Unity
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A SPECIAL EDITION FROM THE FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

THE STRESS OF THE PAST, LIVES ON

THE PERSISTENCE OF MEMORY, SALVADOR DALÍ, 1931

Faculty for Social Wellbeing's latest data on the stressful events that can define our life shows how our future decisions can be conditioned by traumatic moments experienced from an early age

Matthew Vella
MaltaToday

STRESS in life comes aplenty. But how long does it take for us to realise that the decisions that conditioned so many of life's turns might have been conditioned by past, unresolved traumas?

In a far-reaching survey of the different traumas that can affect human beings, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing has tracked a host of life events that caused stress at childhood or in adulthood, and asked respondents to which degree this had affected their lives.

The study provides data on stressful life events that concern schooling, problems at work, troublesome relationships, death, addictions, abuse, abortion, miscarriages, experiences in Court and imprisonment, to mention just a few.

The survey for example finds shocking statistics for bullying, evidence of a pervasive issue that continues to plague communities. 13.8% said they had experience bullying "that led to making an official complaint or changing schools", of which one in two respondents sustained such stressful events well over three times. Stress levels were rated high (5) for 30%, with 45% adding these events caused psychological problems in their present-day life.

"While physical scars may fade over time, the social and particularly the psychological effects of bullying can linger, leaving deep emotional wounds," said Prof. Ruth Falzon (Department of Counselling).

"The findings are a stark reminder of the prevalence of bullying in our society and how, as a community, we do not seem to be able to stop it. Whether in schools, workplaces, and in our new reality online, bullying remains a persistent problem that demands urgent attention."

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Welcome to the Faculty

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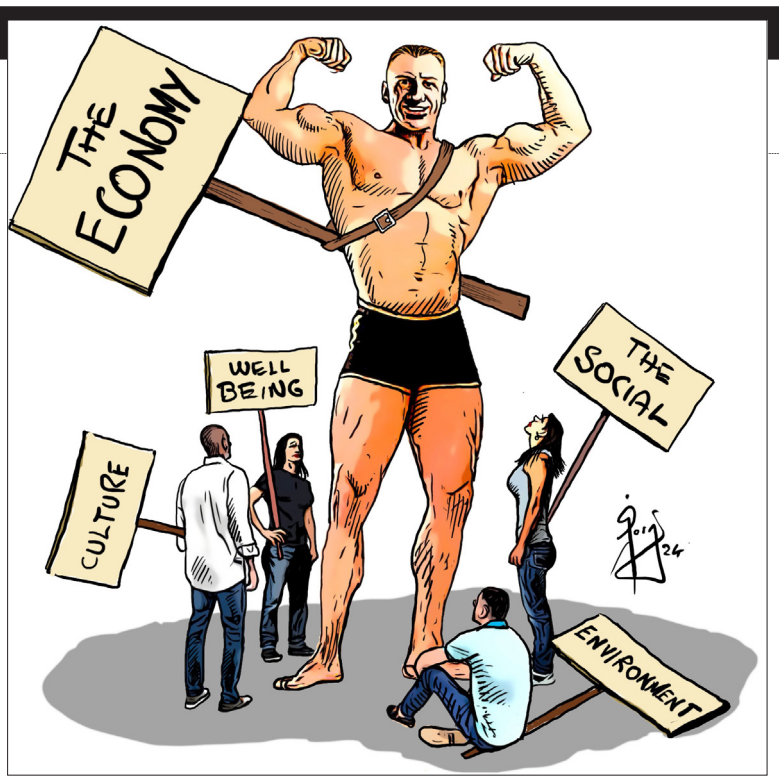
First up...

WHAT'S GROWTH GOT TO DO WITH IT? GDP AND THE MEASURE OF SUCCESS



GORG MALLIA

Maria Giulia Borg
Research Support Officer II, Faculty for Social Wellbeing

FOR years now, Malta has been a front-runner in the EU on economic growth, with exceptional GDP growth: a success story. But can we really determine whether a country is successful based on solely one figure?

Gross Domestic Product is a standard measure developed in the 1930s by Nobel prizewinner Simon Kuznets to calculate a nation's income based on the value of all goods and services produced. Being a relatively straightforward computation, GDP was soon adopted by most countries to gauge their economic positioning, enabling year-on-year and country-by-country comparisons.

Studies indicate that greater income could indeed improve the quality of life of individuals, especially when it can help them fulfil their basic needs. However, past a certain threshold, higher income does not necessarily improve wellbeing. Kuznets himself had declared that "the welfare of a nation can scarcely be inferred from a measurement of national income", knowing full well the limitations of his tool. GDP cannot and should not be used as the sole metric of true economic wellbeing in an economy.

What's in the cake?

Let us assume GDP is a cake. Prima facie, one would assume that the bigger the cake, the more abundance and therefore the happier the people. But does this theory hold? One flaw of the GDP metric is that it does not distinguish of what the cake it made up of. The importance is growth rate rather than what is contributing to the growth.

This means that if the ingredients of the cake are suboptimal or possibly detrimental to the wellbeing of people, as long as they are marketable, they are considered as positives. GDP could be growing due to higher production of warfare items, increased production of pharmaceuticals due to a higher incidence of illnesses, or as in Malta, increased construction or over-tourism.

The growth does not distinguish if there is income being generated to provide better education or simply being income inflows from passport schemes. The overall non-financial impact of the growth is not considered.

Is everyone getting a fair share of the cake?

Even though greater GDP growth might be equated to a more prosperous society at large, this is not necessarily the case if wealth distribution is not made in a fair manner. It could well be that despite a larger cake, vulnerable groups have limited opportunities in getting their slice.

In Malta, in spite of the rise in GDP growth, income inequality has been rising, as computed by the Gini Coefficient, moving from 28 in 2006 to 31.1 in 2022. 30% of persons aged 65-plus were at-risk-of-poverty with an income of less than €10,893 per year, one in every 14 individuals could not afford a meal with meat, chicken, fish or vegetarian equivalent every second day and 33% could not afford to pay a one-week holiday away from home. All the while the government is increasing its year-on-year expenditure on social services.

This inevitably leads one to question whether increased wealth in society is actually leading to an increased standard of living for all, or is it being more exclusive?

How are the bakers treated?

An ageing population, falling fertility rates and limited human resources were major stumbling blocks to the growing local economy. The solution to this was the influx of foreign workers, rising from just 18,700 in 2013 to 107,000 in 2023, a 500% increase. Such foreign workers can be seen contributing in various industries, ranging from construction to hospitality, as well as caring professions.

Yet, are they, as major contributors baking this cake, also getting a slice of it? Unfortunately, we have witnessed the extreme commodification of this foreign human resource. Especially in the case of non-EU nationals, they are at the mercy of employers who are responsible for their single permit visa, making them more vulnerable to abusive employers. With an exponentially growing demand for accommodation, many workers with a minimal pay end up having to share residences with numerous others. One hears not so sporadic horror stories of suboptimal employment, health and safety and housing conditions, amongst others. Despite contributing to more than €1 billion in social system, the majority of these workers remain without a vote, effectively unable to choose who represents them.

What is the real cost of the cake?

Ultimately, when looking solely at the GDP growth rate in isolation, we are often disregarding any non-financial elements which are also at stake.

The greater economic activity in Malta and ballooning population growth is leading to noise and air pollution, congested roads, loss of natural environments as well as a sense of being smothered amongst the local population, just to mention a few.

Environmental degradation, deterioration in mental health and the inability to preserve the beauty of our island for future generations are amongst the external costs to the ever-growing GDP which we are not taking into account. This lack of sustainability could mean that having a bigger cake now, might also limit the ability of having a cake at all in the future.

So, is a bigger cake really better?

It is time to start looking at alternative ways of measuring prosperity in our country. This is not to say that we should scrap entirely the GDP metric, but rather, GDP should be seen as a puzzle piece amongst many other indicators used to measure quality of life.

Yet, what is not measured cannot be managed. It is time we develop a wellbeing index which will help us strive for an economy which serves the people and not vice-versa.

Editorial

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WELCOME TO UNITY'S THIRD EDITION!

Prof. Marvin Formosa
Department of Gerontology and Dementia Studies

TIME flies! I remember as if it was yesterday when the Dean, Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, pitched me his idea for the Faculty for Social Wellbeing to publish its own annual newspaper. A "newspaper which put forward the Faculty's sense of responsibility and concern for social problems and injustices" we pronounced in unison!

And here we are, launching *Unity*'s third edition! Definitely, not an unanticipated outcome. My call for contributions always resulted in tens of positive replies from each stakeholder within the Faculty: resident academics, administration staff, and MPhil/PhD students.

Reflecting on the submitted and published articles in this edition, one can never overemphasise the wide repertoire of interests that characterises the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. The Faculty promotes research on contemporary issues of family life, with particular emphasis on the promotion of resilience in family members, whilst also striving to educate and equip future counsellors with the necessary skills and capacities to become excellent and virtuous professionals in a variety of social and cultural settings.

It is established in the national and international arenas as an arena of criminological research focusing its efforts in fields as diverse as policing, corrections, and spatio-temporal crime statistics. Gender and sexualities are also at the forefront of the Faculty's interests, as are youth, community studies, ageing and dementia studies which contributes much to our understanding of the human life course. Psychology research and training of students in the scientific understanding of human behaviour and relationships, and mental health are paramount.

Last but certainly not least the Faculty's social policy and social work education offers vibrant, exciting, demanding and relevant courses for both younger and mature students.

As always, I wish to take the opportunity to thank everyone involved in making this third edition of *Unity* a success, especially the Dean, the contributors and production team at MaltaToday, and most specifically, Charlene Fabri who worked tirelessly behind the scenes.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in the Faculty for Social Wellbeing Unity gazette do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Faculty.

Nurturing excellence

Prof. Frank Bezzina
Pro-Rector for International Development & Quality Assurance

STUDENTS enrolled at the University of Malta (UM), both local and international, take great pride in being part of this prestigious institution. Consistently ranked in the top 2.85% among over 31,000 global higher education institutions by the Webometrics Ranking Web of Universities, UM demonstrates a strong commitment to quality. This commitment is evident through its robust Internal Quality Assurance mechanisms, which foster a culture of excellence through ongoing professional dialogue with both internal and external stakeholders.

UM is cognisant that quality is key to fulfil its important role in the social, economic, environmental and political development of our island. Consequently, the University considers internal and external quality assurance as complementary and mutually reinforcing. UM is dedicated to sustaining its global reputation for excellence by embracing quality assurance as a means to celebrate achievements and promote ongoing enhancement.

Chairing UM's Quality Assurance Committee and collaborating with colleagues across campus, our experiences underscore an unwavering dedication to providing the highest quality tertiary education experience. Milestones such as the implementation of the Student Feedback and Assessment policies reflect our determination to continuously enrich the educational journey of our students. Regular Periodic Programme Reviews at UM are highly effective in ensuring academic relevance and quality, providing a structured mechanism for evaluating curriculum, learning, teaching, assessment and learning outcomes. These reviews promote stakeholder engagement, facilitate continuous improvement, fostering adaptability to emerging trends in higher education and industry. The effectiveness of this process hinges on the commitment and collaboration of various stakeholders, including academics, administration, students, and external stakeholders.

Simultaneously, Boards of Study are diligently engaged in Annual Programme Reviews, necessitating a similar level of determination and collaboration from stakeholders. The Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) remains steadfast in providing continuous support throughout this process, recognising its impact on both continuous improvement and decision-making within the academic landscape. The commitment of all involved parties, particularly of Deans, Directors, Heads of Department, Programme Co-ordinators, academics and administrative staff, undoubtedly contribute significantly to programme quality and the overall educational experience.

