A portrait of Anjula Mutanda, a woman with long dark hair, smiling and wearing a red top. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

By not belonging to my family, I became curious about others - I had a strong desire to connect

Anjula Mutanda, talks to Rakhi Chand about trauma, resilience and becoming Relate's first black president

Rakhi Chand: *You have many accolades - President of Relate, consultant media broadcaster, relationship psychotherapist, social scientist, author, columnist. How does it sit with you to be so high profile?*

Anjula Mutanda: I didn't enter the public domain with a plan. I never imagined that I would be in this space. I was a clinical practitioner for eight or nine years beforehand. I fell into it through my clinical supervisor who had done some work in the media - she recommended I talk to a production company that was looking for young experts for a new show. I had a chat with a producer, who said that the show was called *Big Brother*.

This is a bit of a theme of my life - I will give things a go, and accept being in an uncomfortable space. I'll try things out. That goes all the way back to my formative years. And those uncomfortable spaces for me started within my family system. That was my lived experience, being half Indian and half Ugandan in Uganda. My mother's family were on the Indian side and wouldn't accept my father because he was black. I became the symbol of the unaccepted and the unacceptable. I carried that as an identity. And living in Uganda, with my mixed heritage, I was often referred to as *mzungu* (the Swahili word for 'white'). So I didn't fit with them either. These were, of course, my first experiences of racism and prejudice. So that's a long-winded way of

saying I always felt uncomfortable. But it's a very familiar feeling - I know how to be comfortable with discomfort.

RC: *You have written about growing up in Uganda during the politically volatile time of Idi Amin and living across the road from his official residence, as your father was involved in politics. You have also described living with your father after your parents separated, then his sudden death from a brain haemorrhage and your mother having to rescue you to flee the country because you weren't allowed to leave. Given what we now know about trauma and its effects, can you see how you were impacted by these events as a child, and how you processed and coped with them? Do you think these events still have an influence on you?*

AM: My first encounter of trauma actually was watching my parents physically fight. I grew up in the middle of domestic violence. I witnessed that as a four-year-old, and the reason I can remember it vividly is because it was so violent. That memory lives in me. I was also beaten as a child, so seeing rage expressed through violence was my normal. I was becoming aware that the world around me was unsafe. The news in Uganda was unfiltered, unlike here. You would see mutilated dead bodies on television, and there was no one monitoring what I was watching. I also remember once playing outside in the garden and watching a man who was walking along the road being stopped by two policemen because he was wearing flip-flops and eating on the street. He was made to throw away his shoes and the food and they beat him. Everything felt unsafe - it was volatile inside and outside my house.

In my early primary school years, I remember numbing out. I forgot how to write; I'd write my numbers backwards. Something was happening to me but no one noticed. And it took a long time for me to connect those early traumas to later behaviours. As a child though, I found ways to survive. I had this innate ability to find adults who were safe. I can remember being very young and phoning a family friend, saying, 'Come and get me, I want to play.' I just wanted to be a kid.

I believe I had two grandiose narcissists for parents. One was neglectful and the other immature. The immature one turned to me to take care of them and the neglectful one would come in and out, and then died. I wasn't even

protected from my father's death - without warning, I was taken to see him in the hospital as a little, little girl. I kept looking at his dead face, thinking, 'Why does he have cotton wool up his nose? He won't be able to breathe.' So that was another trauma. These are the things I carry. But whatever was going on outside of my house would have been more tolerable if what was going on inside my house had made me feel safe - if I had had one parent who was able to communicate and produce love and structure, even in the worst circumstances.

RC: *And all this was before you fled Uganda, which I can only imagine was more trauma?*

AM: Yes. I want to tell you about this in the context of my grandparents' (my mother's parents) experience of the partition of India in 1947. They crossed from Pakistan to India and settled in Delhi. I think they were deeply trauma wounded, but they never spoke about it. And I think some silent coding happened there about identity and belonging. Then my mum dramatically left her family in an undignified manner from their point of view, with a partner they did not approve of. They wanted her to have an arranged marriage and she was their only daughter. There was anger and humiliation and she'd probably internalised her parents' trauma wounds as well. Her own life was fuelled by drama, violence and emotional chaos. So there was multigenerational trauma, all unacknowledged until it reached me.

