L-Università ta' Malta
Faculty for Social Wellbeing

Societas.Expert

FACULTY FOR **SOCIAL WELLBEING**

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing research magazine for academics, students, alumni, stakeholders and the general public an initiative in collaboration with Corporate ID Group.

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Contents

Editorial

PROF. ANDREW AZZOPARDI
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

PROF. PAULANN GRECH
Faculty of Health Sciences | University of Malta

In today's rapidly evolving world, the concept of social wellbeing has transcended traditional boundaries, calling for a more holistic and integrated approach. This is where transdisciplinarity comes into play, revolutionising our approach to the intricate fabric of human wellbeing and quality of life. Whilst as a term, transdisciplinarity may at first sound arcane, it clearly indicates that wellbeing strategies need to go beyond interdisciplinary approaches. It is all about pushing the boundaries related to individual academic and professional disciplines. It is about sharing the common goal of weaving these complex areas and disciplines whilst navigating around the various issues related to social wellbeing. This endeavour has been one of the Faculty for Social Wellbeing's main priorities over the past decade.

This issue of Societas.Expert delves into the very heart of what makes transdisciplinarity so crucial in academia. It addresses topics that were presented at the Faculty's conference in May 2023, titled: Transdisciplinarity at its Cutting Edge. In this research magazine issue, we encounter stories of synergy and collaboration, triumphs and failures, lessons learnt and renewed plans. Welcome to a reality where boundaries are blurred, pragmatism and synergistic efforts are the vital elements, and attaining the highest level of wellbeing is the goal – welcome to transdisciplinarity in social wellbeing.

Introductory Note

JESMOND SALIBA
Corporate Id Group

"We have to transcend our differences to transform our future." - Antonio Guterres

This publication is a reflection that when we are ready to transcend our differences by using a common ground, we can get together to transform our future and the future of our generations.

However a number of questions come to mind. What should be the common ground? How are we going to transcend our differences? Why are we so obsessed with what distinguishes us rather than what unites us?

I would be the first to say that societal wellbeing should be our common ground. Those contributing to this publication also indicate how and where this can be attained. However one key aspect which would lead us to reach this is the need to go beyond the self and be ready to listen rather than just hear, and in the process actively seek common postions and build around them.

In this aspect, one needs also to put together the value which different areas can contribute in our pursuit of wellbeing. The academic side, the policy side, civil society, the corporate world and every individual who means well, can make a change. But transformation will happen when we transcend our differences and build around them while respecting each others' contribution and perspective.

The contributors in this publication give us a myriad of perspectives on a number of issues which are having an impact on the core of our society; the people. People remain crucial and we need to actively seek ways how to retain people at the centre of decisions and developments which are taking place in a number of areas; from regulatory to economic decisions, from technology to policy making.

Perhaps it is time to put humanity back at the centre and in turn be 'the common ground' which leads us to transcend over our differences, in a way that we can redirect and transform our future.

Transdisciplinary scholarship at the University of Malta

PROF. CARMEN SAMMUT
Pro-Rector for Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach
University of Malta

Transdisciplinarity is a growing movement that emphasizes collaboration and integration across traditional academic boundaries. It is a fascinating and rapidly evolving area of study that involves the integration of knowledge and methods from multiple specialised disciplines to solve complex problems. This approach recognizes that different fields of study contribute unique insights and that by combining these perspectives, we may develop more comprehensive and effective solutions.

The University's Strategic Plan 2020-25 encourages interdisciplinary teaching and research on environmental, social and economic sustainability issues. It also encourages interdisciplinary collaboration between academic and administrative units. Interdisciplinarity involves collaboration between experts to combine insights. However, interdisciplinary work typically involves maintaining disciplinary boundaries and perspectives. Experts from each discipline may contribute their own insights and methods, but they may not necessarily integrate their work into a single, cohesive approach.

What is being discussed here takes us a step further: Transdisciplinary involves the integration of knowledge and methods from multiple disciplines into a single, unified approach. The goal of transdisciplinary work is to transcend disciplinary boundaries and create new frameworks that can integrate diverse perspectives. This approach recognizes that complex problems require a holistic and integrated approach that goes beyond the limitations of any single discipline.

Thus, transdisciplinary scholarship requires effective communication and collaboration. This means breaking down silos, scepticism and cynical stances to be able to work together to find common ground and shared objectives. It also means being open to different ideas and ways of thinking and being willing to learn from others. To achieve such collaboration, communication is crucial, as are the creation of platforms and dedicated fora. Encouraging transdisciplinary approaches benefits students who may not merely engage with new areas but may also consider innovative social enterprises or possibly business startups.

Moreover, it is frequently acknowledged that transdisciplinary work is required to reach sustainability goals, to meet the most pressing problems of climate change and global health. It is also required to help us cope with the advantages and challenges posed by new technologies. It is required in a world where the 'god father' of AI Geoffrey Hinton cautions that machines are becoming dangerously super intelligent just when other studies alert us that human IQ is on the decline.

Transdisciplinary scholarship is required to address inequality and injustice. This approach can be complementary to intersectionality, a concept that describes the ways in which different forms of inequality (such as racism, sexism, and homophobia) intersect and interact with each other to create unique experiences of discrimination and marginalization. By integrating an intersectional analysis into transdisciplinary scholarship, researchers can develop more nuanced and effective solutions to complex questions.

Let us not be deceived into thinking that transdisciplinary will happen on its own, just by talking about it. It will surely not materialize unless there is a coherent effort and institutional commitment. It requires support and investment. We must be ready to bridge disciplinary boundaries, manage divergent viewpoints, and navigate political complexities – and by political I also understand inter-faculty turf war games, which may or may not exist.

I must add that the promotion of transdisciplinary collaboration among faculty and students will probably fail if we take a top-down approach. I have been an academic long enough to know that some of the most successful stories at the University of Malta are the result of the vision, energy and enthusiasm of individuals or groups of individuals who champion one cause or another. My message is that the strength of any faculty lies in its ability to reach out and cross-fertilise with various disciplines and professions and to engage in collaborations. We must support and invest in transdisciplinary scholarship so that we may benefit from the synergizes that it generates.

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Dr Claire Casha holds a lecturing post with the Department of Child and Family Studies within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta. Claire graduated from the University of Malta with a first class Bachelor of Psychology (Honours) degree in 1998 and a distinction Master in Family Studies degree in 2014. She was awarded a Ph.D. in Social Policy from the University of York in 2024. Her Ph.D. study focused on fathers' views of parenting arrangements post-separation and explored the interface between family law and doing family through gender.

Dr Marlene Cauchi is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Counseling within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. Her lectures revolve around group work, cultural competence, psychoanalysis, and social research methods. Dr Cauchi's publications have addressed young people's experiences of religion, church attachment, transcultural counselling, and school counselling. She is also a counselling psychologist and supervisor, with a focus on working with adult survivors of trauma and abuse, attachment issues, addiction, spirituality, and groups. She is highly engaged in the community through formation for priests, safeguarding, and youth work. Dr Cauchi is currently in group analytic training.

Hon. Dr Katya DeGiovanni MP graduated with an honours degree in Psychology at the University of Malta in 1997 attaining the shield for best dissertation. She then followed a PGCE in Primary Education specializing in inclusion in 1998 following which she commenced her career at Fra Diego Bonanno Girls' Secondary School, Marsa. In 2000, she joined the Programme for Teaching and Learning in Diversity at the University of Malta and trained as a Let Me Learn Trainer and Consultant both in Malta and at Rowan University, USA. Dr DeGiovanni is a Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Scientist having read for an MSc in Occupational Psychology between 2001 and 2003. She also holds a Fellowship from the British Psychological Society as well as a Ph.D. focusing on school to work transitions from the University of Nottingham. Dr De Giovanni also served as consultant for the European Commission and for the Council of Europe involving VET and Quality Assurance in Educational Settings in Malta having held the posts of Lecturer, Deputy Director and Director at MCAST between 2002 and 2012.

Dr DeGiovanni served on the Board for the Treatment of Sex Offenders, on the Malta Psychology Profession Board as Chairperson and was also member of the Multidisciplinary Board. Until recently she also was the Technical Member on the Senior Appointments Advisory Committee for the Office of the Prime Minister and also Chairperson of the Board of the Authority for Social Care Standards. Dr DeGiovanni also currently holds a visiting professorship position in Organisational Psychology at the University of Padova. She is also the Director of the University of Malta Cottonera Resource Centre. In March 2022, Dr DeGiovanni was elected Member of Parliament representing Partit Laburista on the 4th Electoral District.

Prof. Ruth Falzon is a University of Malta Associate Professor and founder member of the Department of Counselling within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. Her teaching loads, research interests, and publications are Neurodiversity, Emotional Literacy, Counselling Research Methodology, and School Counselling. She has published in several national and international journals and edited books; presented at and organised numerous prominent national and international conferences; delivered keynote speeches, reviewed several international journals; and is on the editorial board of two journals. She is passionate about counselling due to its non-medical and empowerment model towards wellbeing. She takes community engagement seriously and is an elected Council member of the

European Dyslexia Association, International Association for Counselling; Malta Association for the Counselling Profession; Malta Dyslexia Association; and Malta Federation of Professional Associations. She continuously lobbies for equity and inclusion for all.

Prof. Carmen Sammut is Pro-Rector for Student and Staff Affairs and Outreach at the University of Malta. Her current administrative roles include those of Chair of The Board of G.F. Abela Junior College, The Institute for European Studies, The International School for Foundation Studies and the Centre for Environmental Education & Research (CEER). She also Chairs the University's Equity Committee that is responsible for the implementation of the Equity, Diversity and Inclusion plan. Prof. Sammut lectures within the Faculty of Media and Knowledge Science (MAKS) and within the Department of International Relations (Faculty of Arts). Her research interest intersects the fields of media theory, media history, international relations, gender studies and comparative politics.

Prof. Roger Slee is the Diamond Jubilee Professor of Disability and Inclusion in the School of Sociology and Social Policy at The University of Leeds. Roger was formerly the Deputy Director General of Education in Queensland, Australia with responsibility for Strategic Policy, Curriculum Reform, and Workforce Development. He has also been a Dean of Education at The University of Western Australia, Goldsmiths College – University of London, and McGill University. He also held the Chair of Inclusive Education at the Institute of Education, UCL.

Roger has been engaged as an advisor to governments around the world and wrote the scoping technical paper for UNESCO's 2020 Global Education Monitoring Report and works with the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education advising on inter-governmental policy development in inclusive education. Roger has been appointed as a senior adviser for Deloitte Access Economics on state-wide government reviews of education for disabled students (Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales, Northern Territory & Federal Department of Education).

Roger is the Founding Editor of the International Journal of Inclusive Education and the Journal of Disability Studies in Education. He has written and edited numerous books and has been a CI on Australian Research Council "Discovery" and "Linkage" grants as well as research grants with UNICEF, Save the Children, and the Open Society Foundation. Roger was the Chair of the Board of Directors of Children & Young People with Disabilities Australia. Most recently Roger was awarded an Honorary Doctorate and had a Chair established in his Name at the Bernardo O'Higgins University in Chile.

Dr Mary Grace Vella, a probation and social inclusion officer by profession is a Resident Academic at the Department of Criminology, Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta and has taught in a number of post-secondary educational institutions, including the Giovanni Curmi Higher Secondary School, the Institute for Health and Social Care at MCAST and the Department of Systems of Knowledge at the Junior College. She is an activist and founding member of Moviment Graffitti and other civil society organizations dealing with humanitarian, environmental, and animal rights issues.

Matthew Vassallo is a nurse by profession. After completing an undergraduate degree in nursing, he went on to read for a Master in Family Studies. He is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Psychology within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. His Doctoral research focuses on minimising the impacts that affected others experience, as a result of someone else's gambling problem.

Associate Professor Mark Vicars is a teaching and research academic in the College of Arts, Education, Business, Law, Education and IT at Victoria University, Melbourne. His main research interests are literacy education and qualitative research methodologies. He has been awarded the Australian Learning and Teaching Council Citation for pedagogical approaches that motivate, inspire and support socially disadvantaged and culturally diverse students to overcome barriers to learning . Mark is lead editor of Qualitative Research Journal, series editor for The Praxis of English Language (Brill/ Sense) and is a founding member of the International Institute for Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Leadership.

