

# Using an Intersectional Lens to Examine the Child Sexual Exploitation of Black Adolescents.

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## **Introduction**

In this chapter I employ intersectionality as a critical lens to interrogate the ways that race, gender, class and sexuality impact black adolescents' experiences of child sexual exploitation. In particular, the exploration will be anchored in an intersectional analysis to extend understandings of the nuanced ways in which race-constructed otherness is experienced by young black people affected by sexual exploitation. 'Black' is defined here as referring to individuals of African and African-Caribbean origin as well as persons of mixed ethnicity (African or African-Caribbean and another parentage, usually white British). A key reason for focusing on this subgroup of children is that they are disproportionately represented in the care system (Owen & Statham, 2009) and the data on child sexual exploitation suggests children in the care system are disproportionately impacted (Pearce 2009; Beckett et al. 2013; Beckett 2017). The central argument is that positional and situational inequalities intersect in complex ways to negatively impact the everyday realities of black youth, thus rendering them vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Specifically, the chapter discusses the contribution that an intersectional frame of analysis can make to intervening with sexually-exploited black youth. The chapter is organised into three parts: The first section briefly sketches the key messages from the literature on child sexual exploitation and black children. The second provides an overview of the intersectionality theoretical framework of the paper. In the final section, using a case study, from the Serious Case Review (SCR) of child R, a 15-year-old black girl in the looked-after system as an exemplar, I will present ways that an intersectional lens can offer some analytical tools to gain a deeper insight into the challenges for black youths at risk of abusive and exploitative relationships. The paper concludes with some discussion of the implications for a child-focused approach are also discussed.

## **Child Sexual Exploitation and Black Children**

While it is well known that child sexual exploitation affects children and young people from all backgrounds, little is known about the scale and nature of black children's experiences of CSE. Research indicates that girls are more likely than boys to be the victims of sexual exploitation, though boys are also sexually exploited (Berelowitz et al, 2013; Pearce 2009). For Firmin (2018) and Pitts (2013), a number of elements negatively affect young black adolescents' everyday realities to render them a vulnerable population, including being raised in economically-disadvantaged communities and experiencing material hardship and societal racism. Increasingly, attention is being given to the ways in which structural disadvantage can heighten the risk of children being exposed to sexual exploitation (Beckett et al, 2013; Berelowitz et al, 2013; Firmin, 2018; Pearce, 2009; Pitts, 2013). Consistent findings have highlighted that Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) suffered by children including exposure to domestic violence, intra-familial maltreatment, parental mental health and substance misuse problems, for example, exposes children to greater risks of exploitation (Beckett et al, 2013; Berelowitz et al, 2013; Hallett, 2015 & 2017; Pearce, 2009; Pitts, 2013). Additionally, research shows that children living in disrupted family environments, or in the looked-after population, as well as those excluded from education (of which black children are over-represented), are all at increased risk of sexual exploitation (Beckett et al, 2017). Research also suggests that intra-familial sexual abuse trauma is a major risk factor for revictimisation (Firmin, 2013; Thomas & D'Arcy, 2017). As Firmin et al. (2016) remind, black youths have multiple contextual factors that coalesce in complex and subtle ways, leaving them more exposed to sexual exploitation.

Additionally, there are gender differences relevant to the way that black adolescents' experience sexual exploitation. I argue that a racialised and gendered discourse about black boys and girls exists. Research has brought to light that significant numbers of black girls are sexually exploited by gangs and impacted by gang-associated sexual violence (Beckett et al, 2013; Berelowitz et al,