However, this journey is dynamic and requires us to adapt, evolve, and embrace new challenges. In this context, the invaluable contribution of the Kunsill Studenti Universitarji (KSU) and the numerous student societies is beyond measure. The constructive input and feedback from the student community enhance collaboration between the university administration and students. Student representatives' active involvement facilitates effective communication channels, playing a pivotal role in implementing quality assurance initiatives.

Looking ahead, we must address challenges such as advancing the use of Business Intelligence, enhancing digital processes, and preserving our standing in global university rankings. These endeavours demand the same tenacity that enabled us to succeed this far. As a professional community, we need to approach these challenges as opportunities for growth and excellence, reinforcing our commitment to providing a meaningful tertiary education.

Emphasising quality at UM is paramount, guaranteeing the provision of education that adheres to rigorous standards, holds international recognition and equips students with essential skills for their future pursuits. This commitment to excellence not only fosters a renowned and long-standing global reputation for the university but also acts as a magnet for top-tier faculty, exceptional students, and valuable industry partnerships, thereby fortifying the institution's long-term success.

As we contemplate the accomplishments of the past years, our focus shifts to the future, recognising that UM's journey toward quality culture is an ongoing process marked by learning, accountability, and enhancement. The University's collective ability to find solutions, attain objectives, and deliver outstanding educational experiences for its international community is rooted in collaborative efforts. Through our collective endeavours, we will steer the course of continuous improvement, honouring the University of Malta's commitment to excellence and preparing students to lead our future society.

For & Against

Are fathers punished by the courts?

The NGO *Flimkien Missirijiet Inqumu* asserts that men are immediately discriminated against in child custody court disputes (*Illum, 28 June 2022*). *Unity* invited FMI to elaborate further on such a statement and Prof. Marceline Naudi, resident academic at the Faculty for Social Wellbeing's Department of Gender and Sexualities, to react at this assertion

for

Flimkien MIssirijiet Inqumu - Il-Papà Jħobbok Ukoll

AS soon as a father steps into the courtroom, the situation is immediately against them if they are male.

Is it fair that hearings are held in courtrooms, sometimes without air conditioning, where a man who does not wear a tie and a blazer can be found in contempt of Court? Women who wear a blouse and blazer on the other hand are not liable for anything, but if a man dresses in this manner they are in contempt of Court. This comparison is far from frivolous for *Flimkien Missirijiet Inqumu*. Indeed, it is the tip of the iceberg, as there are various other ways in which men experience discrimination when compared to women.

Mediation is the primary bone of contention for FMI. Why does society appear to perceive that when child custody is split equally between a father and a mother, that is a man and a woman, this is a victory for the father and a loss for the mother? We are indeed critical of the norm in separation and divorce cases where children are generally assigned to live with mothers, rather than simply following a principle of equality where custody is equally shared between both parents.

FMI also has qualms on issues relating to accusations of domestic violence. Are studies being carried out on how certain lawyers with a relatively large share of clients, accuse their partners of domestic violence? On how, coincidentally, many of these charges tend to be a photocopy of each other? What legal retribution exists for those who are found to have levied false accusations? Do they get to be doubly charged with what they have accused the other person of? Do they get fined for damages that can at least cover the legal expenses for those who are falsely accused? Do doctors who issue false medical certificates, lose their warrant if these accusations are unproven?

Flimkien Missirijiet Inqumu believes the system makes it easy for malicious accusations to be made, especially when the length of time these cases take up, the accuser can still win, whatever the outcome of the accusation.

What about the problematic issues inside the courtroom. Why are hearings not recorded? Are magistrates' sentences being reviewed and checked, to see if there is a chance that 'Magistrate A' is ruling against a particular gender and Magistrate B against the other gender? Can court sittings be recorded so that the proceedings of the hearing are minuted exactly? There are situations during which a magistrate utters a comment that is then not written and reproduced in the court minutes. One can only wonder why it was not written down.

When a man is accused of an act of domestic violence, it seems that they are already guilty before evidence has been presented in court. Such men have limited time with their children, and are always under supervision even though they have not yet been proven guilty. In many instances, the legal and policing system fails to empathise with such men, ignoring the possibility that these men could be innocent, and as such are already facing an uphill battle in defending themselves.

Court delays are another harsh reality. For example, children still in primary school when their parents' court proceedings start, might end up fishing their compulsory school educaton without the case even being settled. Nobody can give these children back this lost time. Indeed, months may pass between one court sitting and another, with hearings postponed on any excuse, and they are various: ranging from lawyers' parents' days, court officers being sick or on leave, papers forgotten or lost but eventually found, lawyers' absences, court experts unable to cope with their workloads, or court officials unavailable to minute the proceedings.

Meanwhile, fathers are waiting. For *Flimkien Missirijiet Inqumu*, this lost time will never be recouped. Contemporary society is now characterised by a younger generation without fathers as role models. And it is the family that is suffering, and now on course for even greater suffering for future generations.

against

Prof. Marceline Naudi Lecturer, Department of Gender and Sexualities

OUR society still operates on the traditional gender stereotypes… Although much has been done to attempt to eradicate these sexist stereotypes, and although on paper it would appear that a lot has changed, at the end of the day, these stereotypes continue to form a sub-stratum, just below the surface, which seeps upwards and continues to affect our lives in many different ways…

The stereotypes tell us that, in heterosexual relationships, the man is the provider, the breadwinner and that the woman is the carer, the nurturer. This latter translates into being responsible for all the housework (physical and emotional), the wellbeing of the children, the other family members (ageing parents, in-laws), etc.

Of course, many people today will say, this is no longer the case… Many of the women also work outside the home, some part time and some full time, so they too contribute to the household income – and indeed this is correct. And some of the men also help with the house chores – this too is correct. However, the default responsibility for the household and all who sail in it remains firmly on the woman. In Maltese we use expressions like, *'Jaħsilli l-art'* or *'Jonxorli l-ħwejjeġ'* which clearly demonstrate where the responsibility is seen to lie.

Now… these stereotypes affect us often without us even being conscious of them. They are subtle and insidious – they affect how we see things, our perceptions, our realities, the way we live our lives…

So whether you occupy the lower rungs of society's hierarchy, or the higher rungs, a care assistant or a psychiatrist or a judge, you are likely to be affected by this 'unconscious bias'. This would probably mean that as a mother, as a wife, you do everything you have to do for the wellbeing (physical and emotional) of your children and spouse, even if you also have employment outside the home, because your primary responsibility is the home, as befits a 'good' mother/wife. And if you are a father you may do less in the 'home' because your primary responsibility is bringing the money in, as befits a 'good' father/husband.

When relationships crash and burn, as sometimes they do, the stereotypes still continue to affect our lives… So most people would consider and perceive a woman, as opposed to a man, as the main nurturer, carer of little children – they would perceive her as the best option for the children. And indeed they would often also be correct in that assumption… Whilst each relationship/family is unique in some ways, there are also many other ways in which they are similar. If mummy has been the one mainly doing the cooking, feeding, ensuring clean uniforms and sports stuff, looking after sick children, helping with the homework, listening to worries and fears, etc. then mummy is probably the best option to mainly continue doing so… If daddy has not really been very present in the children's lives, then should he expect to get 'equal access' now that the relationship has crashed? What about what's best for the children? They are already having to deal with many changes, uncertainties, etc. – should we add to them? If, however, on the other hand, daddy had been carrying a fair share of responsibility for the doing of the 'house' and caring stuff, then that's different… then enabling him to continue to do so should make the children's lives easier.

We also know, of course, that sometimes relationships crash and burn just because they do, because people change, or life happens, but sometimes they crash and burn because bad things were happening within them, such as domestic violence and abuse. And in our society, where traditional gender stereotypes still hold sway, where men are seen as the leaders, as the heads of households, the controllers, then it's not surprising that domestic violence (of all types: physical, emotional, coercive control, economic, sexual etc.) continues to exist.

In such cases we really need to be super-careful… Persons who are abusive towards their partners, especially in the presence of children, do not generally make good nurturers of children… And this regardless of their gender, though we also know, as research clearly shows, that men are disproportionally the perpetrators, and women disproportionally the victims in cases of intimate partner violence (IPV).

So in the vast majority of cases of IPV we need to look out for the children's wellbeing, which should always come before the wishes or wants of the parents. And abusive persons will at times continue their abuse and control through the court system – and try to camouflage this as parental concern. That this happens, we know, and this shows flagrant disregard for the children they are professing to love.

So… it's not as simple as to say men are discriminated against in family court in relation to access or custody, etc. of children.

Yes, sometimes they are – and this is down to the unconscious bias which tends to be found within us all, including judiciary and other legal professionals – but often this is not done with intent to discriminate, but rather through a lack of awareness of the way the stereotypes affect us. Women encounter discrimination in all the different aspects of their lives – again often due to unconscious bias.

But using the court system to further perpetrate abuse on your partner, and using your children to do so, that is done with intent, and not with unconscious bias – and that should never be tolerated in a court of law!

"Many ignore the connection between stressful life events and their later traumas"

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

The data particularly illustrates the profound impact bullying can have on individuals' mental well-being and social interactions. "The emotional trauma inflicted by bullying can last a lifetime. Victims often experience feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and depression, which can significantly affect their relationships, academic and work/career performance, and overall quality of life."

PhD candidate in criminology Gail Debono, a psychologist, however points out that many people before the current generation, probably did not report their bullying, nor would they have changed school because of it.

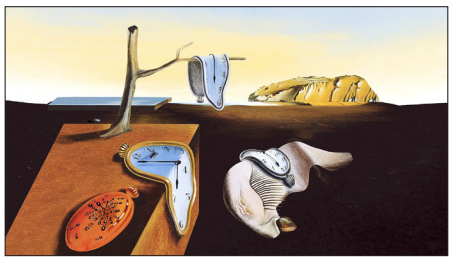
"Had they been asked whether they had been bullied, the result would be reversed. Also, from the ones who admit to being bullied, the percentage of people affected 'somewhat' or 'very strongly' are very high, most especially when you see that respondents who said the bullying had not affected them at all, are also a large number who never made the connection between their personality traits and the bullying they suffered.

"Sometimes people only realise this when they go to therapy, even if they're in their 60s," Debono says – she mentions as example, people who are mistrustful of friends or colleagues. "Some go through their entire lives not knowing that bullying affected their life the way it did. The percentage of 'somewhat' and 'very strongly' is much higher, I can assure you!"

Prof. Falzon adds that the data shows that society cannot afford to ignore the damaging effects of bullying. "We must take proactive measures to create safer and more inclusive environments where bullying is not tolerated. This requires a concerted effort from policymakers, educators, parents, and communities to implement robust anti-bullying policies, promote empathy and respect, and foster a culture of kindness and acceptance. Restorative justice may be the way forward here.

"Ultimately, by confronting the issue of bullying head-on and providing adequate support to those affected – bully and victim – we can work towards building a society where everyone feels valued, respected, and safe. Only then can we truly mitigate the devastating social and psychological consequences of bullying and create a brighter future for generations to come."

"The emotional trauma inflicted by bullying can last a lifetime. Victims often experience feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and depression, which can significantly affect their relationships, academic and work/career performance, and overall quality of life."