Dr Daniella Zerafa is a social worker by profession. She has worked for ten years in family and children's services including child protection services. She has also been a full-time Resident Academic at the University of Malta for the past fifteen years where her work entails the training and education of future social workers. Her Doctoral research focused on child protection decision making. Until recently, she supervised social workers employed in a residential facility for boys and was also a member of the Malta Social Work Profession Board for a number of years. Together with her husband she is a foster parent of three children, two girls and a boy, an identity which she gratefully and proudly embraces.

Being well in an unwell world

PROF. ROGER SLEE
Diamond Jubilee Chair of Disability & Inclusion
University of Leeds

There's more than a little prescience in the opening pages of Manuel Castells' 2019 book, Rupture: The Crisis of Liberal Democracy. Let's turn to Castells' himself, and it is important to acknowledge that he is writing this before pandemic – before the onslaught of COVID-19. For the record, on April 26th, 2023 the World Health Organisation reported 764,474,387 cumulative cases of COVID-19 globally and 6,915,286 deaths (WHO, 2023a) on its COVID-19 Dashboard. WHO itself suggests that this data understates the impact of COVID (WHO, 2023b). Back to Castells -

> *There are malignant winds blowing on this blue planet. Our lives are reeling in the maelstrom of multiple crises. An economic crisis that persists through labour insecurity and low wages. A fanatical terrorism that fractures human existence, feeds day-to- day fear and fuels restrictions on liberty in the name of security. A seemingly inexorable march towards our only home, Earth, becoming uninhabitable. The permanent threat of resorting to wars as a way of dealing with conflicts. Rampant violence against women who dare to be themselves. A whole galaxy of communications dominated by lies, now known as post-truth. A transparent society in which we have all been turned into data. And a culture reduced to entertainment, built on stimulating our basest instincts and the commercialisation of our demons.*
> *(Castells, 2019:3)*

A self-proclaimed analyst of crises, Castells then suggests that there is an even deeper crisis "… which has devastating consequences on the (in)capability of dealing with the multiple crises that poison our lives". This more profound crisis is "… the rupture of the relationship between those who govern and the governed" (Castells, 2019:3). Testing this claim is not difficult. You will remember Donald Trump's call of: "You have to show strength. … Be there, be wild!" which mobilised an angry mob, including the orange-hatted far-right Proud Boys, to descend on Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. on January 6, 2021, with malicious intent (Barry & Frenkel, 2021). The world watched aghast as the terror unfolded. What could be more emblematic of Castells' observation?

> *Continuing this somewhat distressing introduction and with your permission, I'll return to my opening pages for a string of essays collected in Inclusive Education Isn't Dead, It Just Smells Funny:*

> *Political landscapes change and with it so too the lexicons of public debate. Hate is no longer whispered; its pitch is loud and shrill. For as Toni Morrison (2017) who was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 tells us with elegant force:*
>
> *"Why should we want to know the stranger when it is easier to estrange another? Why should we want to close the distance when we can close the gate?"*
> *The Trump presidency, undersigned by fear and loathing, is building a social imaginary of national fortification, banishment of the immigrant, and derision of the basic principles of fairness. .... In true Hegelian form, Zizek (2016) reminds us that these disparities reflect the presence of the negative deep within the weave of those things we offer as fundamental positives. It's not a case of good co-existing with evil, but more a case of evil lurking deep within good. That which it commissions preys on the essence of democracy: freedom of speech, movement, and association. Classic expressions of democracy condemn us to "defend to the death" the right of expression of those who would tear democracy and freedom apart. When our foundational beliefs are threatened, we must not capitulate. We must redouble our efforts to restore that which we believe in.*
> *(Slee, 2018a:1)*

Castells' prophetic observations are sadly underlined and amplified by:

- The regularity of devastating climatic events.
- The Russian invasion of Ukraine.
- Devastating events in the Middle East.
- The escalation of warfare in Sudan as Lt. Generals Abdul Fattah Al-Burhan and Lt. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo allow their personal animosity to engulf the nation in yet another unnecessary war that has sent hundreds of thousands of people into exile.
- Escalating hostility towards those seeking asylum.
- The growing gap between poverty and privilege both between and within nations.
- The quiet discrimination against and exclusion of vulnerable population cohorts locally and globally.
- The continuing fracture of politics and rise of populism.

Before the 2020 pandemic and his untimely death, Ulrich Beck's book Metamorphosis of the World declared his belief that the world was unhinged – meaning the world was broken and it had gone mad (Beck, 2016). It is not a well world.

This address is offered as a provocation – what can we do about the state of the world as social scientists? Marx's (1969) critique of Ludwig Feuerbach which was originally published as an appendix to Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy in 1888 comprises eleven theses. Thesis Eleven has become one of the most familiar and enduring quotes from Marx:

> *The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.*

In his work on the end of capitalism Streeck (2016), rises to a challenge issued by Burawoy (2005; see also 2021) in his Presidential Address to the American Sociology Association; namely the challenge to explore the public mission of sociology. Streeck (2016: 237) was fascinated "... with the contrast between the progressive decay of politics and economy in the United States and the star-studded social sciences departments from Harvard to Stanford". "What was all this brilliance good for?" he asks.

He calls for sociology to ready itself "for the moment in which the foundations of modern society will again have to be rethought" (p. 250). I am convinced that moment is upon us.

In the remainder of this address, I will consider the state of what is referred to as inclusive education with specific reference to disabled students. My use of the reference: disabled students is deliberate and not in keeping with the people first preference for "students with disabilities". My intention, in keeping with the British Disabled People's Movement is to reaffirm disablement as a social construct; a consequence of a world unable to meet the demands of justice and difference.

Let me suggest that as the discourses of identity, diversity and inclusion have become more emphatic in education policy, the reality is that as Zygmunt Bauman suggests we are increasingly mixaphobic (Bauman, 2004). We have passed that moment in education where business as usual is acceptable (Slee, 2019). Ironically, I will draw on lessons from pandemic to suggest how we might establish transdisciplinary-based intellectual activism. In a recent essay, John Gray (Kaplan, Gray & Thompson, 2023:24) writes:

> *Human beings confront tragedy when they know that whatever they do may not be enough to avert disaster. In such circumstances a measure of fatalism is reasonable, though it need not entail passivity.*

This address is my steadfast reminder to myself to build resistance to the gravitational pull of collective fatalism.

As inclusion recedes

As a resident of England, I was distressed by the publication in March of this year of The Special Education and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision Plan (DfE, 2023a) which was presented to the parliament in Westminster by the Secretaries of State for Education, and Health and Social Care: Gillian Keegan and Steve Barclay. An accompanying press release was posted on March 2 2023, by Claire Coutinho the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing announcing The Plan and the establishment of the National SEND and Alternative Provision Implementation Board. Why is this cause for distress? Let's turn to the announcement itself in a press release with the banner proclaiming: "Transformational reform begins for children and young people with SEND: Plan for better, fairer access to high quality special educational needs and disabilities support".

> *The SEND and AP improvement plan published today (Thursday 2 March) confirms investment in training for thousands of workers so children can get the help they need earlier, alongside thousands of additional specialist school places for those with the greatest needs – as 33 new special free schools are approved to be built as of today.*
> *(DfE, 2023b: my emphasis)*

Further into the press release, we receive more detail:

> *The local authorities selected today to have 33 new special free schools built in their areas add to the 49 already in the pipeline. These new places come with the government's £2.6 billion investment between 2022 and 2025 to increase special school and alternative provision capacity.*
> *(DfE, 2023b)*

Let me quickly register some observations on the United Kingdom's response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) and its application through The Special Education and Disabilities (SEND) and Alternative Provision Plan (DfE, 2023a).

First, the less than United Kingdom, comprising four education jurisdictions with divergent approaches to the education of students with disabilities, constitutes a single signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. In April 2009 the Houses of Lords and Commons' Joint Committee on Human Rights tabled, United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities: Reservations and Interpretative Declaration, the twelfth report of the parliamentary session of 2008 – 09 (House of Commons, 2009). For the United Kingdom government it declared, the general education system refers to both mainstream and special schools and the project of inclusive education is best served by the existence of both.

> *... the Government feels it necessary to enter a reservation and an interpretative declaration to make clear its understanding that a commitment to inclusive education is not incompatible with the continued existence of special schools.*
> *(House of Commons, 2009: 17)*

Accordingly, the reservation and the interpretative declaration are set out as follows:

> *The UK reserves the right for disabled children to be educated outside their local community where more appropriate educational provision is available elsewhere.*
>
> *Nevertheless, parents of disabled children have the same opportunity as other parents to state a preference for the school at which they wish their child to be educated.*
>
> *The interpretative declaration includes an express commitment to inclusive education, but expresses the Government's view that any general education system may include both special and mainstream schools:*
>
> *The United Kingdom Government is committed to continuing to develop an inclusive system where parents of disabled children have increasing access to mainstream schools and staff, and which have the capacity to meet the needs of disabled children. The General Educational System in the UK includes mainstream and special schools, which the UK Government understands is allowed under the Convention.*
>
> *(House of Commons, 2009: 14)*

The United Kingdom has demonstrated fidelity to its intention regarding Article 24, espousing a commitment to inclusive education while supporting the status quo – maintaining a bifurcated system of regular schools and investing more extensively in separate special education. This is an investment in sustaining a divided world.

In this respect, England is not Robinson Crusoe. Other jurisdictions are also fluent in a special educational doublespeak deployed to deflect from the failure to embrace the more authentic reforms required for transforming schooling. The Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities issued General Comment No. 4 (2016) on the right to inclusive education (United Nations, 2016:11) clarified the principles of Article 24 and the responsibilities of signatory nations interested in authenticity in their pronouncements, policies, and practices.

Progressive realization means that States parties have a specific and continuing obligation to move as expeditiously and effectively as possible towards the full realization of Article 24. This is not compatible with sustaining two systems of education: a mainstream education system and a special/segregated education system. Progressive realization must be read in conjunction with the overall objective of the Convention to establish clear obligations

for States parties in respect of the full realization of the rights in question. Similarly, States parties are encouraged to redefine budgetary allocations for education, including by transferring part of their budgets to the development of inclusive education.

My critics in special education (e.g., Hornby & Kauffman, 2023) will interpret this as my continuing demonisation of special schooling and promotion of regular schooling. This charge is reductive and risible. The mutuality of the two strands reflects the design flaws of both. I am not supporting the elimination of special education in favour of unchanging regular education provision. Consistent with my earlier pronouncements (Slee, 2011) and the guidance of CRPD's General Comment 4 on Article 24 Education, inclusive education calls for systemic examination and overhaul to achieve excellent and inclusive education for all children (Slee, 2018b).

And back home in Australia?

Australia is a signatory to UNCRPD Article 24 on Education and has its own Disability Discrimination Act (1992) which makes illegal discrimination in education based on disability. Predictably, there are caveats to protect against undue institutional hardship. All 6 state and the 2 territory education jurisdictions in Australia declare themselves to be providers of inclusive education. All have bifurcated provision, and all have seen growth in the number of special schools. Two recent developments are worth noting.

First, on March 10 2015, a primary school principal in Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory contracted a pool-fence maker to construct a cage that was placed in a storeroom that abutted a classroom for the purpose of restraining a young boy with autism. The 2 metres by 2 metres cage was paradoxically called The Sanctuary. The discovery of the cage by The Canberra Times led to an inquiry and review of "the complex needs of children and challenging behaviour" led by Professor Tony Shaddock (Shaddock, Packer & Roy, 2016). It also led to revelations of problematic restraint provisions across other jurisdictions (Slee & Tait, 2022:14).

Second, an Australia-wide Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability was convened in April 2019 (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2019). A public hearing was held in November of that year for four days in the northern Queensland city of Townsville to gather evidence concerning:

1. Inclusiveness in education as it relates to students with disability; and
2. The implementation of existing policies and procedures relating to inclusive education of students with disability, with focus on the Queensland government education system. (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020: 5)

The expert witness evidence to the Royal Commissioners has been published in an Interim Report from the public hearing (Royal Commission into Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, 2020) detailing nine areas of complaint:

- Gate-keeping – schools illegally screening out students with disabilities.
- Higher levels of disciplinary absences & adjusted attendance.
- Mistreatment by teachers & other students.
- Restrictive practices such as seclusion and containment.
- Lack of reasonable adjustments as required by law.
- Low expectations for students with disabilities.

