



Child Sexual Abuse In British South Asian Communities: Understanding The Barrier Of Shame And Honour

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Making Research Count
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Disclaimer

This is an evidence-based presentation. Where I do share my views, these are my own and they do not represent the views of the Centre for Child Protection or the University of Kent where I am employed.



If we hear anything today which causes us to feel discomfort ,let's reflect on why this is and remember that effective action often involves getting comfortable with the discomfort.



I want today to be a safe space for you to share and challenge perspectives.

Trigger Warning

This presentation includes some distressing
content.

Please take care of yourself—feel free to step out,
pause, or seek support if needed. You can contact
me after the session if you wish:

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Support organisations

Courtesy of CSA
Centre of Expertise



The Survivors Trust - Helpline: 08088 010 818

Find help, support and advice in your area:

<https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>



Rape Crisis helpline 0808 500 2222 (24 hours)

www.rapecrisis.org.uk



National Association for People Abused in Childhood 0808 801 0331

<https://napac.org.uk/>

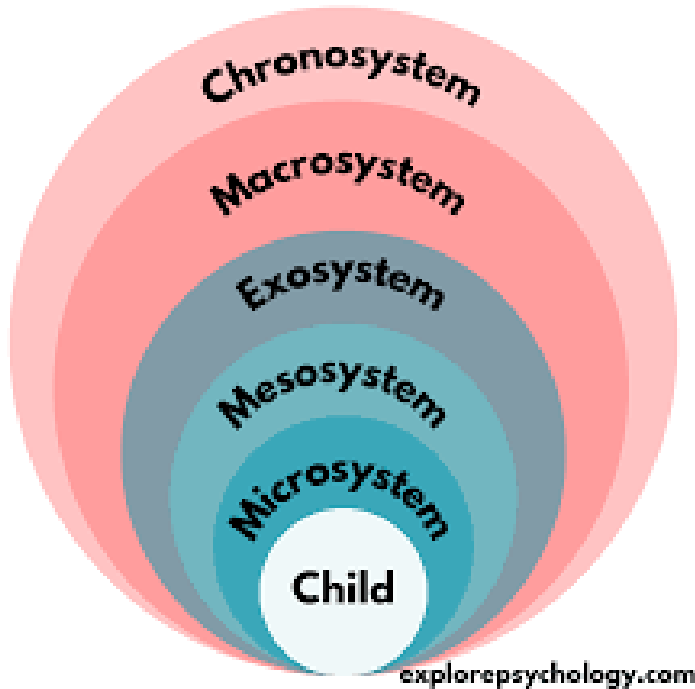


SurvivorsUK

Online help for male survivors of sexual abuse and rape.

<https://www.survivorsuk.org/>

Why am I talking to you today?



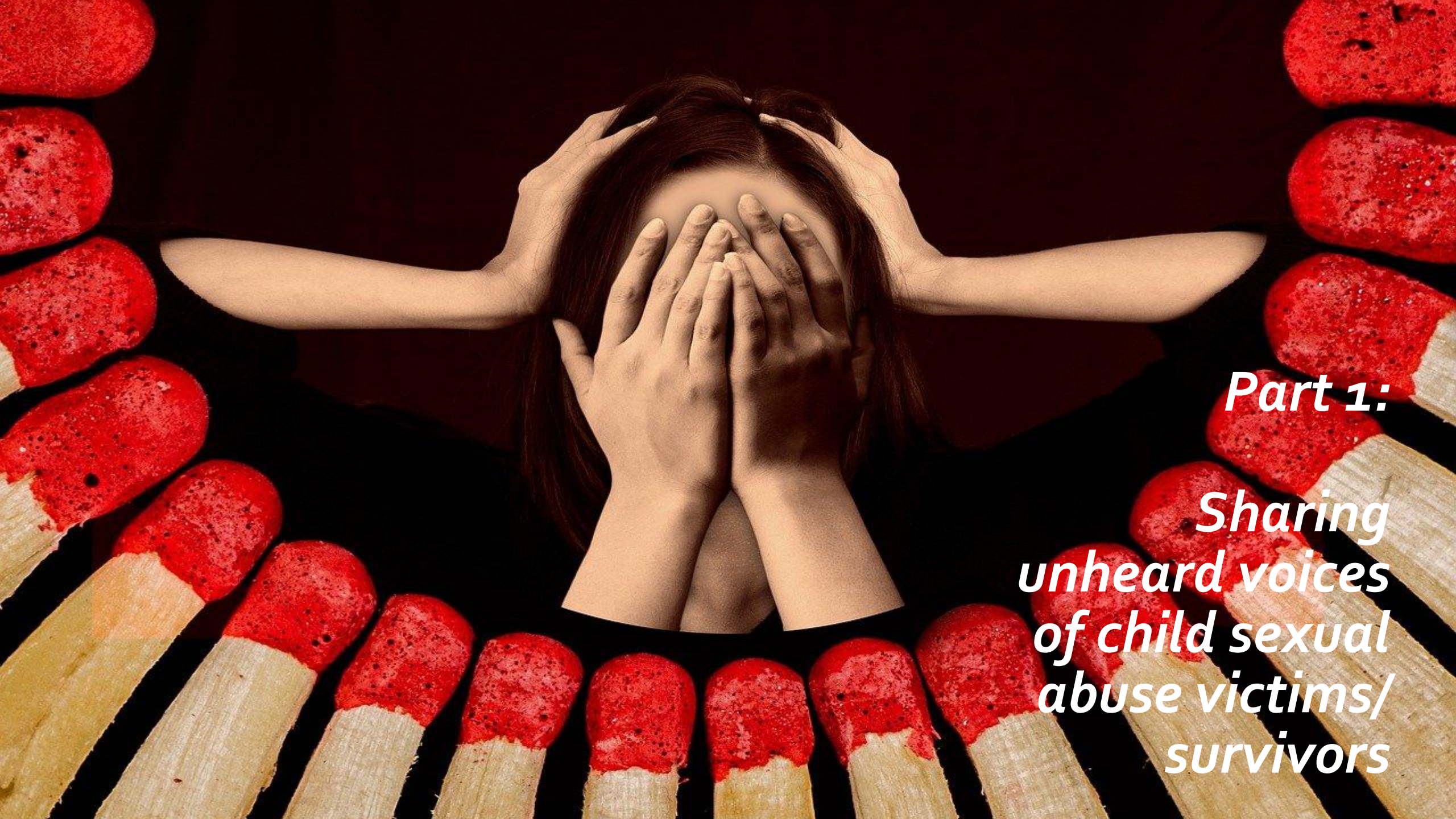
**Sharing
unheard
voices of child
sexual abuse
victims/
survivors**