2013; Pearce 2009; Pearce, 2010; Pitts, 2013; Trickett, 2015; Voisin et al, 2016). It is also clear that many black girls experience multiple forms of violence and abuse, invariably racially motivated hate crimes and abuse in their lifetimes which is relevant for understanding the context of their sexual exploitation (Firmin, 2017). Research reveals that sexual harassment, teenage relationship abuse, gang rape, sexual violence and physical violence are common facets for black girls living in socially and economically-deprived urban areas affected by serious youth violence (Disley & Liddle 2016; Firmin 2017; Pearce 2009). Furthermore, it has been argued that misogynist popular culture represents black girls as sexually promiscuous and having loose morals, in contrast to Asian young women who are represented as 'mystical', 'secretive' and 'hidden'. (Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006). Several scholars have brought attention to the negative ways in which devaluing messages about black girls' sexuality and moral worth contribute to the sexual violence that they experience (Stephens & Phillips, 2003; Chesney-Lind & Eliason, 2006; Bernard, 2015; Miller, 2008). As Firmin (2017) comments, multi-faceted reflections are required to understand how the social location of black girls is crucial in shaping their experiences of exploitation. Here it is imperative to understand how the exploitation experienced by black adolescent girls may result from the marginalised and oppressed positions they inhabit.

Whilst there is a growing literature on boys, much less is known about black boys' experiences of child sexual exploitation. A Children Society report highlighted that child protection services struggle to recognise the indicators of sexual exploitation of boys in general (Leon & Rawls, 2016; McNaughton et al. 2014). Cockbain et al. (2014), drawing on data from Barnados' *'Not Just a Girl Thing'* noted that out of 1,582 CSE cases involving boys, 6% were black (p27). It is generally recognised that boys are less likely to disclose sexual exploitation, and service providers may not know how to ask boys questions about exploitation, nor recognise the signs (Becket et al, 2017). As a result, we lack knowledge about black boys who are affected by sexual exploitation and the needs and issues of vulnerable and at-risk black boys are little understood. There is increasing awareness

that negative stereotypes of black boys as predators serve to exacerbate vulnerabilities and create barriers to identifying and engaging with those black boys who are victimized (West, 2008). Some argue that narratives of black masculinity are rooted in racist assumptions about violence and criminality, propagating negative stereotypes about black males which detracts attention from recognising black boys as victims of sexual violations (Curry & Utley, 2018).

### **Intersectionality as a Theoretical Framework**

Intersectionality, a term first coined by black feminist scholar, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), is an analytical approach to interrogate black women's experiences at the intersection of race, gender and class, which has its roots firmly anchored in critical race feminism. Crenshaw broadly conceptualised intersectionality as the interplay between various forms of oppression that affect the lived experiences of black women and the resulting injustices. More recently, the term has been used more expansively and scholars and activists in different fields have used the language of intersectionality as an organising tool to identify and call into question social inequalities (Collins & Blige 2016). Notably, intersectionality allows for the questioning of the interlocking nature of gender, race, class, sexuality, ability and other axes of oppression for groups in oppressed social locations. Essentially, intersectionality advances the notion of interrogating how intersecting forms of oppression converge for racialised and minoritised groups in complex and subtle ways. According to black feminist scholars, to recognise multiple systems of oppression means that we can better understand how black women will experience gender discrimination differently than white women as a result of their racial background, and will also experience racial and ethnic discrimination differently than black men because of their gender (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984 & 1989; King, 1988). In short, an intersectional theoretical framework helps to conceptualise how categories of difference intersect and interplay in a context of social relations of power, and advances understanding of how divergent groups may experience oppression differently. Importantly for black feminist scholars such as Hill Collins & Blige (2016), the key

tenets of intersectionality are relationality, inequality, power and social context, as well as their interconnectedness. An intersectional lens therefore helps to delineate how multiple marginalised identities coalesce in a social context of power relations. As Hill Collins (1990) asserts, coming from a perspective that is working at the intersection of feminism and anti-racism, an intersectional approach provides the theoretical tools necessary for examining how different groups are affected by inequalities and oppression.

