used by professionals that work with Black girls in state care to address this issue, through rich solution-oriented interviews and a focus group with professionals that have worked with and conduct research on adultified Black children.

My key research questions were:

- What is the adultification of Black girls in state care?

- How are Black girls in state care adultified?

- Why are Black girls in state care adultified?

- What potential strategies can be implemented to address this issue?

- My findings in relation to the first question reflected the adultification of Black girls in state care in their dynamic with their biological parent(s) prior to entering state care; adultification-bias experienced by Black girls in state care from professionals that work with them during their time in state care (for example, in housing assessments and foster carer allocations); and the adultified transition from state care to independent living that Black care leavers experience.

- My findings in relation to the second question came from a range of challenges. For example, those that the children's biological parents have that lead to a reversal of roles in their relationships with their children (in which the child functions as the responsible adult and the parent functions as the child), adultification-bias from social workers, and the challenges within a poorly functioning social care system that makes the children more vulnerable to experiencing adultification.

Recommendations

The experts that participated in my study have a range of recommendations which are broadly outlined below:

- Prof Linda Burton highlighted the need for those that work with children who have been adultified in their parental dynamic to move away from a deficit-model of perceiving them. She highlighted the importance of acknowledging and nurturing the positive attributes that these children have which oftentimes inadvertently emerge from their experience of adultification. Prof Burton also highlighted the importance of professionals recognising the challenges that economically disadvantaged parents and children experience and applying this sensitivity to their assessment of the adultification that their children have experienced.

- Sadiyah Malcolm's mentoring work with Black children reinforces my belief that initiatives that are developed to address this issue should have a co-production model that involves Black girls in the development of the initiatives, and of the need for initiatives that support the children with future employment to provide a broader focus that moves beyond traditional career pathways.

- Travonne Edwards, Rasnat Chowdhury, Andre Laylor and Prof Bryn King made a rich range of recommendations that broadly fell within the umbrella of a need for the social care sector to adopt a more intersectional lens that recognises the multi-layered challenges that Black children can face which includes adultification-bias from professionals within the system. They propose a greater focus on social workers' relationship-building with the children rather than ticking boxes; longer-term strategies to prepare children for their transition from state care into independent living; radical empathy from professionals within the social care system; increased data collection of the children's experience after leaving state/local authority care; youth-led conferences to address the key issues facing children in care; where possible, less reliance on social workers as the go-betweens that sign-off on access to important resources for children in care (a social worker's biased view or negligence could deprive them of these resources); more focus on developing the children's financial management skills to ease their transition into independent living; a recognition of the current cost-of-living crisis and the financial strain on care leavers who are unable to live with their biological parents; and greater effort (where

Recommendations

possible) to maintain connections between Black children in care and the biological families who may fill in the gap when state/local authority withdraws its role as their legal guardians.
ance management in the social care sector.

- The focus group with Travonne Edwards' team led me to make the following recommendations:

    -Local authorities and the Department for Education should review the impact of the current socio-economic climate on care leavers and explore whether some of the support that is being offered to help care leavers as they transition from care requires revamping.

    -More research in this area should be conducted by individuals like my research participant Rasnat Chowdury who have the lived experience of being in state/local authority care.

    -There needs to be a greater drive to recruit care-experienced staff within the social care sector.

    -There needs to be a greater focus on values-driven rather than numbers- driven performance management in the social care sector.

Background

The recent strip searching by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) of a Black girl (Child Q) and the Office of the Children's Commissioner's alarming findings on the frequency with which Black children are strip searched by the Metropolitan police in comparison to children who are not Black, has led to a wider discussion about the adultification of Black children in England. The Children's Commissioner for England (Dame Rachel de Souza) obtained data from the Metropolitan Police confirming that "650 children aged 10-17 were subjected to a strip search from 2018 to 2020" and that "75% were aged 16-17 and 25% were aged 10-15" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.10). The data shows that 58% of the children "were Black" (377 out of the 650), "20% were White" (130 out of the 650), "16% were Asian, 5% were 'other' ethnicity and 2% did not have their ethnicity recorded" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.10). The Commissioner stated that she is "deeply concerned that the MPS has been strip searching children as young as 10 on an almost daily basis" (Children's Commissioner, 2022, p.13). While this has led to a wider public conversation about the adultification of Black children in England, the adultification of Black children is not restricted to policing, it also occurs within the social care system.

The issue of Black care leavers' disproportionate placing in unregulated housing (leading to an abrupt transition into adulthood) was a contributory factor in the former Children's Commissioner (Anne Longford) raising concern about England's social services' fitness for purpose in its care of Black children (The Commission on Young Lives, 2021). The campaign to require local authorities to place care leavers in regulated, supervised housing has been followed by a study that was published in January 2023, which surveyed 355 teenagers (aged 16 to 17) who were in care or care-experienced. The majority that were surveyed indicated that they wanted to be loved, protected and valued. 97% of them indicated that they regarded it as being highly important to have "someone who is regularly around to chat and to show an interest in you" (Article 39, 2023, p.2) and 93% of the survey participants stated that "Having someone who tries to stop you doing things that could harm you" was important (Article 39, 2023, p.2). 93% stated that "Having someone who knows when you are upset or worried, and then tries to help you" as important (Article 39, 2023, p.2).

Background

88% of the children mentioned the importance of "Having someone to help you with managing your money and paying bills" (Article 39, 2023, p.2). The support that the children and care leavers mentioned is support that is usually standard operating procedure for young people that live with their biological parents and underscores the importance of adequate support being given to care leavers as they transition from state care. Adultification-bias from social workers who conduct housing assessment and foster care allocations can make these issues particularly acute for Black children in state/local authority care.

The adultification of Black girls leads to professionals assigning them "different placement and treatment plans to white girls" (The Georgetown Centre, 2017:4) and leads to Black girls' school experience being "toxic, racialized and gendered" (Andrews et al.: 2563). My Fellowship visit to the USA was aimed at providing teachers and social workers in England with more understanding of effective strategies that are currently being recommended to address this issue in the USA and Canada.

Adultification before and during their time in state care

Some Black girls in state care experience adultification due to the adverse childhood experiences that they face prior to entering state care. Adverse childhood experiences entail sexual abuse, physical and psychological abuse, and household dysfunction including parental mental illness, substance abuse and domestic violence (Felitti et al., 1998).

The Office for National Statistics has reported that 66% of children in England that are in local authority care are there due to being "at risk of abuse or neglect"; 13% of them are in care "due to living in a family where the parenting capacity is chronically inadequate (family dysfunction)"; 7% of them are in care "due to living in a family that is going through a temporary crisis that diminished the parental capacity to adequately meet some of the children's needs (family being in acute stress)"; 7% of them are in care "due to there being no parents available to provide for the child"; 5% of children are in care "due to the child or parent's disability or illness"; and 1% of them are in care due to their parents' "low income or socially unacceptable behaviour" (Office for National Statistics, 2023). These situations primarily come under the umbrella of adverse childhood experiences.

Background

These situations often lead children and teenagers to encounter adultification from the perspective of them having to "function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity" (Goff et al., 2014 as cited by Blake et.al, 2017, p.119). Unfortunately, oftentimes the trauma that Black girls in state care have experienced from this form of adultification is compounded by their experience of adultification-bias at the hands of professionals within the social care and education sector that they deal with whilst in state care.

Adultification-bias leads to Black girls being held to behavioural expectations that are usually placed on people that are older than them, and being held to a higher standard of judgement. This can lead to Black girls receiving more punishment from their teachers and other professionals and to the context that underpins their behaviour not being given full consideration, for example, within the criminal justice system and when schools consider excluding them. This issue is particularly complex for Black girls in state care who often deal with external and internalised adultification as a journey of something that they experience in their dynamic with their parents prior to entering local authority care, in adultification-bias from social workers that can lead to them having less contact time with social workers and being allocated lower-quality foster care placements, and in them experiencing an adultified transition from state care to independent living.

Social science research on the adultification of Black children has traditionally not had a gender-responsive approach that appreciates the nuances that come with the misogynoir that often underpins the racial inequality that Black girls experience. There is also a gap when it comes to academic research on Black children in state care. The 2022 report from What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) on outcomes for black children in care in England highlighted a shortage of academic literature in England on rates of reunification (with their biological families) for Black children in care, as well as their stability, health and school exclusions (What Works for Children in Care, 2022, p.7). This contributes to a gap in the existing academic literature on the strategies that are being used to address the issue of the adultification of Black girls in state care.