- Poor complaint handling.
- Funding gaps.
- Inadequate professional training.

Resilience & resistance?

What are our options as social scientists – as social activists? Perhaps we are better placed to move forward after pandemic than before it. Let us consider the following propositions:

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that fundamental change to time-honoured social organisation and practices is not only possible, it is also essential to our survival.

The COVID-19 pandemic has prompted the discovery that connection and engagement are essential for good mental health and wellbeing.

Stephen Ball and Jordi Collet-Sabe (2021) courageously return to first principles, recognising school as an "intolerable institution" requiring more than cosmetic adjustment:

> *One consequence of the failure to open up substantive questions, for researchers and social and political movements seeking to reform or improve the school, is submission to a constant cycle of hope and despair, of progress and defeat, of challenge and incorporation.*
> *(Ball & Collet-Sabe, 2021:3)*

Ball and Collet-Sabe (2021) commence with "Rogan's point (is) that the critique of capitalism in the twentieth century shifted away from a fundamental demolition of its 'moral and spiritual desolation' to a single-minded focus on the calculation of the relative advantages and disadvantages it generates – a shift from 'Is it morally wrong?' to 'Does it have bad outcomes?' – Who wins and who loses?", to argue for a return to an examination of the epistemic foundations of schooling to counter the "similar displacement or avoidance of moral argumentation by calculative evaluation".

This is the character and depth of intellectual resistance that I am calling for as a basis for activism capable of achieving wellbeing in an unwell world. The arrangement of knowledge served by traditional disciplinary divisions delivers dysfunction.

The Australian musician and writer, Nick Cave, poignantly tells us: The history of education policy over the last 40 years suggests that the resilience of ableism in education is oxygenated by evolving forms of special and regular education that seek greater surveillance, calibration, and regulation of student differences. It is hard for parents to be optimistic when daily their hearts are broken by the exclusion of their children. Talking about wellbeing is empty when we fail to confront ableism in education, allowing it to lurk in the shadows of special educational needs discourse. Generating hope depends in large measure on demonstrating a will to think and do otherwise.

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Narrating kinship, care, love and loss in the entangled more than human-animal relations

PROF. MARK VICARS
Victoria University, Melbourne

In this paper I engage somatic experience with/in the animal-human dialectic to narrate the relationality of embodiment, subjectivity and encounter. I inquire, through autoethnographic reflection, on the presence of breath sensation, with cross-sensory [synæsthetic] modes of perception. I situate the inclusion of the more than animal-human dialectic into philosophical consideration to write into spaces of uncertainty and query the ways encounters and entanglements with the more than human can reinvigorate dialecticial questioning about the self and social wellbeing. Drawing on the concepts of mindbodying (Ferrando, & Rozzoni, (2024) and interbeing (Thích Nhâ't Hạnh (1987), I give attention to breath sensation response as an onto-ethical- epistemic re-lating-ship. I situate the use of ordinary moments as a resource for interrogating continuously contestable relational agency and for rethinking my ability to be affected by breath sensation in animal-human entanglements.

Keywords: Breath Sensation, Animal-Human Entanglements, Limbic system

Not a beginning more of an intertwining.

The storyteller is deep inside every one of us. The story-maker is always with us.

Let us suppose our world is attacked by the horrors that we all of us easily imagine. Let us suppose floods wash through our cities, the seas rise … but the storyteller will be there, for it is our imaginations which shape us, keep us, create us – for good and for ill. It is our stories that will recreate us, when we are torn, hurt, even destroyed. It is the storyteller, the dream-maker, the myth maker, that is our phoenix, that represents us at our best, and at our most creative (Lessing, 2007, 6).

I am a storyteller. For over the past twenty years I have been engaged in writing performative and evocative narratives as academic practice, and for some time now I have found myself cognitively meandering and lingering about departure points for entering into a conceptual dialogue with embodiment and encounter. Leigh and Brown (2021,1) have proposed that:

> *Embodied Inquiry encourages us to use different methods and lenses in order to collect data and analyse embodied, lived experiences. It is not tied to any one theoretical approach and yet, it is not atheoretical.*

How can the human body, as a soulful perceiving and thinking being, be relationally read? Found in the work of theorists such as Butler (1993) and Irigaray (2002) is a psychophysical questioning of perception through embodiment and an acknowledgement that the limbic system shapes and is a shaping relationship of how one inhabits place and space with the world (Carozzi, 2005, Butler 1993, Bourdieu, 1990, Mackie 1985). Lewis et al (2001,103) has suggested how:

> *First a memory is not a thing. Cardiac muscle fibers are objects but the heartbeat they generate is a physiologic event, a collective flutter that propels life but nevertheless has no mass and occupies no space. ...Memories are the heartbeats of the nervous system.*

The human is always imbricated in the data: it is in the relational space of (re)presenting and (re)storying our experiences that the Ancient Greek concept of aisthésis, understood here as the primary perceptual-sensory basis of aesthetic experience demanding an expanded psychic physiological imaginary.

Taylor (1989, 47) suggests:

This link between heart and the organs of sense is not simple mechanical sensationalism; it is aesthetic. That is, the activity of perception or sensation in Greek is aisthesis which means at root "taking in" and "breathing in" – a "gasp" that primary aesthetic response.

> *... "sense perception" cannot be understood without taking into account ...the root in the word – that sniffing, gasping, breathing in of the world. What is it to 'take in' or breathe in the world? First, it means aspiring and inspiring the literal presentation of things by gasping.*

This idea suggests how in the writing of the self-there is an after resonance of affective sensation and presence and that writing is initiated by and grounded in an inherently corporeal/ onto-epistemic enterprise. Lorraine (1999, 13) postulates how when

> *...writing theory [as] a practice brings – or should bring – the writer into more intense immediate contact with her-self and the affective materiality of her existence, which feeds and motivates her words. Writing and reading is affective insofar as it is able to intensify the sense that one's experience is meaningful in a fully somatic sense of the word.*

A literature review around the terms 'breath,' 'sensation', and 'presence' in recent philosophical and theoretical writings reveals little about their possible interrelation. 'Breath' is notable for its absence in contemporary philosophy in general with a few exceptions. Luce Irigaray (2002) addresses this absence in a chapter 'The Way of Breath' in her recent work Between east and west and in The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger (1999). The recent work of Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero,(2005) in for more than one voice encompasses this territory of breath at least implicitly with its subtitle 'Toward a philosophy of vocal expression' that remains focused on a rereading of Plato through in relation to sensation and presence that holds the possibility of a further reconsideration of the

relationship of thought and language to the embodied breathing subject. The work of American philosopher Dianne Perpich (2003), linking Cavarero and Irigaray is relevant here. Her work on ethics, especially in regard to the work of Levinas contributes to the breath dialogues as a phenomenological investigation of experiences of embodiment, encounter and relationality of Self and Other. The work of philosopher Martin Buber in I and thou (1958) is also especially important because Buber has implicitly a heightened understanding of breath as a central dimension of embodiment, self and other that have formed the underpinning of dialogues that stay with transdisciplinary troubling.

Breathing in (an)other-kin

Articulating counter narratives that contest and critique have produced in the academy specific genres of research and writing that are in themselves acts of deconstructive problematization (Molla, 2021; Savage 2021). Such approaches often draw from genealogical post-structuralist approaches and are driven by a willingness to 'stay with the trouble' – whatever that might be (Haraway, 2016; Saari & Mullen 2020). Lorraine (1999, 6-7) interpolates:

> *Irigaray and Deleuze in conceiving of philosophizing as a practice [whereby] one that does not necessarily give clear-cut results, but sets us on a path of experimentation and receptivity to the unknown... Investigating these processes enables us to rethink our engagement with them and instigate new experiences in embodied living.*

However, as Allen (2023) has noted:

> *Academic thought is constrained to work within, and sometimes against, all manner of tacit prohibitions which govern its connections—you cannot make that unexpected jump, you cannot make that unusual association, or at least you will do so only if what you do is fully justified, which is to say explained, or returned to the predictable order of things*

I have committed myself in my scholarship to not become too deeply cooked in the academic pot, and have resisted giving up my flesh to be marinated in and by disciplinary signifiers. In pursuing a Queer scholarship I have focused my gaze on how the primary source of agency, engagement, and sensory contact focuses on the sensation not the sign. I am grasping onto understandings of how affect drives intertwined intra-actions; that they are an important episteme from which to cultivate rich, creative and hybrid understanding of 'I'. Lewis et al (2001,144) has noted how for it is when:

> *In a relationship [with an other], one mind revises another; one heart changes its partner. This astounding legacy of our combined status as mammals and neural being is limbic revision: the power to remodel the emotional parts of the people [and animals] we love, as our attractors activate certain limbic pathways, and the brain's inexorable memory mechanism reinforces them. Who we are and who we become depends, in part on whom we love.*

I deliberately jump and jive with the prism of an ontological perception (Dupont 2014:12-14) and I do so in this paper to situate breath sensation, or the attention to breath sensation as a focal point to cultivate awareness and presence, as producing a process whereby, 'self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and as a result of, existing for another; that is, it exists only in being recognised' (Hegel et al 1999,178). Breath sensation not merely as a physiological function but as a transformative process, that sees an individual's sense of self-awareness and identity linked to how others perceive and recognize them. That is the acknowledgment and recognition from others play a vital role in the formation and validation of one's self-consciousness. When we connect this concept to

Haraway's post-humanist philosophy, we find a resonance in her emphasis on the interconnectedness and social nature of human existence. Haraway's (2003) post-humanist philosophical work takes a relativist and somewhat situationist view of the world when she reflects on the multitude of embedded meanings we encounter in our everyday experience of materiality. Haraway (2016) is ultimately identifying a force of social connection which binds us to the material world and uses the concept of Symbiogenesis (becoming by being together) to talk about the idea of 'making-with' as a framework for viewing the existence of human life. Thus reinforcing, the idea that human existence is not a solitary endeavour but a collaborative and mutually dependent process, where social connections and mutual dependencies play a crucial role in shaping our understanding of self and existence.

Making meaning with the more than human

My father had prohibited the 'ownership' of a dog in my childhood, calling them "SHIT MACHINES!" I yearned for something of my own...it was an ache that took away my breath. Between childhood and adolescence I couldn't articulate how my desire for an animal companion was to be an instrument of confession and for a familial kinship I never had. To put it simply I wanted something to love and to love me back; to help me self-regulate having encountered the disappointment that was etched in the raspy awkward and undulating breath of my parents on my announcement of my becoming Queer. After a period of time, intermittent anxiety, depression, a loneliness descended; a change came over me and I became an inert heap. Large gestural movements were replaced by focusing in on the loci of micro movements of breathing in and in exhaling hope a happening occurred. Carried away by the sensation of my breath I was in "...a mood [which] is a state of enhanced readiness to experience a certain emotion. Where an emotion is a single note, clearly struck, hanging for a moment in the still air, a mood is the extended, nearly inaudible echo that follow[ed]." (Lewis et al 2001, 45). Limbically I somersaulted in breath sensation of : apprehension...fear...doubt...distrust...hesitation...dread....confusion...doubt...anxiety...anger...sadness... outrage...loss...trepidation.... grief....rejection ...abjection ...frustration...despair...bewilderment...insecurity.

Unaware that I was being formed as a sensate subject, which Martel (2003,8) suggested 'often happens that [when] we do not remember the first time we did something, or even any one particular time but remember only the repetition, the idea that we did the thing over and over and over again. Affective intensities can guide, dis/connect, excite, divert, inspire, distract, startle, surprise, re-orient or even interrupt thinking, and enable us to tentatively narrate a story of our history into the present.