FRONT COVER

'The Persistence of Memory' is a 1931 painting by artist Salvador Dalí and one of the most recognisable works of Surrealism. In a public lecture Dalí had declared that he did not know the meaning of his own work, so viewers should not worry if they could not decipher it themselves. His melting-clock imagery mocks the rigidity of chronometric time, inspired by hallucinations he experienced from the process he called "paranoiac critical method," in which he deliberately provoked hallucinations as a path to his own subconscious.

Addiction

Addiction is another of the stressful life events traced by the Faculty's survey, which shows concerning insights into addiction's grip on the community, affecting 3.9% of respondents – notably among those who finished with secondary and post-secondary education.

"This challenges the assumption that higher education guards against addiction, suggesting instead that educational attainment does not immunise individuals from such struggles," says Dr Maris Catania.

"With addiction events averaging three occurrences per person and a stress level of 3.24 out of 5 during the most impactful instance, the data reveals a troubling cycle of stress and addiction."

Nearly 30% of participants reported strong physical and social impacts, while a significant 47.1% experienced severe psychological consequences, highlighting addiction's pervasive and enduring harm.

"This pattern suggests a deep-seated issue within the Maltese community, cutting across educational lines and demanding a revaluation of prevention and support strategies," Catania adds.

Catania said the findings call for a nuanced approach to addiction, recognizing its complexity beyond educational achievement. "The stark data on its long-term physical, social, and psychological repercussions emphasises the need for comprehensive public health initiatives and targeted intervention programmes, aiming to break the cycle of addiction and mitigate its widespread impacts in Malta."

Abortion

The same survey also finds an average 3.7% of respondents saying they had experienced the stressful event of an abortion – 4.2% of the female respondents had experienced the termination of a pregnancy, while 3.2% of male respondents were presumably partners.

While the percentage appears very small, the finding comes as no surprise to Prof. Marcelline Naudi (Department of Gender of Sexualities), who says the social taboo of abortion – still a criminal offence in Malta – means people are not comfortable disclosing information about such events.

The data for the stress levels experienced by this cohort however requires a more illustrative picture, Prof. Naudi says. "If we look at the stress levels experienced in this sample, we see about a quarter who felt no stress at all; something between 1/7th to 1/8th felt a lot of stress, with the rest somewhere in between… what we can say is that for some people, terminating a pregnancy is stressful, and for others it isn't."

Termination of a pregnancy is obviously a very gendered experience: in this case the data is not broken down by gender. "We also do not have a gender breakdown in relation to the physical, social or psychological impact on their lives today," Prof. Naudi says.

"What we can note however is that in each area – physical, social, psychological – the largest group felt no impact. Unfortunately, whilst it does give us some information in relation to age, education and locality of those who felt comfortable disclosing that they or a partner had terminated a pregnancy, in relation to experiencing stress as a result of termination, this study tells us very little."

Survey objectives

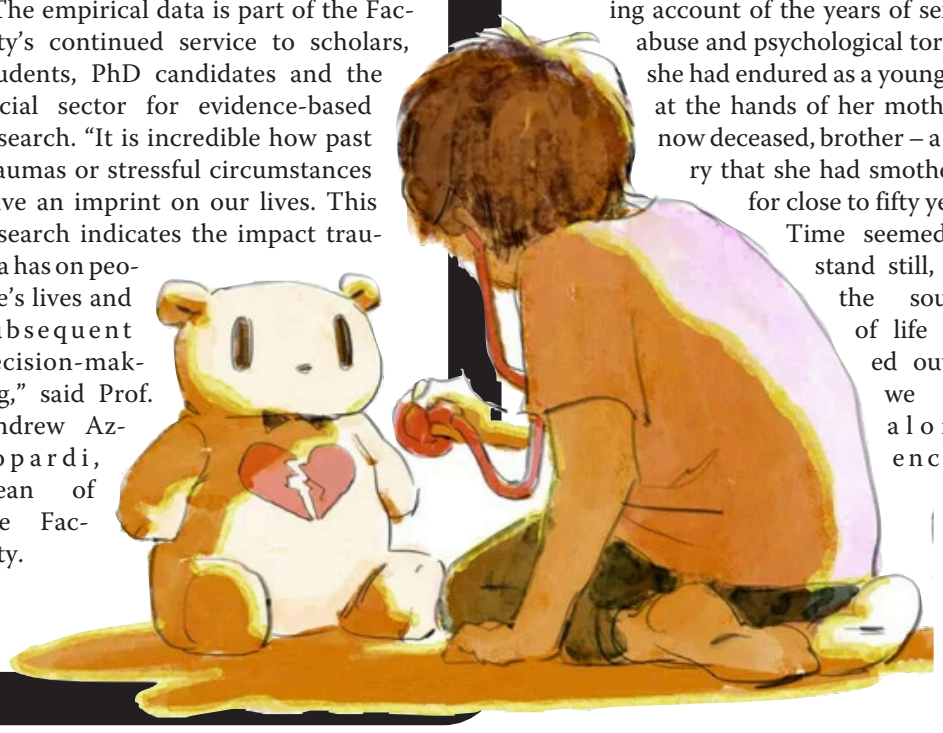
The survey illustrates a variety of stressful life events and their impact upon respondents, providing data that helps scholar understand how such events are perceived and processed by sufferers.

The objectives of the study were to investigate the prevalence and frequency of stressful life experiences across the lifespan of a representative sample of the Maltese population and the perceived level of physical, social and psychological stress generated by these events.

"Understanding the relationship between stressful life experiences and physical and mental wellbeing is important for public health planning and resource allocation," said Dr Anna Grech, lecturer in psychology at the Faculty for Social Wellbeing, said on the results of the survey.

"It is also crucial for the promotion of effective trauma informed preventative measures and treatment strategies. This study helps identify groups that are more susceptible to the negative effects of stress, enabling the development of targeted interventions to support these populations."

The empirical data is part of the Faculty's continued service to scholars, students, PhD candidates and the social sector for evidence-based research. "It is incredible how past traumas or stressful circumstances have an imprint on our lives. This research indicates the impact trauma has on people's lives and subsequent decision-making," said Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, Dean of the Faculty.



WHAT WE CAN DO... WHAT WE MUST DO WELL

Despite increased awareness, continued efforts to make services more readily available, the monster called child abuse is very much still lurking in the shadows of our community

Dr Roberta Attard
Department of Counselling

I had just wrapped up a workshop focusing on mitigating the effects of child abuse and was putting my laptop away as the room rapidly emptied with people scurrying away for lunch, when I noticed one of the participants, a lady in her early sixties, still sitting in her chair. "Not hungry?", I asked her. "Not really", she replied. I sat beside her for the lunch hour as, with tears slowly rolling down her face, she gave me a harrowing account of the years of sexual abuse and psychological torture she had endured as a young girl at the hands of her mother's, now deceased, brother – a story that she had smothered for close to fifty years. Time seemed to stand still, and the sounds of life faded out as we sat, alone, encapsulated in a bubble of inconceivable suffering. "I'm blown over by your resilience", I heard myself saying as she stopped to take a breath. "What makes you think I had a choice?" she swiftly countered. "I was always made to think it was my fault".

Last year, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing carried out a research study titled 'Protecting our children – Exploring and preventing child abuse' (2023) which placed the scourge of abuse and neglect perpetuated in our community under scrutiny to unpack the various contextually-based elements particular to our nation that have rendered it particularly difficult to address. The ultimate aim was to provide those who plan, implement and run services in the community with the data required to increase their effectiveness. So, by means of an anonymous survey, persons affected by abuse and neglect were invited to tell their stories, and these stories were harrowing.

Even in the most developed of countries, survivors of abuse and neglect who manage to ask for assistance often face waits, months and years long, for support that is usually time-limited and patchy. The situation in Malta appears to be no different. Despite increased awareness through educational campaigns and school-based interventions, continued efforts to make resources and services more readily available and emphasis on the rights of children, from the study carried out, it is very evident that the monster called child abuse is very much still lurking in the shadows of our community.

Suffice to say that participating adults who had experienced abuse in their childhood, exposed realities of abuse often involving a combination of multiple types of abuse. They recounted how this abuse was often perpetuated for years, particularly by those who they trusted the most – their mothers, fathers, relatives and educators.

Notwithstanding the undisputed impact of child abuse stretching into adulthood and permeating all aspects of life – physical and mental health, education, relationships, parenting, self-concept and identity, employment – reporting and seeking support by those experiencing it is often very problematic. Amongst participants in this study, 73% reported that they never sought support for the child abuse experienced. Additionally, of the few who did seek support, 30% of them expressed not finding the support received to be helpful, with many saying that it was either not the type of support they needed, or that the support provided did nothing to improve their situation and, to the contrary, even served to intensify the abuse. Almost one third of participants only managed to seek support ten years or more after the abuse had stopped.

The responses were heart-breaking to read. The now-older survivors wished they had been supported to stop the abuse and take action, in a way that did not leave them feeling further victimized; they wished having felt understood and listened to, that the abuse had not been brushed under the carpet; or not told to do their best to stay away from 'provoking' the perpetrator of their abuse; they wished they had received guidance when they needed it most by people who accompanied them throughout the aftermath, who understood how difficult it was for them to trust, and how crucial it was for their trust not to be broken again. Very few recounted having had a "light-bulb moment", a moment of realisation that they were not to blame for the abuse, with many writing about the shame and guilt they still felt, believing that they were somehow responsible for the abuse.

As persons engaged with our communities in the pursuit of social wellbeing; as stakeholders in the formation of therapeutic professionals, the creation and implementation of therapeutic and rehabilitative services; and the development of social policy, the narratives of all those who found no one to turn to in their hour of need should be a veritable bucket of ice-water: it ought to jolt us right out of the thick skin of comforting complacency that at least 'something' is being done. The gluttony for power and penchant for cruelty that seems to be firmly rooted in the human psyche, realistically speaking, will make it impossible to eradicate child abuse and maltreatment from our communities. But at least what we can do we must do well. We are privileged to tend to the wounds and scars caused by child abuse, to assist in mending lives. May we never cease in our efforts until every child's pain is assuaged.

Children

WHERE DO THEY REALLY BELONG? CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND POLITICS

The school is not a place of rehearsal for democratic politics. Children can still be kept safe, because they have the right to protection

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CHILDREN are frequently seen as fragile beings who need protection, leading adults to regard them as incapable of holding political thoughts. Hannah Arendt (1906-1975) was a German thinker of Jewish descent, who believed that children should be protected from politics, to keep them safe from the criticism of the public. This article describes briefly Arendt's idea of the four spheres in light of children, their need to become political and the role of education in the dilemma.

Whilst Hannah Arendt (1958a, 1958b) stated that there are four separate spheres in life which must be kept distinct from each other – namely, the 'private', the 'public', the 'social' and the 'political' spheres – she added that children should be kept in the 'private sphere' and that their parents should responsibly make all decisions regarding their upbringing. Children need to be protected by adults from being exposed to the 'political' realm and its injustices until they grow up. In *'Reflections on Little Rock',* Arendt (1959) addressed the 'Elizabeth Eckford' case, a black girl who was photographed entering a white school – during times of de-segregation - as this much renowned school offered her a wide choice of courses to help her become a lawyer.

Although it seemed that Eckford was taking political action into her own hands, Arendt (1959) did not see it that way. Instead, Arendt was concerned that the girl was not being accompanied by her parents and that the angry white mob would attack her. Arendt was worried about the damage that can be caused to this child who wants to gain access to the white school and will probably have to face being denied admission. Arendt felt that it is dangerous for individuals to try to shift from their social group – to where they do not belong. Arendt preferred the maintenance of the status quo where everyone is to be segregated in their own social sphere.