However, intersectionality has been criticised for having little substance and specifically, that it lacks a clearly defined methodology (Davis, 2008). It is also heavily contested as to whether intersectionality is a theory, a conceptual framework, a paradigm, or a method (Carbin & Edenheim, 2013). Indeed, Hill Collins (2015) acknowledges the inherently problematic definitional difficulties of intersectionality. Notwithstanding the criticisms, the strength of an intersectional approach is that it provides necessary tools for being critically attuned to the issues that affect the lives of black adolescents and frame their experiences of sexual exploitation. To this end, I contend that it is thus crucial to locate black adolescents' experiences of sexual exploitation within a broader understanding of intersecting multiple oppressions. Intersectionality is useful as a way of acknowledging that how disadvantage and marginalisation differently affect black children's lived experiences and increase vulnerability to exploitative and abusive situations. In essence, an intersectional approach requires us to focus on the complexity of issues that are important for understanding experiences shaped by socially- constructed divisions (Mattsson, 2014; Mehrotra, 2010; Murphy et al. 2009). More specifically, an intersectional perspective can enable the asking of difficult questions that will help inform assessments of the layered experiences of black adolescents which are rooted in relationships shaped by race, (dis)ability, gender and class.

Using intersectional theory concepts of relationality and social context, the next section will analyse a case study drawn from an SCR of child R, a 15-year-old black girl in the looked-after system, to

illustrate how an intersectional approach can help make sense of some key issues framing R's experience. An SCR takes place in England when serious or fatal violence or maltreatment of a child has occurred, including when a child or young person dies in custody. Specifically, it involves the Local Safeguarding Children Board commissioning a detailed examination of the case to establish whether there are lessons to be learned about the ways in which professionals and organisations work together to safeguard children and promote their welfare.

## **Case Example**

### **Child R**

Child R is a 15-year-old looked-after girl in foster care who was raped by an older man in the context of a history of child sexual exploitation. In early 2014, R was invited to meet an older, predatory male at a hotel, where he allegedly raped her. The antecedents of this meeting remain uncertain, but R said that a friend of hers had given the man her telephone number, so that he could contact her. R reported the alleged assault to her foster carers the same day, and police action was taken to find and arrest the man. A criminal investigation and court process have now concluded, in which the perpetrator was found guilty of a separate, lesser sexual offence against another young person. The offence of rape against R remains untried, but is held on the man's records as not-guilty.

According to the SCR, R had a family history of housing instability, exposure to drug dealing, child neglect and physical abuse. The family had no secure housing or finances and often stayed with relatives or friends. This meant that they moved around a lot, resulting in instability for R and her siblings. Both police and Children's Social Care received referrals about criminality in the household, largely related to drug-dealing and other acquisitive offences, as well as neglect of the children. There was evidence to show a history of R being groomed for drug distribution. The SCR indicates that R suffered emotional rejection, neglect and physical assaults at the hands of her mother. She was neglected and left in charge of her younger siblings and was exposed to many adults who posed a risk to her. R was made subject to a child protection plan in 2009 and taken into care in 2010 at the age of 10, after reporting that her mother had beaten her. Whilst in care, R had periods of going missing, exhibiting highly disruptive behaviour, as well as multiple placements and exclusions from school (French, 2015).

## **Using Intersectionality to Understand Vulnerabilities**

Drawing on key tenets of Intersectionality, notably relationality, inequality, power and social context, I will illustrate how this approach can help us delve into some of the issues framing R's experiences. Crucially, a common thread running through R's SCR is that the professionals involved lacked an understanding of her particular vulnerabilities.

There is no doubt that several unique issues intersected for R and that she had some very complex needs. Most notably, she experienced cumulative adversity, exposure to multiple forms of abuse and neglect, and a dysfunctional home environment, among other issues. R's SCR highlights that she has suffered a number of ACEs defined as experiencing traumatic events such as domestic abuse, intra-familial abuse and neglect, and other early life stressors (Felitti *et al.*, 1998). Added to this, she suffered trauma as a result of her *"exposure to witnessing adult violence and being used to prepare and deliver drugs to customers"* (Trench, 2015, p14). The SCR found that R's *"defiant and provocative behavior in schools gave rise to concerns about her vulnerability to sexual exploitation and to 'gang activity'"* (Trench, 2015, p10). The SCR also emphasised that *"R was going missing on a regular basis from her foster homes and was often out very late – sometimes being dropped off by an older man"* (Trench, 2015, p11). In order to appreciate the relational context of R's life, it is important to acknowledge that she is positioned at the intersection of interlocking systems of oppressions (Hill Collins & Blige, 2016) which gives rise to some particular vulnerabilities. Specifically, an intersectional lens enables us to better understand that for deeply troubled black girls, like R, the lack of a safe and stable home environment, together with societal racism and gendered power relationships negatively affect their everyday realities; all of which contribute to a context of increased vulnerabilities. An intersectional lens can open ways to re-interpreting the stressful life events and conditions (such as, the trauma resulting from physical and emotional abuse, and a lack of stability in her home life), that negatively affect R's life, potentially contributing to her susceptibility to exploitation. Furthermore, an intersectional approach provides a framework for disentangling the