Background

While this is an under-explored topic (especially within the United Kingdom), there have been a few notable studies on the adultification of children in the United States of America (USA), for example, Georgetown Center on Inequality and Poverty's (based in Washington DC) groundbreaking Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls Childhood study, which makes it a suitable place to visit to explore this topic further.

Tanya Cooper explored the experience of Black children in state care in her 2013 study on racial bias in the foster care system. She found that children of colour in the foster care system in the USA are "less likely to receive the mental health services they need in foster care; are more likely to have fewer visits with their parents and siblings; are less likely to receive services designed to reunify them with their family; are less likely to have contact with their foster care caseworkers; and are more likely to see their parents' rights to maintain a relationship with them terminated" (Cooper, T, 2013, p.243). The adultification of black children and teenagers contributes to some of these issues. The specifics of how it does require further exploration.

The Black Lives Matter movement in the USA has led to a wider discussion about the racial inequality that Black children experience, leading to initiatives that could offer benefits to teachers, social workers and foster parents in the UK who support Black girls in state care. This report is based on the findings of a Churchill Fellowship visit to the USA in August 2023 to September 2023, to discuss with scholars that specialise on the topics of the adultification of children the adultification of Black children and the adultification of Black girls their research on these issues. They shared their thoughts on potential strategies that could be applied within the education and child welfare system to support Black girls in state care who have been adultified and how to address the adultification of Black girls by education and social care professionals.

Research Aims and Questions

The key questions that this report explores are:

- What is the adultification of Black girls in state care?

- How are Black girls in state care adultified?

- Why are Black girls in state care adultified?

- What are the potential solutions to this issue?

The multifaceted nature of the adultification that Black girls in state care experience, from an adultified parental dynamic within their biological families prior to entering state care to the adultification-bias that they experience from staff within the social care sector and education sector when they enter state care, motivated my decision to get my research participants' perspectives on how Black girls in state care are adultified. Local authorities are not a monolith, meaning that the adultification of Black girls occurs with different dynamics within different local authorities. Furthermore, the multi-agency nature of the care of children in state care (from the involvement of social workers, foster parents and teachers) also generates a range of diverse dimensions to this issue. The broad and investigatory nature of the research questions were designed with consideration of these points and with a hope of obtaining a rich range of findings that can at least speak to some of the issues that the local authorities which engage with this report are dealing with.

Monique Morris[1]) has highlighted the issue of initiatives that are aimed at supporting Black children and teenagers within the education and criminal justice system not sufficiently recognising nuances between the experience of Black boys and Black girls. She says: "blanket policies and practices that have been constructed based upon the experiences of boys and young men must be re-evaluated...interventions should include specific training and professional-development opportunities for all school personnel on gender-based violence and implicit bias, as well as mandated partnerships with intermediaries that specialize in culturally competent, gender- responsive, and trauma-informed practices" (The Atlantic, 2016).

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[1] The author of Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools.

Research Aims and Questions

This research will provide useful information to support the development of care provision practice within local authorities and schools that better ensures that issues are identified and assessed in ways that more effectively protect and support vulnerable Black girls through "culturally competent, gender-responsive" and "trauma-informed" initiatives (The Atlantic, 2016).

Methodology

My research comprised of interviews with scholars in the USA and Canada. Namely, Prof Linda Burton and social entrepreneur and PhD candidate Sadiyah Malcolm (author of the upcoming PhD thesis Yuh Tink Yah Big Ooman?). Prof Linda Burton discussed the significance of her groundbreaking conceptual model on adultification, which emerged from her study Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families: A Conceptual Model; how it is reflected in the adultification that Black girls in state care experience in their dynamic with their biological parent(s) prior to entering local authority care and what the professionals that work with them can do to support them in processing their experience in a healthy way while realising their potential. Sadiyah Malcolm reflected on the mentoring that she has given Black girls in the USA (courtesy of her social enterprise) since 2010, her observations of the adultification that the girls experienced and the strategies that her organisation has used to support them.

Travonne Edwards is an experienced youth worker and a PhD candidate. Andre Laylor is experienced in the area of child protection work and is a PhD candidate. Rasnat Chowdhury is a care-experienced social work graduate who has experience of working with children in state care and Prof Bryn King is an experienced expert in the field of social work whose 16 years of work has involved her leading a programme for teenage girls in the child welfare and youth offenders' system (Youth Wellness Lab, n.d). Travonne Edwards, Rasnat Chowdhury and Andre Laylor all work for the Youth Wellness Lab. The Youth Wellness Lab is based in Canada and follows a mission designed by its Youth Advisory Committee which aimed at engaging young people as "authentic partners and leaders in designing, developing, and translating research that impacts service delivery to improve youth outcomes" (Youth Wellness Lab, n.d).

Travonne Edwards and his colleagues engaged in an online focus group discussion during my Fellowship in which they discussed the findings of their 2023 study on the adultified transition from state care of Black children in Ontario, Canada (Pushed, Dropped, or Fleeing from Care: The Narratives and Adultification of Black Youth Who Have Aged out of Ontario's Child Welfare System) and potential strategies to address the issue of the adultification bias that they often experience from the professionals that are employed to look after them.

Findings

What is the adultification of Black girls in state care?

Prof Burton's conceptual model of adultification (please find a reference to it below) is of relevance in the exploration of the adultification that some Black girls in state care experience within their dynamic with their biological families prior to entering state care.

Forms and Features of Adultification

Forms	Critical Features of Adultification
Precocious Knowledge	Emotional and/or Instrumental Tasks
Mentored Adultification	Temporal and Situational Onset
Peerification/Spousification	Duration/Intensity (e.g.; short-term, long-term)
Parentification	Role Boundaries and Clarity
	Individual vs. Collective Responsibility for Tasks

(Burton, 2007: 333)

In her interview, Burton highlighted examples of this to illustrate the context in which this occurs and how:

- "... children of alcoholics or children who had parents who were drug dependent and those children had to assume those adult care-giving roles with their parents."

- "children taking on more adultlike responsibilities when they have a parent or an adult that they are caring for that has a disability."

- "... the children of divorce. Oftentimes those children are caught in the middle in situations and you will find them sometimes being a co-parent to one single parent."

Findings

- "when you have a child, who is coming from an immigrant family, especially when they come to the country and speak the language, they can oftentimes take the adultified responsibilities in the household. So, especially if they are able to speak the language. They can sometimes negotiate contracts for their parents or talk to bill collectors."

The adultification that Burton describes – in relation to parentification (the child taking on the role of the parent in their relationship with their parent); spousification (the child taking on the role and duties of a spouse rather than a child, for example, responsibility to make a significant contribution to the household's income); peerification (the parent behaving like the child's peer rather than parent, for example, sharing recreational drugs with them); and mentored precious knowledge (adults teaching the children information that is beyond their age and that is inappropriate to teach children) – is not the only adultification that Black girls in state care experience. The professionals that work with them when they enter state care sometimes have an adultification-bias towards them which means that they regard and treat them as young people who are older than their age in ways that they do not necessarily treat their non-Black counterparts. Sadiyah Malcolm's description of the adultification of Black girls outlines this:

"Black girls are perceived as being older than they are. They are always perceived as knowing more than they ought to know for their age category. They're always perceived as being more, you know, more prone to certain adultlike behaviours."

This can present a problem, for example, if a Black girl is demonstrating signs of sexual grooming which are not being identified due to the professionals working with her assuming that these signs are a reflection of behaviour that is just inherent in Black girls.

Rasnat Chowdhury's description of what adultification is serves to further contextualise this from the perspective of Black children in state care:
"When they are viewed and treated older than they actually are, it ultimately leaves them less or little room to make youthful decisions that are often given to other youth...They're unable to make mistakes and be a child or a youth...Punished in certain ways just for being youth."

The adultified consequence that children in state care experience is arguably inherent within a system in which a child could be asked to leave their foster home for things that children that live with their biological parents are forgiven for. This adultified dynamic is amplified when children in state care are also having to deal with an arguably adultified system that is being

Findings

utilised by adults (for example, foster parents and social workers) who hold an adultification-bias towards them. Travonne Edwards' reflection on what the adultification of Black girls in state care is reflects this:

"We look at Black youth as folks that have the same standard of culpability and accountability as adults. And inherently aren't afforded the opportunity to make mistakes and learn".