Many years later with the passing of my parents' I became the sole inhabitant of the family home: the site and setting of numerous disappointments derived from unfulfilled expectations. Sitting alone at the kitchen table a different kind of silence now enveloped me. Inhaling deep cigarette smoke amplified my affective re-memberings and I recalled how years before my mother had questioned "don't you ever want to be happy?" "Why have you chosen this life for yourself?" Exhaling I reflected on my practices of resistance, resilience, care and common survival that had emerged out of my peripheral location in their orderly home. Holding my breath each night whilst waiting for the tirade of questions as they 'bewept my outcast state' became indelibly inked on bone, muscle and in connective tissue. Many years later sitting at the scene and setting of those interrogative events I would scan the local newspaper 'pets for Sale' and four weeks later I felt for the first time puppy breath on my cheek – see Figure 1.

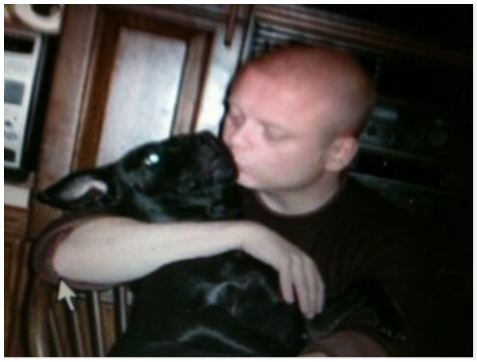

Figure 1: Tallulah and me kissing.

Merleau-Ponty (1968, 133) suggests I am both the seer and the seen, and I now draw on my breath encounters with Tallulah to think with/in a more authentic somatic dwelling place. Lorraine (1999,13) has suggested how:

> *"authentic" encounters ...speak to something of genuine significance rather than simply engage in empty play....for both becomes not simply a form of communication but a practice that asks basic questions about life and reality and breaks down dualisms in order to intensify the experience of living and bring us back in touch with what most strongly moves us.*

Whilst the sense of the dumb animal body still prevails within a Cartesian logic, Lewis et al (2001, 12) suggests how "One must balance a respect for proof with a fondness for the unproven and the improvable. Common sense must combine in equal measure imaginative flight and an aversion to orthodoxy". Taylor (2011, 198) notes that "it is impossible to ignore the immense amount of evidence that shows that the animals ... are sentient" and draws on Nussbaum's (2006) work on the social contract to argue how we "must include other, more complex reasons for human cooperation ...such as love, compassion, and respect" and how " it would be impossible, considering the vastness of the animal kingdom and its deep entanglement with our environments, to try to sum up in a few sentences what nonhuman animals can offer human beings (ibid 213).

In the following telling I put to work the dialectic of intimacy/detachment and draw on the epistemology of proximity to raise generative questions about how expressions of the social contract in animal-human re-lating-ships. How they have a capacity of agitating and critiquing normative discourses as they involve intra-action of social environment and identities across time and place calling for new technologies of understanding within the broader more than human ecologies in which we are embedded. "Intra-action" emphasizes the inseparability and mutual constitution of entities involved in a phenomenon. We simply, do not exist independently but are continuously shaping and being shaped by relationships and interactions within a specific context. Intra-action highlights the interconnectedness and co-constitution of entities, challenging a more traditional view of interaction that implies pre-existing, independent entities coming together.

In preparing a costume for Tallulah for the annual Pride March many years later, a friend journaled about me showing the outfit I had bought Tallulah to wear at Pride had induced in her memories of being connected to worldmaking. and how "What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a

dwelling place (Ahmed, 2015, 11).

> *It will be fun,' he said as he removed a large pair of pink sparkly wings from the backseat of his car. I cringed. Tallulah Sparkles,' he called. 'Come to daddy. 'Tallulah Sparkles, his black English Staffordshire, wagged her tail and obediently approached. It was all part of day's work for her. 'That's my little girl,' he cooed. 'Sit down. Daddy wants to put your wings on". 'Where are we going?' I asked. Down the street,' he replied as he clipped sparkly pink wings into place . I offered him a thin smile. 'Ok,' I said, trying to appear as though it was no big deal. Inside, I was squirming. I did not want to walk down my local street with a dog in pink wings. I looked at my watch. It was half past two, which meant that there would be a lull in the foot traffic. Perhaps we will not be seen, I thought. 'What's wrong?' he asked .'Nothing,' I answered dishonestly.' Are you embarrassed?' 'Why do you care what other people think?' he asked. 'I don't,' I said untruthfully. He was right. I did care. A familiar feeling of shame washed over me. It was the past revisited. When he left, later in the afternoon, I slumped on the couch to think and remember. I drifted back to the past events that were circling in my head. There were glossy memories that were easy to recover ,and then there were some that made me shudder. It was not that I had forgotten them; it was that I had chosen to lock them away. But it was time to open the box and reinvigorate the past in the present in my on-going dis/ease with the incoherence of normalcy (Vicars 2000,9). I took a breath and started to sift through my memories, to (re)member and evoke critical consciousness*
>
> *Van Toledo, 2022, 121)*

Figure 2: Tallulah and me at Pride

Lewis et al (2001, 119) note "The perceptual body is not the anatomical body so where do terms such as 'knowledge' and 'meaning' have a place? In the language of contemporary neuroscience, 'somatic markers' are formed and are formative of a felt sense of identity. In re/membering her puppy breath upon my skin imbues me with a fleshy trace of lightness, an ease, a permeable movement felt as a sensate lucidity and as noted by Merleau-Ponty, (1968, 133):

> *The touch of breath is a fleshly encounter the look, [that] envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things.*

The chiasm

The day came that I knew it would...when she had to leave me. I carried her in my arms in a shit-stained blanket, placed her in the passenger seat and manoeuvred the car with one hand as I caressed her worn out body. I laid down beside her on the veterinarians floor and as I gasped and choked our breath conjoined in final uneven gasps and whimpers. She slipped into silence and left me fragmented, alone: the only communication the broken breath between us. Our 'breath dialogue' was over. Placing my hands on her still body, there remained a trace of encounter, a dialogue that could only be felt and sensed. I was brought closer to a new reality as I reached out for one last caress, I kiss her closed eyes, her mouth, her ears, her still soft underbelly. Lewis et al (2001,p. 73) have noted how:

> *People hug each other on departures and arrivals – an act so familiar we might think it nothing more than a custom. But this style of embrace contains silent evidence of attachment; an imposed separation, or the threat of one, reflexively makes people want to re-establish skin-to-skin contact*

Sobs of despair and wails of loss and longing punctured the air. In the quietened chatter of the waiting room chatter it had been understood what had just taken place; what was taking place. I walked back to the car, my limbic system in full force my dysregulated breath proved to be a mindbodying subsuming activity. Clutching her collar and lead, unaware of how "The sensory experience flashes to the limbic brain, which will sift the event for its significance and prepare physiology to meet that singular moment." (Lewis et al 2001, 53) or how "...in response to limbic stimulation, small muscles on the mammalian face contract in precise configurations. The face is the only place in the body where muscles connect directly to skin." (ibid 52). Mine was crumpled by defeat and limbically overwhelmed I drove home enveloped with/in what the Welsh call Hiraeth- that sensation which denotes a deep, nostalgic longing to return to something or somewhere now gone. My staccato breath enunciated how without breath sensation of having Tallulah by my side... I was unravelling, I was entering the threshold of my (un)becoming. (Tavares, 2016) has suggested that:

> *if we understand bodies as defined, for example, by their sociality, their interdependency, that means that this body – this one – cannot really exist without another body, without another world of bodies. The I – this I – requires a you in order to survive, and even to flourish. We are bound to one another socially in important ways. I cannot live without living together with some set of people.*

My somatic interrogative utilized the concept of aisthésis, as a primary perceptual-sensory experience produced and circulated by the limbic system as a location that has entangled histories, and that in breath sensation continue to

haunt the small stories that constitute my social, affective, cultural and material worlds. Small-stories are authentic natural interactions, conversations and social connections that are "closer to the action and enmeshed within the interactive, dynamics of social life" (Freeman, 2007,156). For a small-story researcher, the focus is on informal daily interactions as a source of meaning-making (Georgakopoulou & Bamberg, 2005) that are "inextricably bound up with ideas about subjectivity" (McCallum, 1999, 3).

All that remains are ....

The intention in this paper was to peel back layers, to open out some in speculative writerly acts the territory of the interplay of breath sensation of the animal- human re-lating- ship into a written articulation. I have had to move beyond the reflective surfaces of academic knowledge which excludes the animal human breathing from form into formlessness. I started with what Lessing (2007) refers to as that empty space that surrounds what knowledge is considered and to question the means by which knowledge is recognized and considered. However as it has been noted by Lewis et al (2001,86) "self-sufficiency turns out to be a daydream whose bubble is burst by the sharp edge of the limbic brain. Stability means finding people [and animals] who regulate you well and staying near them" They go on to note that:

> *Limbic resonance, regulation, and revision define our emotional existence; they are the walls and towers of the neural edifice evolution has built for mammals to live in. Our intellect is largely blind to them. Within the heart's true edifice, those who allow themselves to be guided by reason blunder into walls and stumble over sills. They are savants who can see too little of love to escape painful collisions with its unforgiving architecture. (ibid,229)*

I have sought to write under the influence of limbic invention and have utilsed breath sensation as the prism from which to peer beyond what I thought I knew. Affect, I suggest agitates for changes when re-addressing generative expressions of/alternative ways in which to know, to feel and to imagine otherwise. In my exploration of the more than human dyadic, the thinking with breath sensation is replete with complexities, contradictions and unruliness. Memories exist and rebound in non-teleological ways and are beyond the mere representation of 'what happened.... breath movements can traverse the territory of memory: they become a declarative affirmation of "I was there". It is in the configurations of intimacy/detachment from the social contract that breath relations invoke what Sesta and Vicars (2023,15) suggested are ways of:

> *...knowing as embodiment- knowing through our body- the hunger, tastes, discomforts and pains; knowing as emotion- opening us up to worlds of passions, intuition, fears and betrayals; knowing through deliberate imposition- thinking with ideas about the world and ourselves that are slippery and indistinct; knowing as situated inquiry- thinking about thinking- how far is knowledge able to ravel and does it still make sense in other locations and lives?*

A tacit aim of this paper I set myself was to problematize the "anthropological arrogance" and "philosophical universalisms" as a prevailing component of methodological practice when approaching, the constituted worlds of the more than human in breath sensation. I have endeavoured to consider how claims can made about knowing within the academe and the ways in which the knowledge constructed out of a centre/ periphery relation is troubling or made difficult by psychophysiological affects. Allen (2023) has articulated one of the difficulties is how 'Knowledge tends to the assertion of a connectedness between things, or at least, where knowledge can connect one thing to another, it is seen to be doing well.'

Bochner (2014, 303) references another set of difficulties in his book Coming to Narrative in which he wrote of the force of methodological disciplinarity:

> *You wanted readers to imagine writing with soul. You wanted to get across the point that humas are flawed, messy and complicated beings who live with contradictions, have ideas and emotions, think and think about thinking…You wanted your stories to show that we humans frequently don't know what we're doing; that we sometimes feel vulnerable; bare our souls; keep secrets, feel ashamed, afraid, humiliated and heartbroken. You worry that…people won't appreciate that kind of writing. It's not scientific… and that you're starting to sound like a threat to the discipline.*

This connects to my aim of engaging with the concept of aisthésis, as a primary perceptual-sensory experience produced and circulated by the limbic system in breath sensation. Law and Urry (2004, 401) have suggested: 'Social science has problems in understanding non-linear relationships and flows' but in my situating the notion of breath encounter as a pedagogical process of becoming and unbecoming Koeltzsch (2021,5) has spoken of how "We are our body and active introspection creates consciousness in a broad sense, above all, understanding of the self and others".