In terms of fleeing Uganda, Idi Amin was a violent dictator. He wanted all the Indians to go back to India. Anyone with a mixed heritage was a no-no. I became vaguely aware that there was something wrong with me and that it had to be hidden. I remember travelling under the cloak of darkness to the airport, and not saying goodbye to anybody. We escaped shortly before Amin was overthrown in 1979.

'Whatever was going on outside of my house would have been more tolerable if what was going on inside had made me feel safe'

RC: *Do you have many memories of your early days in the UK? It must have been a huge culture shock for you after Uganda.*

AM: I arrived with one suitcase in a foreign land. We - my mother and I - lived in an old people's home for two weeks. Obviously, we didn't fit there! I was the only child running around, being extremely loud! We then lived for a year in a hostel, my mother and I in one tiny room. Within two weeks I was being shown around a Catholic school. I remember being constantly made fun of by my peers. Kids at secondary school would stick pencils into my hair to watch them disappear into my afro - think of that space violation! People would feel free to comment on my features, saying things like my nose was too wide or my lips too big.

I went to eight schools in total during my school years; I attended one school for only two days. I was always leaving, and life felt chaotic and unstable. When I was about nine, my mother sent me to the Netherlands for six weeks to stay with a family that she didn't know. She really couldn't deal with me, so much so that she regularly threatened to get social services to take me away.

RC: *I wondered how these experiences might relate to the multifaceted nature of your career - you are clearly comfortable with pop culture, working with TV programmes such as Big Brother, but you are also a graduate of one of the UK's top universities (Durham) and have written and presented 'serious' programmes for Radio 4, and are now President of Relate. Has your learning as an immigrant enabled you to adapt and thrive in different environments?*

AM: I have learnt to adapt and thrive in varied environments, but first and foremost I'd put that down to being an outlier in my own family. I learned to create my own sense of belonging; I was keenly aware that I didn't have it from early childhood. My parents' inability to parent me in a healthy and unconditional way taught me to reach out to others. I connected with many different people from different backgrounds, giving me richness of experience. I went to a Methodist Girl Guides group but my friends were Sikh, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, secular. By not belonging to my family, I became curious about others - I had a strong desire to connect. ▶

'How can we function well as a healthy society when only some or a few people are benefiting and many are not?'

CAREER

RC: *You studied psychology then moved towards psychotherapy, achieving your BACP accreditation. Why was being a practitioner important to you? What kind of therapy do you offer to clients?*

AM: I was drawn to the field of psychology to help me comprehend what I had gone through as a child. That was the first step. After completing my master's degree, I was offered a place at Durham to continue my research at PhD level. At the same time, I was offered two jobs, one as a clinical therapist and the other as a workplace consultant. To be honest, I couldn't afford to continue my studies. I was also keen to start working, so I took both jobs! I loved hearing people's stories. I still love facilitating people to unpick these and find meaning in the pain and fulfil their potential. Whether it's on telly or in the therapy room, one to one, I get the same nervousness. It's a new story, a new relationship, and I honour the trust people put in me. I'm there and I'm present. And I feel I have the capacity to withstand another human being's pain.

I have trained in multiple modalities over the course of my career and ultimately I'm an integrative therapist. It's not one size fits all.

RC: *Do you feel we as therapists have to be political? Your father was in politics - you have not chosen to go down this route, but how would you describe your relationship to social justice now?*

AM: I have always been about social justice in therapy. Affordability and access to mental health services matter now more than ever. I think we as therapists can't be apolitical - we are affected by political decisions, whether we like it or not. We have to be cognisant of where our clients are coming from and what injustices are affecting or have affected their lived

experiences. We also have to be aware of where we are coming from (our own prejudices, biases, limitations, beliefs and values) and acknowledge how this might play out in the power dynamic in the therapeutic relationship. As therapists, we recognise that we are seeing clients in the safety of a therapy room. Part of our role is to help our clients feel heard and safe enough to share all aspects of their lived experience, which might be very different to our own, and to step up and hold that safe space for them.