Prof Bryn King's reflections on what the adultification of Black girls in state care is underscores the positioning of Black girls not as girls, but as Black women:

"...this is like an extension of the dehumanisation of Black lives. And it's sort of like the precursor. This history of assuming that Black women didn't feel pain in the same way...First we strip them of their childhood and then we can strip them of their humanity. Because then they're equated with the way we treat Black adults which is also dehumanising".

The projection of toxic stereotypes that are placed on Black women onto Black girls is an integral part of the adultification that Black girls often experience.

Adultification is often framed as a critical incident in a child's life. However, I thought that it would be important to highlight the dynamic nature of the adultification that Black girls in state care experience. Consequently, I asked my focus group participants to reflect on the issue of internalised adultification that they highlighted in their study. Rasnat Chowdhury reflected on the vicious cycle that the adultification of Black children in state care can produce: "They internalise the fact that they can't rely on others. Then they start to figure it out themselves and then they just go through life like that." Members of the focus group also outlined how the ways in which Black children in state care are adultified contributes to their internalised adultification.

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> *We look at Black youth as folks that have the same standard of culpability and accountability as adults. And inherently aren't afforded the opportunity to make mistakes and learn".*
> -Travonne Edwards

Findings

How are Black girls in state care Adultified?

Black girls' lack of protection and safety as children can lead to them feeling pressured to protect themselves, which in turn can lead to their criminalisation. Sadiyah Malcolm's anecdote of a Black girl who was placed with in the youth offender's system for stabbing someone epitomises this.

"I worked with girls that were involved in the court systems, and I remember, erm, specifically, there was one young girl that I was working with. And she was young. I think she might have been like thirteen or fourteen...or actually, she was twelve. She might have been the youngest girl that I was working with in that group. And I remember, she had been in the court system because she stabbed someone. And I remember asking her 'where did you get a knife from?' And I remember the story she told me was that she had been bullied or people had been bothering her because she was young, and she was small in stature. And she said to me 'I knew exactly where to go get a knife because they continued to bother me' and so she went on and told me the story of how she planned to buy the knife. Where she went to buy the knife. How she concealed the knife. And basically, that was her way of protecting herself. And if a twelve-year-old had to think about protecting herself against harm to the extent that she had to basically procure a weapon, it tells you so much about her context. And her discussion of it after that was kind of like 'yeah, my mum wasn't happy that I stabbed somebody, but I had to stand up for myself'. And that's a central tenet of adultification. The idea that Black girls have to defend themselves against something. They have to defend themselves against some system. They have to defend themselves against some home situation. Some community situation. And it's always kind of like this fight in defence of Black girlhood."

While Sadiyah highlighted what the girl's action revealed about her context, adultification-bias often leads to Black girls' experiences not being properly contextualised even in the process of the sentencing that takes place within the youth offenders' system.

Findings

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> *And that's a central tenet of adultification. The idea that Black girls have to defend themselves against something. They have to defend themselves against some system. They have to defend themselves against some home situation. Some community situation. And it's always kind of like this fight in defence of Black girlhood.*
>
> -Sadiyah Malcolm

The situation that Sadiyah described had echoes of the case of Ma'Khia Bryant that has inspired my research into the adultification of Black girls in state care.

Ma'Khia was a 16-year-old girl who was killed by a police officer shooting her outside of her foster mother's home after her younger sister called the police for support as "We got Angie's grown girls trying to fight us, trying to stab us. Trying to put her hands on our grandma. Get here now!" (New York Times, 2021). Angie was their foster mother. One of the "grown girls" was their foster mother's adult foster child. The media attention and public discourse centred heavily on public disgust and outrage with the image of Ma'Khia holding a knife rather than the events that led her to be in that position in her foster mother's home where she should have been safe.

Internalised adultification

Travonne Edwards stated that:

"They internalise it. They realise they can't rely on the system and then they enter a survival mode where some may be able to inherently flourish and do pretty well but at the end of the day the folks that are able to overcome are then seen as resilient instead of understanding that this may be a structural flaw in which young people are forced to be resilient in a setting that's meant to care and support them. So, we're forcing young people to do this extra work of adults

Findings

and if they're able to push through and persevere, they're seen as strong and resilient while internalising all this trauma. All this violence. And if they don't push through, they fall through the cracks and are still pushed."

> **...the folks that are able to overcome are then seen as resilient instead of understanding that this may be a structural flaw in which young people are forced to be resilient in a setting that's meant to care and support them.**
>
> **-Travonne Edwards**

Bryn King expands on this in her description of the type of positive reinforcement that Black children in care receive:

"There is this like a fetishization of Black resilience and Black youth's resilience. It feeds itself. We communicate to you that you have to survive on your own and all evidence that you can, we will continue to push you out and we will reward you and praise you for your 'independence' and resilience when really that's you figuring it out on your own and we pay no attention to the actual toxic cost of that on young people's lives, their health, their wellbeing, over time. How much extra work it takes. How much they have to sort of manage on their own. But we keep feeding them the lie that is reliance. And we keep investing in it."

King's comment is reflective of a wider discussion that Black women have been having in which we are resisting the trope of the '"strong"' Black woman and questioning the void in support that means that Black women are having to be strong in the first place. This issue can also be seen in some biological families who have a dysfunctional dynamic in which the children who are not given adequate support by their parents but are regarded as successful are celebrated rather than the children who question the lack of support or who are perceived to be struggling. In contrast, displays of vulnerability or requests for help could be regarded with disdain or as problematic. Children from these homes can internalise these views and not know what support they should reasonably expect from their foster parents, social workers and teachers.

Findings

Child protection workers' adultification of Black children

The members of the focus group spent some time reflecting on specific ways in which child protection workers adultify Black children. Bryn King described a hands-off approach to working with them:

"...use evident survival skills as an excuse to detach...If they're gonna disengage the control, they don't know how to be caring. And they don't know how to be caring with somebody who does not trust them (for very good reason)...'They don't need me. They've got it. They're going to survive, and I might get it wrong anyway'."

This mind-set can also extend to members of the biological families of these girls as they consider whether or not to engage in kinship care.

> *And they don't know how to be caring with somebody who does not trust them (for very good reason)...'They don't need me. They've got it. They're going to survive, and I might get it wrong anyway'*
>
> -Prof Bryn King

It underscores the issue of a lack of full appreciation of the impact of trauma on a child that has had an adverse childhood experience, and a failure to give the children the space to process their trauma in their own way (for example, by taking time to trust responsible adults as a protective mechanism) without holding them to the behavioural expectations that the concerned professionals have and essentially punishing them for not meeting. The traumatised child is often expected to manage their response to their trauma in a way that suits the requirements of the responsible adult that is working with them, when a child-centred approach in which the responsible adult adapts themselves according to the needs of the child would be more apt. Andre Laylor elaborated on this by outlining the issue that underpinned the care leaver's quote about being "Pushed. Dropped or fleeing from care" that inspired the title of their study:

Findings

"...a lot of the youth spoke about having, say, a job or being able to sort out some financial stuff but maybe not others. They just had that little bit of knowledge around what they should be doing, and their workers were like 'you're fine. Everything's okay'. And a lot of youth spoke about...because of that there was no transition at all. They were just kind of dropped. They didn't know any direction. They wanted a lot of direction. They wanted a lot of support...Even when they didn't have this knowledge...they were just viewed as being independent, being able to figure it out themselves."

Child protection workers' sharing of relevant resources that are developed to support care leavers in transitioning into independent living can be affected by a child protection workers' adultified view of Black children, leaving the children at a disadvantage to their peers who are identified as requiring additional support.

A recently published Economic and Research Council study about children in care and care leavers' relationship with the criminal justice system (based on data that was requested from England's Department for Education) found that "1 in 3 care- experienced children (33%) born between 1996 and 1999 received a youth justice caution or conviction between the ages of 10 and 17 compared to 4% of those without care experience" (Hunter, Francis and Fitzpatrick, 2023, p.7).

> *They didn't know any direction. They wanted a lot of direction. They wanted a lot of support...Even when they didn't have this knowledge...they were just viewed as being independent, being able to figure it out themselves.*
>
> -Andre Laylor

This issue is particularly acute for Black children in state care as reflected by Hunter, Francis and Fitzpatrick's findings that in England "Custodial sentences were twice as common among Black and Mixed ethnicity care-experienced children compared to White care-experienced children" (Hunter, Francis and Fitzpatrick, 2023, p.3) and that "Black and Mixed ethnicity children received approximately 5 youth justice cautions or convictions, more than double the figure for non-care

Findings

experienced children and one more than White care-experienced children" (Hunter, Francis and Fitzpatrick, 2023, p.10).