For Arendt (2006), politics belongs to the 'public sphere' and should not be present in schools and contended that this can be done by keeping the private and the public spheres separate and keeping children safe if held in the private sphere. Schools were perceived as a transitional stage (a safe space), which children must go through, to progress from the 'private' to the 'public' realm. This is very much a protectionist standpoint, whereby Arendt viewed education as essential to introduce newcomers into the common world to act on the changes that need to occur when they grow up. From such a standpoint, education needs to preserve the world as it is and, simultaneously, nurture the natality in children so they can generate change when they become political.

In *'The Crisis in Education',* Arendt (1958a) stipulated that teachers are to assume responsibility for the world as it is, even though they may not wholly agree with it; they need to share the historical and cultural events with their students while not sharing their opinions and ideas because they may be influencing their ability to renew and to regenerate the world. Education should be the transitional phase between the private and public spheres and represent a non-politicised space of mutual trust between teachers and students in preparation for action. The question here is how, or to what extent, children are to be kept safe, and at the same time be introduced to the political and the public sphere.

Children are already political individuals continuously influenced by the private and public spheres they form part of. They are citizens who have a right to make an impact through their political activism and their direct representation

As a counterpart to such views, one finds Biesta's (2010) belief that the idea that the child is not ready for the political world comes from the developmentalist standpoint whereby children are seen as citizens-in-the-making, and education is the intermediary process that helps create democratic citizens with moral attributes. Indeed, Biesta is a stern critic of Arendt's demands that children should be kept out of the public and political spheres, and her assumption that freedom is only associated with adults, not children.

Personally, I find that Arendt's private/public sphere separation for children to be puzzling especially in light of Hannah Arendt's notion of action and the second birth. The school is not a place of rehearsal for democratic politics. Children can still be kept safe, because they have the right to protection however this right of protection is guaranteed by an educational experience that at the same time is actively involved in the process of starting something new.

Children are already political individuals continuously influenced by the private and public spheres they form part of. They are citizens who have a right to make an impact through their political activism and their direct representation.

Indeed, Arendt is rightly criticised for placing children strictly in the private sphere. Children are not waiting for adults to lead them from one sphere to the next, as children's lives already contain pre-existing elements of all the spheres: private, public, social and political.

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CHILD MARRIAGE IN MALTA

AN EMERGING HIDDEN REALITY

An exploratory study presents a practice involving minors and elements of potential human rights violations

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EVER since the 2011 political unrest in the Middle East and Northern African (MENA) region, millions of civilians were forced to flee their own homeland. The 2016 Migration in Malta country profile report stated that these new refugee movements have consequently introduced new challenges to host countries, including but not limited to child marriage. Indeed, the Women's Rights Foundation Malta (2017) acknowledged the case of a 13-year-old Syrian girl, made to marry her 23-year-old uncle. Local authorities could not take any action as only marriages carried in accordance with the Marriage Act are deemed as lawful.

Presented with these new realities, I carried out a study researching child marriage with migrants from MENA who settled in Malta (Sammut Debono, 2021). The findings of this research suggested that most MENA migrants accepted their new acquired status, even after being forced to leave their country of origin, and had a relatively smooth resettlement process. Therefore, they did not face any obstacles during the acculturation phase and also felt a sense of belonging and acceptance as they reside in Malta whilst also valuing the Maltese authorities. Although practices such as child marriage represent a reality for them, they nevertheless strayed away from them, despite still observing their distinct personality and religious traits while being socially integrated within the Maltese norms and values.

However, research participants voiced concern that a particular migrant community distanced themselves from this stance taken by the general MENA refugee community and seemed eager to continue living by the norms and values of the country from which they emigrated. In their opinion, this migrant community seemed to be unwilling to adapt to their new positional reality and was at loggerheads with other members of the MENA community who have settled in and have accepted Maltese cultural norms and values.

The perceptions of the participants suggested this particular Middle Eastern ethnic community was resistant to integrating within the Maltese society. Although members of this particular ethnic community were eagerly waiting to return to their homeland, political realities are proving otherwise, leaving them stuck in a liminal situation marked by waiting and longing.

Since this state of perennial liminality does not allow them to accept the local legislative structures, as a result they feel a lack of belonging and are predisposed on safeguarding their traditions, child marriage being one of them. They persist on the continuation of their past life before the Middle East turmoil, resisting the fact that while child marriage might be culturally accepted in their homeland, it is legally incriminating in Malta.

For participants, such practices are perpetuated as members from this migrant community deem their placement in Malta as transitory, always preparing for a return to their homeland, a return that may indeed never happen. The research study found out that it is as though this community is considering Malta as a stepping stone before their return to their country, feeling that Malta is not their home and striving to overcome obstructs them from altering their cultural lifestyle and traditions.

Although the findings convey a tone of respectful empathy on behalf of research participants towards this ethnic group, their experiences and the challenges they face as refugees, they also assert that this community experienced difficult times due to their forced migration experiences. However, a sense of 'othering' sets in when relating to phenomena like child marriage. The participants asserted that even though they try to assist this community as much as possible to achieve a smooth resettlement process, this is hardly achieved as there is little sign of cooperation from the other party.

The research concluded that whilst child marriage does occur within the MENA migrant community in Malta, not everyone supports this practice. This forced migration reality is showing us clear gaps as both community members and professionals feel disheartened and expressed the need for more information and training to upskill their outreach. The issue of child marriage seems to be latently present, without apparent efforts to address this reality. Neglecting such an issue and veering away from uncomfortable discussions may be at risk of violating the basic human rights of girls and young women in Malta who may be exposed to child marriage. It is important to note that the Maltese Authorities have expressed their willingness to abide by the Target 5.3 of the United Nations' Sustainable Goal Development which supports gender equality and empowerment.

When looking at the short-term goals that should be considered when dealing with child marriage, both professional and community representatives strongly suggest the need for more training and open discussions. Community members suggested starting off addressing community or religious leaders who would in turn involve their respective communities. Professionals called for inter-ministerial and inter-professional training as well as open discussions involving all stakeholders and ultimately public consultation. The importance of including experts from the medical field emerges from this research, as child marriages are directly related to other repercussions impinging on health. Social workers, youth workers and psychologists could also provide a positive input.

As "exploratory' as this study might have been, it presented a practice involving minors and elements of potential human rights violations. In conclusion, a holistic approach in dealing with this reality is becoming increasingly crucial.

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Parents and adolescence

The couple is the environment!

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When a couple relationship is strained, it impacts the quality and effectiveness of how they relate, as well as how they parent. Evidence clearly shows that the quality of the couple relationship directly impacts the effectiveness of their parenting relationship, and their respective relationship with their child

THE environment in which a child grows is crucial for his or her wellbeing and future development. The environment is not just about luxuries and commodities or the lack of them, nor is it about having a large house with a pool and a nice car! No, it's about the atmosphere that a child is brought up in and exposed to that inevitably leaves a long lasting impact on many levels, being they emotional, cognitive, educational, health-related, and relational amongst others. The environment is primarily the couple/parenting relationship in which a child lives and is exposed to.

When a couple relationship is strained, it impacts the quality and effectiveness of how they relate, as well as how they parent. Evidence clearly shows that the quality of the couple relationship directly impacts the effectiveness of their parenting relationship, and their respective relationship with their child (Grech Lanfranco, 2020). Therefore it is no surprise to see problematic behaviours and/or symptoms in children whose parents are distressed and in conflict with each other, particularly in more severe circumstances.

Supporting the couple and parenting relationship is therefore a crucial part of the agenda of the Department of Child and Family Studies, who is engaged in different research projects in the scope of creating the best possible environment for the child, who would after all be the future of our society. Therefore any investment made at the level of the couple, is considered as beneficial not only to the child but also to society as a whole.

The first ever prevalence study on childhood experiences of abuse in Malta, carried out by the Department of Child and Family Studies (Sammut Scerri, Grech Lanfranco, Pace & Borg, 2022) and commissioned by the Commission on Gender-Based Violence and Domestic Violence, found that 52% of participants aged between 18 and 24 years reported having witnessed domestic violence during their childhood.

A total of 61.4% of the participants reported experiences of child maltreatment, with the most frequent types of maltreatment being psychological/emotional abuse (45.%) and physical abuse by the a caregiver (43%).

The main perpetrator of physical abuse on the respondents was identified by 45.7% respondents as being the biological or adoptive father. A total of 64.7% of the respondents claimed that their biological or adoptive father also happened to be the same perpetrator of physical abuse on the other parent, where as 28% of the respondents who have been physically abused have identified their biological or adoptive mother as the perpetrator.

Living in such an environment and being maltreated can have negative repercussions on the children wellbeing and their ability to develop effective relationships as adults. In fact, many studies show a repercussion on the children's cognitive development as well as on their health.

When stress levels are high, the risk of violence within the family environment is greater. Despite the fact that this family environment predisposes children to be at risk for more adjustment difficulties when compared to non-exposed children, there are also children who fare well (Howell, 2011).

Children who were resilient had less violence exposure, fewer fears and worries and mothers with better mental health and parenting skills.

The National Strategy for Positive Parenting in Malta (2016-2024) (Abela, & Grech Lanfranco, 2016) took up the task of providing different means of support to couples and parents and their children, so as to prevent and intervene in situations where there is a higher risk and potential for difficulties to develop. In fact, the Department of Child and Family Studies was commissioned to carry out a pilot study with parents of young infants attending the perinatal clinic at Mater Dei General Hospital. Parents, both mothers and fathers, who indicated that they were struggling with mental health difficulties as well as couples experiencing relationship distress, where offered therapeutic support and attendance to a parenting programme respectively, in order to provide them with the necessary attention and intervention to cope more effectively as a couple and as parents, so that they would be in a better position to offer their child the best possible environment to grow up in.

Ultimately, keeping in mind the importance of the couple as the environment for the child, the importance of early intervention cannot be underestimated.

Every effort needs to continue to be supported at policy level for appropriate interventions that make a qualitative difference to couples and families.

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Identity formation during adolescence: the promise of counselling

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IN my experience working with adolescents aged 16 to 18 years old, I can wholeheartedly sympathise with the growing pains associated with this 'in-between' stage. Such pains include the academic pressures to succeed, the navigation of relationships – both friendships and romantic ones – and the struggle to understand and contain one's emotions.

During the transition from childhood to adulthood we grapple with our identity formation. As Eric Erikson (1968) postulates, at this stage in life we are constructing our unique identity and exploring where we belong in this world. This journey of self-discovery comes with its pressures, that of desiring to fit in yet at the same time wanting to find one's true self.

As human beings it comes natural to us to compare with those around us, however at an age were wanting to be like others is enhanced, comparison can take priority. Today's digital age takes comparison to another level with the use of social media. As we can imagine, comparing will inevitably make me feel 'less than others' and this augments the insecurities already felt at that age. Having a trusted and professional adult whilst going through this unrestful period is vital. As a counsellor in a sixth form school, it is a privilege to be trusted by young adults in their journey of life. I feel blessed to witness the benefits of counselling and how it can help someone live a better quality of life.

Reflecting on my practice, it is clear that adolescents highly benefit from an attentive listener who validates their experience and provides basic psychoeducation on how to deal with their struggles. The therapeutic relationship assists adolescents to feel seen and understood, which in turn empowers them to fight their battles. By engaging in counselling, adolescents are equipped with communication and interpersonal skills, together with an ability to change self-defeating behaviours. Conversely, when adolescents who are struggling do not find the appropriate support, they may end up feeling lonely and isolated which will only increase the mental illness. Sadly, I hear many stories of people who for one reason or another could not find professional mental health support and ended up feeling defeated and helpless.

