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Aversive racism and child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families

Dr Dan Allen, Deputy Head of Department: Social Care and Social Work, Manchester Metropolitan University.

Allison Hulmes, National Director: British Association of Social Workers.

Abstract

Reiterating the urgent need for the development of anti-racist practice with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families, this discussion paper develops the conclusions presented by Allen and Riding (2018) in the *Fragility of Professional Competence* report. Viewing their findings through the lens of aversive racism, we aim to shed some light on a rarely seen paradox in child protection. A paradox that exists when child protection practitioners who, by nature of their professional status, publicly sympathise with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities as victims of injustice, support the principle of equality, and regard themselves as non-prejudiced, but simultaneously possess negative feelings, views, and beliefs about them. Emphasising the opportunity for children's guardians, family court advisers, and independent social workers to identify racism and diversify power systems, we introduce three characteristics that represent important initial steps to address the intersecting oppressions that many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families face. Concentrating on the opportunity for change, we end the discussion with a brief description of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association; a group that aims to challenge racism and enable child protection professionals to stand with children and families at grassroots, and promote their right to live self-determined lives without fear, discrimination, or retaliation.

Introduction

In 2018, Allen and Riding presented a preliminary analysis of the scale and nature of child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children in England. Summarising extensive fieldwork research, that included focus group interviews with 155 child protection professionals, they explained that explicit and implicit discrimination was a contributing factor to the institutional racism experienced by Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities.

Drawing on the data to show specific examples of racism, Allen and Riding located the findings and the central theme of *a fragility in professional competence* within the broader institution of child protection practice. What they did not do, in equal measure, was advance a theoretical explanation of the racism that they found. For this reason, we believe that the main conclusion, that institutional racism exists within a system grounded in law, equality, child, and family rights, justice, and fairness, requires further substantiation.

The purpose of this discussion is to provide a theoretical explanation of the observations that Allen and Riding (2018) advanced. Moving away from the notions of automatic prejudice and unconscious bias, both of which were explored by Allen in this journal in 2016, we will introduce the concept of aversive racism to explain how oppressive child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities is being cultivated by a blame culture that pervades public opinion and public work.

As qualified social workers, we are acutely aware of the expectations that are placed on child protection professionals and the associated complexity of risk prevention, risk reduction, and risk management. We know through experience that child protection professionals are duty bound to make difficult decisions. We also recognise that the decision to act or not can be the hardest one to make. For this reason, once we have highlighted the way in which child protection with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities can be informed by bias, prejudice, and discrimination, we conclude with a discussion of implications of aversive racism and present a strategy for combating the same.

A note on terminology

Throughout this paper, our reference to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is intended as a representation of a much broader group of communities that include, Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Scottish Travellers and Gypsies, Welsh Travellers, New Travellers, Roma, Boatpeople, Showmen and Circus People. It is therefore important to note that people who are frequently referred to as 'Gypsy', 'Roma' or 'Traveller' actually constitute a rich and diverse group of communities who each go under different names, and often distinguish themselves carefully from one another. Although a fuller exploration of these differences might be useful, any additional detail is beyond the scope of this paper. For readers new to this debate, the book *'Social Work with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children'* (Allen and

Adams, 2013) is recommended as an accessible foundation from which to better understand the diversity that exists within a much broader context.

Institutional racism toward the conceptual ‘Gypsy’

The *Fragility of Professional Competence* report (Allen and Riding, 2018) found specific examples of how the child protection system in England can fail to provide an appropriate and professional service to Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities. Summarising the analysis of ten focus group discussions facilitated with 155 child protection professionals, the authors began to shed some light on the presence and effect of institutional racism in process, attitude, and behaviour. Taken together, they explained that child protection practice was characterised by discrimination, prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness, and racist stereotyping.

The research explained how, for some child protection professionals, these key characteristics could lead to a perception of an increased risk of harm based upon a belief that the child and family would be transient (and therefore represent a flight risk), noncompliant, hostile and aggressive. Some assumed that the family would be involved in criminal activity and others assumed that the child would be experiencing poor living conditions, the effects of poverty and unemployment and self-imposed isolation, school absenteeism and disparate outcomes across all known contemporary health, education, and social care measures.