Contextualised by the postexperimental 6th moment (1995-2000) of qualitative enquiry which has paved the way for the advent of post foundational research biographical research has long been known for its for creative innovations and applications for recording experiences of individuals using a variety of technologies and telling stories is nothing new. Drawing on methodological mythopoesis that does not adhere to a rigid and predetermined structure that guarantees specific outcomes, rather a legitimization through story. I have attempted a translation of the corporeal assemblage of breath sensation into a textual representation. The post qualitative notion that any translation of human experience cannot be guided by a predetermined process but is a "pedagogy of interruption" (Biesta, 2010, 91) nurtures the diversity of ways of seeing and knowing the world. The porous aesthetics in narrating breath sensation can problematise the perpetuation of procedural narratives of normalcy of how identity, power and social being are contoured and curated with the more than human. In the onto-epistemic flux and fluidity of the Anthropocene, the post human affective influences interactions and advocates for new ways of knowing, understanding and framing the empirical world (Evans & Fernández, 2018). Through the epistemic prism of posthumanism I am purposefully positioning how the social world can be explained, described and written. Situating breath capital, as something that gets done in relation to others, it is, I suggest a performative presence. Narrating breath sensation as a perlocutionary limbic location, can contribute to a lacunae of contextual analysis, to envision a different connection and perspective of kinship, care, love and loss in the entangled more than human-animal relations. Breath sensation has carried me to the threshold of my story and mindbody mattering. As I come closer to concluding this narrative, I am however, cautioned by Lewis et al (2021, 14) to remind you, the reader, that:

> *No multilettered neuroanatomical diagrams lurk within these pages. [I] have set out not to map the mind in numbing detail, but to lead an agile reconnaissance over landscapes that lie hidden within the human soul*

In thinking with the more than human through the interpolations of affect and presence I turn back to the sensory and the emotional to acknowledge how limbic wellbeing and Tallulah were/are intra-connected and how at times

Figure 3: Tallulah

there are no words but only sensate breath from which to make meaning - see Figure 3

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

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Reflections on "Ensuring the wellbeing of all – liminality, service provision and nationality" - a research presentation session by Prof. JosAnn Cutajar

DR CLAIRE CASHA
Department of Child and Family Studies
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract

In this paper, the focus will be on some of the results which emerged from a needs assessment study, carried out in Marsalforn and Xlendi in 2022 by The Malta Trust Foundation, financed by the Gozo Regional Development Authority. The focus of this study was to find out how satisfied Maltese and non-Maltese residents living in these areas were with the services offered in Gozo. Both Marsalforn and Xlendi have experienced an increase in population, and so, an ancillary objective of this study was to find out how prepared state and other entities were for this increase in non-Maltese residents living in this region of Malta.

Introduction

This paper touches upon two important and related issues: the level of community affluence/deprivation and the level of social connectedness/isolation. Indices of neighbourhood social deprivation comprise factors such as crime including violence and drug trafficking/abuse, unemployment, and isolation; but also, a lack of community resources including quality institutions and services. These factors are captured in this study.

Studies such as those by Abeyta et al. (2012) and Wickham et al. (2014) show that community affluence mitigates risks in regard to wellbeing. Abeyta et al. (2012) found that people of low socioeconomic status seemed to benefit from residing in high-affluence communities and that residing in such communities may mitigate the effect of poverty on cardiovascular disease risk factors. The study by Wickham et al. (2014) is important for showing how measures of stress, trust, and social support mediated the relationship between the neighbourhood index of multiple deprivation and measures of depression and psychosis. Social connectedness is important for wellbeing across the family life cycle including for adolescents (Jose et al. 2012, Lamblin et al. 2017) and the elderly (Morgan et

al. 2021, Suragarn et. al. 2021), and takes on added significance for minority groups, such as migrants. Strang and Quinn (2021) highlighted the need to enable asylum seekers and refugees to develop sufficient close bonding relationships; and to find better ways to construct knowledge of, and cultivate trust in, resources and services.

Needs assessment study in Marsalforn and Xlendi (Gozo)

The study findings presented by Cutajar (2023) may be interpreted from the Feminist Standpoint Theory (Harding 2004) which posits that knowledge is socially situated; that marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that render them more aware and better placed to question than are non-marginalized groups; and that the lives of the marginalized should be the starting point of research. An interesting facet of this research is that it does not compare a non-marginalized group with a marginalized one, but rather, a relatively less marginalized group (Gozitans) with a relatively much more marginalized group (non-Gozitans). This is because, as Cutajar (2023) herself alluded to, Gozitans are relatively marginalized themselves when compared to the Maltese in terms of less resource availability and more isolation, though far less so in comparison to non-Gozitans.

A feminist standpoint theory pertinent to this study is that of Nussbaum (1998) who laid down a challenge for policymakers to secure at least a threshold level of ten human capabilities for individuals, namely: living a full life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination, and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species (e.g. concern on environmental issues, enjoying nature and appreciating its beauty); play; and control over one's environment. It is evident from this presentation that these capabilities may be threatened in the case of both groups, but much more strongly so in the case of the non-Gozitans' group, which reported facing barriers in the areas of access to education including language classes, healthcare, transport, and leisure. According to Nussbaum (1999)'s capabilities approach, there tends to be a self-fulfilling prophecy effect in that people adjust their expectations to the low level of wellbeing they think they can attain. This is captured in the study findings which show disenfranchised non-Gozitans' vulnerability to engage in negative behaviour in a context of exclusion and othering by the Gozitans in the community.

Community deprivation and isolation cannot be delinked from deep structural inequalities. This calls for a multi-pronged approach targeting several policy areas including the labour market and labour income; housing; access to health and education services; and access to leisure opportunities. These called-for policy measures are even more challenging in contemporary times which have seen retrenchment of social welfare/services and a new surge of industrial action across Europe in a context involving a cost-of-living crisis and the devastating wake of the COVID pandemic.

Conclusion

To conclude on a note of hope, Nick Cave's (2022) quote "Hope is optimism with a broken heart" seems applicable to the scenario. In this study by Cutajar (2023), only the more marginalized group – the non-Gozitans – suggested language classes and an inter-cultural community centre when asked what changes they wanted, and this attests to the feminist standpoint theory's tenet that marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of social issues. However, cultural and sports activities were suggested by both groups of study participants. This provides policymakers with a golden opportunity to create, support, and promote such activities in their efforts to drive change towards community integration. An example would be that of Günter Schütte in Germany, a swimming instructor who gave swimming courses for children, which served as a tool to help children of refugees overcome the fear/trauma of water, and also as a tool of social integration in that refugee children integrated with native children who attended these swimming lessons (Oltermann 2018). This is in line with the call made by Strang and Quinn (2021) to facilitate social bonds for refugees, a call which is relevant in relation to all foreigners.

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Thinking about the breakdown of care in Maltese society

DR MARLENE CAUCHI
Department of Counselling
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract
What kind of society perpetuates such horrors as those we have seen in Malta over the last years? Whilst individual psychology may offer some insight into intrapsychic processes underlying specific events or people, it is imperative that we adopt a group psychological view of societal forces promoting such phenomena as structural oppression and silencing of the Other, crass materialism, splitting, and scapegoating. Such dynamics seem to suggest a fracture in the very fabric of society: a dehumanising process whereby the values of solidarity, compassion, and care for other human beings are neglected. They highlight a culture of selfishness and lack of concern for those who are not part of a person's inner circle of relationships. This paper refers to a conference session by the author: during the session, group analytic principles, such as the foundation matrix, basic assumptions, the anti-group, and malignant mirroring were utilised in an attempt to shed light on the breakdown of care in contemporary Maltese society. Whilst this paper presents reflections on the session, it also seeks to propose a way forward and focuses on the questions that we need to ask ourselves as participants in this societal dynamic.

Introduction

I was recently asked to present at the Faculty Conference held last May, 2023. This paper will detail the process involved in the presentation planning and execution.

My first impulse upon seeing my name on the programme was to refuse to present. What on earth could I talk about in relation to care and control? I even had a valid reason to refuse - I had lectures on the day. Yet, something niggled at me, a tension that I had largely ignored for the last six years. Could I? Dared I? Indeed, the question I wanted to address came to mind almost automatically: What is it about Maltese society that perpetuates such horrors as the ones we have experienced in recent years? These events came to mind in quick succession: the assassination of Daphne Caruana Galizia, rampant corruption, construction accidents, numerous femicides, people

left to die at sea, Lassana Cisse's murder, structural abuse of black persons, young people wanting to leave Malta... The fact that most people seemed impervious to such events beyond the initial shock baffled me. My premise was that Maltese society was experiencing a breakdown in care, promoting a widespread culture of selfishness and a lack of concern for persons outside one's inner relationship circle.

Why was it, then, that I hesitated? The breakdown of care in Maltese society: the topic was hugely relevant to the theme of the conference. It was a topic that I was passionate about, yet always in private or in close circles. Surely, I was not... afraid? And yet, that was precisely what I was overcome by. What if I was labelled as partisan, just because I criticised the current state of Malta? Would I be shamed, or even scapegoated? Could I bear it? And yet, were these fears not indicative of something important that seeks to silence diverging minds? By not doing the presentation, I would be safe, but I would also be colluding with such a system.

Other doubts crept in my thoughts. I was no expert in sociology, politics, or history. What if I could not answer my own question? The only explanation that came to mind was splitting, a concept that is often used in group analysis. But splitting was a symptom. What were the origins? The idea to use a group analytic framework to aid my analysis was natural - I am in the process of training in this approach. Whilst it is fundamentally a therapeutic approach, since its inception, group analysis has been used to understand societal and organisational dynamics (Penna, 2022). Indeed, group analysis, originally developed by Foulkes (1948) is rooted in sociology, psychoanalysis, and group dynamics. Each individual carries, as part of their identity, their background. Indeed, the person is social to the core (Foulkes, 1948; Foulkes & Anthony, 1957).

The way we behave as persons within society, therefore, is marked, not just by our own individual dynamics, conscious and unconscious; we also carry a social unconscious. This was a major contribution by Foulkes (1964). This is, perhaps, not surprising. Fuchs was a Viennese refugee who, upon arrival in England, anglicised his name and never spoke about his origins again (Levin & Nitzgen, 2020). His theory, though, revealed his (unconscious?) preoccupation with the fact that our background cannot ever be escaped.

How did our Maltese background and history, therefore, impact our care, or the lack of it, towards our fellow humans? As I pored over books and papers, a major influence became apparent. The oppressor was very much part of our personal and societal matrix. The Maltese were oppressed through the ages due to colonisation, we had a system that encouraged oppression of people who were different from us 'locals', and oppressors seemed to be able to get away with murder, literally. I was also guilty of being part of the system that assuaged its conscience by signing petitions and occasionally participating in public demonstrations. Was the expectation of oppression, also, not at the core of my fear around the presentation?

Regardless of its manifestation, the oppressor-oppressed dynamic clearly pervades our society. Political parties use media to colonise minds and silence diverging thoughts (Dahlin, 2005). We identify with the oppressor when we turn foreigners away from Maltese shores. We may even inadvertently adopt a colonial vision of inclusion through acts of patronage and kindness towards outsiders by those of us who are, or think ourselves to be, already on the inside (Dalal, 2012; Scanlon, 2014). Ideas around authority and domination become so internalised that ordinary "indeed decent men and women accepted their almost metaphysical obligation to rule 'subordinate, inferior, or less advanced' people" (Said, 1993, p. 10). Our self-identity, therefore, is often linked to our group identity (Foulkes, 1975). We have plenty of examples of voices being repressed through the negation of public inquiries, intimidation, harassment, or denigration, as well as the colonisation of certain institutions through the appointment of particular persons.

Corruption was difficult to explain along these terms, until it occurred to me that corruption could also be conceptualised as an attempt to defraud perceived oppressors, be they the British empire ("tar-Reġina"; "tal-Ingliżi, take it easy"), the government, laws or rules of civilisation. At the core, it promotes a state of mind and the social relation of instrumentality (Long, 2019). It is imbued by a negation of the other's interest and wellbeing. In true colonial fashion, authority is exercised through domination over persons whose right for clean air and nature, for example, are not respected, but are subject to someone else's interest. Authority is associated with power over, rather than service for. Is this not a colonial understanding of power?

As I went up to the platform to present at the conference, I suddenly became keenly aware that I was wearing a blue suit. Would that be perceived as making a statement of allegiance to a particular political party? I had been mindful of preparing examples that spanned both political parties and beyond. I scanned people's faces for any signs of hostility. They had presumably read my abstract and knew what my presentation was about. What had brought them to this particular presentation? Perhaps that meant that we thought on similar lines and would not attack my line of thinking. But why was I also engaging in the splitting dynamic? Could there be no other position, apart from two polarities? And anyway, did I really think I was going to be ambushed during a conference organised by the stalwarts for social wellbeing? The irony was not lost on me, but it solidified my awareness of the extent to which my social unconscious is permeated by the oppressor-oppressed split.

