

A "Different Kind" of Wisdom in Family Matters

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Have you heard the word 'antigypsyism'? It refers to a specific form of racism and discrimination directed at Romani and Traveller communities, as well as others who are stigmatised as "Gypsies".

For centuries, antigypsyism has shaped the harmful assumption that there exists a community living outside the mainstream, often unseen, unheard, and reluctant to engage with authorities. It frames these communities as rejecting conventional structures and societal norms; as "self-contained peoples" with their own rules and traditions, often seen as resistant, impenetrable, and fundamentally "other". Despite persistent efforts to control, integrate or assimilate them, the distinct languages, cultures and traditions of many Romani and Traveller families have endured. It is for this reason that antigypsyism continues to position them as existing outside the accepted social order.

In our work, we have witnessed how antigypsyism manifests in the shadows of child protection practice, operating as a form of aversive racism. If the term is unfamiliar, aversive racism describes individuals, often in positions of power, such as those involved in child protection and family justice, who outwardly support equality and believe themselves to be anti-racist, yet harbour unconscious biases and negative assumptions about the conceptual "Gypsy". We have seen first-hand how antigypsyism gives rise to these prejudices. Such attitudes are tolerated as 'acceptable' forms of racism and become embedded in institutional decision-making.

A clear example of aversive racism is seen in the way professionals apply child protection procedures. These are designed to assess risk, follow statutory guidelines, and prioritise the best interests of the child. Yet, when Romani and Traveller families are involved, professionals often assume their understanding of family, childhood, and community deviates fundamentally from mainstream norms. Due to aversive racism, professionals assume that such families lack structure, parental capacity or discipline. Long-standing nomadic traditions are framed as barriers to a child's well-being, within a system that favours sedentary lifestyles and fixed, geographically bound service provision.

In court reports, Romani and Traveller families are frequently described as "hard to reach", "not easily understood", or as living beyond the scope of mainstream education, health, housing, social care, and criminal justice systems. These accounts suggest a different set of values, a different rhythm of life, presented not as cultural diversity but as deviance from the norm. This narrative is no accident; it creates power, affirms a sense of "otherness" and justifies intervention rooted in bias rather than evidence of actual harm. In these instances, child protection becomes more than a welfare assessment, it becomes a judgement on whose way of life is most valid.

Too often, cases brought before the family court do not involve traditional indicators of neglect or abuse, but rather reflect concern over a family's way of life. The assumption that a child's welfare can only be secured within dominant societal structures fails to acknowledge how those same structures have historically excluded and disadvantaged Romani and Traveller communities. These dynamics often remain invisible in child protection assessments, where unspoken biases and cultural assumptions fuel the overrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in state care, more so than any other ethnic group.

With each case we support, we see how aversive racism persists. Thresholds are apparently met not because Romani and Traveller families are inherently neglectful, but because their cultural norms are viewed with suspicion. We acknowledge that no community is perfect. Romani and Traveller communities are supported by a wide range of state systems and services. Yet across this diversity, many families maintain strong collective identities, rooted traditions, and resilient support structures. Without an understanding of these cultural contexts, key aspects such as familial strength, intergenerational resilience, and the impact of historical trauma are frequently misinterpreted, filtered through the lens of aversive racism.

In supporting Romani and Traveller families through care proceedings, we have seen how essential cultural and familial dynamics are often overlooked. If we are to develop a deeper understanding of antigypsyism and aversive racism, we must remember: different does not mean deficient; nomadic family structures are not inherently chaotic; non-conformity is not neglect; and what may appear unfamiliar may, in fact, carry its own wisdom, order, and care. However, unlike other forms of racism, such as Islamophobia or antisemitism, antigypsyism remains largely unaddressed within the complex family justice system. There is little to no formal education, public campaigning, or awareness-raising about 'anti-Gypsy' attitudes. As a result, the vacuum continues to be filled with centuries-old misinformation, prejudice, and stereotypes. This distorted knowledge shapes public and professional understanding of Romani and Traveller communities (especially Romani women and girls) and continues to reinforce exclusion and fear. As we have seen, without targeted education and systemic change, antigypsyism is able to deepen, further marginalising communities already at risk.

The lack of attention given to antigypsyism in family justice shows that current approaches to child protection have not been designed with restorative or natural justice in mind. Accepting this truth is the first step towards dismantling aversive racism, practising cultural humility, and recognising that deeply ingrained traditions and values influence every family's life in unique and meaningful ways.

Today, we hope to use our time together to imagine a shift in direction, one that allows family courts to navigate cultural differences without imposing a rigid standard. This change requires a more nuanced understanding of family life across cultural lenses, and a commitment to confronting embedded societal biases. In a system often slow to recognise racial injustice, antigypsyism and aversive racism continue to cast long shadows.

So today, let every professional working with Romani and Traveller children listen with an open heart. Let every future assessment include cultural awareness. Let every decision reflect respect for the child's perspective and the diversity of family life.

Most of all, let us see that family and parental difficulties are not universal truths. Overcoming antigypsyism and aversive racism in family justice requires us to recognise a different kind of wisdom in family matters. It requires empathy, honesty, and the willingness to look beyond one's own worldview, and we look forward to sharing our thoughts on how that journey should begin with you today.