Examining the impact of racist stereotypes on child protection practice, Allen and Riding explained that a focus on subjective meanings and a lack of understanding, professional curiosity, humility, and reflection could lead to poor community engagement, problematic and punitive practices, and limited opportunities for positive collaboration. Consequently, they began to show why child protection involvement creates intergroup mistrust, reduces positive affect, and leads to fewer attempts at relationship building. Where strict timescales applied to determine the duration of an assessment, the authors also found that the limited opportunity for positive collaboration had a significant and detrimental impact on some decisions, actions or inactions, and outcomes.

Although Allen and Riding sought to illuminate the scale and nature of child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma children and families in England, we remain concerned that their

findings could be minimised. In addition to strict legal and regulatory governance frameworks, there exist robust codes of conduct that serve to promote and maintain the professional integrity of child protection professionals. There are also well-established checks and balances designed to protect the rights of children, families, and communities. For this reason, we have heard it said that the presence of multiagency teams, independent reviewing functions, casework management models, supervision frameworks, legal scrutiny, children's guardians, family court advisers, and independent social workers, means that the racism Allen and Riding discovered should only be associated with individual and isolated cases of poor practice. In other words, their findings cannot be generalised, and therefore not associated with a root and branch failure of the entire child protection system.

Whilst we acknowledge the point that individual and isolated examples of poor practice remain a serious concern, we are not convinced that individual poor practice accurately explains the overrepresentation of these children in state care. As decisions and actions must be quorate, verified, justified, and defensible, trust must be given to the assurance that child protection practices are fair and just. However, as shown in the report that Allen and Riding wrote, individual child protection practitioners do not always demonstrate fair and just approaches when safeguarding Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children. This can only be because they are making decisions within a system that is institutionally racist.

Reflecting on the *Fragility of Professional Competence* report it seems that a crucial limitation was that the scholarly grounding of their argument was not sufficiently elaborated. The authors did not fully explain, for example, how racist stereotyping within child protection should be identified as '*anti-Gypsyism*' (Popoviciu and Tileagă, 2020). What the authors could have done instead was explain how racism operates before advancing the principles of anti-racist practice much more deliberately.

To our knowledge, there is no agreed theoretical explanation of the racism that exists inside child protection practice systems with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in England. One potential reason for this gap in knowledge is that the phenomenon of racism and anti-racist practice is complex and difficult to define. However, when the findings that Allen and Riding advanced are viewed through the conceptual framework of aversive racism, an original understanding of the complex relationship between child protection practice and Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities comes into view.

Aversive racism

The conceptual framework of aversive racism was developed by Kovel (1988). Examining the presence of sustained racism in North America, Kovel began to distinguish discrete variations within the racist acts that he studied. Reflecting on the treatment and experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic communities, he began to theorise the presence of a nuanced form of implicit racism that he argued was different to explicit or overt forms of “dominative racism” (Kovel, 1988: 54).

For Kovel, dominative racism can be identified by explicit actions of an individual, group, or organisation as they act out bigoted beliefs in agency, thought, and deed. He argued that aversive racism is much more subtle. When identified, an individual, group, or organisation will publicly sympathise with victims of injustice, support the principle of equality, and promote various anti-racist initiatives, but, at the same time, possess negative feelings, thoughts, opinions, and beliefs about others.

Developing Kovel’s early work, Gaertner and Dovidio (2005: 618) sought out additional empirical evidence and attempted to finesse the definition of aversive racism and its scholarly grounding when they wrote that:

‘The fundamental premise of aversive racism is that many Whites who consciously, explicitly, and sincerely support egalitarian principles and believe themselves to be non-prejudiced also harbor [sic] negative feelings and beliefs about Black and other historically disadvantaged groups. These unconscious negative feelings and beliefs develop as a consequence of normal, almost unavoidable and frequently functional, cognitive, motivational, and social-cultural processes.’

Within the above explanation, there emerges a suggestion that aversive racism is qualitatively different from Kovel’s (1988) description of dominative racism, and by extension, different from Eduardo’s (2015) description of blatant, explicit, modern, or colour-blind racism too.