**Examining racial
and ethnic
disparities and
disproportionalities
in child
safeguarding and
protection**



**Helping to
change how
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action**

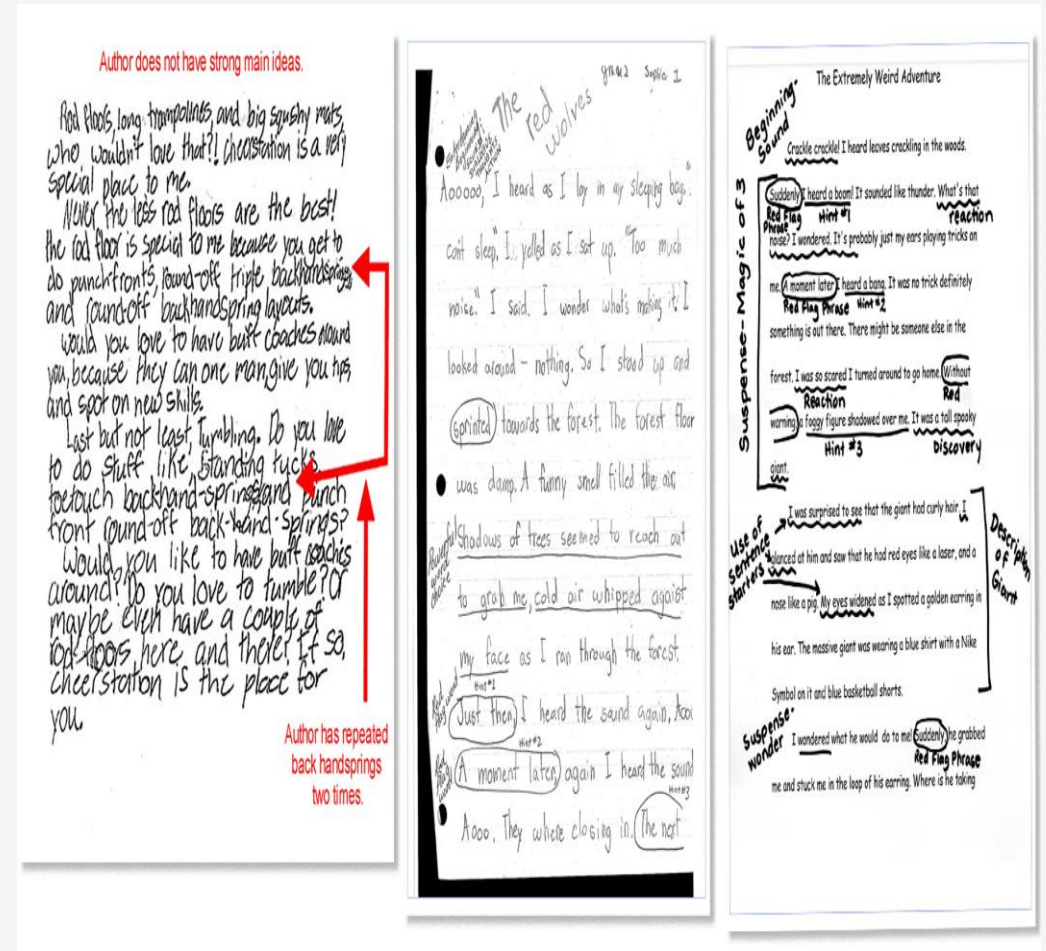


Part 1:

***Sharing
unheard voices
of child sexual
abuse victims/
survivors***

Research Methodology

- 15 British South Asian female victims/survivors of CSA: Bangladeshi (2), Indian (8) and Pakistani (5)
- Aged 21-61, from the North, Midlands and South of England
- Recruitment through gatekeeping organisations and social media
- Three years of field work, including during Covid-19
- Semi-structured interviews within a feminist intersectional and narrative research design: listening to the women **telling their unique stories**
- Narrative analysis of data: what is shared; how it is shared; and why they are telling their story; avoids categorisation of experiences
- My positionality as a South Asian woman and child protection researcher
- Research limitations: absence of women unable to engage via social media channels/support organisations; researcher positionality; single research method



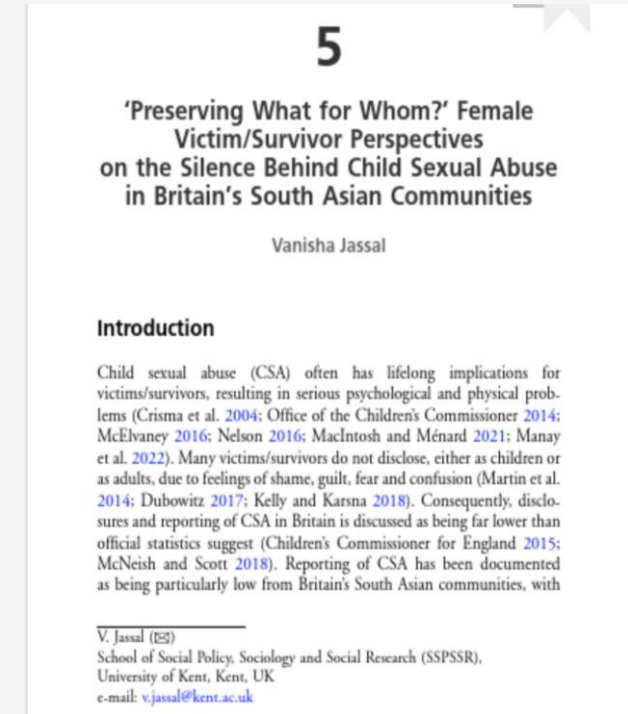
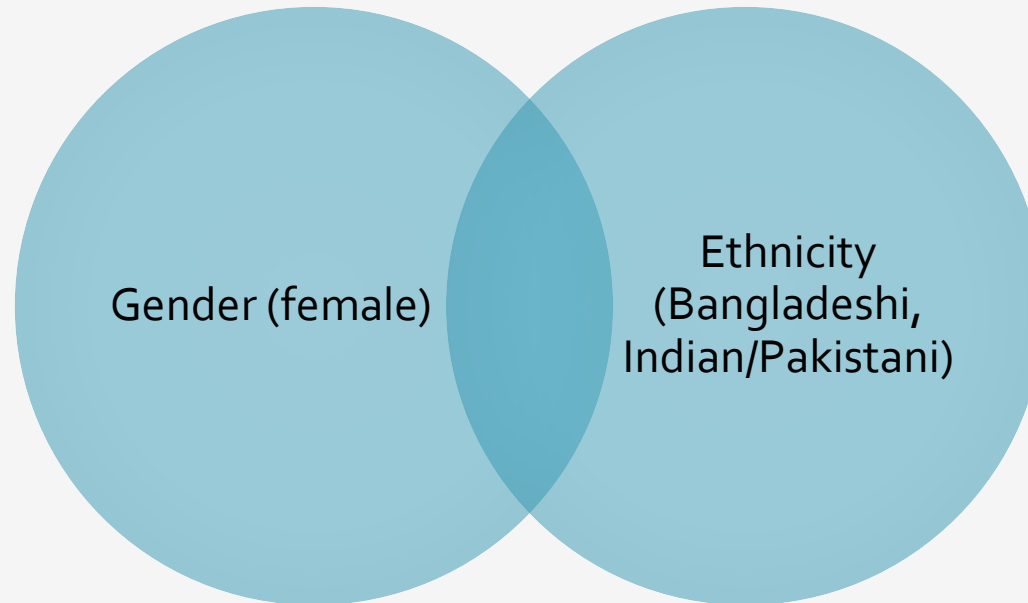
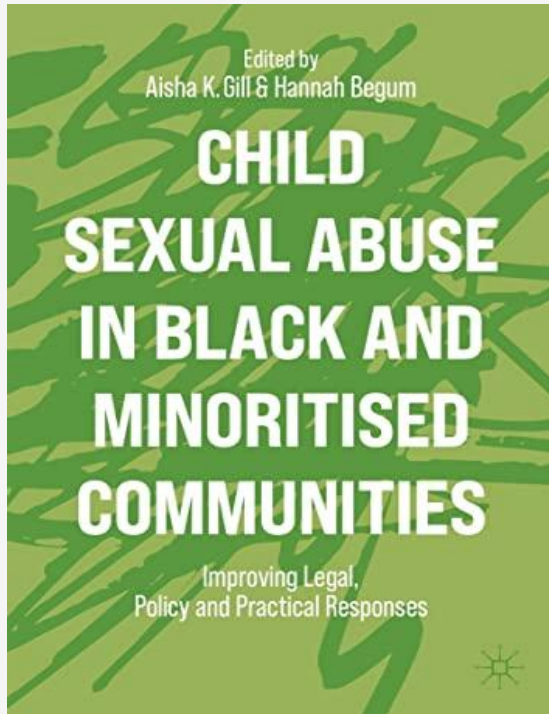
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*British South
Asian Women's
Experience of
Child Sexual
Abuse: An
Intersectional
Feminist
Narrative
Inquiry*

