OU BME podcast interview by Katherine Jegede
Dr Anthony Gunter

Katherine Jegede and Anthony Gunter:

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Hello, and welcome to the BME Network podcast. I am your host, Katherine Jegede. Our producer is the indomitable Claudia Torres. And our director is the equally incredible Sara Asamoah. And I am, we are delighted to welcome to the show today, Dr. Anthony Gunter. Sorry Anthony, welcome.

And I will ask you to say a bit about yourself in just a moment. But I want to remind people listening to us that part of the purpose of the podcast is showcasing academic and research talent here at the Open University.

We are doing this though with an emphasis or an interest, if you like, on issues that are important to the BME community. That doesn't mean to say we don't want to hear from people outside of that community. But this is really about showcasing BME voices, as I say, amongst our research and academic populations and students and beyond. Because being BME touches all aspects of our life. So, I'm really excited to have you Dr. Gunter. I have read-- or are you happy with me calling you Anthony?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Oh, yes. Happy. Happy, just-- yeah.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Yeah. Fantastic. So, I've done a bit of research on you, and you've done so many interesting things. But I think it will be easier if you said a bit about your background and the work you do at the Open University.

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: OK. Well, yeah. I'm a senior lecturer in childhood youth studies. I'm also a program lead for the Department for Child and Youth Studies. It's an interdisciplinary team. So, we have human geographers, psychologists, sociologists. And I myself am a criminologist.

So much of my work is looking at the intersection of race and crime, as well as young people in society. So black young people, asian young people, and other issues that affect BME children and young people growing up in the UK.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's so fascinating. I'm going to touch upon the intersectionality between race and crime a bit later on in the conversation, I think. But just this issue of working

with or being interested from a research perspective on the things that impact young people and children. What things should we be thinking about as laypeople as perhaps people who aren't part of the research world, if you like? What are the important issues?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: I think, obviously, education. Obviously, who gets educated, who gets thrown out of school. Unfortunately, black young people tend to be disproportionately thrown out of school. So, a lot of the positive things unfortunately when it comes to issues of race, they become negative.

So, every child deserves to play in a safe environment. Every child deserves to go to a school and achieve the best that they can. Every child then who leaves school as a young adult deserves to go into education or training or a good job. But again, there's the barriers and issues that disproportionately impact upon those from BME backgrounds.

So hence why a lot of the discussion that we would like to have get skewed in terms of us trying to get underneath some of these issues and barriers that are affecting many of our young people growing up in this society.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: And what does this impact look for young people as they grow into young adulthood and adulthood? I mean, why is it important for us to care and to really understand these issues?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: I think every child matters. That's what we say. And every child is essential. That we say. And every child deserves an equal chance. But if you happen to be born with a different skin colour, different religion, have immigrant status, that is not going to be the case. Or if you're from a lower-class background, your outcomes are going to be worse.

So, you're going to be more likely to grow up in poorer neighbourhoods, go to a poorer school, your parents are more likely to be unemployed or live in impoverished conditions. All of this is going to have a negative mindset upon you.

Now, if you go into the education system, this should be an opportunity for you to rise above that. But teachers will look at you and will make assumptions about your potential, which doubly affects you. So almost you've got two hands tied behind your back, if not three or four if you had them.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's it's really interesting to know. I mean, I'm from a conservative background. And I'm not going to paint all conservatives with an ignorant brush or accuse them of not being empathetic. But some of the things you hear from the conservative side of the field is that what's all the fuss about.

How would you say that the media is failing, if it is indeed failing, in making sure that we are aware of these issues, that they are part of the collective consciousness, if you like?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Well, I think from a conservative perspective, they argue we're one of the richest countries in the world. We all have access to education. We all have access to the same things.

Yes. If you happen to live in a nice environment, you have two parents that have a stake in society, everything is geared up toward you. But for those who are not so fortunate, that's when things are a bit more problematic. And it's therefore not just about and your family's ability to navigate and take on board all of the things that society has to offer you.

So, I think more empathy around those who are growing up in these communities and these neighbourhoods and going to these schools that haven't got the same structures, the same support structures, same opportunities that a lot of other people have.