This issue is further explored in Travonne Edwards' reflections on how Black children in state care are adultified:

"From the perspective of my frontline practice in this area, one of the number one ways in which folks in these settings are intervening for the 'best interest' or the care of these Black youth is highly punitive. Policing is the number one intervention for these youth. It's like, stop. If not, restrain. If not, police...The general ways in which their behaviours are naturally stereotyped as more aggressive, as more deviant...I'm seeing a lack of care, which in turn increases their likelihood to be penalised and to be criminalised...Now they're no longer eligible for foster care (which is kind of seen as the graduation from group care). They're stuck in group care.

> "
>
> *"It's like, stop. If not, restrain. If not, police"*
>
> -Travonne Edwards

Then they're moved from an open custody to a closed-custody group care." Open custody enables young people to remain within the community whilst serving their sentence. The issue of adultification-bias and poor staff reports affecting social workers' assessment of suitable housing for Black children in state care is a key example of how these children are adultified within the social care system. Rasnat Chowdhury elaborated on the consequence of adultification on housing provision for Black girls in state care:

"It's also Black youth dealing with the consequences of being adultified throughout their time in care that led to an inadequate transition because... they have no room to make mistakes. They're constantly being moved.

They have to start over. And then there's a lack of trust that was brought up. So, their whole time throughout [their time in care] of being adultified then does then not provide the necessary skills they need in adulthood."

Findings

Rasnat's comments not only reflect the adultification of Black girls but the ways in which unstable housing undermines their ability to have the level of maturity that is required of them as they transition from care.

Why are Black girls in state care adultified?

Sadiyah Malcolm outlined a key reason behind why Black girls are adultified: "Black girls don't fit the mould for their gender category. They don't fit the mould for their age category. They don't fit the mould for whatever is described as childhood in the given space".

The issues of racism (Black girls being discriminated against due to their skin), texturism (Black girls being discriminated against because their hair texture is different to other girls') and featurism (Black girls being discriminated against due to them having Afrocentric features) reflect an aversion to Black girls based on them not fitting the physical mould of other children that elicits a more humane response from some professionals.

> **" Black girls don't fit the mould for their gender category. They don't fit the mould for their age category. They don't fit the mould for whatever is described as childhood in the given space.**
>
> -Sadiyah Malcolm

This could lead them being perceived as cold or hard (in comparison to girls who are used to crying and receiving parental support to regulate their emotions) by professionals that work with them.

Bryn King reflected on how Black girls' adultification is used as a mechanism to justify their inhumane treatment:

"For me this is like an extension of the dehumanisation of Black lives. And it's sort of like the precursor. This history of assuming that Black women didn't feel pain in the same way...First we strip them of their childhood and then we can strip them of their humanity. Because then they're

Findings

equated with the way we treat Black adults which is also dehumanising. The entry into that pathway which is also crystallized in institutions and in institutional practices."

> *This history of assuming that Black women didn't feel pain in the same way...First we strip them of their childhood and then we can strip them of their humanity.*
>
> *-Prof Bryn King*

What are the potential solutions to this issue?

Prof Linda Burton highlights the importance of adults having conversations with children about their adultified experience to enable them to process what they have experienced in a healthy way:

"I've oftentimes seen situations where parents do not talk with their kids about what they just saw. They just say 'don't you even worry about it. That's none of your business'. And sometimes, they will actually say 'stay in a child's place'. When you've actually seen something that just knocks you off your feet. And when parents don't talk (and there's a way to talk to your kids about these difficult situations), the kids don't know how to interpret it. They don't know what impact it has. They don't necessarily understand it. They just know it's a part of their reality and sometimes they may accept it as a part of their reality. That's why it's important for parents (no matter how difficult those situations can be sometimes) to talk their kids through those situations in an appropriate way."

Professionals that play a key part in the lives of children in state care, for example, foster parents, social workers and teachers should be given more training on how to navigate these conservations with these children in conjunction with ongoing support from psychological therapists. There is a danger that the children could normalise the dysfunctional experience that they have (making them more vulnerable to enter into relationships that have the same unhealthy dynamics) without receiving support to process and unpack their experience. The need to talk to these children rather than simply about them is reflected in a request that was

Findings

made in a study by Sarah Beresford (a Churchill Fellow) on children whose mothers are in prison, in which the children asked to be included in the discussions around the processes that their mothers go through, for example, the probationary officer's post-prison plan for them (Prison Reform Trust, 2023). A mother's release from prison after a long period apart can create a mixture of emotions and anxiety among children. It is understandable that the children would like more meaningful engagement from the professionals who manage these situations.

Prof Burton highlights the importance of moving away from a deficit model in which the focus is on the challenges that children that have had an adultified experience face towards recognition of some of the positive attributes that the children develop from their adultification: namely, "self-confidence, responsible behaviors, 'sense of mattering' in the Family, life skills and problem solving, competence, heightened social awareness, empathy and capable leadership" (Burton, 2007, p.333).
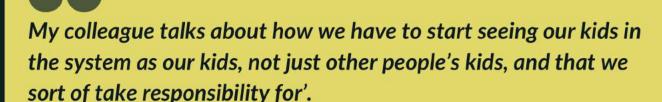
> **"**
> *self-confidence, responsible behaviors, 'sense of mattering' in the Family, life skills and problem solving, competence, heightened social awareness, empathy and capable leadership.*
> *-Prof Linda Burton*

The focus group's response to the question about key recommendations for social care teams

- "Starting this transition process into independent living earlier. Not waiting until they're at the brink of transitioning." (Travonne Edwards)

- "Wherever possible support Black youth in maintaining biological family...in order to have that long-term support system present." (Travonne Edwards)

- "Ensuring Black youth in care can actually demonstrate some practical skills to independent living before pushing them to independent living." (Travonne Edwards)

Findings

- "Ensure they have an understanding of their financial resources when leaving the system." (Travonne Edwards) Homelessness due to this issue was a key research finding of his team's study.

- "Being aware of the rights and the services that are available to them." (Rasnat Chowdhury) "Housing rights...paying rent, discrimination around that, clauses that can affect you as a tenant." (Travonne Edwards)

> **My colleague talks about how we have to start seeing our kids in the system as our kids, not just other people's kids, and that we sort of take responsibility for'.**
>
> **-Prof Bryn King**

- "We have to remember that youth that are preparing to transition from care are still children. We have to start building radical empathy in the child welfare system to sort of think about: would you want your own children to be treated this way? Would you expect them to leave home with this set of skills? My colleague talks about how we have to start seeing our kids in the system as our kids, not just other people's kids, that we sort of take responsibility for". (Bryn King)

- Youth-led family group conferencing. (Bryn King)

- "Remember these are young people that have been overwhelmed by systems and bureaucracies. Let's think about ways that are not just writing things down. Let's think about expanding their modes of expression. It's incomplete to check a box and to create a plan that isn't relevant to a young person, that isn't connected to who they are, who they love and the trauma they've experienced." (Bryn King)

- "A sustainable plan that can carry on after they leave care." (Andre Laylor)

Findings

> 66
>
> *It's incomplete to check a box and to create a plan that isn't relevant to a young person, that isn't connected to who they are, who they love and the trauma they've experienced.*
>
> **-Prof Bryn King**

- The state is supposed to be like their parent, their care giver. Yet they're dropping them at a very early age. Whereas if you're in a family-based setting your parents, your family helps you into your adulthood. Helps your kids. So, I think these kids need someone who can potentially follow them that they can reach out to and say: 'I need some support. I don't know what to do. Is there anything that can be done for me here?'..." (Andre Laylor)
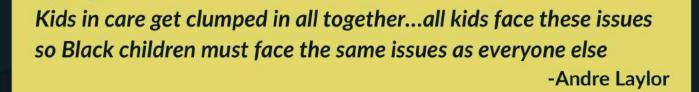
Conclusion

My research questions were focused on an exploration of what the adultification of Black girls in state care is, how Black girls in state care are adultified, why Black girls in state care are adultified and what are some potential strategies to address this issue. It is clear that there is not a rigid definition of what the adultification of Black girls is but that underpinning the various reflections around the definition that my research participants gave me was a view of Black girls as being more mature for their age and the treatment of Black girls as children who are more mature for their age in ways that do not allow their age and vulnerability to be taken into consideration. It is also the positioning of Black girls with adultified responsibilities with their biological parent(s).