The challenge of this transitional phase is further complicated by the lack of up-to-date literature focused on this age group. Unfortunately, counsellors and therapists who work with adolescents aged 16 to 18 years old cannot refer to current research on this matter, resulting in dubious therapeutic techniques.

To mitigate against such a state of affairs, I have initiated a research study which endeavours how young adults perceive and experience counselling. I am intrigued to find out what works for them and what does not, focusing on which creative tools they find helpful when navigating their identity formation. Moreover, I am exploring how counselling affects young adults in their relationships and their life in general. Listening to young adult's experiences is enriching my knowledge on how to meet adolescents' unique needs in therapy and am eager to contribute valuable information in this field. The results of this study shall be shared to the general public in the foreseeable future.

LIVED EXPERIENCES: YOUNG AND N.E.E.T.

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RESEARCH about 'young people who are not in education, employment or training' (NEET) is voluminous, often conducted quantitatively and from a judgemental stance that views this area and the young people concerned as a social problem (e.g. Arnardottir, 2020; Bonanomi & Rosina, 2020). Unfortunately, scarce attention is given to the lived experiences of being NEET, a gap that my study at the Faculty for Social Wellbeing attempts to address by researching young persons who find themselves suspended between past compulsory schooling and the transition into adulthood, which is primarily symbolised by entry into the labour market.

This research study seeks to shed more light on NEET young people's life worlds to inform policy decision-making about education, training, and employment during late teenage hood and early adulthood. The main questions that the research seeks to answer are the following: (i) How do young people in the situation labelled 'NEET' interpret their situation? (ii) What was their experience of school like? Moreover, (iii) How do they visualise their future – where do they see themselves in five years, for example?

This research prioritises each participant's unique experiences and life trajectories by adopting the approach of hermeneutic phenomenology. The data was collected through participant observation and semi-structured in-depth interviews with fourteen 18-24-year-old young men and women – 8 males and six females – and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2022). The participants were recruited from Youth Guarantee and through personal networks. The interview questions addressed perceptions of the participants' lives, how they perceived their future, the impact of school experiences, their constructs of success and failure, and the impact of relationships with significant others.

The findings yielded seven personal experiential themes shared by all the participants:

Personal narratives of hardship – this theme highlighted how the participants have had to battle on a personal level throughout their school years, circumstances that put added pressure on them, a weight on their shoulders that they often bore silently out of shame, fear of judgment, or the inability to articulate their suffering;

The impact of previous school experiences – this theme draws attention to school practices that tend to perpetuate discrimination, potentially alienating different young people from engaging in education and training;

Use of time – the everyday realities of young people in Malta who are not in education, employment, or training (NEET) are foregrounded in this theme, focusing on how they spend typical days. This analysis reveals different temporal organisations and the activities they consider essential to structure their time.

Success and failure – this theme demonstrates the participants' values and beliefs as independent human beings searching for meaning;

Life attitudes – this theme sheds more light on whether the participants feel that they are victims or whether they feel that they have the power to determine their destiny and the extent to which these beliefs reflect their choices;

Coping – the research participants' particular knowledge and skills in dealing with life, and especially with challenging situations, are encapsulated in this theme;

Future projections – this theme reveals how these young people visualise themselves in five years, and how this projection might relate to how they look at themselves at this stage.

Most noteworthy is the fact that the theme of resistance to structures – and therefore agency – is shared across all the major themes on various levels. Their exercise of personal power indicates that they are not mere victims of imposed structures but can act on their own devices to transform themselves and their circumstances, too. From a social justice perspective, the NEET label is inadequate because of its blindness to the complexity and flux that characterises the lives of young people everywhere. In this sense, it cannot be used as an effective tool to address social inequalities and injustice. The research participants wished they could have been understood more at school and given more time and attention without resorting to labels and 'special treatment'. The participants wanted school to engage with their realities and knowledge rather than imposing uniformity, a false neutrality, and inflexible syllabi that would be irrelevant in a 'liquid' world and an ever-changing future job market.

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A national critical mindset and effective political and media literacy are essential for meaningful dissent to foster. Our education system is pivotal to this effect

Youth rebellion, dissent and social change

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IN his milestone paper Social Structure and Anomie, sociologist Robert K. Merton (1938) identified a number of reactions or adaptations to the discrepancy or strain between the success goals emblematic of middle-class American culture and the structured means or opportunities provided to achieve them. This discrepancy yields a social reality where many of those whose life chances are thwarted because of power differentials in society react to the embedded inequalities in society.

Mertonian sociologists such as Albert K. Cohen (1955) and Cloward and Ohlin (1960) talked about delinquent youth gangs as collective solutions to the status frustration that working-class boys experience through inaccessibility to middle-class success goals. Within the gang, made up of young people who share similar fates, conventional values and rules are overturned through a process of reaction formation. Subcultural status and capital is gained by the extent that subterranean and delinquent values are expressed and embodied by gang members.

However, interestingly, for Merton delinquent responses to social strain do not essentially register rupture with convention. Delinquents remain gridlocked in the race to achieve the American dream. Their deviation is not from established middle-class success goals. It is primarily from the legitimate opportunity structures that normative society provides to achieve them. This deviation takes the form of innovation, where while success goals such as financial wealth are still pursued, illegitimate means are adopted to reach them. A host of utilitarian crimes are examples to this effect, from theft to prostitution, drug and human trafficking and so forth.

Moreover, for Merton, such is the allure of the American dream that most people (even the underprivileged) still attempt to play the game so to speak, conforming to the status quo and following the rubric of convention devotedly. Canadian youth culture theorist Micheal Brake (2013) identifies 'respectable youth' painstakingly engrossed in building their prospects of educational achievement and heavily investing in budding professional careers as an emblematic in this regard.

Dissent is the antithesis of indifference and passivity. It is crucial for debate, effective dialogue and social innovation. It must be spurred, fostered and encouraged

Conformity and innovation are, however, only two of the myriad forms of adaptation to strain. Other adolescents and adults retreat and drop out of society completely, refuting conventional goals and participation in the accompanying normative opportunity structures. The deviance here is inward directed and non-utilitarian. Drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide and suicide ideation are evident examples of this. Ritualism, another reaction to social strain, presents us with a different scenario. Ritualists retain their immersion in the opportunity structure provided to achieve conventional goals. However, they simply do so out habit and routine rather than conviction. Success goals (such as career advancement) are refuted, but the route to them (gainful occupation, for example) is still dutifully pursued.

This brings us the final and perhaps most important adaptation to social strain, particularly in terms of its ramifications for social change. Rebellion. Here, both the established goals and the legitimate opportunity structures to achieve them are refuted, and replaced by new ones reflecting and advancing a different world view and vision. Brake (2013) asserts that young people active at the margins of the creative, artistic and political worlds epitomise cultural rebellion. The dissent such creatives register is key for social transformation and innovation. Consider for example the indelible and lasting global impact of 1960s counter-culture. Counter hegemonic, the Age of Aquarius rocked the status quo. Conservative ideas were challenged by a radically different world view that espoused *inter alia* minority and women's rights and egalitarianism, peace and nuclear disarmament, sexual freedom, a post-human ecological outlook, and a world view espousing communalism, co-operation and democratisation. One can argue that eventually many vociferous voices from that time were emasculated and even co-opted by the system – such is the latter's power to adapt and realign itself. However, the Flower Power movement's impact across the globe on championing and mainstreaming ideas that were destined to remain at the margins cannot be disputed.

Post-independence Malta also opened up to the winds of an unparalleled sea change that saw power gradually yet decisively shift away from the conservative establishment. Young, radical creatives played a crucial role in the process. The first co-ed teen organisations of the 1960s and the radical writers and poets in the *Moviment Qawmien Letterarju* may be both considered as strong cases

in point. Amidst the political turmoil of the 1980s, we had the important dissenting voices of *Tan-Numri, Iż-Żgħażagħ ta' Taħt l-Art* and the student movement (amongst others) championing change, as did the multitude of uncompromising rock bands based at Tigné's *Rokarja* and elsewhere.

The 1990s saw the rise of vociferous and effective environmental groups and today, we have a potent civil society (spurred by the ultimate price paid by Daphne Caruana Galizia) spearheaded by young dissenters who dare to dream of a better Malta. On the fringes of the literary and artistic world we have myriad forces expressing dissent while pursuing a DIY ethos away from the controlling hands of the State and market forces. Examples of this are evident even though several are still off the radar for many.

And it is in relation to this last observation that I wish to end this piece. Dissent is the anti-thesis of indifference and passivity. It is crucial for debate, effective dialogue and social innovation. It must be spurred, fostered and encouraged. A national critical mindset and effective political and media literacy are essential for meaningful dissent to foster. Our education system is pivotal to this effect. The State has the responsibility to nurture the space for such dissonance and critique, while ensuring that the autonomy and independence of dissenters remains intact. This is essential for the status quo to be continuously challenged and eroded.

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SHAME AND SUBSTANCE USE

Individuals who experience high levels of shame are more prone to developing substance use disorders

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ACCORDING to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, addiction is a chronic and recurring brain ailment characterised by the unmanageable consumption of a substance or the repetition of specific behaviours, such as gambling, even when faced with negative consequences. Despite experiencing a range of detrimental effects, individuals afflicted with substance use disorder (SUD) persist in engaging in irresponsible behaviour.

The widespread acceptance of the biomedical model can potentially be attributed to a tendency to provide biological explanations for human behaviour, even in cases where these explanations lack theoretical consistency or obvious empirical support. Multiple research studies have consistently demonstrated that individuals have the capacity to modulate and change their addictive behaviours merges with the biology and psychology of addiction. These findings suggest a dynamic interaction between volitional aspects and a significant social component that influences the origin and nature of addiction. Irrational behaviour and perceived lack of control can indeed be understood as motivated behaviour, ultimately prioritising immediate rewards over long-term advantages. It is only when the balance between the costs and benefits of substance use is altered that individuals may contemplate reducing or discontinuing their drug consumption.

One much-cited definition of shame confers it as an "intensely painful feeling or experience of believing we are flawed and therefore unworthy of acceptance and belonging…shame creates feelings of fear, blame and disconnect" (Brown, 2006, p. 29). Shame has been labelled as the master emotion "because no other emotion plays such a central role in affective, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural experiences" (Turner & Schallert, 2001, p. 320)

Shame manifests itself in the intrapsychic, a feeling of being flawed, and in the relational, 'the exposure of a flawed self' (Wiechelt, 2007, p. 400) instilling the need to hide. Shame is the force that unites us as social beings, compelling us to reflect upon the social norms we have violated and urging us to restore our wounded sense of self. While profound shame can erode our very core, it also serves as a crucial motivating factor for addicts, compelling them to reclaim their lives, reconstruct themselves, and strive for personal growth. It ignites their desire to regain control.

While it is still not fully understood whether shame directly causes addictive behaviours (and/or vice versa), research indicates that individuals who experience high levels of shame are more prone to developing substance use disorders. The emotional baggage and negative self-talk that we carry from our early years can contribute to certain behaviours that provide temporary comfort and can lead to addiction. This creates a harmful cycle where active addiction triggers actions that evoke shame, causing one to increasingly rely on substances for short-term relief. Being ashamed of losing control or not meeting personal goals can drive individuals to hide their shortcomings. When societal shaming is added to the equation, the burden becomes overwhelming, leading to greater secrecy and dependence on substance use.