PhD Research questions

- What **meaning** do British South Asian female victims/survivors of CSA give to 'shame and honour' in the context of their abuse?
- What do the women's narratives demonstrate about their **ethnic, racial, personal, social and cultural identities**, and what broader implications do these identities have for UK CSA practice and policy?
- How does the application of an **intersectional feminist theoretical framework** provide a deeper understanding of their experiences of CSA?

Contextual reading



(Jassal, 2022).

*"A lot of people like me...**they don't have their voices heard,** especially in the Asian community. A lot of it is very hidden. Older family members will tell you, 'Don't tell people', because of the whole stigma around honour, shame and so on. A lot of BME children are at risk and **I don't think anyone realises how much at risk they are.** As you're growing up, your parents teach you about shame and honour. It's a very big thing in the Asian community'.*

(Laila)

(Jassal, 2025; p.13)

Child sexual abuse statistics



Estimate 1 in 10 children are sexually abused by the age of 16 in England and Wales

Fewer than one in 10 adults who were sexually abused in childhood had told someone in an official position when it happened

Children are disproportionately more likely to be victims of sexual offences than adults – they make up 40% of victims but only 20% of the population

Each year, at least 500,000 children in England and Wales are estimated to experience child sexual abuse

Almost half of all offences reported to the police in England and Wales in 2021/22 took place in the family environment (abuse was by parents, siblings, grandparents or anyone considered 'one of the family')

In 2022/23, almost 99% of individuals convicted of child sexual abuse were men (both men and women can and do sexually abuse children)

Adults who described being sexually abused in childhood: one-third said they were first abused before the age of nine, another third said the abuse started between ages nine and 12 and the remaining third said it started between the ages of 13 and 15

Child sexual abuse occurs across all ethnicities, but victims and survivors from minority ethnic backgrounds often face additional barriers in telling anyone and in accessing and receiving support

CSA in British South Asian communities

- *Cultural barriers* often cited as the reason for low referrals, predominantly *shame/sharam* and *honour/izzat*

(Cowburn et al. 2005; Gilligan and Akhtar 2006; Gohir 2013; House of Commons Home Affairs Committee Report 2013; Martin et al. 2014; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2015; Fox 2016; Gill and Harrison 2019; Rodger et al. 2020)

- Shame and honour has been reported as factors in the low rates of disclosure and reporting of sexual, domestic and honour-based abuse and violence perpetrated by males against females across South Asian communities

(Thiara and Gill 2010; Gill and Brah 2014; Aplin 2017; Harrison and Gill 2017; Idriss 2017; Mansoor 2017)

- A greater consideration of culture is needed when developing an understanding of and responding to CSA in South Asian communities

(Gilligan and Akhtar 2006; Gill and Harrison 2019; Rodger et al. 2020; Jay et al. 2022; Jassal 2022; Ali et al. 2021)

CSA in British South Asian communities

- Paucity of research documenting the experiences of British South Asian communities and evidence of less interventionist and effective approaches

(Moghal et al. 1995; Begum 2018; Kaiser et al. 2021; Jassal 2022)

- CSA services appeared to be less available/accessible to minoritised children and children from minoritised communities are known to receive a poorer quality of CSA services than their peers

(Allnock et al., 2012; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2015)

- A higher proportion of Truth project participants (CSA victims/participants as part of the Independent Inquiry into CSA) of Asian ethnicity (73%) did not disclose at time of abuse, compared to White (66%), Black (68%) or Mixed ethnicities (65%).

(Jay et al., 2022)

Laila

“Finally, somebody’s actually doing some research into it [South Asian CSA] because it’s something that needs to be done”.



Grand Narratives of Shame and Honour

The silence around sex, sexual relations and sexual behaviours

Shame and honour intertwined with concerns about marital prospects

Community-wide perspectives as influencing family life

Self-reflections on shame, honour and gender inequality

Izzat (Honour)



Satinder

“I think...some of the factors that contributed to my vulnerability were ...you know, just a complete lack of sexual education, a complete lack you know. Such a repression around any form of kind of sex or intimacy related conversations”.

Zara

“Then no one’s gonna want one to marry the girl because she’s...obviously she’s dirty now or whatever. So it’s like the girl suffers from the perpetrator, but then she suffers from the community as well, because nobody’s gonna want to marry her, it’s just...it’s suffering for the girl throughout. The perpetrator will once again get away with it. He can get married, he’ll have children, you know. Nobody’s gonna know he’s not a virgin”.