And I think it's just being mindful of that. And of course, the media doesn't want to show us that because it likes to think we live in a meritocracy. We like to think that we live in an advanced society. And yet, if you go to Africa, if you go to Latin America, you go to parts of South Asia, Southeast Asia, oh, yeah. There's poverty there but not in good old the UK. We're above that all. But we're not, and that's the problem.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So, empathy is a really interesting word. I get a lot of pushback from liberal friends of mine who say that's one thing they feel that conservatives lack. I mean, I consider myself a moderate. Yes. I'm right leaning centrist, but I do actually agree a lot of the time with this idea of there being a lack of empathy.

And I thought it would be a nice way to get into this the saw report that we had a couple of months ago. I think that was one of the things that people found difficult was that the saw report reached the conclusions that it did. But it didn't really show much empathy toward the people who were saying, well, actually, this isn't our lived experience.

It's all very well and good to say that there isn't any institutional racism or systemic racism, but this is our lived experience. So how do people navigate that type of research? How do they begin to understand when government put out reports like that?

Because I think for some people, they felt that they were gaslighted. I know Dame Doreen Lawrence felt that the report was harmful. For people who don't know, I'm talking about the equalities commission report on racism in the UK. So how do people begin to navigate those

kinds of questions that can be more complex and perhaps out of reach for the layman, layperson?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: OK. I think it's the really interesting conversation, a complex conversation. And Tony Sewell is responsible for my academic career. Because my book was-- my PhD was born out of his PhD book. And I wanted to take it into another area.

So, Tony Sewell actually makes some good points. And in terms of the report, people who are in that report, what they were actually-- the conservative, black conservatives for want of a better word-- what they were doing, they were tapping into a narrative that most BME communities actually agree with, which is we want to do for ourselves.

We're not interested in the state. We want to do for ourselves. And he wanted to get over this negative message that we're failures, and it's all against us. But they went too far by what they didn't take into consideration was how the state stops that energy. It stops the energy.

So, it's quite right that the family has something to say, that people want their own businesses, people want to do their own thing. People want to-- people don't just want to be seen as a problem. If you're a black young kid boy growing up, you just don't want to be seen as a failure.

You don't want to be seen as a gangbanger or a criminal. You want to be seen that you can be a scientist. You want to be seen that you can be an engineer. That's true. But if your teachers are not putting you in the streams that are going to allow you to do those higher science subjects, then your dreams of being a scientist are going to be scuppered. That needs to be taken to a cap, because that's real for a lot of our kids.

And what the Sewell report failed to do was actually take a real deep dive, look at these structural problems which stop the energies and the talent of BME communities from thriving.

It didn't do that. Because it meant the people responsible for that are the people who are sponsoring that report, which is the conservative government. And I think that was the problem.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I wouldn't be doing my job, Anthony, if I didn't try to challenge you a little bit from my perspective, obviously a right leaning perspective. Certainly, in my background as a Nigerian person, Nigeria is a very conservative country by and large.

There's very much this belief that it's about individual responsibility, and you see Nigerians doing very well, certainly, within my own circle of friends or people who go on to achieve-- they're very successful in whatever field, whether it's medicine and so on.

So why is it do you think that some people are able to buck the kind of trends and succeed? And other people, members of the BME community can't do that?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Well, I mean, I think interestingly, you talk about being Nigeria and being West African. And I'm part of the Windrush generation, third generation. My parents were from Jamaica. And the idea is Jamaicans and Caribbeans don't do well. But our West African sisters and brothers do do well.

That was the narrative at the time simply because the West Africans who came, Ghanaians and Nigerians who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s predominantly came as students.

All right. So, there was a different trajectory. Right. Whereas, if you go 20 years before that to 1940s, the majority of Jamaicans who came to Britain again were students.

So again, it was a different thing. If you look at the Nigerians and Ghanaians now coming to Britain, they are now at the bottom of the pile. They're not doing the same as the generations that came because it's different generation of people.

Similarly, if you look at America, African Americans are a complexity. The group that does the most well, the black group in the United States that is the most successful-- surprise, surprise-- are Jamaicans.

Jamaicans are the most successful-- one of the most, if not the successful black immigrant group to the United States who are different, so your African Americans. So, what I'm trying to say here is we have to take into account issues of class and what you're coming to do. And therefore, if you are a student, and you're on a scholarship from Ghana, which one of my friends, her dad came to Britain in 1960 on an engineering scholarship from Nkrumah, that's completely different to another a Ghanaian friend of mine whose dad came to work in the NHS.

So, there are different trajectories. These are not the same two Ghanaians, if you know what I mean. So, our experiences are shaped by our social class circumstances. And unfortunately, to be black means you are more likely put into the bottom of the pile.