Consistent with these other systems of oppression, aversive racism flows from a position of power, cemented by an individual’s social status and perceived authority (Penner et al.,

2010). However, because negative feelings and beliefs about minorities groups can be socially developed, and then reinforced or normalised, Hodson (2005) explains that the racist comments and disparaging judgements that powerful individuals, groups, or organisations might make about the lives, cultures, traditions, religions, representations, and choices of others is not always acknowledged as being inappropriate.

According to Popoviciu and Tileagă (2020), aversive racism can be particularly difficult to identify because it is hidden behind a façade of equality, inclusion, tolerance, and genuine positive regard. By way of example, Aronowitz et al., (2020) used a mixed methods strategy to show that White health and social care professionals working in North America would speak about the importance of anti-racism, but then behave awkwardly or inappropriately when working to support minority ethnic patients and service users, often because they felt uncomfortable, uneasy, or fearful. They also show how minority ethnic patients and service users can be ignored if they complain about racist or unequal treatment because health and social care leaders generally believe that their systems and the power of the people who work in them are beacons of equality (Ibid.).

The contradictions shown by Aronowitz et al., (2020) suggest to us that the multi-systems of oppression in health and social care, identified by the theory of aversive racism, provides a good position from which to develop our fundamental understanding of racism in child protection practice too.

Within the following section, we will apply the theory of aversive racism to some of the testimonies that were presented by Allen and Riding in their 2018 report. Whilst we recognise Gaertner and Dovidio's (2005) argument that aversive racism is qualitatively different from dominative racism; we will show how the potential consequences of it are no less destructive.

Aversive racism is conversations about cultural diversity

In child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families, the theory of aversive racism can be used to identify a rarely seen paradox that exists between the conscious, explicit, and sincere support for anti-oppressive practice, and the underlying unconscious negative feelings and beliefs toward the conceptual 'Gypsy' culture:

“I feel like despite not knowing the traditions or the culture, the actual culture, not knowing everything about them, if you go in and do an assessment and just be objective and just try your best work with them, the way we'd work with a normal family, rather than Gypsy children, you will be fine.”

The approach described above provides a clear example of how child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities can privilege the dominant culture. Consistent with Powell's (2011: 471) observation that welfare professionals can construct perceptions of a Gypsy, Roma and Traveller culture as *'subordinate to the dominant Westernised concept of civilisation'*, the speaker disregards the unique perspective and intersectional impact of injustice. By being objective, the speaker also attempts to demonstrate a commitment to the principles of anti-oppressive practice, but the linguistic and rhetorical strategy used to underscore the identification of 'Gypsy' children as akin to 'normal' children highlights the process of 'othering' and the presence of aversive racism that is further illustrated below:

I have worked with loads of Gypsies and never had a problem. I remember trying to do a child protection assessment with all the children in the house, they were running everywhere; they were like mice! Just children everywhere.”

Referring to the children as rodents, this second narrative demonstrates the presence of aversive racism. We recognise that in making this statement the speaker might have been making a flippant clichéd remark. The speaker was after all part of a focus group discussion with other professionals where candid responses may have been encouraged and supported. However, an institutional stereotype is reflected when the family are problematically perceived as bearers of multiple children, who lack control of their children. The critical aspect of this quote is the apparent contradiction of a professional conscious attitude. The denial of personal prejudice *'I have worked with loads of Gypsies and never had a problem'*, and the underlying negative perception toward, and beliefs about the family, *'they were like mice!'*.

Aversive racism in conversations about risk

As suggested above, aversive racism means that some child protection professionals can overlook diversity and cultural differences in child-rearing practices. By attributing risk to a stereotypical representation of the conceptual 'Gypsy', aversive racism also means that some professionals can fail to distinguish between culture and interfamilial difficulties. Instead, child protection concerns are reduced to a 'Gypsy issue' that, as shown in the following extract, are assumed to affect every Gypsy, Roma and Traveller child.

“Domestic Abuse can be common in the Gypsy and Traveller culture. Statistics suggest that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are three times more likely to experience domestic abuse. They are also culturally close-knit, less likely to report domestic abuse or ask for help because of what will be felt within their communities. To me that is scary - a major risk.”