It is clear that the issue of how Black girls in state care are adultified prior to entering state care, during their time in state care and as they transition from state care is not exhaustive. It can range from a lack of guidance and support from child protection workers, to the criminalisation of Black girls in state care, to an adultified transition from state care. The reasons why Black girls are adultified are also multi-faceted, from the adultification-bias that has historically been applied to Black women that is used to justify their inhumane treatment, to a vicious cycle in which Black girls in state care's internalised adultification is reinforced by the professionals that work with them, to a social care system that puts a focus on meeting its target of children leaving its care regardless of whether they are ready to do this.

It is appreciated that children in state and local authority care and the social care teams that work with them are not a monolith and that issues around the adultification of Black girls will manifest differently in different local authorities for a wide variety of reasons. My hope is that within the range of recommendations outlined below, there can be at least one suggestion that could potentially be of use to teams of professionals (for example, social care and education sector workers and foster parents) that work with Black girls in state care.

Recommendations

My recommendations based on Andre Laylor's contribution to this study:

- **The application of an intersectional approach that does not view children in state care as a monolith.** This is inspired by Andre Laylor's comment: "Kids in care get clumped in all together...all kids face these issues so Black children must face the same issues as everyone else...I think there's a lot of contextualisation that's needed in terms of understanding ABR ("anti-Black racism") and how that impacts these kids. I think that should lead in terms of trying to understand what their experiences are."

> *Kids in care get clumped in all together...all kids face these issues so Black children must face the same issues as everyone else*
>
> -Andre Laylor

- Andre Laylor's comments about the challenges with professionals' tick-box approach to assessing the needs of the children led me to recommend **a more holistic approach to the assessments of the needs of these children.** This is inspired by Laylor's comment: "I worked as a child protection worker for several years. A family service worker. The system's not designed to create relationships. It's more than just signing off forms and ticking ticky-boxes. There's a whole relational aspect to it. Trying to get to know you. I think those are the things that need to come into play a lot more. Caseloads are high so a lot of workers are just jumping around from child to child. Checking off those ticky-boxes to make sure they're doing what they need to do because there's this fear of the ministry cracking down on you. So that is primary in someone's mind rather than making sure this youth is actually okay. Getting to know them. What are their issues? What's going on? Making sure that they're comfortable in their placement." Strategies to reduce the work pressure on the responsible adults that work with children in state care are crucial (for example, their case workers, teachers and foster parents – especially those that are not afforded flexible working). Dr Bruce Perry, who is a leading expert on the impact of an adverse childhood experience on the developing brain, states that any organisation that regards itself has having a trauma-informed approach but does not address the traumatic pressure that its staff experience is not an organisation that has a truly trauma-informed approach (Perry, 2020).

Recommendations

> **Checking off those ticky-boxes to make sure they're doing what they need to do because there's this fear of the ministry cracking down on you. So that is primary in someone's mind rather than making sure this youth is actually okay. Getting to know them. What are their issues? What's going on? Making sure that they're comfortable in their placement.**
>
> -Andre Laylor

- **Preparing children in state care for independent living when they leave should be embedded as a part of the long-term local authority care plan for the children rather than an add-on when it is time for them to transition from care.** This is inspired by Edwards' statement: "Both in the hands of the youth worker and the social worker, a lot of them are doing these things as tick boxes right at the transition of the young person's transition into care. Instead of making this a meaningful activity throughout the years spent in child welfare (building the skills sets, the life skills, all these things necessary for independent living). Folks are waiting for until the moment they're held accountable to do these things. Learning doesn't happen that way. Especially meaningfully...Independent living is so much more than the accountability measures of social workers."

My recommendations based on Rasnat Chowdhury sharing her thoughts on the advantages that she has working with children in state care as a care-experienced person are as follows:

- **More research by those that have had a lived experience of being an adultified Black girl and also of those that are care-experienced.**

- **Promoting the recruitment of suitable work applicants who are care- experienced.**

- **Increased data collection of care leavers' life outcomes after they leave state care** (in consideration of Rasnat Chowdhury's point about a lack of data to capture this contributing to the problem of Black care leavers' adultified transition from state care).

Recommendations

> **Both in the hands of the youth worker and the social worker, a lot of them are doing these things as tick boxes right at the transition of the young person's transition into care. Instead of making this a meaningful activity throughout the years spent in child welfare (building the skills sets, the life skills, all these things necessary for independent living). Folks are waiting for until the moment they're held accountable to do these things.**
>
> **-Travonne Edwards**

- **A removal of barriers to some of the care leavers accessing resources that require a recommendation or application from social workers where feasible.** This is inspired by Chowdhury's statement that: "Taking out the middleman (which would technically be the social worker or the child protection worker in this case) and providing youth with the information that they need in a different sense that's more youth friendly. Whether that's a database or a website or whatever the case may be. But it really then takes the pressure off the social workers to provide that information who can also be gatekeepers of that information in the sense that they get to decide who that information is relevant to versus who it's not relevant to. So, I think just taking that person away and providing youth with all the resources and all the information that they need in their transition." This would help to reduce the chances of Black children in state/local authority care being disadvantaged by the gatekeeping of relevant resources by professionals who hold an adultification-bias towards them.

My recommendations based on Sadiyah Malcolm's contribution to this study in which she outlined her contextualised approach to developing programmes for Black girls:

- **More initiatives to support Black girls in state care that involve the girls in their design as co-creators.**
- **Peer mentoring.**
- **Initiatives that support Black girls being included in funding budgets.**

Recommendations

- **A more holistic and less disjointed approach to discussions around Black girls' issues.** Currently fragmented work is being done in different areas; a joined-up approach that reflects a multi-agency response is needed.

- **More sharing of information, resources and support for Black girls for career pathways** which do not necessarily follow a traditional pathway that is heavily dependent on applicants having strong General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) results and Advanced (A level) qualifications. This is inspired by Sadiyah's comment: "I wanted to expose them to an array of professionals and life paths so they could envision for themselves what it is they wanted to do." This is in recognition of the issue of only 12% of children and young people in state care in England entering university or college (Office for National Statistics, 2023) meaning that the majority of care leavers in England do not have the qualifications that are required to access the graduate employment market. It is also in recognition of the Commons Education Committee's findings of 22% of 27-year-old care leavers in England being in employment versus 57% of young people in the general population in England (Halfton, 2022).

My recommendations based on Travonne Edwards' contribution to the study are:

- **A move away from a target-driven performance management approach to social work** that emphasises "pushing out" these children to meet number- driven rather than values-driven performance management targets. This is inspired by Travonne Edwards' statement about a social care system that is "essentially designed to push you out regardless of how well you're doing."

- **A review of the implications of the current socio-economic climate on care leavers as they transition from care.** This is inspired by Travonne Edwards' statement that: "inflation is at an all-time high. Housing crisis. So, you're pushing out youth at the age of 18 or 21 when most people outside the system are still living at home...Hoping they're going to adapt to modern-day society when they have no resources. No support system. And the system inherently cuts you off after a year or two after you exit...There's a time limit on how long the state can actually take care of you although they're stepping into the role of care giver." Edwards' statement particularly struck a chord with me as the financial pressure I faced after I finished Law School (having been pushed out my mother's home due to her breakdown) meant that I studied law from 2005 to 2011 but I did not have the support system in place to fight to secure employment as a barrister (the training placement offered a significantly reduced salary) while paying my rent. Living as a property guardian (to save money) which

Recommendations

contributed to me moving home (ten times in in six years) did not give me the stability to focus on flourishing in my first graduate job. My experience of a traumatic bad marriage that culminated in me being in a refuge are things that I would have been better placed to avoid had I had parental support during those pivotal years in my twenties. The importance of the point that Edwards raised is something that I fully appreciate. I have focused a lot on the importance of raising the education attainment levels of children in state care. This will not suffice in making a meaningful and significant difference in their life if they do not have a good support system around them. Dr Bruce Perry talks about how his forecast of an individual's ability to have positive life outcomes despite an adverse childhood experience is determined by the support system that is around them (Perry, 2020).

> *So, you're pushing out youth at the age of 18 or 21 when most people outside the system are still living at home...Hoping they're going to adapt to modern-day society when they have no resources. No support system. And the system inherently cuts you off after a year or two after you exit...There's a time limit on how long the state can actually take care of you although they're stepping into the role of care giver.*
>
> -Travonne Edwards

• **Highlighting the importance of encouraging children in state care (including Black girls) when they demonstrate vulnerability and reach out for help.** This is inspired by the discussion around the vicious cycle that is created by Black girls in state care's internalisation of the adultification that they have experienced and King's statement that: "There is this like a fetishization of Black resilience and Black youth's resilience. It feeds itself. We communicate to you that you have to survive on your own and all evidence that you can, we will continue to push you out and we will reward you and praise you for your 'independence' and resilience when really that's you figuring it out on your own and we pay no attention to the actual toxic cost of that on young people's lives, their health, their wellbeing, over time. How much extra work it takes. How much they have to sort of manage on their own. But we keep feeding them the lie that is reliance. And we keep investing in it."