factors that are constraining and shaping R's experiences. Thus, viewing R's experiences of childhood neglect and sexual exploitation through an intersectional lens allows us to make better sense of some of the adversities and obstacles she has to contend with that would have had a significant impact on her psychological well-being and coping behaviour. As such, an intersectional lens will be better able to make sense of the factors that come together to impact the experiences of sexual exploitation for young people like R; it can foster the development of a strength-based approach that can build on R's strengths to engage her in the work. Most notably, a strengths-based approach shifts the focus away from a deficit perspective as it has, as its underlying principle, the idea that most people can change their behaviour when provided with the correct support and adequate resources (Bernard & Thomas, 2016). Crucially, for engagement with children like R to happen, it will be important for practitioners to have the skills and awareness to think themselves into the frame of reference of the child to understand the problems that are posed for undertaking nuanced assessments (Bernard & Thomas, 2016, p 67). A strengths-based approach will be essential for harnessing R's resilience and sense of hope, which she will need for navigating the toxic familial, and neighbourhood environments that she has to inhabit.

Of relevance here is that, although R's SCR makes no mention that she experienced discrimination, it is important to consider that subtle processes of situational racism and positional racism may have impacted. Briefly, situational racism is defined by racist behaviour that is shaped by the social context, may have impacted, while positional racism is defined here as the nuanced ways in which race-constructed otherness are

experienced by black people (Mirza, 2009). For example, some commentators have introduced the concept of adultification to describe the ways that subtle and unconscious race-based bias contributes to the treatment of black children in the child welfare and justice systems: where black children are deprived of ‘childhood’ as attributed to their white counter parts and treated as if they were adults (Dancy, 2014; Epstein et al, 2017; Goff et al. 2014). As Epstein et al. (2017) and Goff et al. (2014) observe, black children are often perceived as less innocent than white children and thus less in need of protection; some practitioners may also treat them as if they are older than their actual age and find them more culpable for their actions. These important insights have some relevance in R’s case. For example, the SCR notes her patterns of going missing from care, sometimes missing for more than twenty-four hours; as highlighted earlier, one of the major concerns about children who go missing is their exposure to several risk factors, including sexual and criminal exploitation (Biehal & Wade, 2000; Hickle & Hallett, 2016). The SCR also suggests evidence of sexual exploitation, “R having unexplained amounts of money and being dropped off by an older man” (p32). Yet, as the SCR points out, the local authority’s Multi-agency Missing from Care Protocol was never acted on; e.g., having a strategy meeting to discuss a risk management plan and having an independent return home interview with R once she had returned to the placement (DfE, 2014). I suggest that the lack of concern for R’s wellbeing and the invisibility of her experiences support notions of adultification; an intersectional analysis can enhance our understanding of the subtle processes that may contribute to the adultification of black children affected by sexual exploitation. In short, intersectionality can help us to elucidate many of the underlying issues and dynamics of child sexual

exploitation, as well as to make sense of their coping strategies, help-seeking behaviour, and engagement with services.