Despite a growing interest in that interface between shame and substance use, there is still a lack of comprehensive understanding when it comes to the complexities and nuances of shame. Whilst there are multiple viewpoints on shame that have yet to be explored through empirical research, little is understood on how individuals who engage in substance use perceive and grapple with shame. This gap in knowledge is particularly significant as well as problematic when one considers how therapists' reactions can influence clients' feelings of shame.

Concerned with such gaps and the dearth of research within the Maltese context, I am currently carrying out an M.Phil/Ph.D research that explores the ways shame effects persons who use drugs problematically could contribute to improving the quality of care provided to people using health services. Delving into and comprehending the real-life experiences of individuals affected by this phenomenon enhances our existing knowledge of the link between shame and addiction. The objective of this research is to assist practitioners when providing therapeutic support to these individuals with regards to the emotion of shame. Overall findings are expected to provide a more detailed understanding of shame related issues to addiction and its implication on addictive trajectories and desistance, as well as pave the way for the established use of shame resilience applications and further research in the subject, since there are existing gaps in knowledge in the Maltese context with regards to these issues.

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SAGA BRODERSON SEX EXPLOITATION SURVIVOR, CAMPAIGNER

Only Fans? It's men who are reaping the profits.

A survivor of commercial sexual exploitation as a child, Saga Broderson is at the forefront of the internationalisation campaign for the Nordic model, which seeks to criminalise sex buyers and help women exit prostitution. Here she speaks to *Prof. Andrew Azzopardi* about her work for Beyond Survivors, and the battle to bolster the fight against sex exploitation and trafficking

Saga, let's start from here: will we be talking about 'prostitution' or is it 'sex work'?

I do not call it 'sex work' because that implies it is 'work' when it is really not. It is violence. It is violence against women and children mostly. By defining it as 'sex work', you are implying that people in prostitution aren't experiencing violence when they actually are doing so, every single day. It is an act of buying another human's body. This is violence and we need to take a stand against this.

Why is this issue close to heart?

Well, from my own experience, I was groomed from a young age, so I found myself in prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation as far back as childhood. I think it is very important to highlight that I was groomed, and that this was not a free choice. Statistics always show that most people are in prostitution not by their free will or to "make easy money" but because many women and children are in fact groomed into it. They would probably have been experiencing rape or sexual assault in the past which eventually leads them into prostitution and it was the same for me.

What changed?

Three years ago I got out of this life with help from organisations. I found my way into a better life and what really helped me most was getting access to trauma therapy. It is only then that I could really start to work through this experience. At one point, I didn't realise that prostitution was affecting me badly but once you get out of it you realise that you were in fact exploited and were experiencing a lot of violence every single day.

Is it true that people get very rich as prostitutes?

No not at all, very few do so. The pimps, the traffickers, they take most of the money. The majority of women in prostitution are homeless, living in poverty, stuck in abuse like drug abuse and so on. It's a misconception that in prostitution that you make easy money.

How did you manage to exit prostitution?

For starters, I got help from organisations that help women in prostitution. I managed to get a safe place to live in because until then I was living around in a lot of different men's apartments. I received trauma therapy. The fact that in Sweden we have the Nordic model, which implies that sex buyers and pimps are criminalized – but that women in prostitution are not criminalized – was also very helpful.

Locally many speak about the Nordic model: what is it?

It is about criminalising sex buyers and decriminalising the people in prostitution, which means that the government is stating: 'you were not in it by free choice, so you are not a so called sex-worker'. It is men's violence against women and it's a structural problem. We've had the Nordic Model since 1999, the same year I was born. It gives the police better tools to detect sex buyers and helps social services to support women who are in prostitution.

I value the fact that you not only talk about a story that happened to you, which created a lot of pain and trauma, but you're also involved in advocacy. Why are you doing it? Didn't you have enough on your plate already?

Thank you and I appreciate your question. I coordinate Scandinavia's biggest survivor network and we cooperate with a lot of other international organisations that work with these people, on how to criminalise sex buyers, how to develop better guidelines on a European level and so on. I've also co-founded the international survivor organisation 'Beyond Survivors', an initiative by an organisation called Child X, that works with preventing trafficking of children. We have been down at the European Parliament to speak on this subject. There is a report written by German

The 'Nordic Model' is about criminalising sex buyers and decriminalising the people in prostitution, which means that the government is stating: 'you were not in it by free choice, so you are not a so called sex-worker'. It is men's violence against women and it's a structural problem

MEP Maria Noichl and got approved so that's a very big win for us.

What needs to be done?

It's a tough question to answer but an important one. I think for starters we need to just keep on fighting for the introduction of the Nordic Model in as many countries as possible and hopefully it gets accepted in the entire EU. We've had countries, after Sweden, adopting, following us and which have enacted even better laws, for example like France. I also think the Noichl report will help further. So, we just need to keep on working and pushing hard.

Can you tell me more about the distinction between prostitution and 'sex work'?

For starters, I understand why women or others involved in prostitution want to look at it as it as 'my body' and that 'it is my choice'. But overall, you're still stuck in this very patriarchal system. For example, if you look at the Only Fans website, the ones making the most money out of it are the owners – the founders of the platform, which are the men – whilst the people involved in it, by comparison, get almost nothing for it. So, you are still stuck in their hands basically. I just wish that everyone could see the bigger picture that there are men hovering above, making most of the money out of it, and they are treating 'your' body as property or as an object.

Saga, what is wrong with men? Why do they behave in this way?

I have been thinking about this so many times and also because I often come across men who are capable of empathy, love and warmth. When some women say that men are animals I do not believe that, because I want to believe that you aren't! I believe that we need to fight this problem together. But then we have to realise that statistics show that 98. 99 per cent of all the perpetrators are men. I think it is a mix of power, a history of men always being in power and always treating women like this, and it goes on and on, over a number of generations. But we can stop it. I just think we have to work together more, men and women, against this problem.

You are working in places where there are wars and conflicts because it is known that over there, abuse happens more systematically...

I am not involved directly but we are in contact with organisations that are on the ground working with these women. For example, when the war in Ukraine broke out, we were in contact with some people who were on the borders trying to detect human trafficking. It's a huge tragedy and problem, and I am very worried that with all the conflicts around the world that are going on, that it will increase human trafficking.

Are there particular reasons why it is easier for people, especially women and girls, to end up in such situations in, for example, certain regions in the world, where there is poverty or a culture where people end up in prostitution?

Yes there are plenty. We call it 'risk factors', because for instance here in Sweden or countries that have it better financially, the biggest risk factors are sexual assault in childhood and. being brought up in abusive homes, or being groomed online. When we talk about migrants coming to Sweden, the majority of people in prostitution here in Stockholm, are actually migrants. So yes, certain social conditions make it riskier.

How come these women are unable to escape?

Most often it is the result of fake promises from the traffickers. They promise easy money and food and they mostly offer work so that you can pay off all your debts and can send money back home to your family. For example, most of the migrants here in Sweden are from Romania, Bulgaria, Nigeria – countries that are very poor – and other countries like Ukraine which have an ongoing war. So, they are very exposed to being trafficked because they feel they have no other choice.

Is there hope for these people?

Yes. You just need to get the right help and you need to get it right. You need to be in an environment where people really help you out with the traumas and all that you've been through. Because if you are given the support and you treat the traumas that you've been through it is very possible to live a happier life after.

Interview first broadcasted on RTK 103 and newsbook.com.mt

Talking about death

The shadows we face: Death anxiety and wellbeing in old age

The psychological ramifications of death anxiety, when left unaddressed, can permeate various facets of an older adult's life, negatively impacting their mental and emotional wellbeing

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AS individuals progress through the stages of life, the omnipresent reality of mortality becomes increasingly pronounced, casting a shadow over the ageing process. Recognising and managing this concern is not only imperative but also pivotal in fostering a more resilient and fulfilling ageing experience.

The ageing process is a multifaceted journey that encompasses not only physical transformations but also profound shifts in an individual's cognitive, social, and emotional landscape. One prevalent psychological challenge that surfaces during this phase is death anxiety, defined as the fear and apprehension of death. This existential dread becomes particularly poignant in old age, where the inevitability of one's own mortality or the loss of loved ones looms ever larger, triggering a range of potential emotional responses including anxiety, depression, and existential distress.

The psychological ramifications of death anxiety, when left unaddressed, can permeate various facets of an older adult's life, negatively impacting their mental and emotional well-being. The fear of death may manifest in feelings of despair, isolation, and an overall diminished quality of life. To promote better mental health outcomes, it is crucial to understand and acknowledge death anxiety in older adults.

Therapeutic interventions emerge as a crucial approach in addressing death anxiety among older persons. These interventions delve into existential concerns and facilitate open conversations about mortality. Providing a supportive environment where older individuals can express their fears and anxieties surrounding death allows mental health professionals to guide them in developing coping mechanisms and cultivating a more positive outlook on the ageing process.

Fostering a sense of purpose and meaning in later life is another avenue for mitigating death anxiety. Engaging in activities that bring joy, fulfilment, and a sense of accomplishment can redirect focus away from existential fears. Establishing and maintaining social connections play a vital role in alleviating death anxiety, as a robust support network can provide comfort and companionship in the face of life's uncertainties.

Establishing and maintaining social connections play a vital role in alleviating death anxiety, as a robust support network can provide comfort

Cultural and spiritual beliefs also play a significant role in addressing death anxiety in old age. Many individuals find solace in their faith and cultural traditions, which offer frameworks for understanding and coping with mortality. Integrating these beliefs into therapeutic approaches becomes instrumental in providing holistic support to older adults as they navigate the psychological challenges associated with ageing.

Furthermore, societal attitudes toward ageing and death exert a considerable influence on the well-being of older individuals. The phenomenon of ageism assumes particular significance within the realm of gerontological well-being. Ageism, pervasive societal bias characterised by stereotyping, discrimination, and prejudice based on age, holds significant implications. One notable consequence is the marginalisation of older individuals, fostering feelings of exclusion and a decline in self-worth. This tendency to view older adults negatively exacerbates death anxiety, reinforcing the notion that ageing inevitably entails decline and societal insignificance.

The connection between ageism and death anxiety is highlighted by the fear of being neglected by society and the devaluation of an individual's contributions. These factors collectively contribute to an increased sense of existential distress among older individuals. The psychological burden carried by older adults is amplified by societal attitudes that perpetuate ageist stereotypes, intensifying concerns about mortality.

Recognising the urgency of addressing ageism in the context of mitigating death anxiety becomes crucial for promoting the overall wellbeing of older persons. Strategic initiatives aimed at challenging stereotypes and fostering intergenerational understanding play a pivotal role in reshaping societal attitudes toward ageing. Establishing environments that actively appreciate the wisdom and diverse experiences of older adults becomes significant in the collective effort to counteract ageism. By nurturing a culture that values the multifaceted contributions of individuals across the lifespan, these initiatives contribute to a positive and inclusive societal environment that mitigates age-related biases.

In conclusion, the shadows cast by death anxiety in old age have profound implications for the well-being of older adults. Recognising and addressing these concerns through therapeutic interventions, social support, a sense of purpose, and consideration of cultural/spiritual dimensions are essential for promoting resilience and well-being. As we navigate the complexities of ageing, a holistic approach that encompasses psychological, social, and cultural dimensions is crucial in fostering a positive and fulfilling ageing experience.

THE PERCEPTION AND OPENNESS TOWARDS DEATH IN MALTA

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THE death of a loved one is considered to be one of the most severe life events to be experienced in a person's lifetimes. Losing someone we deeply leave leads to the realisation and acknowledgment of our own mortality, so thinking of and speaking about death is often accompanied by a sense of uneasiness and reluctance.