So even though you might have been a Ghanaian engineer, on graduating, you're not going to have those same opportunities as a white engineer. You're going to be better than your Ghanaian colleague who came to be a nurse, but you're still not going to have the same experiences that you should have, just like we have our Indian doctors who have come, they are all GPs. They are not consultants in private hospitals.

So, this is what we are talking about in terms of institutional racism and the barriers. They are complex and nuanced, so we need to get under the skin of them. And we can't just say, well, Nigerians do well. But do Nigerians do as well as they could and should have done for who came with that baggage and that background. And the answer to that is, no, they probably have not. So, we can't mask the fact that they've done better than a bus driver, but they didn't come-- they came with skills, qualifications, so they should really be the new CEOs. That's what they should be doing if we're going to follow that line of thinking. So why are they not?

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's really interesting. And I suppose, for me, I am open to the fact that I know a very specific group of people who have a very specific group of exercise-- experiences rather, and their experience seems to buck that trend. For example, you have Nigerian people who-- I forget his name now. The guy who's up at Gatwick and things like that. So, I'm not narrow minded. I suppose it does take-- it is going to take some thought on my part, but it's really interesting hearing a different perspective on this.

So, one of the things-- I mean, I could talk about this all day with you, Anthony, it's so interesting.
DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: It's exceptionalism, conservatives like this notion of exceptionalism to excuse structural policies that keep people down.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: OK. That's harsh to hear, but it's important. I'm always open to new learning. I've wanted to come around to something I came across when I was reading about you, this notion of road culture because there's lots of different narratives that impact the Black community, particularly Black youth. So, what is that? I think I have a notion in my own mind from, I suppose, the right perspective on what road culture is and this whole, kind of, we talked about earlier, the intersectionality of crime and race and that sort of thing.

But in your words and from your research, what is road culture?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Well, first and foremost, road culture, which is what I turn for my PhD thesis and others have turned into something else. Road culture is actually a positive thing. Road culture is the cultures that Black-- it's a Black diaspora identity. So, whether you're from Nigeria, whether you're from the Caribbean, whether you're from-- you're African American, it's something that as a Black young person, you buy into in terms of the music, the culture. It's a positive construct that you present to yourself.

And it's largely about having fun. It's about going out with your friends, it's about the way you speak, your style, your dress, it's a positive thing in the main. However, it can become a negative thing in terms of the negative aspects of road culture. Which are to do with criminality and crime. And unfortunately, the mainstream media focus on the negative aspects of Black youth cultures. And only focus on the negative i.e. gangs.

So, a negative of road culture would be gangs. So, some academics are writing about road culture in a very narrow perspective, calling it gangs and gang crime. whereas, actually, that's not what it's about. It's actually about holistic view, which puts young people in a positive light but doesn't shy away from some of the more challenging aspects of their behaviour. But in terms of being able to arrest that, to arrest the gang narrative to violence narrative, we need to put it in a bigger context of positivity.

So, we need to give young people a positive worldview and a belief that they can achieve, and they can do a lot. Rather than just focusing on a negative saying, you're going to stab people, you're going to kill people, you're going to sell drugs. That to me is a very narrow focus. But it's still a focus for some young people who feel like that's the only option for them. And it's about trying to make sure that that's not a narrative that we keep spinning for our young Black kids in particular.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's really interesting. One of the things that we set out to do with this podcast is to reclaim some of the narratives that are being skewed or warped in some way. But I am mindful of people who may not be able to navigate those kinds of narratives. Particularly, when you see these things that are not right perpetuated in the media over and over again. You mentioned people focusing on the positives, which is certainly wonderful, but how do people do that in practical terms?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: How do they-- Well, how they do that in practical terms is actually looking beyond the media narratives that say Black kids are failures or Black kids are bad. But actually, have you actually spoken to a young-- so can you see a young Black person, they might be dressed in a certain way, they might be speaking in a certain way. And straight away, we fear them. If we see a group of young Black kids with-- they're probably talking a bit loudly, they're very energetic because all of our cultures, West African cultures, Caribbean cultures, we are loud, energetic, vibrant people.

We talk loudly, we laugh loudly, everything we do is loudly, is done loud. Doesn't mean that's aggressive, doesn't mean that it's bad, so already, we kind of like, we shirk from that. But rather than shirking from it, let's have a conversation with them. Let's-- OK, what are you laughing about? What are you talking about? What are your dreams? And when you ask a young person what their dreams are it stumps them because they kind of have to think because no one actually stops to ask them, what is it you want to achieve in life?