### **Intersecting Identities: Lived Experiences**

In what follows, I discuss some issues concerning R's intersecting identities. The SCR suggests that R's identity were either ignored or marginalised in assessments of her needs. For example, on page 18 (Trench, 2015) the SCR state, "*a gap has been noted in relation to the attention given to her sense of identity*" (Trench, 2015, p18). However, there is no attempt to reflect upon what this lack of attention may have meant for considering her lived experiences of neglectful and abusive care (Bernard & Harris, 2018). Furthermore, on page 32, the SCR points out the lack of awareness by the professional helpers of the risk of sexual exploitation, her "*previous sexualised behaviour*", and the risks it posed. Nonetheless, this statement is not subjected to any analysis, so we are not told what her sexualised behaviour consisted of. I contend that an intersectional lens has the potential here to enable the development of counter-narratives to avoid victim blaming and to challenge the dominant perception that girls and young women who are sexually active are participating in transactional sex when in fact they are being manipulated in coercive and exploitative relationships and how this might be impacted by racism for black girls and young women. For one thing, an intersectional paradigm enables a more nuanced view of Child R's gendered experiences of sexual exploitation. At the same time, as race and gender oppression coalesce for R, an intersectional lens can help to elucidate the subtle nuances of racialised gendered power dynamics for raising important questions about the set of factors contributing to R's

experiences of sexual exploitation. Within this frame, we can appreciate the significance of multiple oppressions, coupled with experiences of trauma and what that means for black adolescent young women, like R, who are socially marginalised, and therefore are at increased risk of victimisation (Miller, 1998). To this end, if practitioners are to develop relational practice with R and especially to understand the multifaceted dynamics of her whole experience, this has to be informed by an intersectional analysis that can take account of the complexity of the contextual factors framing her lived experiences (Firmin, 2018).

To be clear, I am in no way suggesting that engaging highly-resistant young people like R is in anyway straightforward. Indeed, how to build up trust with hard-to-engage young people in the statutory child protection system possess a real challenge. The SCR indicates R's "*lack of engagement and her stated mistrust of professionals*" (p19), and in particular her "*mistrust of those in authority*" (p31). The SCR quite rightly points out that, in general, it is not uncommon for looked-after adolescents to have problems trusting and communicating with professionals who are there to help. However, viewed through an intersectional lens, we can consider the additional factors which may act to silence R's voice. For example, "for black children, the debilitating effects of racism powerfully influence the way traumatic events are experienced and the meaning given to them" (Bernard, 2002, p241). Additionally, it must be noted that when black young people do ask for help, some may encounter professional helpers who are insensitive, or lack understanding of the key issues affecting their lived experiences. An intersectional perspective therefore provides an entry point to understanding something of the

implications this may have on R's ability to give voice to her experiences, as well to recognise her self-efficacy and personal agency and to make sense of help-seeking behavior (Firmin et al. 2016). Therefore, an intersectional lens opens up new ways for considering how R is supported to interpret and make meaning of her experiences as coercive and exploitative (Chung, 2005).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has employed intersectionality as a lens of analysis to explore its possibilities for making sense of black adolescents' experiences of child sexual exploitation. It has suggested that, as black adolescents experience some unique context-based factors that interplay, an intersectional lens provides the necessary analytical tools for illuminating their lived experiences of sexual exploitation. An intersectional approach allows for seeing how multiple marginalised identities create a context of increased levels of risks for black adolescents. Specifically, an intersectional lens offers scope for pinpointing how structural inequalities resulting in gender, dis(ability), race, and class-based oppression are inextricably intertwined facets of black adolescents' lives. Their experiences are likely accentuated by these factors when they are victimised by sexual exploitation. Notwithstanding that the case study was but one example of a young woman's individual experiences, it is a powerful story that illustrates the way that black children's complex needs may be overlooked. As the significant role of an SCR is to learn lessons and avoid repeating mistakes, the issues raised are relevant to the broader population of black adolescents affected by sexual exploitation. It is therefore essential to understand that black adolescents' experiences of sexual exploitation take place in a

societal context of deficit-thinking that stigmatises their identities and devalues their experiences, which has a significant bearing on how risk is framed. It is evident, then, that an intersectional lens can open up a space for asking important questions about race and racism to make robust assessments that are rooted in an understanding of the complex terrain that shapes risk for black adolescents in particular ways. The intersection of race, (dis)ability, gender and class impacts black adolescents significantly, so practitioners must be aware that black adolescents are confronting specific adversities in their lives that need to be disentangled to understand the barriers they have to navigate. Ultimately, intersectional approaches are crucial for making effective interventions that are cognisant of the risk and protective factors for black adolescents who experience multiple forms of oppressions.

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