The society and culture we live in affects the way that death is viewed and approached, with many being characterised by a reluctance to speak about death. Rituals, distinct by the culture they happen in, include the way mourning takes place, the funeral process and how a community comes together, or not, following the death, with religion also playing an important role in this process.

Death and mourning in the Maltese Islands have traditionally been characterised by silence, crying, and a withdrawal from the community. From the *newwieħa* – women whose role was to cry loudly for the deceased – the covering of furniture and a strict wearing of black as a sign of mourning and respect when losing close family members.

Between August and September 2023, a study was carried out by the Faculty for Social Wellbeing with a representative sample of the Maltese population (n=400) to understand the attitudes of the Maltese population towards death. The study utilised the Wong, Reker and Gesser's (1994) Death Attitude Profile-Revised (DAP-R), a psychological assessment tool used to measure the attitudes and beliefs about and approaches to death and dying. DAP-R is based on five dimensions: (i) Approach Acceptance (AA), referring to the acceptance of death as a natural part of life; (ii) Fear of Death (FD), referring to the fear and anxiety about death and dying; (iii) Death Avoidance (DA), that is avoiding thinking about death; (iv) Escape Acceptance (EA), where death is viewed as a way to escape from life; and (v), Neutral Acceptance (NA) where there is a detached approach towards death. In the context of the Maltese study. An edited version of the DAP-R was compiled for the Maltese context with the original author's permission which included translation to the Maltese language to facilitate data collection and the inclusion of two questions additional locally-based questions – namely, (i) Do you feel that Maltese culture and society are open to discussing death? (ii) Do you feel there is enough support to help the bereaved going through the death of a loved one in the context of Maltese society?

The neutral tendency to discuss death confirms a belief that the Maltese population does not feel comfortable discussing the subject of death. It possibly reminds us of our own mortality

Respondents were asked to state whether they agree or disagree on a Likert scale based on seven scores varying from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree', and whether they feel that Maltese culture and society are open to discuss death. Within the Maltese context, a significant number of respondents to the survey instrument expressed a neutral perspective, or 'undecided', on discussing the topic of death (20.9%), with an average response of 3.56. These scores highlight that Maltese culture and society is somehow still unprepared to discuss and engage on the subject of death.

Furthermore, a total 32.2% of respondents tend to agree that Maltese society is open to discuss death, while a total of 46.6% tend to disagree with this statement, reflecting a higher percentage of the population which believes that Maltese society is reluctant to discuss death. Respondents were also asked if they feel that there is enough support for the bereaved who have experienced the death of a loved one in the Maltese context. An average score of 4.20 highlighted a perceived moderate level of support believed available in the Maltese context, with 19.5% of respondents having a neutral stance to this statement. Overall, 45.3% tend to somehow agree with this statement, whereas 35% tend to disagree.

Through various analytical tests conducted on the results of the study, one can note that at any age, respondents either 'disagree' or are 'undecided' about the openness of Maltese society to discuss death, whilst older-aged participants are more likely to agree that Maltese culture and society are open to discuss death.

Older respondents also agree more that there is sufficient support to help the bereaved going through the death of a loved one. Whilst there was no gender discrepancy for the statement 'The Maltese culture and society are open to discussing death', males scored significantly higher than females when enquired about their perception on the level of support available to the bereaved. Participants with a primary level of education and those who are retired scored significantly higher when asked about the level of support available locally to help the bereaved whilst there is no discrepancy in the level of education or occupation status for the statement 'The Maltese culture and society are open to discussing death', where participants 'disagree' or are mostly 'undecided'.

Overall, the neutral tendency to discuss death confirms a belief that the Maltese population does not feel comfortable discussing the subject of death. It possibly reminds us of our own mortality. Nonetheless, there needs to be a push forward towards openness in discussing death and dying in the Maltese context, to allow for further awareness and help eliminate the sense of stigma and fear that comes when talking about death.

This study also shows that participants tend to have an overall neutral stance on the level of support available for the bereaved in Malta. These results show the population may not be aware of all the support services available, or may have never sought to look into what is available, or even ultimately consider that such services not to be enough. A deeper analysis shows there might be a reluctance in seeking support when losing a loved one, tying once again with the element of stigma associated with discussing the subject of death.

Whilst the death of a loved one brings about feelings of sadness and a deep change in our lives, the death of others or our own are inevitable experiences. Creating a discourse about death and bereavement, to eliminate the stigma which comes with discussing death, may help facilitate the experience of the bereaved as well as help us accept further that our time on earth is finite and that death is inescapable for all of us.

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Elderly care

FROM RETIREMENT DREAMS TO CORPORATE SCHEMES: THE BUSINESS OF AGEING AND PUBLIC FUNDING

What is the reality of the publicly funded mass institutionalisation of older persons taking place under the guise of progress?

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BEFORE delving into this brief discussion, I emphasise that none of the forthcoming remarks are intended as a judgment on any individuals associated with the topic at hand. Whether it be staff, management, businesspersons, consultants, decision makers, Franciscan friars, or any other involved party, I habitually presume that everyone's intentions are virtuous; however, good intentions, time and again, pave the road to hell.

By the time this article is published, Malta will have "celebrated" yet another milestone in the development of services for older persons, a new residential facility that replaced a retreat home previously run by a religious order inspired by St. Francis. A new state-of-the-art investment that provides top quality services for older persons – the stuff of dreams for all of us who, after five or more decades of hard work, will be able to retire in the peace of a St Francis inspired retirement "home".

But then, is it a "home"? Beyond the glossy headlines, what in developing a 400+ capacity residential facility has been driven by the best interests of older persons? To what extent does such a facility contribute to older persons' sense of security, sense of purpose, sense of belonging, sense of competence, sense of identity, sense of self-actualisation?

Let's start from some basics. The Constitution of Malta, in line with Universal Declaration of Human Rights, unequivocally protects any citizen's right for respect of one's private life. Yet, unless one is extremely privileged, either by virtue of one's financial resources or by some special political patronage, no older person living in a publicly funded residential placement has this right guaranteed. Imagine being compelled to leave your own home for whatever reason, being admitted to a residential facility, and with all that you would have had to give up you are also forced to give up your privacy, placed with a roommate not of your choice. And only if you are lucky are you spared the trauma of being in a room with two or three other older persons. I've made this argument before and have often been given the flippant reply that older persons love company. Yes indeed, don't we all... when it is actually us that choose whom to keep company with!

How does one reconcile a strong strategy for the deinstitutionalisation of disabled persons while on the other hand financing and implicitly promoting the mass institutionalisation of older persons?

Privacy is not the only loss. Running a 400-person facility necessitates structure and procedures to keep the enterprise well-oiled and running smoothly. The person can no longer function as an individual, but necessarily has to fall in line with 'the system'. Even a simple choice like one's wake-up time is taken away.

What is the reality of the publicly funded mass institutionalisation of older persons taking place under the guise of progress? I put this question to a professional colleague of mine who works in these homes. She mentioned high staff turnover and shortage of staff, language barriers leading to frequent misunderstandings and frustrations, sub-par variety and quality of food with limited choices and absence of fresh options, residents having no say in the choice of their roommates, residents' lives predominantly consisting of passivity, and a prevailing culture of learned helplessness, leaning towards making residents dependent on the facility rather than fostering genuine independence.

So, coming back to the 400+ "home", who are the likely main beneficiaries of this milestone development? No doubt, the religious order is guaranteed an income for 60 years so that its financial concerns taken care of, with the secured income expected to outlive the current generation of friars.

The "investors" have made careful calculations on the number of older persons they need financed by pub-

Imagine being compelled to leave your own home for whatever reason, being admitted to a residential facility

lic funds for a guaranteed number of years, for a secure investment with minimal risks and a sound return on investment. Government will seek public recognition, boasting of the progress being registered in the services for older persons. Yet, to what extent can older persons be listed as beneficiaries? Are those persons, in whose interest these services are being created, actual beneficiaries, or are they the ones losing out for others to benefit?

There's an old joke that goes around the religious circles about this individual who went to seek the Rabbi's advice, and the conversation goes as follows: "Rabbi, I have a strong desire to live forever. What can I do?" "Get married" replies the Rabbi. "And will I live forever?" "No, but the desire will disappear." I wonder whether the Rabbi would now reply: "Get a publicly funded retirement home placement." As one older person living in a residential home put it: "This is not the life I worked so hard for and not the life I want to be living. It is not a proper life. I get the feeling that I'm a burden and that it will be much better for everyone the quicker it is all over."

On a national policy level, how does one reconcile a strong strategy for the deinstitutionalisation of disabled persons while on the other hand financing and implicitly promoting the mass institutionalisation of older persons? And how does the massive public funding going into the institutionalisation of older persons contribute to a national strategy for active ageing?

When older persons move out of their home, their neighbourhood and their community, they experience a terrible prolonged shock of loss, the loss of a way of life, their circles of support, and all they would have hoped for in the evening of their life journey.

And they find themselves becoming yet another number in the balance sheet of the profitable business of ageing, financed by public funds – their retirement dreams engulfed by the corporate schemes that not only replace one's own home but also the hope of dignified twilight years.

Active ageing for older persons living with dementia: The Montessori Approach

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WHILE ageing is a natural aspect of human growth, age is the main unmodifiable risk factor for dementia. The probability of a person being diagnosed with dementia rises with rising life expectancy and population ageing. Dementia is an umbrella term for various neurodegenerative syndromes that impact primarily memory, cognition and daily functioning. It is a complex condition that can have significant impacts on both the individuals living with dementia and their primary caregivers, who most often are their families. Approximately 50 million individuals worldwide are estimated to be living with dementia, and an estimated 10 million new instances of dementia are reported each year. According to projections, the global population living with dementia is expected to nearly double every 20 years, reaching 75.6 million in 2030 and 135.5 million in 2050. Malta is hardly an exception to this trend, given its ageing population. It is projected that the total number of persons living with dementia in Malta will more than double from 6,552 to 14,117 in the 2018-2050 period.

Persons living with dementia experience challenging behaviours, characterise through physical or verbal expressions of unmet needs. Studies have suggested that a lack of meaningful social interactions and activities may serve as triggers. Consequently, there is mounting evidence that non-pharmacological therapies and psychosocial activities may be effective in treating cognitive impairment as well as behavioural and psychological symptoms of dementia. Psychosocial approaches to supporting those living with dementia include the use of Meaningful activities, which focus on the individual's interests and abilities, have been found to reduce responsive challenging behaviours, increase social engagement, and hence, improving the overall quality of life.

Montessori-based activities are undoubtedly one strategy that is believed to encourage social interaction and engagement for persons living with dementia through the implementation of person-centred care. The Montessori-based activities are based on the 'Montessori Method,' which was created in the early 1900s by physician and educator Maria Montessori for the education of young children. Cameron Camp created the method's use in dementia care throughout the 1990s after observing that activities designed by Montessori are a good fit for persons living with dementia. As the Montessori approach is an educational philosophy and approach that emphasises self-directed learning and hands-on activities, it is based on the belief that individuals learn best when they are actively engaged in the learning process and have the freedom to explore and discover at their own pace.

In the context of dementia care, the Montessori approach offers a holistic and person-centred care by focusing on the remaining abilities, needs, interests and strengths of older persons living with dementia. It provides individualised activities and routines that are culturally relevant, meaningful, purposeful, and promote engagement, independence, and cognitive functioning, within a supportive physical environment. Montessori-based activities are based on task breakdown; guided repetition; cues for self-correcting behaviours; modifiable tasks by moving progressively from simple to complex; as well as from concrete to abstract.

