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A special episode with Professor Sandra Bucci and Dr Ola Abdelhadi

Episode transcript

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** Hi, my name is Ola and I'm currently doing a PhD funded through the National Institute for Health and Care Research Manchester Biomedical Research Centre, and I'm so excited today to be interviewing Professor Sandra Bucci, hopefully to inspire you to pursue a career in research. Hi Sandra, how are you today?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Hi. Good, thank you.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your work?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Yeah, sure. I'm a National Institute for Health and Care Research, Research Professor in Digital Mental Health. And I'm a Professor of Clinical Psychology here at The University of Manchester. And I'm also a Clinical Psychologist by background, so I'm an Honorary Consultant Clinical Psychologist at Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust and co-director of the Complex Trauma and Resilience Research Unit at Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust. And basically, in terms of my role, I lead a large programme of research in the area of digital mental health with a particular focus on working with people who experience severe mental health problems. I'm also co-founder of Care Loop Health, which is a spin-out from The University of Manchester.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** Sandra, what's your role in the Manchester BRC?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I co-lead the Digital sub-theme, which sits within the Mental Health Theme of the Manchester BRC.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** As part of International Women's Day, we are celebrating successful women researchers like Sandra. How does it feel to be one of the top 30 women in science and to hold such a prestigious NIHR Professor Fellowship?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Well, it's a fantastic honour. I think it's especially important for visibility for women not just in STEM (Science, Engineering, Technology and Mathematics), but across science. And being successfully awarded the Research Professorship was a real highlight. It was the first awarded at Manchester, so it was a great achievement, not just personally, but also for our Faculty at Manchester in particular for Mental Health at Manchester, because I feel the success of the award was the result of some fantastic mentorship that I've had, collaboration and supportive networks that I've had.

It also felt very validating of the work that we've been doing in mental health at Manchester. And it really feels like a responsibility not only to have an impact, but also to pay it forward, to help others navigate their own path, encourage more women to apply for prestigious fellowships and awards, and to keep pushing forward.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** Sandra, I'm sure you've had many proud moments in your career. What has been your proudest moment?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I guess there's not really been a single moment, but more a collection of moments that have been both big and small. In terms of the big milestones, I guess, being awarded the Research Professorship or being recognised as doing impactful work in science and securing grant funding and some big grant funding means I can do some cutting-edge research. They're the obvious moments.

But they're not the only moments that are important to recognise. Some of my proudest moments have been much quieter, so that may be, for example, seeing one of my mentees or a junior researcher gain confidence. That's been incredibly rewarding. Or seeing a project go from an idea through to applying for the grant funding, securing the funding, to seeing my research team in their flow, and through to hosting interdisciplinary events or events to showcase the work. And getting the work into clinical practice has been really rewarding.

And I suppose I've also had proud moments when I felt I've overcome challenges or when I didn't give up. So, for example, if I've had to fight for grant funding or overcome challenges in recruitment if I've been doing a study. They've been other moments that I felt proud of.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** What's helped you progress in your career?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I think it's been a combination of strategic approaches and peer support and mentor networks and perhaps personal qualities that have helped.

So, being proactive is one. I've put myself forward for opportunities. Whether that be applying for a fellowship, or leading a grant, or taking on a role, or even speaking at a conference, it's made me step outside of my comfort zone. And those opportunities have then built on each other.

Another thing that's helped me progress, I think has been mentorship. I really wouldn't have progressed in my career without some good mentorship. And I started this early. So my first boss, actually many years ago now, is still one of my mentors. And my current mentors are brilliant. They challenge me, they have a critical ear, they can be a critical friend, and they offer advice and have offered advice at important times in my career. But I've also had some very good sponsors, and sponsorship is a bit different to mentorship. So this is someone who actively champions you, who puts your name forward for opportunities and helps you get to the next level.