Priya

“I think shame could actually be the biggest thing that’s stopping anyone complaining or going to the relevant authorities, and I think it's also fear from the backlash, from the community... (not wanting) dishonour or any of that, you know”.

Sonam

“Having been brought up in that environment of having always to cover, the girls would always have to cover up. No one ever said to my brother, don’t wear shorts or don’t walk around shirtless in front of girls that are not your siblings ...so I was constantly kind of reminded that if anything does happen between me and a man, it’s instigated by me because I didn’t do the right things”.

Zara

“Izzat (honour) is something the girl has to protect. The girl is the family’s izzat. But if somebody came and... raped me... that would be the family’s izzat gone. Not just my izzat. So, it's my job to protect this izzat. And if somebody takes it away from me, it's my fault, and I will have to pay for it. So, it's always on the woman. We have to hold it and it's such a heavy thing to hold for all our life... and then we have to pass it onto our daughter, right? You know, it's just... it's not fair. Where does the man come into it”?

Grand Narratives of Strength and Resilience

Secrecy to protect others

Seeking to make change for
others

Living amongst, yet
disconnected from shame and
honour



Parminder

“I don’t want her (mum) to be upset because of me, because of me (very quietly). I don’t want to give her, even if she, ...even if she supported me, and said to me ‘actually it wasn’t your fault’, I still wouldn’t...because I know what it’s like to live with this...and... I wouldn’t want her to feel that. I wouldn’t want her to feel... ‘I left her by herself to sort it out herself and just ride it through’. Yeah, I just couldn’t do it to her’.

Laila

“I feel like our voices are often silenced as South Asian women. And so when I saw you advertising your research, I thought, I want to get involved and I want my voice out there... and I thought you know, maybe my voice can help impact and help other survivors”.

Zara

“You know, he's followed me all my life. Every time I move houses, he moves houses, to a couple of streets away from me, even now he lives a couple of streets away from me. And that's one thing I know, he's promised me, no matter where I go in the world he's going to follow me. And I've learned to deal with that”.

*Grand
Narrative
of Disclosure*



Kiran

“It's been three years since I've come out and I'm shocked at the way my experience has been interpreted... the lack of support I've had and how they don't wanna talk about it, and they just want to bury it under the carpet, and pretend it hasn't happened. It didn't make me feel any better or any good. I regretted coming out with it in fact. It was a big mistake I made”.

Sofia

“Yeah, it’s weird cos I kind of regret it. I regret disclosing, like I really do. I think I was in a better place when, like I said, I had that hope that you know when I do eventually disclose, I would get that support from my family and like extended family and I didn’t, and now everyone knows about it”.

Priya

“[I’ve] lost the richness of the culture that I could have had ...my children have lost the richness of that culture they could have had. And for me....I don't see it [the community] in a positive light anymore...I really would have liked to have had support from my community, so that I could be integrated back into it....Because whilst my life is very anglicised, I’m still an Indian. I’ve lost all of that over the years”.

‘Often children internalise these beliefs and values [about shame and honour] at a young age and they can therefore be deeply held’.

(Laird and Tedam, 2019; p.126).

Miriam

*“When I talk about shame, when I talk about honour, when I talk about modesty, to them [White people], they're just words. To me, I live and breathe and eat it. They are the air that I breathe. They'll say ‘Miriam, shame is not that important. Put shame in its place’.
However, it's like saying Miriam, stop breathing”.*

Take-away messages

'Shame and honour' are cultural norms which are deeply integrated into the identities of many South Asian children and young people (and adult survivors); their influence and impact in the context of abuse requires practitioners to make concerted efforts to understand and explore how they impact lived experiences

The **meaning of family and community** for South Asian children and young people can be heavily weighted; assessment and intervention must consider the weight of this, and interventions designed accordingly

We must avoid taking the **silence and invisibility of South Asian children** to inadvertently lead to no/limited investigation or inaction; this is a failure to protect and safeguard children and young people

Positive developments



The React Network

A network for practitioners and academics of African, Asian and Caribbean Heritage who are focused on addressing child sexual abuse.



What is the React Network?


The React Network brings together practitioners and academics of African, Asian and Caribbean Heritage who are interested in or focused on addressing child sexual abuse of people from these communities in England and Wales.

In 2024, our report [Child sexual abuse of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage children: a knowledge review](#) identified a number of significant barriers to effective support for children and adult survivors of child sexual abuse. Despite these challenges, numerous organisations are actively providing innovative and impactful support within this complex landscape.

Leave site →



Useful organisations

- Apna Haq: [Apna Haq - | Supporting Black and minoritised women in Rotherham](#)
 - Imkaan: [Imkaan](#)
 - Karma Nirvana: [Karma Nirvana](#)
 - Panahghar: [Panahghar – Every person has the right to live a life free from violence](#)
 - Quetzal: [Break the Silence - Quetzal](#)
 - Southall Black Sisters: [Home - Southall Black Sisters](#)
- 



Part 2:

Examining racial and ethnic disparities and disproportionalities in child safeguarding and protection

A wide and concerning evidence base

Over-representation of children from African/Mixed heritage backgrounds and under-representation of Asian backgrounds in the child protection system (Owen and Statham, 2009; Bywaters et al., 2017; Cénat et al., 2021; Ahmed et al., 2022).

Black children who ethnically identify as Caribbean were more likely to be involved with child welfare than those from other ethnic groups including other Black ethnic groups (Bywaters et al. 2017).

Discriminatory decision-making in child protection systems leading to disproportionate numbers subject to investigation and intervention (Laird and Williams, 2023)

Children from Asian, Black, and Any Other ethnic groups tended to have **less time between a referral and entering care** (1 month or less on average) than White or Mixed ethnicity children (3 months on average) (Ahmed et al., 2022)

Low rates of child sexual abuse referrals from the South Asian communities explained solely through the lens of cultural barriers (Jassal, 2022)

Independent Inquiry into CSA found that **organisations did not recognise or support the cultural and religious needs of victims** (Jay et al. 2022)

There is a lack of professional curiosity in relation to the prominence of race in children's lives; **cultural, racial, and religious experiences are frequently misunderstood** (Bernard and Harris, 2019)

“It’s Silent”: Race, racism and safeguarding children

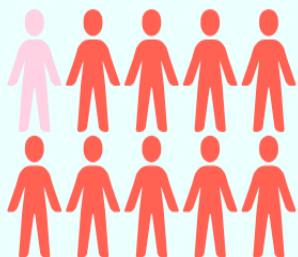
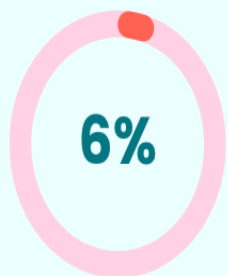
Panel Briefing 4

March 2025

Practitioners’ understanding of Black, Asian and Mixed Heritage children’s lived experiences was incomplete. Consequently, they held poor understanding of children’s vulnerabilities and risks.