Recommendations

Black girls in state care are often robbed of their childhood by adverse childhood experience or by the limitations of the professional care they receive. I hope that by engaging with these recommendations, professionals working with Black girls in the care system will be able to provide support to restore those childhoods.

> It's also Black youth dealing with the consequences of being adultified throughout their time in care that leads to an inadequate transition because...if they have no room to make mistakes. They're constantly being moved. They have to start over. And then there's a lack of trust that was brought up. So, their whole time throughout of being adultified does then not provide the necessary skills they need in adulthood.
>
> - Rasnat Chowdhury

Next steps

Since my return to the UK in September 2023, I have shared the findings of this study with social workers as the keynote speaker at Lewisham Council's 2023 annual social worker conference and with social work students from the universities of West London, Kent, Wolverhampton, Winchester, Hertfordshire, Sussex and Middlesex and Anglia Ruskin University courtesy of an October 2023 Black History Month event. I have also shared my findings with professionals at Coram Innovation Incubator's Practice Forum. I will continue to share my findings with trainee social workers and teachers. I will also share my findings with social work students at Goldsmiths University of London and members of the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). I will be developing podcasts to disseminate my findings with CoramBAAF and the British Educational Research Association members. I will also be sharing my findings with members of the British Association of Social Workers and with academics that research the lived experience of children in state/local authority care. My hope is to continue to use opportunities to amplify the voices of the adultified children that my research participants captured in their research and to support the professionals that work with these children in listening to these children and reducing the noise that can stop their voices from being heard.

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Appendix

Ma'Khia Bryant: A Case Study of the adultification of Black Girls in State Care

Prof Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality' in 1989 (Columbia Law School, 2017) in response to a culture in academia of analysing through the lens of a 'single-axis framework' (Crenshaw, 1989, p.139) the discrimination experienced by those with protected characteristics (for example, race and gender), in essence through the lens of the discrimination that they experienced that was rooted in one of their characteristics. In the 34 years since Crenshaw coined the term intersectionality there has been a wider focus in academia on recognising the intersectionality contained within the discrimination that Black women and girls face from the perspective of discrimination that is rooted in their overlapping characteristics of being female and being Black, leading to terminology such as misogynoir and the development of Black girlhood studies as a sub-section of childhood studies. While there has been a significant development in academia's intersectional approach to research on race relations since 1989, there is still a considerable amount of work that needs to be done to embrace a more intersectional approach to childhood studies. There is a need to recognise the discrimination that Black girls experience when looking only at their race and gender leads to a lack of an appreciation of the lived experience of subsections of Black girls within the general population of Black girls, for example, Black girls who have disabilities and Black girls who are in state care. The story of Ma'Khia Bryant, a 16-year-old Black girl who was murdered by a police officer in the USA in April 2021 and the public's response to it reflects the role that the intersectionality of being Black, female and care-experienced has in the adultification that Black girls in state care often experience. It also shows the importance of exploring the psychology that underpins the adultification that Black girls in state care experience prior to entering state/local authority care and during their time in state/local authority care.

Tanya Cooper's 2013 study on Black children's experience of state care in the USA concluded that: children from racialised backgrounds in state care in the USA are "less likely to receive the mental health services they need in foster care; are more likely to have fewer visits with their parents and siblings; are less likely to receive services designed to reunify them with their family; are less likely to have contact with their foster care caseworkers; and are more likely to see their parents' rights to maintain a relationship with them terminated" (Cooper, T, 2013, p.243). Ma'Khia Bryant's case highlights the consequences of this unequal treatment fors Black girls in state care.

Appendix

This article will explore the events leading up to the death of Ma'Khia Bryant and its relationship with the findings of my August to September 2023 USA Churchill Fellowship study on the adultification of Black girls in state care.

My Churchill Fellowship was aimed at exploring why Black girls in state care are adultified, how Black girls in state care are adultified and potential strategies to address the issue. I interviewed scholars in the USA and Canada. Namely, Prof Linda Burton, author of the study Childhood Adultification in Economically Disadvantaged Families: A Conceptual Model; social entrepreneur and PhD candidate Sadiyah Malcolm, author of the upcoming (at the time of me writing this) PhD thesis Yuh Tink Yah Big Ooman? and Travonne Edwards, Rasnat Chowdhury, Andre Laylor and Prof Bryn King, authors of the ground breaking 2023 publication Pushed, Dropped, or Fleeing from Care: The Narratives and Adultification of Black Youth Who Have Aged out of Ontario's Child Welfare System.

The social care landscape for Black girls in state care in Ohio and England

In 2021, the state of Ohio had a situation in which Black children were a minority in the wider population of children in the state but "accounted for nearly a third of children removed from their homes" (New York Times, 2021). England's Independent Review of Children's Social Care's 2022 report found that rates of African children in care outnumbered "White British children by four in low deprivation neighbourhoods" and that "Black and Mixed ethnicity children are overrepresented in the group of children who have long term child in need plans compared to the national average. This group has the worst attainment outcomes and the highest proportion of children with a Special Educational Needs status" (The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, 2022, p.4). It found that these disparities could not only be attributed to the economic status of the Black families concerned (The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, 2022, p.4). Discrimination arising from the intersection of being economically disadvantaged, Black, female and care-experienced are some of the additional elements that mean the cause of these disproportionate outcomes for Black children cannot be solely attributed to their social and economic class.

A 2022 survey of 101 parents and 59 families that had experience of accessing local authority family support (Waddell et al., 2022, p.8) found that "minority ethnic families face additional challenges when they seek early help or family support...these challenges include experiences of

Appendix

racism and discrimination from support providers" (Waddell et al., 2022, p.3).

What Works for Children's Social Care's 2022 analysis of administrative data of formal kinship care in England found that "Children from minority ethnic groups, and Black children in particular, are underrepresented among children living in kinship foster care and kinship special guardianship" (What Works for Children's Social Care, 2022, p.5). The Independent Review of Children's Social Care's report found that "Too little work is done to ensure children from ethnic minority backgrounds remain safely within their family networks" (The Independent Review of Children's Social Care, 2022, p.11).

ChiByDesign's 2020 report of their collaborative project with the United States of America state of Ohio's Department of Job and Family Services and Columbus Foundation (How racism in the Ohio Child Services System Impacts the Lives of Individuals involved) found that "Black interviewees told us that they were consistently ignored when expressing concerns about their care or their needs for assistance" and that "lack of race-equity standards for fostering exposes Black and mixed-race youth to racist foster experiences" (ChiByDesign, 2020).

The aforementioned research highlights the relevance of Ma'Khia Bryant's story to social workers in England. Ma'Khia Bryant's story shows the impact that the identified challenges can have on the life of Black girls in state care.

Ma'Khia Bryant's entry into state care

Following the death of Ma'Khia Bryant the New York Times embarked on a rich piece of investigative journalism into her life and death which involved interviews with her relatives and a review of court documents and case records that Ma'Khia's mother (Paula Bryant) provided to the New York Times (New York Times, 2021).