And some women who've been a sponsor and recommended me for promotions or whether that be leadership roles have been immensely helpful. Also, collaboration. Science is not an individual effort. I've built some very strong and long-lasting collaborations, and I can honestly say aligning yourself with people, as a research group, you are better together rather than seeing yourself necessarily in competition with your peers. You just have greater capacity for impact as a group rather than viewing yourself as an individual researcher. And I've been really fortunate in Mental Health at Manchester for the network that we have cultivated.

And in terms of personal qualities, I think being resilient and being adaptable have helped. A career in research has highs and lows. Grants get rejected, your experiments might fail, and progress can feel very slow. So setbacks are part of the process, and actually they can be an important time in shaping the work and where it goes next.

And being adaptable I think is also important in science. My research now is in a very different place to where I started and that's I think because I've adapted to a changing landscape, certainly in the area of healthcare that I work in. So I've shifted focus, and embraced new methodologies and worked outside of my discipline and I think that's been crucial in being able to progress my research.

I think having passion and energy to make a difference has been a really powerful driver. And I think that stems from my upbringing. I've come from an immigrant family where my parents migrated from Europe to Australia after the Second World War. And actually, the sort of values that instilled in me has profoundly shaped my work and my purpose. I saw firsthand the struggles that came with building something from the ground up. And that's instilled in me a strong sense of responsibility to help others. And I think when you see hardship it makes you value perseverance and hard work and how actually the power of education and research can change lives.

So knowing what motivates you and drives you and having a clear purpose, I think, is really important especially when you are faced with challenges.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** Thanks, Sandra. The points on resilience and your upbringing really resonate with me. From my upbringing, I also come from an immigrant family. My parents, they immigrated from Sudan to the UK to work here and their hard work has really instilled my sort of ethos with hardworking and that you try, try, try. Even if you fall, you try again. And so I can really resonate with that.

And then in terms of resilience, I feel like that is my ethos. I am somebody who has chronic health problems and I've never let that stop me. But that's really built up my resilience in terms of my personal life, but also in terms of my working life.

So I'm sure, Sandra, you've had lots of challenges and drawbacks in your career. Anything that comes to mind that's hindered your career?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I think there's been some structural and some personal. Self-doubt has been one of them. There's times where I've wondered, am I really good enough? Or am I really ready enough to apply for a fellowship or lead a project, or step into a leadership role? But I think it's important to emphasise that this is common, especially for women and especially for women from underrepresented groups.

But to overcome this, I have had to intentionally challenge these doubts and get some good mentorship around this, reminding myself that if I don't go for this, I won't help people through my research. And actually, that's worse than putting myself forward for things and risking being unsuccessful.

Another thing has been balancing career progression with other responsibilities. An academic career and a clinical academic career can be demanding. There's research, there's teaching, there's leadership roles, there can be clinical work and there's personal life of course, and that can be a difficult balance.

And academia, I think rewards overwork. You know, the job never feels done. And so early on in my career I wanted to be part of everything and that can easily implode if you don't keep an eye on things or have some boundaries. So, I learnt to set boundaries and prioritise what really aligns with your goals and the goals of the work. And trying not to feel guilty have been important lessons.

And the competitive nature of funding and applying for fellowships and grants. So the funding landscape is competitive and if your research isn't prioritised for funding, it can really feel like a setback and it can actually hinder your progression and the progression of the work. I just think it's important to remember that you're on a journey and to reframe any setbacks you might have as part of the process and use the feedback that you get to refine your ideas and try again.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I can really relate to your point about self-doubt. I think that's one of the things that I really struggle with is having imposter syndrome and feeling that I'm not worthy or not good enough for a career in research.

But I'm working through that and I'm really proud of myself to be doing a PhD and hopefully inspire other women and inspire, hopefully other mums that they can do this.

How would you say you've navigated your struggles and twists in your career path?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I've drawn strength from my background. I've mentioned that my parents immigrated from Europe to Australia after World War II and had many challenges and they started from having nothing really, and they built their lives from there. They weren't formally educated; they didn't speak the language and they had to develop a level of resilience and toughness and perseverance to make something of their lives. And I think those qualities were really instilled in me and my siblings. So having a level of resilience and determination and perseverance and not giving up can really be applied, I think, to a research context, and I think it's probably given me a deep-rooted drive to keep going. When I'm faced with a challenge, I remind myself of the bigger picture, and that really helps in those challenging times.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I loved your answers. Your parents must be so proud of you. I really feel like being adaptable and flexible has really helped me, and every time I've spoken to a successful researcher, they've always had such an interesting path to where they are now.