The lack of robust consideration of intersectionality in reviews is concerning. Understanding intersectionality can provide a powerful framework and tool to support practitioners to better comprehend the lived experiences of children and families

Racial disproportionalities affecting children



Asian children are less likely to be referred to mental health support, making up 6% of referrals in 2023/24, but representing 12% of the population (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

Black children make up 6% of the population but account for 10% of arrests (Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).

There is a need for more research relating to East Asian, Southeast Asian and African heritage children who have been sexually abused.

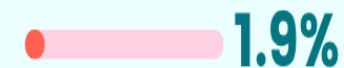
(Dhaliwal, 2024).

Police are more than six times more likely to strip-search black children.

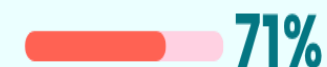
(Runnymede Trust, 2024).



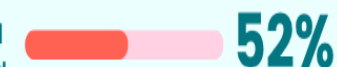
The rate at which Chinese children accessed secondary NHS mental health services (specialist care beyond GP-level, including CAMHS and similar) in England (Department of Health, 2024).



A recent poll of nearly 1,000 UK social workers found that almost $\frac{3}{4}$ believe that racial bias within social work "affects child protection practice a lot" (Community Care, April 2025).



A poll of 1,000 six to 15-year-olds found that more than half of 13-year-olds had heard someone be racist at school (Gayle, 2020).



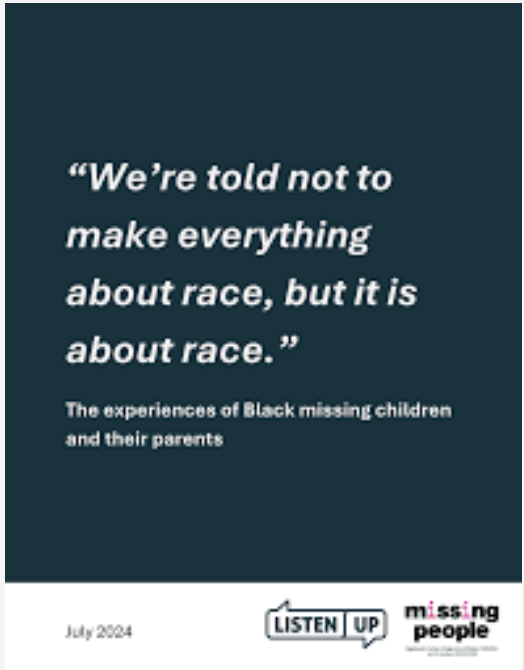
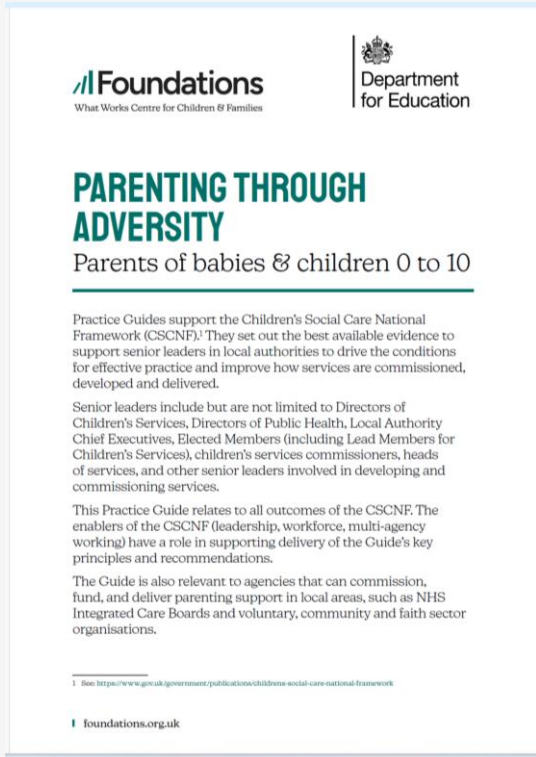
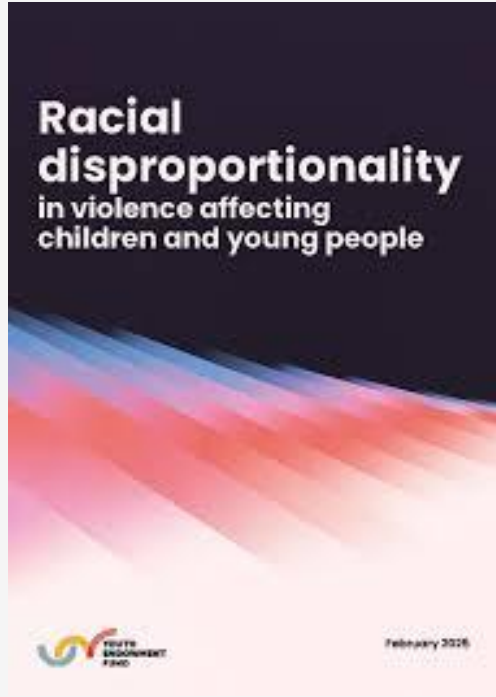
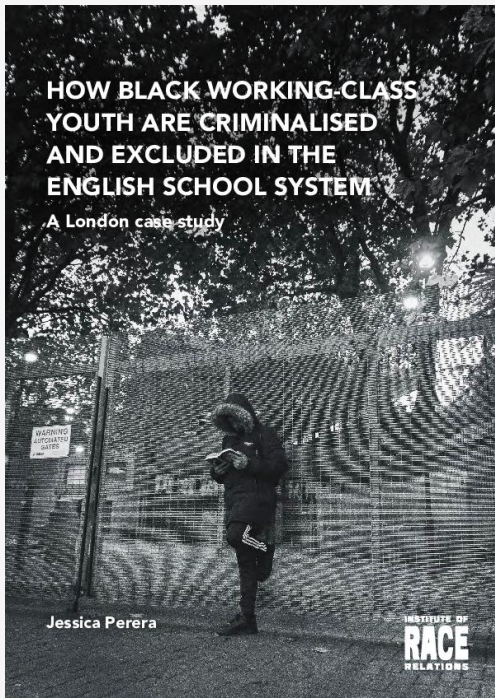
There is an under-representation of South Asian children in child sexual abuse referrals.