And once you ask that question it makes them think. And then also, it makes them understand that perhaps you've got an interest in them rather than just seeing them as a-- because it's easy for them to react to you, that you're going to hold your handbag, you're going to be fearful of

them. So, they're going to play into that. The amount of times I've heard young people say, Oh, I saw that white woman holding her handbag, she crossed the street when I was there. OK, I'm going to get-- so they always like, think, OK, if you think that of me, I'm going to make sure that I act in a way to give you something really to be frightened of me about.

But if you actually seem to actually be open to them and want to get to know them, you want to understand what they're about, you're going to switch their mindset because they're going to be a bit more open, less defensive, less thinking that people are out to get them. And therefore, we can do more to help them and support them. They need help and support. All young people need our help, guidance, and support. But at the moment, adults see these young-- our young people as enemies, as a threat. And that's not a good way to harness that support that they need. And that communication, and that dialogue to break—

I mean, I love rap music and I hate the music that young people listen to. But I say that with a smile on my face because I'm happy to be educated by them and have the conversation, to hear. And I'll say, it's not like in my day. And that's a dialogue, it's a segue into having a conversation. whereas in, oh, it's all violence, they're going to kill each other, they're all stabbing one another. You can't go anywhere with that. But if you can say to them, you guys, what are you rapping about?

It's not-- and they will tell you, and actually, they're doing this, they're doing that. You're starting to have a dialogue rather than just breaking it down and saying, you're not as good as our generation, you're this, you're that. So, it's about creating dialogues and conversations with our young people rather than the opposite, which is to be antagonistic and to be fearful, and to have no interest in them.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: So, would you say, Dr. Anthony, that the kind of stats that we hear typically about Black violence, particularly among young people, is that an accurate reflection of the reality? Because some people would say, yes, they see that kind of crime all the time. Or do you think it's an unfair representation of Black youth?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: It's an unfair representation. Look, there is an issue. I'm not going to sit here and say to you there isn't an issue with some of our young people who are getting involved in a lifestyle that is problematic and risky, and difficult. But that's with all young people.

All young people, when they get to teenage years, they do things that they shouldn't, they take risks that they shouldn't take. So, we need to understand that there's some young people who we need to do a lot more work to support and ensure that they don't get involved in risky, damaging, and dangerous behaviour.

But the majority of young people are not going to be involved in that. They're not. And therefore, we shouldn't therefore, give the impression that the only thing that they-- that these knives-- that-- I mean, OK. If we said there's 300,000 Black young people in the UK. maybe a million, I don't know. But 300,000 half a million Black young people under the age of 18 in the UK. All right. And how much knife crime incidents are there in a year? Fortunately, not more than 100 in London and across the UK.

So, OK. Even if we said 200 to 300 young people, or even 500 of our young people are involved in violent crime. 500. Now that's 500 too much, but you don't need to be a mathematician to understand that what's 500 got to do with half a million? So, what about the other 495,000 young people? What about them? Do they not matter? And that's the issue. So, it's not trying to scale over the surface and say, well, 500 young people involved, or five young people involved in this sort of behaviour, we need to do something about it. It's not good.

Of course, we need to, but we shouldn't make that become the majority because it isn't. It's a very small percentage, a very worrying small percentage, but it's still a small percentage. So, I'll ask you, what are you, or what are we doing for the other 98% of our young people? and what are our conversations about the other 90% of our population? And there is none.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: That's a really interesting question. I couldn't say who should answer it. I'm not entirely sure who should answer it, maybe we answer it as a community, maybe we answer it as a society. Swinging over as to wrap up this conversation to the more positive.

There seems to me to be an overrepresentation of Black people in the media at the moment. That's my take on it, that it's not realistic. You turn on the TV, you'd think the UK is 95% Black.

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Yes.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I understand, I think to an extent, what the intention is with that. It's sort of making up for lost time, but it seems like overkill. Is that helpful? Do you see that as a positive thing, or do you see that as problematic in any way?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: I think-- depending on how you're looking at it because you say that, but in certain areas, it's still white. In all the key areas, it's still white. OK, you might see a few adverts here and there, but fundamentally—

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Not a few. [CHUCKLES]

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Well, OK. OK. OK. You might see, OK, they're all in all the adverts. All right, fine. But then, I suppose if you live in London or Birmingham or Manchester that reflects

your reality, to be honest with. If you live in a village in the middle of Cornwall, no. But if you live in modern Britain I suppose it's probably not that far out of the realm.