Having completed my presentation, I was naturally relieved. It was over. There was something else, though. I felt empowered. Having expressed my thoughts, I felt I had found my voice. There were no consequences; in fact, conference participants could engage in a fruitful discussion. Was I wrong about my analysis of Maltese society all along then? Is society not really split? Is divergence of opinion not really met with othering? A quick glance at the readers' comments in local newspapers, though, confirmed my original suppositions. So what had happened at the faculty conference? How was it that I was not 'othered' for expressing my thoughts? Freire (1972; 1995) comes to mind. As participants at the conference, we could have a conversation. Empowerment ensues from finding our voice and engaging in dialogue, moving beyond the othering, oppressor-oppressed, and silencer-silenced dynamic. We become citizens, respecting humanity in all its complexity, overcoming the tendency to split (Treacher, 2005).

Conclusion

Maltese society is shifting. Testament to this is the number of individuals, volunteer and civil society groups that are coming together, beyond partisan politics, to call out structural oppression and corruption, and think about the way forward. It is a time of great possibilities. Whilst sitting on the edge of the unknown (Benjamin, 2020), we are riding through the transition from despair to hope, through dialogue (Hernández-Tubert, 2011).

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Reflections on "In detention I saw hell on earth": Giving voice, bearing witness, advocacy and preserving history' - a research presentation session by Dr Maria Pisani and Dr Lorleen Farrugia

DR MARY GRACE VELLA
Department of Criminology
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract
This paper will present reflections on a conference session by Pisani & Farrugia (2022), on their research that explored the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors as they transitioned to adulthood. The researchers also aimed to give voice, bear witness, develop an evidence base for ongoing advocacy, and to document and preserve for historical purposes the voices of unaccompanied minors. The findings of this research demonstrate how the State has not only failed in its obligation to protect the rights of young people seeking asylum, but has itself actually been a source of control, terror and violence. This paper adds on to these reflections by focussing on the predatory relationship between the state and unaccompanied minors and calls for an end to this form of institutionalised racism and State Crime.

Introduction

Many professionals who come from the social field and have worked or come in contact with children who are under the care of the state can attest to the vulnerability, complex situations and distress that children who are under a care order endure in their everyday life, often with a prolonged long-term effect. Being unaccompanied constitutes an added vulnerability to this spectrum, as unaccompanied minors continuously face additional challenges, disadvantages, and barriers. Imagine yourself – a child, all alone, suffering abuse and trauma with no one to rely on, except an impersonal state, which - as you might be also fully aware - may not necessarily be acting in your own personal self-interest. I'm sure we would all feel the same.... sad, isolated, disempowered, angry and lost.

Unaccompanied minors and the state: A predatory relationship

Notably, it seems as if the relationship between unaccompanied minors and the state may be synonymous with that of the relationship between victim and offender. As in most crimes of a predatory nature, the relationship between unaccompanied minors as victims and the state as perpetrator is characterised by huge power disparities. A clear and significant power imbalance of the most powerful versus the most vulnerable; the state who has the power to legislate, enforce the law, and provide access to rights and services and those who on the other hand, are subject to the law, have no power, no rights, and no voice whatsoever. We are all in some form or other controlled by the State, also supposedly in our best interests, but what makes this relationship of domination and oppression between the state and unaccompanied minors more insidious and predatory, is its control under the disguise and mantra of care.

Several experiences of unaccompanied minors were presented in the conference session and in the research report by Pisani and Farrugia (2022) which attest to the difficulties faced by these minors due to the state's administrative systems and governance mechanisms. Fortunately, even though these various "institutional practices made it very difficult for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children to maintain and create loving relations in their lives" (Kauhanenvet et. al., 2022, p. 5), these accounts do not only emit stories of victimisation but also recall narratives of resistance, empowerment and hope.

Here I will not focus on unaccompanied minors but more on the offender, the perpetrator – our State! So, what, and who makes up the state? The State - all the bureaucracy, processes, bodies and institutions comprising the apparatus of the government, includes both the interests identified with the government and the people who work for the government (Ross 2000). Although private institutions can wield coercive power, the state holds the exclusive legal authority to legislate and enforce the law and in the process, control and coerce. The state is indeed the political entity that holds the legitimate monopoly on the use of force, and holds the balance of power, as it has a disproportionate amount of resources in order to carry out its mandate. A mandate, which in the case of unaccompanied minors it is clearly not fulfilling.

This leads us to the concept of 'higher immorality' (Mills 1956) or 'governmental lawlessness' - (Sykes and Cullen 1992), better known as state crime. State crime comprises all acts of commission or omission that violate international or the state's own domestic legislation. In the case of unaccompanied minors, it's evidently a question of both, as the Maltese state is simultaneously violating both international human rights law as well as domestic child protection legislation. The state is often presented as a benevolent force, however, there is no crime that politics has not justified on state reasons. The Machiavellian maxim "In the interest of the state" has historically served as a pretext for various hideous crimes. Indeed, "on the score of the interest of the State, of the safety of the commonwealth, politics have caused the perpetration of every possible crime" (Proal, 1898, p. 33); slavery, war, genocide, and crimes against humanity, apart from repression, corruption, exploitation and curtailing dissent. Letting people die at sea, repatriating people to unsafe countries, keeping people arbitrary detained, and denying basic rights and services for the most vulnerable members of society – in this case, unaccompanied minors, is also often carried out in the maxim of the interest of the state.

'In the interest of the state' is also linked to the other Machiavellian maxim, directly linked to illegal, immoral, and unethical practices – that of, 'Might makes right', translating into "I am in power and I do what I want, and you do what I say". As the state is both "a crime-regulating and crime-generating institution" (Barak, 1993, p. 209), it is often the case that "those who legislate and enforce the law – and determine what is to be regarded as legitimate – are in the position of violating the law themselves without being criminally defined" (Clinard and Quinne, 1978, p. 144) and criminally liable.

Conclusion

Denying unaccompanied minors their fundamental rights and freedoms violates international and domestic law. Whether by commission or by commission, it's an abuse of power, a form of institutionalised racism, and let's call it by name - it's a crime, a State Crime and like any other crimes, we should expect that perpetrators are held accountable and brought to justice, and victims vindicated!

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Care and control in social work with a focus on child welfare situations – two sides of the same coin?

DR DANIELLA ZERAFA
Department of Social Policy and Social Work
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

MATTHEW VASSALLO
Doctoral Candidate, Department of Psychology
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract

Social wellbeing transcends individual wellbeing and hence implies interactions and relationships. As academics in this field, we accept the privilege of providing the space and opportunity to those who decide to embark on a journey to develop into professionals who are of service to those whose individual and social wellbeing is usually challenged. In the process, we invite them to consider various intricacies and nuances which are integral to practising in the social field. One intricacy relates to the notions of care and control. As our social welfare systems became more developed, the concept of risk took on a more central position in the everyday work of professionals working in the social field. This paper will focus on how professionals navigate through a minefield, as they balance care and control in their everyday work with service users. It will explore how these professionals, especially frontline professionals such as social workers, are expected not to be too risk averse, whilst simultaneously giving their all to carrying out professional assessments and developing care plans that ensure that their service users are not harmed or harm others. This paper shall consider how possible it is, in practice, to position care and control as sides of the same wellbeing coin, and, whether professionals can reasonably be expected to satisfy the demands of both these notions.

Introduction

Service providers in the social field are of service to those whose individual and social wellbeing are usually challenged. The fact that besides individual wellbeing, service providers such as social workers, are also responsible for social wellbeing implies interactions and relationships and hence brings further nuances into the equation. A focus on social wellbeing places professionals in a particular position where they have to navigate through a minefield, as they balance care and control in their everyday work with service users.

Care versus control

As our social welfare systems became more developed, the concept of risk became more important in the everyday work of social workers (Alfandari et al., 2023). This emphasis on risk brings up the question as to whether it is possible, in practice, to position care and control as sides of the same wellbeing coin. The question arises because risk-driven interventions challenge the care-driven interventions traditionally associated with helping professions and bring forth the dilemma of care versus control, of autonomy versus protection. Whilst care includes interventions which involve support for the individual, family, group or community in their own right, control is more concerned with intervening so that individuals and groups avoid harm to themselves, each other or other citizens (Alfandari et al., 2023). Thus, an emphasis on risk presents professionals with the challenge of marrying these two notions of care and control. Whether this can be done is however contested (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2013).

Front-line professionals such as social workers cannot do without a deep-rooted confidence in trusting themselves; trusting themselves to make the right decisions, trusting themselves to offer the best possible service to their clients. Through the years they have trusted themselves and accepted risk-taking as part of their role, whilst assuming that lacking the readiness to take calculated risks could possibly even lead them to be of disservice to their clients.

The criticism of social workers' lack of professionalism resulting from child death enquiries in the 1980's however, pushed for a more rational approach to decision-making. Whilst prior to this extensive criticism, social workers' knowledge, professional values, experience, looking at past evidence and basing their decisions on these pillars seemed to be enough to inform their decisions, they then found themselves stretching their skills to position themselves as predictors of the substance and severity of various dangers that might occur in the future (Calder, 2016; Zeira, 2014). In order to attempt to make as accurate predictions as possible, they started to use the concept of risk to inform their assessments and decisions.

Additionally another very strong influence on social workers resulted from the mass media coverage of issues related to child abuse. Mass media is usually sensationalist and very critical of social workers, at times demonising them and individually blaming them (Gilbert et al. 2011). This criticism places social workers in a "double jeopardy", as there are high professional risks which are at stake both if they over-respond to risk situations as well as if they under-respond to them (Colton & Welbourne, 2013, pp. 82-83). Although as Gambrill (2008) points out decision-making errors are usually systemic and no one person is to blame, the impact of mass media is huge and this collective systemic responsibility is often overlooked and social workers find themselves targeted.

In this risk-averse context, social workers may feel paralysed and robbed of their confidence to take calculated risk. They know that adopting a zero-tolerance approach to socially challenging situations such as child abuse is almost impossible but they also feel pressured towards risk-averse behaviours and decisions (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2013). This context risks creating anxiety in social workers related to making mistakes, as they are pressured to believe that eliminating risk should be prioritised over meeting the needs of families, hence being robbed of what Featherstone et al. (2014), refer to as their "moral identity". And as this anxiety takes over, social workers

then find themselves increasingly seeking to control, instead of empower their service users, losing the balance between intruding in people's lives and respecting their diversity and freedom. This possibly happens because social workers are trained to be certain in their decisions, knowing that so much could be at stake if the 'wrong' decision is made.

By the late 1990's however social workers began to be criticised once again, this time for the fact that the social work assessment had been diminished and diluted to an assessment of risk. They too were aware of this development and were unhappy with it themselves. In the early 2000's it became clear that this approach of risk aversion was betraying social workers' intrinsic values. It became clear that the excessive focus on those at high risk had its cost and this cost was related to cuts in service provision to those at lower risk "significantly reducing the investment in preventive services which would require a focus on need rather than risk" (Alfandari et al., 2023 p. 83). Various authors emphasised that social workers were born as experts of uncertainty and this is the status they should seek to regain. The secret, social work researchers claimed, was to once again become more daring in our approach and to let ourselves work creatively and innovatively (Stalker, 2003; Taylor & White, 2006). Gambrill (2005) actually pointed out that "a reluctance to consider errors as inevitable may result in overlooking uncertainty" and "a desire to avoid uncertainty is a source of error" (p. 17). These changes in attitude towards risk were accompanied with a push to move social work practice towards a family service orientation as opposed to a child protection orientation (Parton & Beridge, 2011, p. 62).

Care order decisions in Malta

A study carried out in Malta in 2016 looked at child protection social workers' decision-making processes as they navigated the journey related to whether a child should be removed from parental care through the care order (Zerafa, 2016). The results of this study clearly depicted how real the care versus control dilemma is for these social workers. In this study, social workers were found to have done their best to build strong relationships with parents despite their child protection role. These social workers tried to build relationships "that aimed to bring about the necessary changes in the families' situations and attempted to avoid care order recommendations. Although they were working within a child protection services setting, their main aim was to help parents ameliorate their situation" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 258).