I started my life doing pathology and then paediatrics and now clinical genetics and now doing a PhD in genetics. I've had PhD opportunities early on in my career that I couldn't take or weren't given to me, which made me upset at the time, but I kind of feel like my career path has changed so I'm really happy that everything sort of turned out to where I am today.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Yeah, so you've also had a winding journey.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** So talking about mentorship, how do you feel is the best way to get a mentor? Should it be somebody that's working with you, somebody else for a more pastoral role, how would you go about it?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Okay, great question. I've had multiple mentors who've served different purposes at different times. So earlier on in my career, I think I selected mentors who I felt were maybe in a similar place to me. And I wanted more advice on how to navigate certain aspects of my career from women in particular who I felt had been through a similar thing.

So I was really looking for that alignment and that advice. And now actually I have asked for mentorship from people outside of my discipline or from people who may have had different experiences to be more challenging. Now for mentorship, I look more for challenge rather than alignment necessarily, although that is always important to have.

So I think it depends on what you need at the time and then you look for mentors who maybe can align with your context and the timing of your career. And you don't just have to have one mentor. You can have different mentors for different things so that they can serve a different purpose.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I think you may have found yourself a new mentee!

So hindsight is 20/20. Sandra, what do you feel advice-wise, would you give your younger self?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Three things. The first is that you belong in the room. Because you'll have moments where you feel that you don't fit in or that you have to work harder maybe than others to be taken seriously or to be heard, but your background and your experience and your perspectives are your strengths. And I would've liked to have realised that as my younger self.

I think the second thing is to apply for that opportunity. Even if you think you may not be quite ready, women often wait until they feel like they're perfectly qualified or their idea is perfectly formed, and you could miss an opportunity that could be really transformative. So take the leap and you'll work it out when you are there.

And the third thing is that there's time – you don't have to have everything figured out. And I think I probably thought I did as I looked around me and thought everyone else has this figured out. And as I've gotten older, I've realised that isn't the case.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I really resonated with ‘taking opportunities.’ I applied for this PhD actually when I was on maternity leave, in the depth of postpartum depression after a really complicated birth. And actually, I'm so proud of myself for pushing myself because I wouldn't be here today doing this amazing BRC PhD.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Gosh, well done. That must have been a really difficult time.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** It was really difficult, but I almost felt like it was like a turning point in my life personally and in my career because it really gave me self-belief that I could fight or do anything.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** And where do you feel that's come from?

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I think that's really come from what you were talking about, your upbringing, my parents working hard to educate me and my siblings and to also provide for their family back home in Sudan, which is quite common in Sudanese community where you have to send money back home to help people. So they've always had a really hard work ethic and they've always pushed me to be my best.

I also feel like my personal struggles, my own chronic health problems, have always pushed me to seek help, I'm very good at saying help me. I've been in counselling, I've done therapy, but I've also realised how much I've overcome and it hasn't been since I've taken a step back and looked at how much I've overcome, realised that actually I can do anything that I put my mind to.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Amazing.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** What top tips would you give to early career colleagues like me to help us navigate our career paths?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Well, firstly, I would say don't be afraid to put yourself forward. Many of us hesitate thinking that we need to be more ready before applying for that fellowship or applying for that award. Don't be afraid to put yourself forward.

You can probably tell, I think the power of mentorship and sponsorship is really important. So find mentors and build a strong support network. That's crucial.

I'd also say don't get stuck in an echo chamber. Find people that challenge you and your ideas and your way of thinking. Because it will make the work better.

And learn to manage what you might perceive to be rejection. Developing that resilience is a valuable skill, in a research or a clinical or an academic career. So I would say to learn, to reflect, and to push forward following that reflection.