Yes, my dad was in politics. No, I wouldn't want to follow in his footsteps. I didn't admire him. I was absolutely terrified of him, and he wanted to be the star of the show. I have found my own way to communicate and express what really matters. In terms of social justice, TV and now social media reach those who might not have access to therapy otherwise. They can be a platform for information, education or insight. For me - and this chimes with the values of Relate - therapy should be for anyone who wants to access it. It has been, and largely still is, seen as the preserve of the white middle class. But what about those who don't have the money and the access, and who would really benefit from therapy? We all live in this society together, so how can we function well as a healthy society when only some or a few people are benefiting and many are not? That's a very stuck society. I'm not for that.

RELATIONSHIP THERAPY

RC: *When introduced by Relate in 2021 as their first black president, you were described as being passionate about issues of diversity and inclusion. What do you think are the priorities in this area for the mental health field? What would you like to see in policy and practice?*

AM: I've been working with Relate as an ambassador, and then vice president, and then president for nearly a decade now. I am a big advocate for healthy relationships, which is what Relate represents, whether those relationships are marriages, friendships or mother-daughter relationships - the whole gamut. It is very much about inclusion - everybody's welcome. However, there is a lack of diversity in the Relate family and in the wider field. I think it's a question of outreach. I said to Relate, one of the things I can do for you is show off the amazing work you do. I also talk about diversity because I embody it. From my very presence, I hope we attract

lots of counsellors and clients from different backgrounds, so that we really are the broad church that we want to be.

At Relate, the intentions are good and there is openness. But it's a systemic issue that is about the whole field, including how we train and who we train. For example, the theoretical approaches we all learn are Western, and the founders of psychology and psychotherapy we are told are white and male. So our field has to take a long hard look at itself. The American Psychological Association made a critical start by apologising for its part in systemic racism within the psychological field. We have to be honest, self-reflect, challenge and interrogate how to do better, and then action it.

I am happy to speak on diversity and inclusion issues, as I can bring my lived experience to the table and champion brilliant black and brown experts. However, I am keenly aware that sometimes, as the only black person navigating white spaces in the workplace, I may be leaned on to educate, advise, help explain and solve inequalities. This can feel draining. We need our allies to stand shoulder to shoulder with us, and we need organisations to take responsibility to clean up their own processes so that the workplace is safe for everyone.

RC: *I have seen that, as President of Relate, you are promoting relationship therapy not just for couples but for all kinds of relationships, including friendships. What other trends are you seeing?*

AM: There are a lot of themes emerging. For example, handling toxic friendships - Relate is very experienced at doing great work in this area. Loneliness is also commonplace, and Relate has done great research on this. I think COVID uncovered the loneliness epidemic and I also think we have created a culture of competition over co-operation, breeding isolation and mistrust. What we're trying to do at Relate is expand who can come to therapy and for what - for example, an adult child coming with their mum or dad, or friends when something's broken down.

RC: *What do you think are the challenges of relationship therapy as a method? For example, a common issue expressed by couples therapists is that clients seek help too late - but what are other barriers to healthy outcomes?*

AM: I believe that the stigma of having relationship therapy is abating. I think young people are also leading the charge here, and they are phenomenal because they are curious. They want to understand how to have healthy relationships. That's very encouraging. I hope that the work I do in the public domain makes potentially taboo conversations easier and normalised. My mission is to make these important conversations in relationships accessible, informed and relatable.

RC: *You described your parents' marriage as 'painfully miserable'. Is it time we let go of the ideal of 'getting married and staying married' in today's society when we are living longer, divorce is less stigmatised and becoming logistically less onerous, women may be more financially independent and differences in relationship styles (such as polyamory) are becoming more acceptable?*

AM: I have strong views on creating healthy relationships but I don't have strong views on marriage itself. I come from a highly divorced family. I've also been married for 22 years. And yes, I think there is more freedom for people to have different relationships and to find out what works for them. And that's what I want to see - a world where people feel they can express themselves the way they want to in a healthy relationship. The more people can live their truth, the healthier we will be as a society.

