

## *The Psychology Department and the Community*

*Dr. Sandra Scicluna Calleja*

*The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. (Thoreau)*



A COUNTRY is frequently evaluated on the basis of its economic and political activities. However these activities are dependent on the individuals and groups who execute them. For this reason, strong and nurturant communities, on national and local levels, underpin the effective functioning of a country. Helping professions have an essential role to play in this arena through interventions at individual and community levels. Members of staff of the Psychology Department have actively participated in this initiative, in a deliberate attempt to foster healing, growth and support in Maltese communities. What follows is a brief analysis of social change from a psychologist's point of view, followed by an outline of the major values and actions implemented by the University of Malta's Psychology Department.

The current socio-political climate is one of growth and change. Growth is beneficial, indeed essential to humans but it is also a human process that, by its instability, gives rise to psychological stressors which need to be addressed. Change promises better but creates difficulty, particularly within vulnerable persons in the community, some of whom are:

- the physically, psychologically, socially, or economically disadvantaged;
- the privileged who would like to maintain a status quo;
- the ones who find themselves suddenly on the undesirable side of the community as a result of a change in social values;
- The executors of change who need to develop new skills and resources to match the growth that is needed.

This growth is occurring against the backdrop of the increasing prominence of individualism and increasing material prosperity. From a psychological standpoint these qualities have their benefits and liabilities. Individualist living heightens the responsibility of the individual to better his or her life, placing more responsibility on the self. Some of the problems with this attitude are that it weakens the social bonds that have traditionally kept Maltese communities together. It diffuses or institutionalises civic spirit and gives rise to the *new poor*: the lonely, the socially isolated, and a new disadvantaged class of people who function best not on their own initiative but as part of an interdependent whole. The primacy of the individual's beliefs and choices also fosters polarisation, social division and weakened family ties. The increase in material prosperity has liberated us from the insecurity and urgency of economically precarious living and given us a choice regarding what quality of life we choose to pursue, but it has also given rise to a series of psycho-social issues, notably: the tyranny of having to maintain the image of good living; the obligation to be happy; the expectations of easy or consistent success; deep disillusion and loss of meaning on realisation that money does not control everything; the psychological weakness that is fostered in persons "who have everything;" and the pursuit of wealth at the expense of other essential aspects of living such as relationships and personal development.

The situation in a nutshell is aptly stated by Jennifer James, a North American cultural anthropologist who states that:

*The profound changes we are facing today would normally take two or three generations to be assimilated. We are trying to make the stretch in a decade. No wonder the result is anxiety and even chaos. We face a depth and breadth of change unparalleled since the Industrial Revolution. The old values and institutions are breaking up, and we are unsure what will replace them" (1996, p.16).*

For this reason, helping professionals need to give priority to supporting individuals and strengthening communities.

*The Department is actively committed to working towards promoting strong supportive families characterised by healthy relationships, skilled in overcoming difficulty and promoting socio-political structures that recognise the importance of the family and invest in it*

The members of staff of the Psychology Department have always valued and maintained strong links with Maltese communities by reflecting on and researching prominent issues and intervening through education, training, assessment, therapy, consultancy and supervision. The Department has always perceived that its mandate, within this uniquely small community is also to use its expertise directly for social growth. Its most prominent initiatives are the following:

### ***Strengthening families***

Intervention in families has consistently been given importance because as a noted sociologist of the Maltese family states: “besides being a major social institution, it is the basic unit in the whole social structure” (Tabone, 1987, p.1).

On the level of psychological interventions, members of staff have developed practical skills and experience in the fields of family therapy, couples counselling, relationship problems and child assessment and therapy. In order to strengthen this tradition of family healing, they are involved in training family therapists and couples counsellors, as well as preparing all locally trained psychologists to work with Maltese families. Relevant research conducted includes studies of marital conflict, mating and mate selection, intimate relationships over time, families and poverty and effects of mobile phones use on relationships.

On the policy level, one member of staff presently chairs the *National Family Commission*, set up to advise government on family policy and to conduct research and campaigns. Several other members have at one time or another been involved in consultancy to social service agencies.

We are actively committed to working towards promoting strong supportive families characterised by healthy relationships, skilled in overcoming difficulty and promoting socio-political structures that recognise the importance of the family and invest in it.

### ***Promoting inclusion and democracy***

The value of inclusion has been very strongly espoused and extensive work to foster inclusive communities has been undertaken. Society tends to exclude persons who are in any way perceived as deficient or unusual. This normally includes disabled persons, gifted persons, the mentally ill, the poor and the poorly educated. These are the populations that are in the greatest need and the Psychology Department is very sensitive to this fact.

Most of the work on inclusion has focused on children since they constitute that part of the population that is least able to help itself and because child intervention is a sure way of influencing future social values. Departmental members have been involved in the setting up and running of two agencies aimed at providing assessment and specialised education to children with disabilities. In addition, there has been extensive collaboration with the state's Education Division to introduce inclusive methods of education where disabled children are, as far as possible, placed within ordinary classes and provided with additional individual help. Sensitivity to inclusive values has also served to bring poor school performers to the fore and implemented practices for diagnosing and working with the learning disabled.

