



## How Parentification and Adultification Bias Affect Child Abuse Investigations Involving Teens

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## Agenda

- Define parentification
- Define adultification
- Describe how they are different and how they impact each other
- Examples of parentification/adultification bias in our work
- Techniques and strategies for addressing these biases
- Case studies



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## Parentification, defined

- Process of role reversal whereby a child or adolescent is obliged to act as parent to their own parent, themselves or siblings
- Instrumental parentification
  - Completing physical tasks for the family, such as looking after a sick relative, paying bills, or providing assistance to younger siblings that would normally be provided by a parent
- Emotional parentification
  - Child or adolescent must take on the role of a confidante or mediator for (or between) parents or family members



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## Effects of Parentification

- Not always pathological
- Destructive parentification is linked to
  - Maladaptive parenting
  - Child maladaptation
  - Physical abuse
  - Sexual abuse
  - Behavioral problems
  - Decreased emotionality
  - Poor social competence
  - Higher risk of depression, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, anxiety, and low self-esteem
  - **Loss of childhood**



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## Parentification and child abuse

- Linkage to increased risk of
  - Physical abuse
  - Sexual abuse
- Can be the result of neglect



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## Adultification, defined

- Adultification can take two essential forms:
  - A process of socialization, in which children function at a more mature developmental stage because of situational context and necessity, especially in low resource community environments
    - Can mirror parentification
  - A social or cultural stereotype that is based on how adults perceive children "in the absence of knowledge of children's behavior and verbalizations. This is based in part on race.



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## Adultification bias

- 2017 study by Georgetown Law's Center on Poverty and Inequality found that adults view Black girls as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, even in the 5-9 year-old age bracket



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## Adultification bias

- Compared to white girls of the same age, survey participants perceive that:
  - Black girls need less nurturing
  - Black girls need less protection
  - Black girls need to be supported less
  - Black girls need to be comforted less
  - Black girls are more independent
  - Black girls know more about adult topics
  - Black girls know more about sex



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## Perceptions

- Researchers found that 10-year-old Black boys were perceived by police officers and undergraduate white women as less innocent and projected to be 4½ years older than white 10-year-old boys.
  - Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta & DiTomasso, 2014.
- Researchers found that simply comparing the images of Black and white boys as young as 5 years old when associated with toy guns are enough for white adults to perceive Black boys, not White boys as threats.
  - Todd, Thiem, & Neel, 2016
- Early pubertal onset among Black youth may clash with racial threat to place children at greater risk of racial discrimination. Early maturing Black youth could be at a major disadvantage as they interact with a society that has negative images of adult-looking Black youth.
  - Ge et al., 2002; Spencer et al., 1998; Stevenson, et al., 2002; Swanson and Spencer, 2007



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## Perceptions

- Girls of Color (GOC) are more likely to be suspended, arrested from school compared to white counterparts. A key factor in this findings were how teachers perceived them as adult-like and more knowledgeable about sex.
- These perceptions were associated with educators' beliefs that the GOC needing less protection, nurturance, support, and comfort. These experiences for GOC affected long-term schooling outcomes
  - Epstein, Blake & Gonzalez, 2018



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## Perceptions

- An examination between Caucasian with Asian students in a parentification inventory
  - Was it parent-focused, sibling focused, and perceived-benefit parentification?
- Asian students disclosed that, within their culture, there was a strong tendency to emphasize "assisting" behaviors and togetherness to produce a tight kinship structure.
- Caucasian students perceived adultification as a beneficial experience for them when compared with their Asian counterparts.



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## Inverse experiences

- Behaviors associated with parentification/adultification with white and Asian youth could insulate/protect abuse; deter suspicion of abuse
  - Associated with positive traits/can be praised
- Behaviors associated with parentification/adultification with Black and brown youth could contribute to victim blaming and/or a lack of empathy



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## Presentation of parentified/adultified youth

- Abuse experiences are minimized
  - Adult-like/mature/obedient
  - "Doing fine" because they are "managing the household"
  - Treated older than they are
  - Developmental level is ignored
- Accommodation strategies are exaggerated
  - Assertive
  - Reject feelings of infantilization
  - "Difficult"
  - Disbelieved/blamed
  - Not the "perfect victim"
  - "Fast," "loose," "risky," "reckless"
  - Take on adult roles before they are ready



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## Parentification and Adultification Bias in Our Work

- What traits do our teams associate with adultified and parentified teens?
- How do our teams respond to "difficult" behaviors?
  - How does this affect cases?
- Which alleged victims do we lack empathy for?
  - Why?
- When do we find our team playing the role of the defense attorney?
  - Attacking child's credibility
- How do these myths and stereotypes influence how professionals and community members see victim/survivors?



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## Disproportionate focus on

- Problematic behaviors
- Everything the youth did "wrong"
  - Playing the defense attorney
- Focus on credibility concerns without acknowledging consistency with dynamics of abuse
- Unwillingness to modify interview process
- Parentification behaviors are associated with resiliency behaviors rather than as consistent with abuse



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## Sammy's case

- 14 y/o
- Highly isolated
- CSA/CSEC by father and uncle
- Accidentally burnt down an abandoned building
- Sent to a juvenile detention center where she first discloses
- Why will some team/community members be skeptical of how, when and why Sammy disclosed?
- What about how, when and why Sammy disclosed could show consistency with abuse?



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## Mercedes' case

- 17 y/o transgender girl
- Self-produced images
- Tentative disclosure in the interview about CSEC
- Discloses physical abuse and rejection from family of origin due to gender identity
- Why will some team/community members be skeptical of Mercedes lack of disclosure about CSEC?
- What about how, when and why Mercedes disclosed could show consistency with abuse?



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## Ayla's case

- 13 y/o indigenous girl living with grandma on a reservation
- Placed with grandma after experiences of drug endangerment and abuse by biological mom
- Describes getting children ready for school, preparing meals, bathing and toileting younger children
- "Befriended" by older male
- Grandma's trailer is overtaken
  - Used to sell drugs
  - Grooming for CSEC
  - CSEC occurring in household, not yet with Ayla
- Why will some team/community members be skeptical about Ayla's disclosure?



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## Suggestions for practice

- Forge the balance between a non-infantilizing interview that one that respects the lived experience of the youth
  - Not just an "adult interview"
  - Not a "child-like" interview
  - Expanded interview
- Honesty
- Offering choices
- Advocacy
- Independence
- Harm reduction



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## Suggestions for practice

- Different types of advocacy
- Understand attributes of parentification and adultification and understand their relationships to abuse
  - Not just "resiliency"
- Credibility concerns
  - Address in interview
  - Advocacy in court process
  - Approach with curiosity



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## Citations

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