Within this extract, the speaker associated the 'family culture' to the concept of harm reinforced by a 'close-knit' community. Whilst for some, living in a 'close-knit' community could be a tradition, which can positively enhance the child's cultural identity; it is described here as a key barrier to effective child protection. In this regard, a 'close-knit' community became synonymous with the words "secrecy" and "privacy". Words, which when recognised as an example of aversive racism, heighten a perception of risk:

“Child protection with Romani and Travellers is characterised by professional suspicion and assumptions. We assume that the situation of the Gypsy, Roma or Traveller is likely to be worse because in their culture. They do not realise what constitutes a risk. They move about. School attendance is poor, no health immunisations, not registered with healthcare, not in school, poor housing, unemployed. This is all in their culture. They don't know how to promote a child's health or development...”

Whilst a commitment to safeguarding practice means that child protection professionals should have strong convictions concerning structural inequality, fairness, justice, and racial equality, the above quotation suggests that risk-averse practice can fuel aversive racism. Note that the speaker is not referring to a single person or family; they are describing the entire Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community. In doing so, they are revealing a professional

opinion that every Gypsy, Roma and Traveller person lacks parental capacity. It is therefore arguable that the aversive racism shown here endures to label Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people as dangerous, negligent, or problematic:

“...if I am asked to work with a Gypsy family. I will be afraid and have low confidence in my ability to dig deep and to carry out a detailed assessment. I would be so fearful of getting through the front door and if I thought that the parents will become more aggressive my ambition will be to get the kids out.”

In similar circumstances, like those so honestly and transparently discussed above, aversive racism means that the threshold criteria used to determine the tolerance of risk can be disproportionately low. As a result, the child protection professional might only make a cursory effort to work effectively in partnership with families to verify risk or to conduct thorough pre-proceedings and other time-limited assessments. This finding exposes a critical flaw in child protection practice. Namely, that aversive racism could enable the justification of punitive action, including the removal of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children into state care, even in the absence of verified harm.

Aversive racism in documentary evidence

As Aronowitz et al., (2020) explain, identifying aversive racism can be difficult because it lurks in the shadows of professional practice disguised, as we have already seen, as benevolence and altruistic intent. However, documented evidence of racism and oppressive attitudes may be easier to identify and therefore easier to challenge. The following two extracts have again been taken from a child protection assessment that was summarised in Allen and Ridings (2018) research:

“There are signs of significant concern in relation to his cognitive and emotional development. Although these may in part be culturally determined, it does not suggest that this child cannot learn.”

“The harm that the child suffers relates to being exposed to the oppositional behaviour of the parents that is seen in Travellers”

In both examples, aversive racism is used to associate the individual child and family with the conceptual 'Gypsy' culture. Here the author presents an assessment of the child's needs and experiences in abstract terms, reducing an entire diverse community of people to a list of traits and stereotypes, minimising the individual experiences and perspectives of the child and family. The challenge in recognising oppressive and discretionary assessments, like those presented above, is possible, but only if those involved in scrutinising proportionality, fairness, and justice for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and families are aware of aversive racism and the impact that it can have.

Discussion

By using the theory of aversive racism to present a view of child protection practice, we accept that safeguarding children is a complex task that requires an accurate assessment of the needs of the child and the numerous situations and experiences that can pose a risk to their welfare. From personal experience, we recognise that child protection practice with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller families may have to deal with specific and palpable examples of conflict, exploitation, abuse, and neglect. We also recognise that the lives of some Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children are currently being effectively safeguarded by the tremendous work and commitment of dedicated individuals. For this reason, more collaborative research is needed to understand and share these examples.

The challenge that remains

Whilst examples of good practice do exist, what concerns us most is the need to understand what our knowledge of aversive racism means for anti-racist child protection practice more generally. For some Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children and their families, it means that prejudice, structural ambivalence, limited verifiable evidence of harm and no clear evidence of the 'right way' to act can be interpreted by some child protection practice as a risk. A risk that is then used to justify oppressive intervention and state control.

One solution to minimise the impact of aversive racism can be found in the opportunity for children's guardians, family court advisers, and independent social workers to apply this theory as they seek to provide assurance that the actions, decisions and recommendations of the child protection team are proportionate, fair and just. However, whilst these professionals have an essential role to play, they cannot be expected to challenge anti-

Gypsyism in the functional, cognitive, motivational, and social-cultural processes of child protection alone. For this reason, careful thought should be given to the opportunity for anti-racist child protection practice to include of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller communities in the development and coproduction of the policies and practices that affect them at grassroots.