(Scott, 2023; Jassal, 2025).

Black children in foster care receive fewer routine/preventive check-ups yet more treatment for chronic conditions.

(Radney et al., 2024).





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Sara Sharif

'Learning identifies the need for leaders across all partner agencies to embed a culture which expects practitioners to always consider children's identity and the impact of race and culture on the family and safeguarding practice'

(Surrey Safeguarding Children Partnership, 2025; p.27).

- Sara was a child of mixed heritage, a Polish national mother and Pakistani national father
- Failure to consider Sara's intersecting identities and how these may have increased her vulnerability: race, ethnicity, religion, class
- **Professionals seeing bruises on Sara, and hearing about physical abuse in the home from the children, but eventually always led to no further action – why?**
- **Lack of engagement with Sara's birth mum – why?**
- Identified as a young carer; form not returned by step-mum; not followed up by agencies – **why?**
- No evidence that father's domestic abuse DA had ceased or that he had completed the DA perpetrator programme – **why?**
- Step-mum's vulnerabilities not pieced together – **why?**
possible historic honour-based abuse; mental health history; caring for 6 children in a two-bedroom flat
- Interim care order changed to supervision order – **why?**
- Occupational therapist does not question why Sara was the only child in the family wearing the hijab – **why?**

'Now more than ever, as our nation increases its cultural, racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, establishing culturally inclusive professional caring becomes even more urgent and is considered an essential component of quality of care in professional practice'.

Ortega et al. (2025).



Part 3:

***Helping to
change how we
think, work and
take action***



*From Mastery to Accountability: Cultural Humility
as an Alternative to Cultural Competence*

(Fisher-Borne et al., 2015)

“Both cultural competence and cultural humility are similar in their aim to address existing disparities in how care is delivered but differ greatly in their approach”

Cultural competence emphasizes knowledge acquisition and skill mastery.

Cultural humility emphasizes accountability, critical self-reflection, and challenging systemic inequalities.

The goal shifts from “knowing the other” to “knowing oneself in relation to others.”

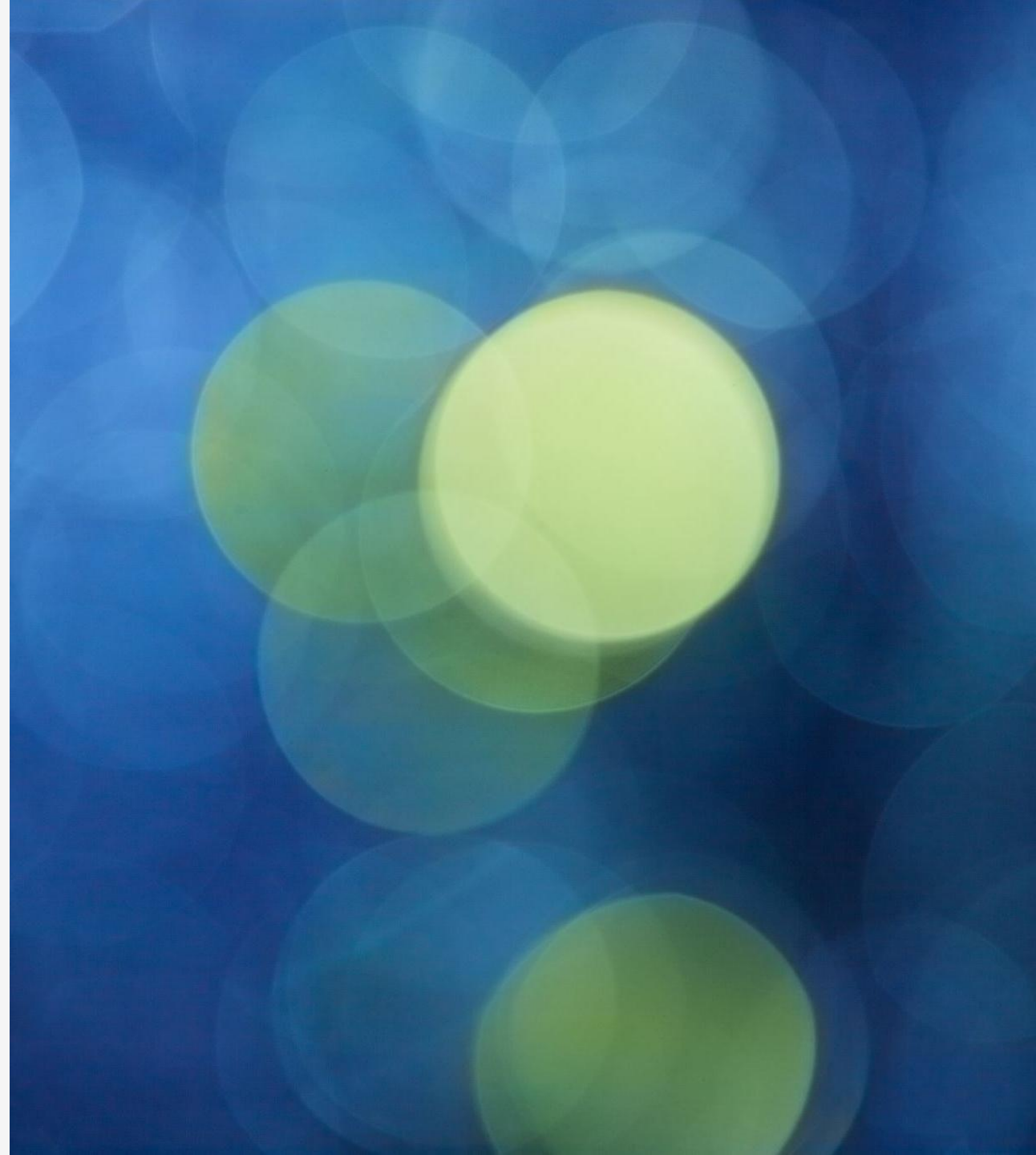



Table 1. Comparison of Cultural Competence and Cultural Humility


Dimension	Cultural Competence	Cultural Humility
Perspective on Culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges layers of cultural identity • Challenges stereotypes • Views difference in the context of systemic discrimination 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges layers of cultural identity • Recognizes working with cultural difference as a lifelong, ongoing process • Emphasizes understanding ourselves as well as others
Underlying Assumptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes the problem is a lack of knowledge, awareness, and skills to work across lines of difference • Focuses on developing individual and organizational knowledge, values, and skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assumes that to understand clients, we must also understand our communities, colleagues, and ourselves • Requires humility and recognition of power imbalances in client-provider relationships and society
Core Components	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge • Skills • Behaviours 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging power imbalances • Institutional accountability • Ongoing critical self-reflection
Key Stakeholders	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioner (primarily) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practitioner • Client • Community • Institution/Organization
Common Critiques	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overemphasis on knowledge acquisition • Lacks an inherent social justice focus • Can become a "cookbook" or checklist approach • Risks stereotyping "the other" • Suggests an endpoint 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited empirical evidence • Limited conceptual framework development

The responsibility of practitioners and organisations

Are we curious enough about race, ethnicity and culture in safeguarding, and read any relevant research? Do we bring this learning into our teams and into our decision-making?