Through its specialist expertise in the area of learning disabilities the Department has been involved in the setting up and running of an innovative private school designed according to the latest know-how in the psycho-educational field. To this end, academic training courses are provided for the teaching of children with special needs and for training classroom facilitators who work with them. Research currently focuses on the diagnosis and treatment of autism, technology for persons with disability, as well as evaluating present inclusive measures.

The Department lays emphasis on the notion of a democratic society where every person is equal and important. Our social psychologist has run an organ donation campaign in order to study how attitudes can be changed as a result of which, the number of persons holding organ donor cards doubled over the period of the campaign. The same person also sits on both the state appointed Committee for the Advancement of Women set up to advocate women's rights and to advise on national policies, as well as on the Quality and Ethics Board of the Broadcasting Authority.

### ***Taking a stand against socially condoned violence***

Another social ill that the Psychology Department has addressed is the type of violence that society tends to turn a blind eye on. The prevalent social attitude in these cases is that the seriousness of such violence is overestimated. Intervention focuses on three manifestations of this phenomenon: bullying, domestic violence and sexual harassment.

Up to some years ago bullying, particularly at school, was perceived as an unavoidable reality that children had to learn to deal with. Extensive research has examined this phenomenon and attention has been drawn to the prevalence and seriousness of this issue as well as to the emotional reactions of school bullies and their victims.

Supervision and advice was provided in the setting up and running of a treatment programme for male perpetrators of domestic violence by the local social service agency APPOGG. It is a pleasure to note that as a result of this programme social attitudes towards domestic violence are slowly beginning to change. Domestic violence is renowned for being a silent violence, victimising and isolating the women who are frequently the target of this violence.

In the area of sexual harassment, intervention has included the education and creation of awareness about this reality, countering the prevalent belief that victims of harassment are "making a fuss about nothing." University-wide complaints regarding sexual harassment have been dealt with and advice provided to other agencies regarding the implementation of policies on sexual harassment measures. It is to be noted that the University of Malta was one of the foremost institutions in Malta to devise and implement a regular formal policy on sexual harassment.

### ***Promoting effective leadership***

In a way leadership can be conceived of as the motor that moves the community. Ineffective leadership tends to halt community responsiveness and growth. For this reason, the fostering of effective leadership is another area of interest and has resulted in the publication of a much used reference manual in leadership skills training. Extensive leadership skill training workshops for leaders from many domains of society ranging from state officials to religious leaders have also been provided. Such efforts have given rise to many local initiatives that have brought the notion of quality leadership to the fore.

Over the years a programme has been developed, designed to foster practical skills aimed at preparing future helping professionals to be better leaders. The major skills imparted in these courses are: interpersonal, intrapersonal, group, helping and teamwork skills. The practicality of these courses has rendered them useful and a very good strategy in the formation of attitudes and behaviours, and has made them very popular.

Consultancy work and personnel selection for various Maltese governmental and private organisations helps to foster quality workplaces and provide leadership that reconciles the focus on persons and their needs to the exigencies of the organisation. Current research conducted in this area focuses on psychological contracts in the workplace.



On a more immediate level, all departmental members are aware of their leadership role in the community and participate as such on the national level through presentations, TV shows, local magazines, and in the communities where they live.

### ***Fostering all round health***

The area of Health Psychology proposes a notion of health that contrasts with traditional medical views. Health is perceived as spanning not only the physical and mental domain, but also the social. Initiatives in this direction have included an anti-smoking campaign on campus, research on human resilience and on perceived health hazards, as well as the provision of relevant psychological training for health professionals.

Space constraints prevent elaborating on other research such as: teacher stress, exploring the “psychopathology” of the healthy, development of psychotherapeutic intervention strategies, the narcissist as an emotional abuser, and the creation of structures that facilitate communication.

The final point has to do with the personal and the professional. A personalised view of psychology holds that one cannot separate the person from the profession. The psychotherapeutic concepts of transference and counter-transference are ample indications of this. Some important personal values that staff bring into their work are: integrity, professional excellence, hope, love, respect, depth, the pursuit of meaning, care, compassion, and solidarity. They bring their own personhood into their work. As with all other persons, they bring their assets and they bring those aspects of self which Carl Jung has termed "the shadow." For this reason the Psychology Department itself is a form of micro community, both conflictual and cooperative where the persons themselves focus on their own development and the practice of the above-mentioned values on themselves. This struggle to maintain an effective working community and to work through differences creates a human affinity to the client population.

This has been a brief outline of the workings of the Psychology Department. Last but not least, the preparation of future psychologists through a unique professional quality training model where Clinical, Counselling and Educational branches are brought closer together by the introduction of a substantial common training component, is the long term contribution of the Department to the community. □

#### *References:*

- James, J., *Thinking in the Future Tense: Leadership Skills for a New Age* (New York. Simon and Schuster, 1996).  
Tabone, C., *The Secularisation of the Family in Changing Malta* (Malta. Dominican Publication, 1987).

***Dr. Scicluna Calleja heads the Department of Psychology in the Faculty of Education. This paper has been prepared in collaboration with its members of staff.***