Characteristics of change

Reflecting on the themes introduced here, we believe that the first characteristic of anti-racist child protection practice must be to promote the diversification of leadership within the child protection system. The strategic roles that exist to protect children must ensure that there are equal representation of Gypsy Roma and Traveller people within the structures that are designed to promote fairness and justice. For this to happen, child protection leaders must establish a platform to build a multi-racial movement that can achieve the healing of the social divisions caused by centuries of racism. They should also enable Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people to stand together in solidarity with one another in the evolution of a pro-Gypsy, Roma and Traveller child and family rights based social movement.

The second characteristic of anti-racist child protection practice must be to confront aversive racism through the recognition that child protection for some Gypsy Roma and Traveller families is multi-issue. Working to build effective partnerships, child protection professionals should begin to engage children and families and encourage them to talk about and lead on issues that are affecting them. By seeking opportunities to stand with families and raise awareness of environmental hazards and the social determinates of health inequality, child protection professionals can help to raise awareness of the right of families to care for children in safe and healthy environments. This model of practice must move past a legal and political debate to incorporate the intersectional impact of marginalization, economic, social, and health inequality to raise awareness of oppression and the various ways that racism is limiting the choices that are available to some families.

The third characteristic of anti-racist practice with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller families is for an emphasis on grassroots organising. With the level of racism that exists in society and in child protection, grassroots organising requires collective action. It requires the participation of the community that must also centralise the ability of those children and families who

have been impacted by aversive racism to transform the system and the policies that effect their lives.

A radical ambition?

We recognise that the three characteristics we present here are radical, and potentially difficult to achieve in the current climate of a centralised, crisis driven and risk averse child protection system. However, it may not be well known that we are already making steady progress to enable these characteristics in the UK.

In 2020, the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association was established by the British Association of Social Workers. We aim to bring together Gypsy, Roma and Traveller social workers and support them to addresses the inequalities that we have described. Working closely with the community, we promote the key tenets of anti-racist practice by advocating for the development of child welfare services that seek to protect of the right of every family to experience equality. Focusing on the need to promote social justice, we work in partnership with child protection leaders to emphasise and address the social, political, and economic systemic inequalities that affect the safety of children and families too.

Working to address racism in all of its manifestations, we at the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association recognise that child protection practice must focus on the complete physical, mental, spiritual, political, economic, and social well-being of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people. We recognise that this position can only be achieved when every Gypsy, Roma and Traveller child and family has the economic, social, and political power and resources to make healthy decisions for themselves in all areas of their lives without fear, discrimination, or retaliation.

Find out more

The research findings presented in this discussion paper inform the anti-racist campaigning function of the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Social Work Association. At this time, we are focusing our efforts on building partnerships and networks with child protection leaders and other key stakeholder groups. We are not conducting or supporting independent assessments, but we are working on a pilot model to facilitate and support a series of

round-table events that can bring child protection professionals together with community members and child protection leaders to present information, discuss challenges, identify solutions, and co-produce a strategy for change.

If you would like to find more information on the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Social Work Association and the work that we do, please contact Allison Hulmes via email at Cymru@basw.co.uk and follow us on Twitter @GRTSWAssoc

Conclusion

Within this discussion piece, we have applied the theory of aversive racism to excerpts taken from Allen and Ridings (2018) study. By applying this theory, we have been able to illuminate a rarely seen paradox and help explain why confirmation bias, racial inequality, and racial disparity is entrenched within the institution of the child protection system. Whilst we suggested that children's guardians, family court advisers, and independent social workers have an essential role to play in identifying and challenging aversive racism, we also recognise that they cannot challenge anti-Gypsyism alone. By way of solution, we have briefly summarised what we believe are the three main characteristic of anti-racist practice with Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller families. Introducing the work of the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller Social Work Association, we have also shared some information about the work that we are engaged in as we seek to diversify leadership in child protection, confront racism, and include Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people in the development and coproduction of the policies and practices that affect them at grassroots.

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