How do we explore the lived experiences of racially minoritised children and young people? Do we know how race and ethnicity, and other intersections, impact them? Do we know enough about racial trauma ?

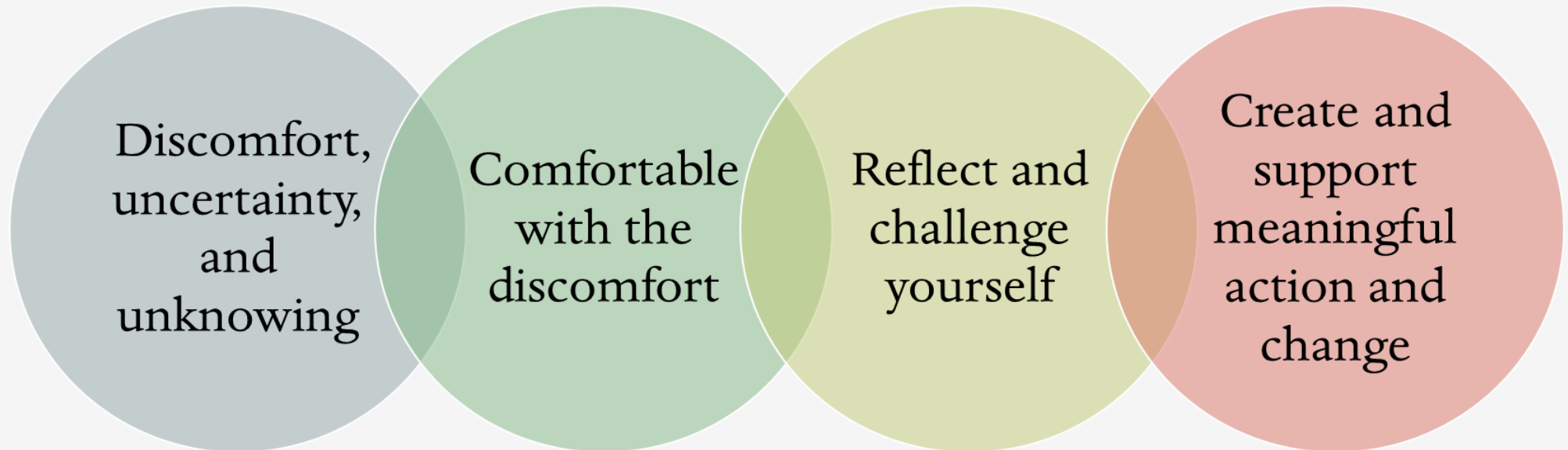


Are we sufficiently aware of local groups and organisations who are strongly positioned to support our work with racially minoritised communities?



As leaders, are we naming these issues and taking ownership and responsibility to recognise and address race, ethnicity and culture in safeguarding practice? e.g. workforce culture, hiring practices, policies, recording ethnicity data.

Courageous conversations



Created by Dr Vanisha Jassal and Isobel Drew

Let's start reframing the discourses e.g....

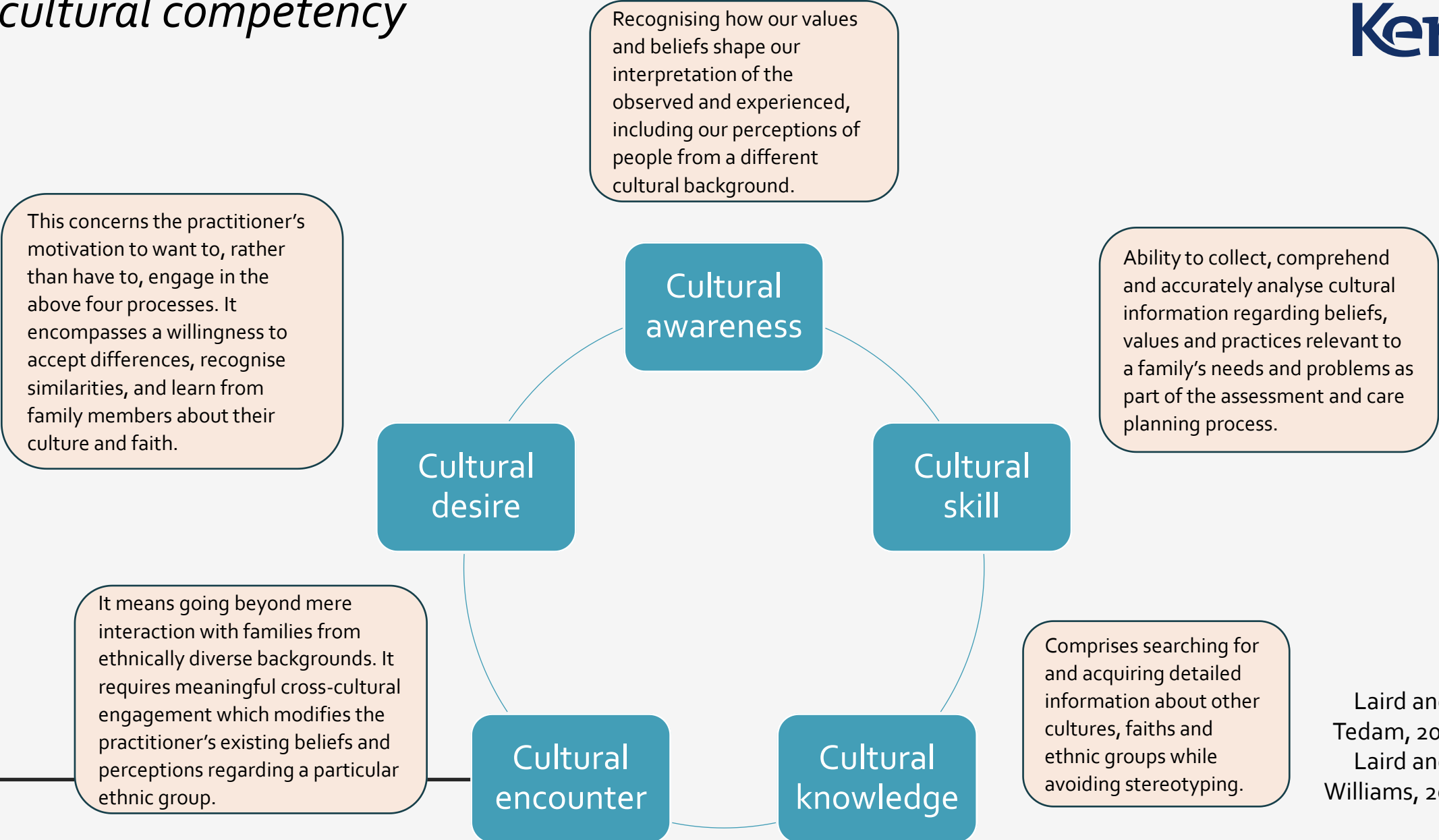
Traditional Frame

- "At-risk youth"
- "Lack of engagement"
- "Cultural barriers"
- "Lack of reporting"
- "Lack of integration"