And be proactive and intentional. So don't wait for opportunities necessarily. Let people know what you want and where you want your work to go and what you can offer.

And lastly, I would say to keep purpose at the centre of what you do. So remind yourself why you started, what you started. Because you're going to need that, especially when you face challenges.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I absolutely love that. And one of the things that you were talking about was challenges or drawbacks, and I always say after every setback there comes a comeback.

What top tips would you give to early career colleagues to ensure that their work is recognised and rewarded?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Yeah, I think this can feel an uncomfortable one sometimes, especially for women, I think. I guess one tip is to share your success and the impact of the work and the impact that you've made where you can, so you speak up about your research, whether that be in a meeting or at a conference, or going up to speak to somebody. Share that success, or the impact, if you don't feel comfortable necessarily with sharing a success.

Another tip is to apply for awards and apply for fellowships regularly, even if you don't get it. The process of applying actually helps you articulate your impact, which will make you better prepared next time. Build a strong network and actively engage in your research community. So go to events if you can, engage with your senior colleagues or societies and try and be visible in your community in whatever way that you can.

I would also say, say 'yes' to presenting your work. So if you're given an opportunity to speak or present, take it. And I think an important one is to collaborate with the right people, and that can take time to find, but this includes people who they may not necessarily be the most well-known person in a field, but I think it's important early on to collaborate with people who will elevate you and give you the time that you need to help you develop.

Lastly, I would say is to try and be that person who lifts others up. Because as you lift others up, they'll be inclined to lift you up, and that's how you build a network and a supportive network, which will help sustain you over what can be a long career.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I absolutely love that. I just feel like positive energy, positive vibes, especially in a research team, is so important because we all lead really busy, complicated lives. Any sort of uplifting energy is always welcomed.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Yeah, and especially in those tough times, I think.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I would love to take a role in the future in leadership, but why Sandra, do you think women are underrepresented at senior leadership levels in research?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** I think that's been a complex mix of historical, structural and cultural factors.

So sometimes senior leadership roles can be filled through informal networks and where senior leadership roles have historically been filled more by men, women have had less access to sponsorship and mentorship and being put forward or encouraged to go for senior leadership roles.

I think career interruptions has been a challenge. So where women have had childcare or other caring responsibilities that's been one of the challenge areas. And I think in our field maybe there's been fewer role models. So when you don't see people like you necessarily in positions, you might be less likely to aspire to those positions or see how to make it work and how it can be made to work.

And I think there's something about gendered expectations. Traits that are associated with strong leadership for men perhaps can be viewed more negatively for women. For example, being ambitious can be viewed perhaps more negatively for women who might be perceived as aggressive or confrontational.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** What sort of changes in current practice or culture do you think is needed to make a difference to women's equality in research?

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Well, a couple of things. I actually think we need to have men advocate for women. Often, it's women being sent on women's leadership programmes and there's all women in the room. And we're talking about things that are just wider than the people who are necessarily in the room. So I think it's actually important we have different people advocating for women. It's not just a women's issue.

I think there are structural and cultural changes at institutional levels that are needed. It's fixing a system rather than fixing women as a message, I think is really important. And that may include things like transparent promotion criteria, flexible work policies without penalties. And perhaps broader metrics of success, particularly in research and academia, they can be quite limited. That's rooted in that historical context of what it means to be successful in academia. So I think some broader success metrics and criteria are important.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I really like the part when you said it's not just a woman's problem. It's so interesting. I feel like in my career, a lot of the people that have believed in me have been my male colleagues that have pushed me and seen my inner greatness, which I have never seen. I definitely think there needs to be a culture change and to really promote equality in research for women.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** It's also about what we're striving for: equality, diversity, and inclusion for everybody, irrespective of gender or sexuality or ethnicity or class. It's about having better representation in all areas.

**Dr Ola Abdelhadi:** I completely agree. I've absolutely loved talking to you, Sandra. I could talk to you all day. I hope this is gonna be inspiring and hopefully giving people a deeper dive into the wonderful mind of Sandra Bucci.

**Professor Sandra Bucci:** Thank you.