Ma'Khia's family had been engaged with the state of Ohio's child protection services years before her death in 2021. The New York Times' review of a case document that Ma'Khia's mother gave them outlined an incident in February 2017 in which Paula Bryant took Ma'Khia, her sister Ja'Niah and her two younger siblings to Child Protection Services as she was at " '...her wits end' " (New York Times, 2021). Their mother spoke about the children's struggle with the family's move to a new area contributing to the challenges that she was having with them at the time (New York Times, 2021). Paula Bryant described an incident in which Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah were arguing about their bedtime and their younger sister went out of their home calling for

Appendix

help which culminated in police involvement and the girls' raising allegations of physical abuse from their mother and older brother. A court later dismissed their allegations of abuse by their mother but found their mother to be guilty of neglect (New York Times, 2021). The girls' grandmother Jeanene Hammonds took custody of Ma'Khia and her three siblings as a kinship carer ("sleeping on the couch so the children could have the beds") receiving $1,200 from the state (New York Times, 2021). They lived with her for sixteen months (New York Times, 2021). The New York Times' article highlighted an issue of discrepancies in the amount of money that kinship carers in Ohio received based on the findings of a review by Anthony Capizzi, an Ohio family court judge in 2019. Ching-Hsuan Lin's 2013 systematic literature review on academic literature on the services that are provided for kinship carers in the USA found that kinship carers received less support than foster parents who were not related to their foster children, with the New York Times' investigation finding that "The per diem allowances paid to licensed foster parents are often 10 times greater than the public assistance paid to relatives" (New York Times, 2021). With the rate of inflation increasing in recent years, household expenditure has increased in the USA and in England. More academic research is needed on the experience that kinship carers like Jeanene Hammonds have of receiving support from states and local authorities while caring for Black girls. The intersectionality of being a kinship carer who is Black and female caring for children who are Black and female has the potential to also affect the experience a kinship carer like Jeanene Hammonds has. They may be dealing with the challenges of dealing with social workers that have an adultification-bias towards Black girls which causes them to see the girls as more resilient and in less need of help, and to harbour a level of misogynoir towards their Black female kinship carers that disinclines child protection workers from offering them the same level of support as kinship carers who do not share their characteristics.

The response that Jeanene Hammonds received from child protection services after her landlord discovered that the four children were living in her two-bedroom apartment and evicted her may have been the turning point that cost Ma'Khia Bryant her life. After being evicted, Jeanene put Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah in a summer camp and their two younger siblings in temporary foster care. Jeanene's request for Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah to stay in a hotel with her for a few days was rejected and the four children's kinship care was formally ended in place of standard foster care placements (New York Times, 2021). While it is appreciated that social worker decisions of this nature are fraught with the tension between having compassion for kinship carers and having a duty to place the children in an environment in which they receive stable housing, Jeanene Bryant's case highlights a need for a less bureaucratic and more human response in which social workers look at ways in which they can support kinship carers with the socio-economic

Appendix

challenges that can hamper them from fulfilling their role as workers' tick-box approach in their assessments of Black children in state care contributing to their adultification.

There is a greater need for a discussion about the psychology behind the different levels of support different kinship carers received from local authorities and the role of misogynoir, which often leads to an expectation for Black women and girls to be "strong" in situations that other human beings would be expected to be overwhelmed by.

Ma'Khia Bryant's life in state foster care

Ma'Khia Bryant was placed in five foster care placements within the space of two years. During the focus group, Rasnat Chowdhury highlighted how the adultification of Black girls in state care contributes to poor outcomes: "It's also Black youth dealing with the consequences of being adultified throughout their time in care that leads to an inadequate transition because...if they have no room to make mistakes. They're constantly being moved. They have to start over. And then there's a lack of trust that was brought up. So, their whole time throughout of being adultified does then not provide the necessary skills they need in adulthood." While the facts that underpinned Ma'Khia's housing in in five foster care placements within the space of 24 months have not been fully established; there is a need for more research on the psychology that underpins that adultification that Black girls experience from their foster parents that can be a contributory factor to a girl like Ma'Khia Bryant. She was an honour's roll student, had a foster mother that wanted to adopt her and was described as quiet and shy by her teaching assistant and foster mother.

The separation from her sister

Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah were initially placed in group homes. During the focus group, Travonne Edwards spoke about social workers' adultification-bias towards Black children in state care contributing to poor housing assessments: "From the perspective of my frontline practice in this area. One of the number one ways in which folks in these settings are intervening for the 'best interest' or the care of these Black youth is highly punitive. Policing is the number one intervention for these youth. It's like, stop. If not, restrain. If not, police...The general ways in which their behaviours are naturally stereotyped as more aggressive, as more deviant...I'm seeing a lack of care which in turn increases their likelihood to be penalized and to be criminalized...Now they're no longer eligible for foster care (which is kind of seen as the graduation from group care). They're stuck in group care. Then they're moved from an open custody to a closed- custody group care".

Appendix

The adultification of Black girls on a macro level by wider society (the view of them being less childlike and in need of care and more aggressive and problematic) compounds this issue as it reduces the pool of available foster parents to look after them, which can mean that social workers are pulling from a pool of prospective foster parents that are not as well-equipped as the pool of prospective foster parents that are interested in caring for their white counterparts. The separation of Ma'Khia from her sister meant that even when she found a foster parent that had a good dynamic with her and wanted to adopt her, her longing to be with her sister hampered this (New York Times, 2021). The manner in which this separation occurred (while they were at a children's home/group home) already set the tone for this separation to be particularly traumatic for Ma'Khia. Ja'Niah told the New York Times that "not long after their grandmother dropped them off, she and Ma'Khia were told they had to go into separate rooms for physical examinations. When she emerged, her sister was no longer there. 'Where's my sister?'' she said. It was like 'We don't know, we'll check,' but he never got back. 'So that's when I realized we were being split up' " (New York Times, 2021). Limited pools of foster parents that are willing to take in two Black teenage girls contributes to scenarios of this kind. There does need to be a deeper exploration of the psychology behind people becoming foster parents and having a higher disinclination for becoming foster parents to Black girls. That said, there is still a need for the professionals that work with Black girls in state care to do everything within their own circle of influence to reduce the trauma that the children in their care experience. This was clearly not done in the case of Ma'Khia and her siblings. Adultification-bias that causes people to regard Black girls as being more resilient than their white counterparts contributes to them receiving less trauma-informed support from professionals. Ma'Khia was now left to deal with the trauma of being separated from her mother, grandmother and sister.

Ma'Khia's Social Worker

2021 documents highlight Ma'Khia Bryant's social worker's history of alcohol and drug abuse and the flagging of these issues in his recruitment background check (Nelson, 2021). It would be reasonable to expect these challenges to impair the effective judgement of her social worker. While court documents demonstrate that her social worker was placed on leave prior to Ma'Khia's death, it is unclear what his department's position was on his ability to conduct his job properly and how any issues were being handled. While adultification-bias can lead to Black girls being more likely to be allocated to poorly equipped foster parents than their white counterparts, this can also extend to their allocation of social workers. While not all the facts have been released to determine whether that was the case here, the psychology behind the allocation of Black girls' social workers and the role that misogynoir may play does require a bigger discussion.

Appendix

Ma'Khia Bryant: Black, female and disabled

Ma'Khia Bryant had finally been reunited with her sister Ja'Niah at the foster home where she was living on the day she died (New York Times, 2021). Her foster mother told the New York Times that " 'She's a quiet girl. She doesn't start fights anywhere. She wasn't a troubled child' " (New York Times, 2021). Ma' Khia's foster mother had a number of foster children in her care (New York Times, 2021). Ja'Niah said that their foster mother sometimes left them with her adult foster child who "berated them and mocked Ma'Khia's speech impediment" (New York Times, 2021). Working as a supply teacher in secondary schools since 2018 has given me an insight into the higher propensity for children with disabilities such as speech impediments to experience bullying from children in school environments that are chaotic and high-pressured compared with some of the outstanding schools with smaller pupil numbers and less density of children with a range of complex needs being placed in one class. I would imagine that environmental factors such as this also affect the experience that children with disabilities experience in their foster homes. Ma'Khia's case highlights the need for social worker placement assessments to give due consideration to the implications of various intersections of a child's identity (including disability) when deciding on suitable families to place them with.

Ma'Khia's foster mother attributes the social care agency's requirement for her to "work full-time outside the home" to be a key contributory factor in the challenges that she was facing in terms of supervising the children (New York Times, 2021). Ma'Khia's foster mother's adult foster daughter may have been dealing with her own unresolved trauma. State and local authorities' over-reliance on a small pool of foster parents for children that are hard to place in foster homes can lead to children coming in and out of some foster parents' homes without due consideration being given to whether the children's personalities and background will aid or hamper a healthy dynamic within these households. There was a situation in which Ma'Khia's foster mother asked the police to remove one of the foster children in the home and a call to emergency services asking for a psychiatric evaluation of one of the children (New York Times, 2021). It is unclear what the outcome was in this particular child's case; however, if was similar to the police's response to Ja'Niah's telephone calls for help (to say they could not do anything) then it would be fair to assume that adequate support from medical professionals and social workers to support Ma'Khia's foster mother with the care of the children in her care was not forthcoming.