Disruptive Frame

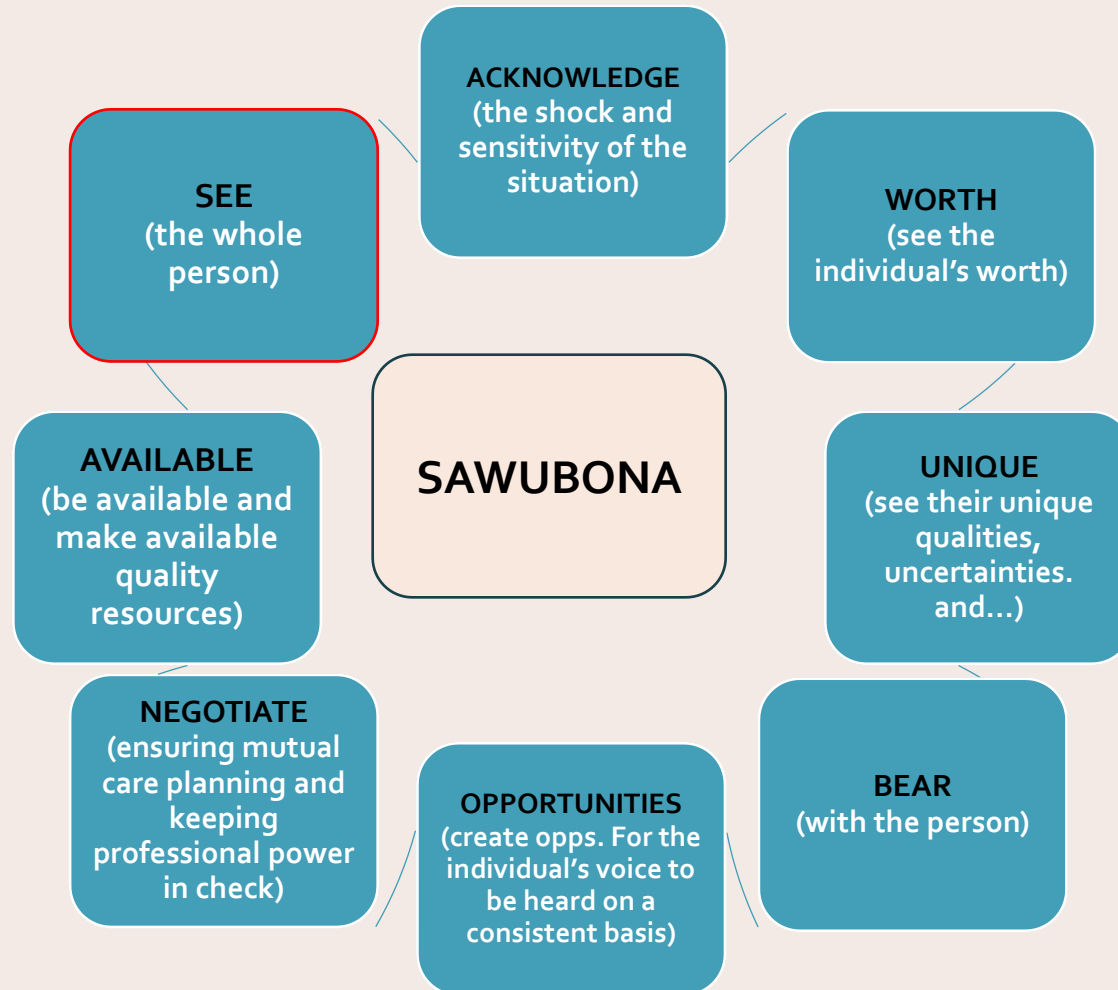
- "System-impacted youth"*
- "Institutional exclusion"*
- "Lack of cultural humility"*
- "Institutional apathy"*
- "Develop understanding of racial trauma"*

The ASKED model of cultural competency



Laird and Tedam, 2019; Laird and Williams, 2023)

The SAWUBONA Model



- Sawubona: ancient Zulu greeting: *I see you; you are important to me, and I value you.*
- An Afro-centric culturally sensitive original model built on indigenous knowledge and cultural values, supporting social workers to support Black mothers' experiences when children are removed from their care
- Challenges Eurocentric social work assumptions and sees the person in the context of their lived experiences
- Centralises the person within their socio-cultural context and recognises the multi-faceted layers of oppression

Key resources and readings

- CSA Centre of Expertise Resources:
[Practice resources | CSA Centre](#)
- Dhaliwal, S. (2024). *Child sexual abuse of African, Asian and Caribbean heritage children: A knowledge review*. Barkingside: Centre of Expertise on Child Sexual Abuse. Available at: <https://www.csacentre.org.uk/app/uploads/2024/07/Child-sexual-abuse-of-African-Asian-and-Caribbean-heritage-children-A-knowledge-review.pdf> [Accessed 23 August 2024].
- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (2025) "*It's Silent*": *Race, racism and safeguarding children*. London: Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67cboag9d5993d41513a45c5b/Race_Racism_Safeguarding_March_2025.pdf (Accessed: 24 November 2025)
- Government statistics on children in need and child protection, including child sexual abuse and breakdown by ethnicity:
[Statistics: children in need and child protection - GOV.UK](#)

Continue the conversation....

- If you are supporting racially minoritised children, young people or adults who have experienced child sexual abuse, you can join the REACT Network at the CSA Centre of Expertise: [The React Network | CSA Centre](#)
- Join the Association of Child Protection Professionals (AoCPP) Special Interest Group 'Culture in Child Protection': email hello@aocpp.org.uk
- Study online with the Centre for Child Protection, University of Kent: email ccp@kent.ac.uk
- Email me: v.Jassal@kent.ac.uk
- Follow me on X and LinkedIn: @vanishajassal

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