Social workers even spoke about having felt disappointed and let down, especially in situations where they realised that they would have put in a lot of effort and energy to help parents change but no progress had been made. They disclosed having encountered challenges in their role as child protection workers because different aspects of their role conflicted, with particular difficulties having ensued when parents required support and they turned to the child protection worker: "I wanted to be supportive towards the mother. I would have liked to empathise but it was difficult to do so when I had to protect the children" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 259). The care aspect of the social work role can be felt strongly in this social worker's words, despite the social worker having had to fully revert to the control aspect of her role: "I have issued enough care orders to see the suffering of the parents. When it came to this care order, I saw the mother suffering as well...despite her misgivings she suffered a lot" (p. 260).

When parents already had experiences where social workers exerted their control function, this impacted the development of a positive relationship with other social workers. In these situations, parents viewed social workers as a threat, as "those people who took away my son" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 260). Parents were reported to avoid contact with social workers to keep them at a distance – "they try to avoid the system" so "we would not have anything to back us up"(p. 260), further demonstrating the difficulties brought up by the conflict between the care and control functions of the social work role.

Final reflections and implications

In the introductory section of this paper, the word 'minefield' was used as a metaphor to describe the professionals' daily struggle in carrying out their duties. This is truly what it feels like for many professionals going to work in the morning – going to a place which has many dangers through which professionals must thread with extreme caution in every step and decision they take. It is already bad enough that professionals must deal with increased workloads and a lack of time and other resources. This is exacerbated by the fact that they must also perform their duties with fear: fear of being judged, fear of making the wrong decisions, fear of being taken to court and fear of losing their warrants, amongst others.

Ultimately, it may be this fear that creates this constant tug of war between providing support to clients, their families, and the community, and the focus on avoiding the potential occurrence of harm. So, it seems like social workers and other professionals are constantly navigating through this minefield which is also occurring within an ongoing battle - a battle between doing what is right for the client while safeguarding their own profession because at the end of the day, it is this profession which puts food on their tables and clothes on their backs.

Another valid point which provides contemporary challenges to professionals is the impact of mass media which has been taken to new heights with the revolution of social media. Whereas in the past mass media was limited to newspapers, television, and radio, today, people can access mass media at the touch of a screen. This has created a shift in the role of people at home from that of a spectator or listener, to that of an active contributor through interactions such as posting comments and sharing posts. So, in addition to the damage caused by the media's critical and sensational coverage of particular cases, professionals are also at risk of being targeted by keyboard warriors. These keyboard warriors most often comment and share their judgmental opinions about different issues solely by reading the article's heading, and without even bothering to read what the article says. These keyboard warriors impact social workers and other professionals in various ways.

Professionals often experience emotional impacts as the comments written on social media can be highly critical, and at times even abusive towards professionals which may lead such professionals to experience feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout which then impacts their performance at work. These comments may also negatively impact the reputation of the profession. Lately, news portals have been flooded with articles about the directives issued by the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses (MUMN) over the government's proposals for the upcoming sectoral agreement. Some news portals misleadingly promoted the issue as "over 4000 nurses and midwives go on strike" (Balzan, 2023), leading to an unbelievable amount of judgemental and abusive comments towards these professionals. Ironically, most of the individuals bearing this judgmental attitude were probably also the ones clapping on their balconies during the pandemic and calling these professionals 'heroes'. It is amazing how quickly people change their opinions! Of course, a strike and an industrial action are not the same thing, but bending the truth helped news portals achieve the hype and activity that they wanted to create on their social media platforms, but at what cost? The obvious consequences here are the demotivation of professionals to carry out their duties, the tarnishing of the profession's reputation, and the risk of attracting fewer individuals to choose these professions in the future.

Where does all this lead us? In the end, all this has a domino effect on the type of service that clients receive: if social workers and other professionals are practising their profession in fear, they will then be cautious about the types of interventions that they adopt in practice - this will undoubtedly limit their client's autonomy. If the reputation of professionals is tarnished in the eyes of the public, how can professionals expect their clients to trust them and build a solid therapeutic relationship to strive for the benefit of the client's wellbeing? If the younger generations are discouraged from becoming social workers and other such professionals, who is going to safeguard and support the wellbeing of our society in the future?! Ultimately, social workers are being pressured into believing

that eliminating risk should be prioritised over meeting the needs of families. It is evident that even if they are not pressured into believing so, then the fear that they experience while practising their profession is having the same effect. In an ideal world, social workers should balance risk management with meeting their client's needs. Obviously, we do not live in an ideal world, so social workers must take an active role in achieving this balance between care and control. Zerafa (2023) has mentioned some tools which can help manage this boundary. One of the most important points is evidence-based practice. By adopting an evidence-based approach, social workers use what they know works in a similar situation. In order words they use the best available evidence to guide decision-making and intervention planning. This approach emphasizes the importance of using research findings and other forms of empirical evidence to inform social work practice and ensure that interventions are effective, efficient, and grounded in scientific knowledge. This has been associated with several benefits which include improved client outcomes, promoting accountability, enhancing credibility and promoting ethical practice. All these values are at the heart of the social work profession. Another strategy which may also be beneficial in helping social workers achieve this balance is increasing awareness and education about the social work profession. Increasing awareness might lead to build improved public understanding about the social worker's role within the various settings in our society. This may help eliminate any misconceptions that the public might have about the profession, bringing about a positive change in perceptions towards social workers. This may ultimately lead social workers to practice their profession with less fear and more pride.

Conclusion

Alfandari et al. (2023) point out how "care versus control issues are now increasingly prominent in the assessment and care planning stage of social work intervention" (p. 83). Social workers continue to be expected to use assessment tools to predict harm, while they are also criticised for not exercising enough professional judgment in their decision-making and relying too much on these same assessment tools.

In such a context, we are left reflecting on what it is that is driving us in our interventions. Are we being predominantly driven by risk, by the desire to avoid harm? Or are we being driven predominantly by need, by that which our clients identify as being the conditions which can improve their quality of life? We are left pondering whether we can negotiate the inconsistencies between the demands made on us by the notions of care and control, whilst remaining true to the values of the social work profession. And hence the notions of care and control challenge us to go back to our roots and think about what we are standing for and whether we are happy with our current position. Finding the perfect balance between care and control and putting an end to the debate related to which of the two should take precedence when social work is being practised is probably impossible. Yet, becoming aware of what it is that influences our practice and the implications of being predominantly risk-averse, or of not giving risk the attention it deserves, is extremely important as it is only through this awareness that active steps can be taken to remedy situations where the relationship between care and control is caught off-balance.

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A psychologist and academic in politics

DR KATYA DEGIOVANNI
Department of Psychology
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract
Over the years, the contribution and overall interest of resident academics to serve in parliament has been scarce in Malta. This paper aims to explore the possible reasons for this, and highlights overlooked contributions that academia can give to parliamentary work. The role of the backbencher is highlighted and discussed in the midst of the work carried out at the University of Malta. This paper also aims to instigate a discussion on the way forward with regard to our direct contribution to what happens in parliament which is where decisions affecting our own lives are taken.

Introduction

"Why did you have to do politics?" That is a question asked to me by many for which I have no real answer. Did I have a choice? And, most importantly, how did I take such a decision which would have a significant impact on my life? Gulzar (2021) mentions that who decides to become a politician influences the performance of democracies in important ways and the current literature consists mainly of studies carried out in advanced democracies. Research often focuses on work on political entry or leadership that is formal but more work is needed on the antecedents of such political entry which I also aim to highlight in this paper. What family background, activities and jobs increase the likelihood of future participation in politics as a politician? Tracing the antecedents of formal political entry could provide insights into how the political class may be broadened.

My story

In my case, the path into politics was a natural one. I was born in politics because of two important and significant members of my family. The first person is my late cousin who was also a member of parliament elected from the 4th district, namely Dr Karl Chircop. His sudden, early, untimely demise 15 years ago at age 43 was a shock not

only to his family but also to the constituents and patients that he served. His life was a mission focused on those wanting to help those in need both in their health and also in their social issues. Having lost his own father also at the age of 43, he could really and truly understand the loss of a loved one and consequently, he strived hard to lessen the suffering of others.

The second and perhaps most influential person is my own father who spent a lifetime working in politics as lead designer and public relations officer but really and truly his aim was to focus mainly on empowerment and social mobility. He himself deserved to further his studies as an adolescent but these were cut short because University tuition at the time was not free of charge and my grandfather could not afford to fund University for all of his 8 children. A strong believer that education is the foundation of social mobility made him work hard in several positions both as a teacher, education officer and Director at the Ministry of Education and then also as Mayor of our hometown Fgura where he was elected as such several times. He still works hard in his ideals and is the President of the Veteran Section and a member of the executive of the party. Moreover, he is the Vice President of the European Senior Organisation (ESO) and also the Vice President of the AGE Platform Europe and now works hard against ageism. It is also worth mentioning that my father works pro-bono as a lawyer since he followed his dream and attained a warrant to practise at the age of 69.

However, there were and still are other influential persons. My mother Ruth started off her career more or less at the same time as my father. Both attended teacher training college in the late 1960s. However, my mother chose to marry and had to relinquish her post as a teacher, as in the seventies it was an accepted fact that men were the only breadwinners for their family. She was reinstated in 1980 also through a measure of the Labour Party in government but she lost six years of service and retired three whole hierarchical career levels lower than my father. I attribute this due to the fact that she had to start her career from scratch and also because by default, our society expected her to manage the household.

My husband Kenneth is the result of another successful strategy adopted by the party I represent. He hails from a humble working-class family, but attained a Ph.D. from the University of Malta and is also a Resident Academic. He fully represents what my father could not achieve at his age. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines social mobility as the change in a person's socio-economic situation, either in relation to their parents (inter-generational mobility) or throughout their lifetime (intra-generational mobility) (https://www.oecd.org/stories/social-mobility/). This possibility was made available through the policy of having education as "free for all" by the party I represent. Finally, I must say that my son and my husband's daughter are influential in different ways. My son accompanies me and supports me in all the activities I do. He is really the reason for which I would tend to agree with Vote16 although Godli (2015) and Ribeiro et al. (2022) state that there is an ambivalent perception regarding young people's political maturity to vote at 16. My husband's daughter is slightly more laid back when it comes to active politics although she would make a good spokesperson representing reasons for which the younger generation seems to be so alienated and discouraged from the political arena as a whole. These significant others are my life and the backbone of my decision as well as my will to serve.

Choosing to serve

It is worth mentioning that prior to deciding to contest for the general election, I had contested elections for the University Council twice. It was indeed easier for me for some reason, to get elected as the first female and first psychologist in parliament than to be elected on the University Council! I must admit that the gender corrective mechanism (Sammut et al., 2019) was to me a good motivator. On the day of the bi-elections, I was surprised to see that I was in fact elected from a vacated seat by the Hon. Deputy Prime Minister Chris Fearne. There is still a lot of work to be done in this respect however as on that district there are three ministers and a parliamentary secretary

who are male. Having been elected is the first step but women deserve much more in terms of representation with respect to gender balance in the 4th district. More so, young females deserve more female role models to aspire to.

Another reason for which I chose to serve as a parliamentarian is to use my knowledge and skills in the educational field. I graduated as a teacher in 1998 and subsequently as a psychologist in 2003. However, since 1998 I have always worked in educational institutions spanning primary education to further and higher educational settings. I strongly believe that we are always lagging behind in how to guide and enable agency for our young people with respect to their further and higher educational opportunities. Those who are practising guidance in this respect have not experienced the confusion that the younger generation is now faced with. Career guidance practitioners of my age had two choices: either attain O levels and do the academic route or find a job in a factory. As career advisers, they would have chosen the former scenario without experiencing anything about the world of work. This leaves them without any knowledge of apprenticeships, work-based learning, boundaryless careers and a whole lot of other factors and variables contributing to the fast-paced change scenario that the younger generation is faced with. According to Morgado et al. (2016), Malta has one of the highest rates of both horizontal and vertical skills mismatch and therefore our country is experiencing a skills mismatch in essential fields. Career guidance is an important tool both for social mobility and skills enhancement.