RC: *You presented a Radio 4 programme in 2021 as part of the Bringing up Britain series that brought together experts to address the pressures facing young people in relationships today, particularly teenage girls, and what is expected of them sexually in relationships and the harassment they face as part of everyday life. What can we do as a society, as*

'I said to my daughter, when she was about 10, "You should respect me." And she said, "Mum, respect has to be earned"'

parents and as therapists to protect and support girls and young women?

AM: I have a daughter. I think how we bring up our sons and daughters is critical. When I made *Bringing up Britain*, I got to talk to some brilliant experts on how to educate your children about consent, starting as young as three. Simple things like how to say no without using any words. But we have a great deal to do. So much has gone wrong, been allowed to take root and even normalised. And I am angry and heartbroken about this. We need to cultivate human beings who respect themselves and each other. Understanding boundaries and consent is vital. What does 'yes' mean? What does 'no' mean? These things matter as building blocks. As soon as your child is aware, you need to be doing that.

And as parents, we need to understand what we are verbally and non-verbally communicating and we need to strive not to send mixed messages. We need to give our children permission to challenge us. I said to my daughter, when she was about 10, 'You should respect me.' And she said, 'Mum, respect has to be earned.' She was right - respect goes both ways. Having the confidence as a child to speak up, have boundaries and say no, for instance, means as an adult you are far more likely to stand up for yourself and less likely to be silenced. I think, as parents, therapists and as a society, we are all responsible for cultivating and modelling healthy relationships for all our children.

RC: *In another Radio 4 series, Diversity Works, you focused on how couples of different backgrounds make their relationships work. Why is this an area of interest for you - does it connect with your parents and your own marriage?*

AM: Yes, I was drawn toward this series because of my own mixed heritage, family history and also I'm married to an English guy. I understood that, for many couples, it could and did lead to experiences of exclusion and unbelonging. I made *Diversity Works* a long time ago though - 17 years - and things are different now, I think. I see many more mixed heritage couples and there's far more representation of mixed relationships now in TV and in film. Things have changed for the better, but there will always be tensions, biases and ingrained prejudices to navigate. I'm all for people who are open-minded and flexible, because at the heart of it, we're just human beings trying to get along.

RC: *You recently co-launched an app aimed at couples called 'Paired', which aims to make 'relationships happier and healthier in just 10 minutes a day'. Can you tell us about that? Do you think we should be thinking beyond the therapy room in terms of how we promote psycho-education about relationships?*

AM: Definitely. I was approached a few years ago by one of the developers of the app, who was looking for couples therapists to contribute. And I loved the app because it is so simple. There are lots of couple experts on there, each bringing different insight and knowledge. The app asks very simple questions as a way of opening dialogue. It's bite-sized advice that is palatable.

LEADERSHIP

RC: *As I said, you are the first-ever black President of Relate and were introduced as such by Relate when you came into the role. What does it mean for you to be their 'first-ever black president'? What's it like for you to be introduced like that?*

AM: Kind of weird, isn't it? But it's also a political statement that I wanted to make. Relate has come a long way - even though it embraced my presence 10 years ago. I'm almost part of the furniture now! At the same time, it was important to me to acknowledge that I'm the first black President of Relate, to acknowledge - post-George Floyd and the inequalities exposed by COVID - that we at Relate are part of this conversation. We are also looking at ourselves and considering what we do, how we do it, why we do it and how to do it better.

RC: *In the two years since the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests in 2020, we have witnessed a shift in society's awareness of racism, white privilege and the lack of diversity in many organisations. Has it impacted the type of work you are now offered?*

AM: Yes, because organisations are waking up to just how invaluable and enriching it is to have diversity at the table. In fact, I've always been sitting at the table but I might have been invisible. I also recall in 2012 being told that I lacked an 'international' profile so couldn't be offered the second series of a show, despite having done a first that was incredibly well received. An 'international profile' was code for 'not black'. Today I would not let someone get away with ▶

'I've seen lots of women not having a seat at the table. So they've built their own table'

that kind of insidious comment. Let's hope that these positive changes are here to stay and not just a short-lived novelty in order to tick a box.