So, you could say they've gone a bit overkill, but personally, I'm not concerned about it. I'm concerned with who's actually behind the camera, who is actually commissioning it, and it's still the same. So, I think it's like you can put people at the front of the camera, but that's neither here nor there, you still got to look at who's behind the camera, who's got the power. And whether they put more Black people and people get upset about that, I think it's the wrong thing to get upset about.

To me, I don't care who's in front of the camera. It's who's behind it that I still care about. And the fact is there's not enough of us behind the camera still to make any difference in our society.

And I think that's what I'd like to focus on. Yeah. But yeah. You could look at it and you can chuckle to yourself, but that's all I do, chuckle. But it's not a big issue. The issue is still the power relations in our country. It's like football, we have loads of Black footballers in our Premier League.

But again, who's managing them? Who's coaching them? Who runs the football teams? It's still the same old, same old. So, it doesn't really matter what's in front of our eyes, that can always be-- I'm not a media expert or media person, but I know enough to know that that's an illusion and that's not really the important thing.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Well, I do agree with you there actually, I think there is not enough of the right type of people, there's not enough balance behind the camera and that's why we're seeing these sorts of slightly lopsided representations of reality. That's my take, my opinion. And I value what you have said, and I hope our listeners do too. Anthony, it's been an absolute pleasure talking to you. We've touched on a range of subjects.

I just wanted to ask you what the takeaway is, I think, for people, particularly Black parents who are perhaps, OU you staff members or OU students, what are the takeaways? How do they navigate these things? How do they start to understand narratives, reclaim narratives? How could you just wrap up this conversation for us on that note?

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: One of the things that never change is-- and it's a disconnect between Black parents and their kids. Because even though I went to school and I was born and raised here, I still don't get what my kids are going through as Black kids. And it's always the same, the world that each of us lives in is different. And even though we're Black, my experiences are different to kids who are growing up and going through the education system now. It's completely different.

I knew where my enemies were. I knew my teachers would say racist things to me. People would say-- I knew where I stood. With younger kids think, they feel that we're living in a raceless society. And then when they get hit up against a brick wall that is racial, they think it's about them, they internalize it because they haven't been trained to expect it. But I was always looking for it on every corner. Where as they can't see it.

So, I think we need to put ourselves in their position to understand where they-- and it's hard.

It's very difficult. But I think we've got to put our own hurt aside, our own experiences aside, and actually listen to them and to hear their experiences because they're going through something that we never went through. It's different to us, but it's different. And I think we've just got to do more listening and understanding.

And I think that one of the problems is if there's a barrier between the generations of Black people, then it makes it difficult for us to actually, as a community, as a society, as a whole to actually make strides together because we have to do it together with our young people. We can't be separate. And I think that's the takeaway. I think we need to sit down and listen and actually hear what your son or daughter is actually saying to you. And even if you've got a reaction to it, actually just stop there and listen.

I mean, it's hard to said than done. Don't get me wrong. But we need to do that. We've got to do that. And if we do that, I think we're halfway there. And at the moment we're not doing enough of that and we're leaving them to society to basically not do the right thing with them. And that's what's happening.

KATHERINE JEGEDE: Thank you very much, Dr. Anthony Gunter. We've been talking to Dr. Anthony Gunter. Senior lecturer in criminology here at the Open University. A PhD renowned academic and researcher. So many interesting things. Everything you said actually triggered 10 questions in my mind. But if I responded to everything, we'd be here all day. All I can say is, thank you very, very much for being on the program today. It's been absolutely fascinating talking to you, and I hope that we're able to have a conversation again with you soon.

Dr. Anthony Gunter, thank you very much.

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Thank you, Katherine. It's nice talking to a conservative.

[LAUGHTER]

I'm not shouting it.

[LAUGHTER]

KATHERINE JEGEDE: I call myself a moderate. I try to be open minded because I want to learn. I have my values, my political beliefs, they won't shift. But I am always open to dialogue.

So, it's been fun talking to you. I kept saying Gunter, I think I'm European. Gunter. Dr. Anthony Gunter, Thank you once again.

DR. ANTHONY GUNTER: Great. Thank you.