My choice of becoming a psychologist was a laboured one as making choices for me at secondary school was very hard. I can say that I never particularly excelled in any subject, but I was a good all-rounder making subject choice very hard for me. Psychology, which is a multi-disciplinary subject was my lifesaver. As a student, I realised that the formation of a psychologist as a professional in Malta was hard and this led to awkward situations with other professions performing roles which are similar to ours. Later, as chair of the Malta Psychology Profession Board, I came to realise that as a profession we should be more tolerant towards others who work in our field and will strive for mutual respect and collaboration. Only this behaviour shall truly make our clients the centre of our practice and mission.

I would also like to work hard against ageism. I have witnessed discrimination against those who are older in age. It is harder for them to attain a job and society seems to push them aside once they attain their pension. This is a great loss for society because we are not managing knowledge in the right way. Enabling structures which would include experienced persons to participate fully would only contribute to a better society and avoid a costly, care-taking attitude.

An organisational psychologist in parliament

It is overall inevitable as an organisational psychologist in parliament, not to observe what goes on around me. There is, as one would expect, an overrepresentation of lawyers who supersede the second largest occupational groups taken together (doctors, bankers, engineers and teachers). It is worth noticing that two of the lawyers in parliament are also ex-teachers. It is therefore evident that the jargon and the ways in which parliament is managed are closest to what a lawyer is used to. Other professionals stand to be at a disadvantage and have a steeper learning curve. Moreover, lawyers are socialised into winning disputes. That is what earns them their bread and butter especially if they are working within Courts. Other professions would prefer situations where there are win-win opportunities and a more collaborative approach. Parliament should not only be representative with regard to gender, but it should also represent its people in other ways. Some of these ways should be the professions and/or occupations of its members. The more diverse the representation is, the more chance there is that parliament is truly representative.

Parliament is not only about speeches in the plenary. There are also committees (https://parlament.mt/menues/committees/standing-committees/#/!) and other bodies which require government representation. One of the committees within which I serve is the Welfare Committee where funds are allocated to homes for older persons. Another committee of which I am a member is the Children's Council, an ex-ufficio membership I hold as Chairperson of the parliamentary Social Affairs Committee. Other parliamentary committees of which I am a member are the Family Affairs Committee and the Petitions Committee. The role of these committees is to invite stakeholders, discuss and present matters to the plenary for consideration. It is important to have academics present because of the research studies that Non-Governmental Organisations and other entities present. These research studies need to be handled with a critical eye and not taken for granted because they claim to be research. Should policy be evidence-based, then we should have the right people on board to ensure that the evidence is gathered and analysed in the right way.

So what else does a psychologist and an academic bring to parliament? Our training mandates understanding people and the ability to maintain good human relationships. Inherent here is the understanding of change management which, more often than not, requires dealing with people and providing a shoulder of support. A psychologist can also link real-life experiences and translate them into a political manifesto. I believe that politics should go round full circle: it is a process initiated by the people and for the people. The politician is only the enabler who should also be in direct contact with people and who can organise proper public consultation. As a psychologist in parliament, I feel I am a strong advocate for resilience and mental health as well as for an inclusive society without the use of stereotypes and pigeonholing.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Parliament is there to represent our people who come from all walks of life. Getting talented and skilled individuals into office is important (Gulzar, 2021). Similarly, our parliament should be a representative sample. We cannot afford to be misrepresented as misrepresentation may lead to bias. In order for this to happen, we need to stimulate our students to aspire to become politicians. The political scenario in our country needs professionals hailing from the social sciences not only for elections but also within the administrative support structures of parliament itself.

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Redefining 21st century learning and assessment – how does the University of Malta fare?

PROF. RUTH FALZON
Department of Counselling
Faculty for Social Wellbeing | University of Malta

Abstract
Education and literacy are a 21st century fundamental human right working against poverty (Freire, 1970; Hanemann, 2015; OECD, 2016; UNESCO, 2018; Wagner, 2011), pervading every part of our lives, and affecting wellbeing (Bartlett et al., 2011; Falzon, 2019; Sachs et al., 2004). Their lack leads to challenges with employment and quality of life (Birdwell et al, 2011; Demaine & Entwistle, 2016, United Nations, 2020). This paper reflects on 21st century context for literacy, learning, and assessment (Chetcuti et al., 2018; Falzon & Camilleri, 2014; Verheijen, 2019).

The 21st century context

Technology has improved so much that 21st century schools cannot ignore its use to access learning and process assessments. Technology is the fourth revolution for means of production of knowledge, following language, drawing/writing, and print (Beaver, 2012; Harnad, 1991). It took over 300 years for Gutenberg's 1440 third revolution, printing, to truly infiltrate and affect society, namely the 1760s' Industrial Revolution. The transition from Printing to Technology was then mere decades (Shenkoya & Kim, 2023; Warschauer1998).

Notwithstanding, we experience two realities: the fourth revolution in most strata of life and the third revolution in educational systems. "With the appearance of computers and digital technologies, new means of interacting between people, and a growing competitiveness on the international level, organizations are now requiring new skills from their employees, leaving educational systems struggling to provide appropriate ongoing training" (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023, p. 1). Whilst largely responsible for the need for these massive, rapid changes, these "fast-evolving digital technologies are also the answer for implementations and solutions in education and other sectors of life" (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023, p. 1). These new skills require educational systems to work with the

21st Century's 4Cs of education and learning: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication, first proposed by the US Ministry of Education and now embraced globally (Nganga, 2019; Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023; van Laar et al. 2017), including UNESCO (Lor, 2007).

My two basic premises for this paper are: (1) traditional literacy continues to be vital (Kirsch & Jenkins, 1998; OECD, 2016 UNESCO, 2018); and (2) 21st century literacy, namely the use of technology to access traditional literacy, must be considered for learning and assessment as a choice for all, not an eligibility concession for those who need (Camilleri et al., 2019; Degirmenci et al., 2020; Lysenko & Abrami, 2014), particularly with the 4Cs' context.

Literacy?

A traditional meaning of reading is: gleaning meaning from verbal-visual print (Butler, 1982; Wagner et al., 2009). A second school of thought challenges traditional access to and production of verbal-visual print (Camilleri et al., 2019; Capodieci et al., 2020; Singer & Alexander, 2017). Traditional reading involves accurate and fluent access to print - simultaneously recognising graphemes representing phonemes, and blending them into words accurately, namely decoding, you amass sight words with practice (Aro, 2004; Ehri, 2014; Hall & Ramig, 1978; Falzon, 2012) to enable you to read fluently and automatically (Bell, 2001; Gersten et al., 2020; Rupley et al., 2020; Sullivan et al., 2013; Young et al., 2015). Brysbaert's 2019 metanalysis quoted "Normal silent reading rate in English is 238 wpm for non-fiction and 260 wpm for fiction" (p. 21). This automaticity is vital for accessing meaning (Limpo et al., 2020; Megherbi et al., 2018; Samuels et al., 2006; Wagner et al., 2009). You will only slow down when decoding unfamiliar or made-up words, for example, Sesquipedalian and Nudiustertian which, for the curious reader, mean long and multi-syllabic words and the day before yesterday respectively.

Writing, that is translating ideas from vocabulary to sentences to organised language, then requires a different set of skills totally separate from the ability to spell. The production of thoughts into organised language someone else will access in another space and time is what is truly required for writing (Arcon et al., 2017; Dahlström & Boström, 2017; Leu et al., 2017; Graham & Santangelo, 2014).

Alternative access and production

21st-century literacy, education, and assessment must consider a construct which does not involve the mechanics of word attack skills for reading and writing. Our educational systems still place a lot of emphasis on books, paper, and handwriting, with little or no emphasis on the skills of using ten, rather than three, fingers to write, or of promoting tablet swiping or using speech-to-text-to-speech assistive technology (Horowitz, 2023; Leu et al., 2017; Petrescu, 2014). Finland has taken this plunge and, as of eight years ago, children starting school will only be introduced to typewriting (Russell, 2015). I am still not convinced and perhaps, because of my age and a dearth in the literature, I am a bit resistant to accept, and totally appreciate and understand this new reality. I query: what is the cognitive effect of not teaching children to handwrite in manuscript or cursive/joined (Leu et al., 2017; Ruffini et al., 2023)?

Educational systems and educators must avoid unnecessary suffering by challenging and changing their traditional definition of learning and assessment, and upgrade to the 21st century reality, which wants the human race to focus on the 4Cs: creativity, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication (Thornhill-Miller et al., 2023; van Laar et al. 2017). Indeed, within the context of the 4Cs, should we do away with individual assessment?

As a university academic, I often receive the same complaint from students: "I would have done much better on examinations had I been allowed to type rather than handwrite". The 2019 Coronavirus Disease lockdown gave

our students this possibility. Students could use technology to submit work. It is hoped that this option remains now that we have returned to normal. Standard computers themselves already incorporate adaptations to address all possible options to access and produce verbal-visual print. For example, Microsoft 365, the Immersion Reader, Speechify for mobiles, or reader pens are easily available for schools and home (Degirmenci et al., 2020; Salmerón, et al., 2023), and, in principle, also accepted by the University of Malta (UM, 2019), although the decision is not taken by the candidate but by UM.

A choice … not a concession!

What I am advocating for is beyond submitting a request for entitlement to accommodation (UM, 2019). This should become a mere choice … for all. After all, at the Doctorate level, viva voce is used to assess candidates (Crossouard, 2011). Examination boards do not question or verify how the thesis was produced (Falzon & Camilleri, 2014). This is also supported by the European Union (2017) Directive and Regulation 2017/1563 on access to print. 2017/1563 facilitates access to published works in formats accessible to persons who are blind, visually impaired, dyslexic or otherwise print-disabled. This law supports my argument regarding alternative access to and presentation of literary material as a choice. If applied appropriately, it will introduce the world of education to the 21st century.

I, therefore, advocate that students should be allowed to simply choose, as opposed to having to apply for, what formats they are most comfortable with when sitting for their "written" examinations, even language examinations, just as one chooses to wear prescriptive glasses, or to write with a fountain pen or a pen. Further, time should not be an issue unless it is specifically being examined. In this 21st century, such possibilities should be a choice not the result of hours of assessment and testing at high financial costs, human resources and anxiety for students, families, and schools (Antonelli, 2014; Camilleri et al., 2019; Chetcuti et al., 2018)

The latest UM erudition

In 2016, the concepts of inclusion enshrined in the Maltese Education Act (2011) were also reflected in Article 6(2) of the UM's entry requirements (Education Act, 2016). The UM's entry requirements were now in line with the law, which states that children have a right to an Individual Education Plan (IEP), which demands provisions, adaptations, and personalised targets resulting in children following different curricula across subjects. Article 6 (2) (Education Act, 2016) enshrined this, and educators and assessors could assure parents and students that one may attend university if they have their Matriculation (MATSEC) certification (minimum 44 points or as probation students) but do not have one of the three required Secondary Education Certification (SEC) grades, namely English, Maltese, and Math. Now we are Back to the Past! UM is now asking such candidates to produce proof that they have failed the SEC examination they would like to be exempted from, at least twice. My Department of Counselling has of course complained, and my Faculty endorsed this complaint.

This has created unnecessary further stress and suffering for young people. They would have been thriving at school, so much that they were successful in obtaining their MATSEC certificate, making them eligible to start UM education. Forcing young persons to attempt examinations they are academically, neurologically, or psychologically not prepared for, and with the overwhelming probability that they will fail due to their IEP, is not just misguided, but goes against the very spirit of the law. Equally seriously, it risks discouraging young persons and in the long run affects the country's employment body, apart from arising mental health issues and their toll on the economy. In my book, this is a grave injustice, discriminatory, and indeed abusive (Antonelli et al., 2014; Falzon & Camilleri, 2010), belittling the inclusion principles UM is supposedly embracing, Maltese professionals' erudite knowledge, care, and practice, and all the students' and their families' hard work and commitment to ensure that our future generations thrive, remain motivated and are successful. Such actions never fail to baffle and appal me!

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