Appendix

Ma'Khia Bryant: the student

The staff at Ma'Khia's school saw a discrepancy between the " 'quiet and diligent' " Ma'Khia " 'who would hug her teacher's aide every morning before Math' " and the traumatised Ma'Khia that they saw in the infamous photographs of her holding a knife before being shot by a police officer. Paula Bryant recalled her last conversation with Ma'Khia in which Ma'Khia informed her about making her school's honours roll student list (Black Enterprise, n.d). While it is encouraging to hear that Ma'Khia was happy and was making progress in school, there is still more work that needs to be done in schools' multi-agency response in their safeguarding of Black girls in state care. Unfortunately, teachers' adultification-bias towards Black girls (for example, stereotyping them as knowing more about adult topics) can lead to red flags being ignored. The Office of National Statistics 2023 report confirmed that only 12% of children and young people in state care in England enter university or college (Office for National Statistics, 2023). The USA's Legal Center for Foster Care and Education's 2022 statistics show that (as demonstrated other studies in the USA and England) many children in state care would like to enter higher education (university) (70–84% of them indicated this) (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2022, p.1) but only 2–10.8% of young people in care in the USA obtained a bachelor's degree (Legal Center for Foster Care and Education, 2022, p.1). There is a greater need for more academic research into the experience that children in state care have with their teachers and the role that the intersectionality of being Black, female and care- experienced can have in their school experience and access to adequate pastoral care.

When I reference Ma'Khia's case, I have found (anecdotally) that people (including teachers) are often shocked to hear about her teachers' views on her. For example, the fact that she was an honour's roll student; her teacher's aide/teaching assistant Jessica Oakley described her as " 'a hard worker, a sweet girl, very shy' " and recalls her effort to maintain her academic performance in spite of the disruption that the school experienced due to the pandemic, when she "continued to seek out Miss Oakley's assistance even when the school shut down because of the coronavirus, once spending eight hours with her teacher, on a Google Hangout, going through all her homework" (New York Times, 2021). I have found that at this point people start to say that they have a better understanding of what happened to her and acknowledge that there was a problem with the situation in her foster home rather than with her. The fact that these people have already been informed that an adult foster child and another adult are alleged

Appendix

to have tried to physically assault a foster child in her foster mother's home but still required further context and clarification before the right compassionate response is elicited is reflective of the adultification of Black girls that requires them to be the "perfect" victim and for their "good" character to be validated by others before they receive a certain level of compassion. I have also experienced this in teachers' reactions when I deliver my workshops on the adultification of Child Q (a Black girl who was strip searched by police officers in Hackney, London recently). Teachers' responses often change when they learn that she was a former school prefect. The fact that the teachers searched her bag, scarf and shoes for drugs and found none (City of London and Hackney, 2022, p.2) and still decided to call the police does not suffice, there is still a need for more "context". Safeguarding is a key duty of professionals that work with children, namely their ability to adequately protect these children and respond to urgent issues that may compromise their safety. The psychology behind why Black girls' good character needs to be established through the voice of others and is required for people to be outraged about their experience of adultification creates a serious safeguarding issue in the care of Black girls in schools and within the social care sector and requires further exploration.

Ja'Niah Bryant's Cry for Help: Part One

Ma'Khia's younger sister Ja'Niah called the police service 23 days prior to her death (New York Times, 2021). She told the emergency services " 'I want to leave this foster home. I want to leave this foster home' " in a quavering voice (New York Times, 2021). The police officers record of attending Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah's foster home stated that Ja'Niah was agitated and told them that the fighting at the foster home was " 'getting worse and worse' " (New York Times, 2021). The officers told her that " 'there was nothing they could do' " and stated that this " 'seemed to push her over an edge' ", causing her to become ' " 'irate' " and to state that " 'if she was not allowed to leave, she was going to kill someone' " (New York Times, 2021). It is clear that Ja'Niah was under significant emotional distress when she made this call to the emergency services. The response that she received from the police reflects what happens when there is not a robust trauma-informed, multi-agency (an approach that brings different sectors such as the police, hospitals and social services together) response to supporting children in state care in an emotional crisis. The police do not appear to have obtained support from medical professionals or Ja'Niah's social worker and their response is a contributory factor to the escalation of the situation at the foster home culminating in Ma'Khia's death.

Appendix

Ja'Niah Bryant's Cry for Help: Part Two

Ja'Niah said that after school on 20 April 2021, one of their foster mother's adult foster children berated them for " 'habitually disrespecting' " their foster mother and that things escalated (New York Times, 2021). Ja'Niah said that when she called her foster mother (who was at work), she was told that " 'she was too busy to get involved' " (New York Times, 2021). She then called her grandmother, while the adult foster child called one of their foster mother's other adult foster children to come to the house to fight Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah (New York Times, 2021).

Jeanene Bryant described herself " 'standing on the stairway inside, trying to protect her granddaughters as the older woman threatened to beat them up' " (New York Times, 2021). Jeanene referenced Ma'Khia grabbing "a steak knife from the kitchen" (New York Times, 2021). The audio record of the 911 call that Ja'Niah made featured someone in the background saying "I'm not scared of no knife" (New York Times, 2021). The New York Times reported Ja'Niah's voice heard on the call to the emergency services stating that " 'We got Angie's grown girls trying to fight us, trying to stab us, trying to put her hands on our Grandma. Get here now!' " (New York Times, 2021). The police officer was recorded: " 'What's going on?' 'What's going on?' he repeatedly asks in the video, as Bryant struggles first with one woman and then another. Reardon shouts, 'Get down' and points his gun at Bryant, who is seen swinging her arm toward the other woman. The officer then fired four shots" (National Public Radio, 2021).

The events of the day of Ma'Khia Bryant's death exemplify the reflections of PhD candidate Sadiyah Malcolm during her interview for my Churchill Fellowship study, as she reflected on the case of a Black girl that she was supporting who had entered the youth offenders' system. Sadiyah told me "I worked with girls that were involved in the court systems, and I remember, erm, specifically, there was one young girl that I was working with. And she was young. I think she might have been like thirteen or fourteen...or actually, she was twelve. She might have been the youngest girl that I was working with in that group. And I remember, she had been in the court system because she stabbed someone. And I remember asking her 'where did you get a knife from?' And I remember the story she told me was that she had been bullied or people had been bothering her because she was young, and she was small in stature. And she said to me 'I knew exactly where to go get a knife because they continued to bother me' and so she went on and told me the story of how she planned to buy the knife. Where she went to buy the knife. How she concealed the knife. And basically, that was her way of protecting herself. And if a twelve-year-old had to think about protecting herself against harm to the extent that she had to basically procure a weapon, it tells you so much about her context. And her discussion of it

Appendix

after that was kind of like 'yeah, my mum wasn't happy that I stabbed somebody, but I had to stand up for myself'. And that's a central tenet of adultification. The idea that Black girls have to defend themselves against something. They have to defend themselves against some system. They have to defend themselves against some home situation. Some community situation. And it's always kind of like this fight in defence of Black girlhood". While Sadiyah considered the context that led to the girl in her anecdote using a knife to defend herself, the adultification of Black girls in society means that they are often perceived as being inherently deviant and aggressive and their experience is not often contextualised. This is exemplified in the public's response to Ma'Khia Bryant's death.

Ja'Niah Bryant's Cry for Help: Part Three

After Ma'Khia was killed and police officers led Ja'Niah into her foster home, she had the emotionally triggering experience of seeing a news report about the verdict of the George Floyd trial while trying to find a cartoon for her little brother to watch (New York Time, 2021). This moment was a sad reflection of the clash between the children's status as children and the fact that they had to deal with issues such as bereavement and legal proceedings which undermined the protection that should have afforded to them as children. Ja'Niah said that " 'I called my real mom – my biological mom – and I told her, I said, I need you. They just shot Ma'Khia. Get here now'. Ja'Niah recalled, 'I needed her' " (New York Times, 2021). Ja'Niah's poignant and heart-breaking statement is a stark reminder that the lack of proper protection and care for Black girls in state care often renders them in a full circle position of longing for the support of their biological parents who were deemed unfit to look after them.

The adultification of Ma'Khia Bryant: after her death

Paula Bryant's lawyer Michelle Martin spoke of the additional trauma that Ma'Khia's family had to deal with as Ma'Khia was subject to adultification in the public discourse around her death (ABC News, 2021). Indeed, it was my observation of Black women adultifying Ma'Khia in their social media coverage and discussion of her death that inspired me to change my MPhil/PhD topic to the adultification of Black Girls in State Care in 2021.

Ma'Khia's experience of entering state care and dying in state care highlights an urgent requirement for the understanding of the needs of Black girls in state care, and the training received by the professionals that work with them, to be approached with an appreciation of the intersectional challenges that come with being Black, female and in state care.

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