RC: *You forged a successful career in a largely white environment long before the resurgence of the BLM movement - were you aware of barriers you faced that others didn't?*

AM: I have been fortunate to work and connect with some incredible people, white, brown and black, throughout my career, who have not only supported me and opened doors but have become invaluable friends and allies. However, I have also experienced being gaslit and experienced the threat of stereotype, all with the potential to trigger a trauma response. In that conversation I mentioned, where I was told I wasn't 'international' enough, the person delivering the information added insult to injury when they added, 'You're taking this very well.' 'How do you want me to react?' I responded. I knew that if I got angry I would have been labelled as an angry black woman. I didn't have the privilege to state how I really felt about the rejection of me - which was rage. Microaggressions happen and they are traumatic.

I was also raised with the saying that I think every black and brown immigrant parent has said: 'You have to work twice as hard to get half as far.' It's true. That internalised messaging, coupled with experiences of injustice, can turn into self-blame and self-flagellation. This is commonplace, affects mental health and is not OK.

Research shows that women of colour are still more likely to face microaggressions at work, which of course takes a toll on mental health. However, I think things are starting to shift, albeit very slowly. That you and I are having this conversation seems indicative of that emerging shift. When these injustices were happening to me, I not only felt isolated but, when I tried to share my concerns with colleagues or human

resources (HR), I was also met with assurances that what happened to me could happen to anyone. Or HR would listen and sympathise but nothing would change, leaving me feeling even more vulnerable.

Today, challenges are being made and are being taken more seriously, but there's still a hell of a lot to be done. That's why I value my platform - I'm here and want to use my voice to stand up for other people. And I hope that others who experience similar pain find support in reading this.

RC: *I'm well aware that there is a lack of black women in senior leadership positions in any sector and mental health is no exception. You've spoken about invisibility, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the legal scholar, famously wrote about the theoretical erasure of black women in 1989. She argued that attention tends to be on the most privileged - focus on gender tends to benefit white women, and focus on race tends to benefit black men. Do you think the next generation of black women, like your own daughter, face similar challenges?*

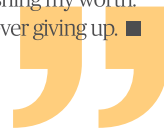
AM: Yes and no. Hopefully many are better positioned to handle any attempt at erasure. My daughter is 21. She's also mixed heritage, Indian, Ugandan and English, and she's proud of her identity. She is an astute, vibrant person who is now being celebrated for being herself. But when she was younger she looked a little different from other kids at her primary school and was consequently othered. And by six or seven, she was often labelled - by some parents and teachers - as too loud and bossy, too visible for some people. But she'd been raised to be confident and outspoken, to use her voice. At times during the school years, the emotional challenges were painful - she experienced criticism for having her voice and for being someone who was bursting with ideas and curiosity. Shocking! So I want to honour the next generation of girls and boys for being louder and prouder.

We seem to be in a situation sometimes where it's two steps forward and one step back. If one black woman makes a mistake, all black women have made that mistake. I've seen lots of women not having a seat at the table. So they've built their own table. I've seen far more of that going on. That's what I've done - I've just pulled up a chair wherever I've gone. So the next generation need not to be afraid to do that. They also have

social media to be able to create community around them, with like-minded allies who are willing to support. It's a slow climb and I'm aware of the challenges. But we need to change the complexion of who's at the table. We need less of the attitude 'We'll mentor you' and more 'Bring your ideas, come as you are, you belong here.'

RC: *Your latter words remind me of a certain kind of black feminism that refuses normative systems and power structures in their totality - articulated as living 'otherwise'. It sounds like good advice - or a healthy way of being - for organisations and leaders. What advice do you have for racially minoritised women seeking leadership positions in the mental health arena?*

AM: I can only talk about what's helped me - being authentic. Reaching out for support when needed. Creating a powerful community of allies. Not being silent. Never diminishing my worth. Never accepting invisibility. Never giving up. ■



About Anjula

Anjula Mutanda MBACP (Snr Accred) is a consultant media broadcaster whose credits include presenting a programme for BBC Radio 4's *Bringing up Britain* series. She is a relationship psychotherapist, celebrity psychological therapist, family dynamics expert and President of Relate.



About the interviewer

Rakhi Chand MBACP (Snr Accred) is a doctoral researcher, psychotherapist, supervisor and writer living and working in the Peak District. Her research looks at the lack of black and racially minoritised women in health leadership. www.chandcounselling.co.uk/blog