This type of approach works with the procedural memory, the one responsible for skill and task performance, which is typically intact in cognitive impairment. Activities within this approach require careful planning. They should be matched to the interest, ability, and skill level of the persons living with dementia, which means that the activity facilitator should have an accurate knowledge of the life-history and background of the persons that will be taking part in the activities. Activities, which ideally should be applied from everyday environment, can either be facilitated one-to-one, or in groups.

On one hand, one-to-one activities may include sorting pictures and/or familiar items into categories; activities that make use of fine motor skills such as folding or activities which require repetitive motion. On the other hand, group-based activities may include reminiscence about a common interested topic; or facilitated group discussion based on a short story amongst others. A key feature of this method is by inviting individuals to participate and to provide them with different activity choices.

Evidence shows that engagement in Montessori-based activities result in improved cognition, increase in social interaction and reduction in agitation and aggressive behaviour. Understanding the unique challenges and needs of older persons living with dementia is crucial in providing effective person-centred care. By employing the Montessori Approach, caregivers and healthcare professionals can implement strategies that cater to the specific requirements of older persons living with dementia, by promoting their wellbeing and enhancing their overall quality of life.

Life care

LGBTIQ OLDER PERSONS IN LONG-TERM CARE

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WHEN picturing older individuals, the common imagery tends to adhere to a conventional storyline – visualising a cisgendered man and woman, perhaps as a couple or surrounded by grandchildren. However, this depiction oversimplifies life's trajectory, overshadowing the rich tapestry of experiences among those who don't align with this narrow mold. In the context of long-term care, seniors frequently encounter desexualisation, where their sexuality takes a back seat to health and financial matters. This perspective presents a unique hurdle for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) community, perpetuating the problematic concept of 'compulsory non-sexuality' for older persons and further marginalising those with diverse sexual identities.

The current generation of LGBTIQ individuals, who may eventually require long-term care services, has lived through a history of active discrimination and persecution due to their sexual and/or gender identity. Such negative experiences may have been encountered personally or witnessed among friends. Recent social and political shifts have begun to acknowledge and affirm their rights, prompting older LGBTIQ individuals to seek recognition, understanding, and integration in later life. The pressing question of 'who will care for us' becomes especially significant as they age further, where many lack traditional support structures and their own support system begins to diminish.

A survey by the American Association of Retired Persons (2020) highlighted significant concerns among LGBTIQ older persons regarding long-term care. A substantial percentage expressed worry about the availability of family or social support, emphasising the absence of specific services tailored to their needs. In particular, transgender individuals faced heightened concerns about healthcare, sensitivity of providers, identity concealment, and housing discrimination. The fear of unfair treatment or inadequate care due to sexual orientation is prevalent among the LGBTIQ community, leading some to conceal their identity in long-term care settings.

Mistreatment in long-term care facilities include refusal to assist with bathing, disclosing sexual orientation or gender identity without consent, separating same-sex couples, and neglecting medical care based on sexual orientation or gender identity. The lack of awareness and training among staff further compounds these challenges. Discrimination and microaggressions are perpetuated by a failure to inquire about gender identity and sexual orientation, creating an unwelcoming environment for LGBTIQ individuals.

Anticipating potential discrimination, some older LGBTIQ individuals may choose to conceal their identity, leading to a state of 're-closeting' or 'de-transitioning' after years of being 'out.' This denial can have consequences on mental health and exacerbate feelings of invisibility. The inadequacy of staff training and communication tools further contributes to the challenges faced by older LGBT individuals in long-term care. The AARP survey also reported on the European scenario and highlighted widespread concerns about neglect, abuse, limited access to services, and verbal or physical harassment among older LGBT individuals. Instances of abuse within care homes, as reported in the United Kingdom, underscore the urgent need for addressing homophobia and providing proper protection for vulnerable individuals.

The fear of losing control over identity, especially among transgender individuals facing dementia, adds another layer of complexity. Housing discrimination remains a pressing issue, particularly for older Black and minority ethnic LGBT groups. Some advocate for specialised services tailored for LGBT individuals, but the availability of such services is limited.

The AARP survey suggested that LGBTIQ seniors would find greater comfort with healthcare professionals who undergo specialised training, visible advertisements promoting LGBT-friendly services, awareness of the LGBTIQ identity among service providers or staff, and the presence of LGBTIQ-welcoming signs or symbols in physical locations and communication materials. This perspective has brought attention to exemplary practices observed in various countries, including Europe, the United States of America, Australia, and Canada. These practices underscore the positive impact of continuous affirmative training and established frameworks. Additionally, the availability of both LGBTIQ-affirmative care homes and exclusive care homes orretirement villages has been instrumental in fostering safe living environments and providing peace of mind.

Locally, the current state of long-term care predominantly adheres to heteronormative practices and settings, lacking visibility for LGBTIQ individuals. On a promising note, the *National Strategic Policy for Active Ageing: Malta 2023-2030* (Ministry for Active Ageing, 2022) represents a significant step forward. For the first time, it includes a dedicated theme addressing the needs and concerns of LGBTIQ persons, marking a positive development in promoting inclusivity and recognition.

Providing adequate care for older LGBTIQ individuals requires acknowledging their unique life experiences and addressing the challenges they face in long-term care settings. Sensitivity, training, and awareness are essential to create an inclusive and supportive environment for this population, ensuring their well-being and safeguarding against discrimination and abuse. Ignoring the history and future fears of older LGBTIQ individuals undermines the development of effective care plans, perpetuating their sense of marginalisation and invisibility in society.

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Stress and work-life balance

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"I feel I never have time to relax" – "Life seems to have become like a race, always running from thing to the next, never catching up" – how many times have we heard, or even uttered ourselves, these phrases? Modern life seems to be a constant race against time, trying to meet deadlines, rushing from one thing to the next, and balancing work, family and home demands.

I recently read on Facebook that the 40-hour week was conceived at a time when strict division of labour was the norm – one partner in a traditional family structure worked at a paid job for 40 hours, while the other partner took care of the home and family. Nowadays, with both partners in such families typically working, this means that 80 hours are being spent at the workplace, with the housework and family needs still needing to be taken care of over and above. The situation is even worse for persons living alone or with dependents. This situation leads to increased stress, with the possible accompanying physical and psychological complications.

Technology has added an extra level of stress in most cases. While technological advances have been great in enabling us to communicate with others all around the globe, and undoubtedly proved invaluable to keep the economy afloat during the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the downside is that technology takes up so much of our time because of our need to feel constantly connected. Technology has enabled most jobs to be able to be carried out remotely, with the consequence that the distinction between our work time and the rest of our lives have become increasingly blurred. Technology has also created a culture where immediate responses to requests are expected – many of us check our work emails when back at home, and are expected to answer out mobile phones if the manager calls outside of office hours. Indeed, I am writing this article on my laptop on a Sunday – the one day a week I am expected to be resting from my employment!

This expectation has come to be known as the 'always-on' culture, implying that many workers are not able to switch off from work and enjoy the rest of their lives. It has long been known that rest and recovery are important for one's physical and psychological health, so this situation must necessarily be having an effect. Indeed, a recent study by Ljuba Belkin found that instead of an increase in efficiency, looking at afterhours emails can actually decrease job performance. Other reported effects of this culture, which seems to be promoted in most workplaces, include burnout, increased conflict between work and the rest of one's life, and conflict with one's loved ones.

The result of the need for immediate responses brought about by technology has also resulted in everything looking urgent – we seem to be rushing from one situation to the next, with little time to stop and think about strategy, priorities, goals, and what we wish from life – arguably much more important than meeting the next deadline.

Life expectations also factor into the equation. Is it really worth working 60-hour weeks for 50 weeks of the year, so that you can afford a two-week holiday once a year in an exotic place? What will your young children appreciate more later in life – the fact that you worked three jobs so that you could buy them expensive toys, or the time you spent with them playing with the cheaper ones which you could afford because you worked less?

The solution – not easy, mind you – is to take steps to regain control over your life, and achieve a better balance between your work and the rest of your life. These are some suggestions:

- Battle the 'always on' culture by 'switching off'. Create times and spaces to physically switch off your mobile phone, if at all possible. Do not access technology at all – no Facebook, Instagram, or X – and no looking at work emails. This will be difficult, requiring a lot of self-discipline – but the results will be more than worth the effort;
- Spend quality time with your loved ones, doing things together that you all enjoy – and make sure that work and technology do not encroach on these times;
- Invest time in what you enjoy doing – a hobby, going to the theatre, sports. Set goals for yourselves are work to achieve them. Have you always wanted to run the marathon, take up painting, or learn how to dance? – go ahead and do so!

Finally, remember that a better work-life balance, in the long run, results in benefits in both the life and work domains. This will help you enjoy life more, be healthier, and also increase your productivity at work – a win-win situation of ever there was one!

The stigma of the abortion secret

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ABORTION is not an uncommon occurrence. Nevertheless, women who have had abortions do not easily speak about their experience because they fear repercussions from those around them. According to the Guttmacher Institute (2022), around 3.4 pregnancies per 1000 ended in abortion in Europe. Meanwhile, an approximate 450 women in Malta have an abortion per year, despite an almost complete abortion ban. Some women travel to other countries, while others have their abortion locally illegally using abortion pills.

In 1968, Goffman conceptualised stigma as a discreditable or discrediting attribute, behaviour or reputation. He described three kinds of stigma, namely – those which distort the personality such as moral weaknesses, those that are associated with specific groups like religion and race, and those secondary to physical appearances. While stigma creates stereotypes and encourages discrimination, stigmatised people suffer a loss of status and power.

A stigmatising characteristic does not need to be visible. In fact, people who have had abortions are not immediately distinguishable to those around them, but nevertheless, they are still at risk of suffering stigma. The abortion moral conflict is an interplay of concepts around family, motherhood and female sexuality. Society does not look kindly on those who refuse to give birth and opt to terminate a pregnancy, as they are seen as rejecting their femininity.

This essentialist view of femininity pervades throughout most cultures. On one hand, this perspective dictates that a woman's natural destiny is procreating, while her instinct yearns to take care of the vulnerable. She is also intent on maintaining her feminine purity. These supposed qualities make her an inherent carer and bearer of children. On the other hand, the constructionist view considers the woman's various traits, roles, capacities and endeavours. Women having abortion exhibit bodily autonomy and challenge the essentialist sentiment. This defiance can fuel the creation of labels and stereotypes.

The notion of women being destined to become mothers is not a new concept. In her book on maternal sacrifice, Lowe (2016) outlines how the Greek harvest goddess, Demeter, sends the land and all its crops into a deep freeze, when her daughter is kidnapped. She only lifted this punishment when her daughter was returned. Diverging types of motherhood are also explored in traditional children's stories, like 'Cinderella' and 'Snow White'. A cruel stepmother is counterposed with a selfless mother who dies while giving birth. The maternal sacrifice framework dictates that a "good" mother will always place her present and future children at the centre of all her decisions. She will set aside her aspirations, needs and wants to ensure that her children receive the best possible opportunities. Abortion goes contrary to the notion of maternal sacrifice, and thus is the ultimate denunciation of womanhood.

Essentialist opinions within society drive abortion stigma, of which there are three types. Women carry "internalised stigma' from beliefs they hold about abortion, which fuels negative self-talk, resulting in possible deleterious psychological consequences. People who have had abortions can also feel others' unfavourable views of them, leading them to experience 'felt stigma'. As a result, they hold back from disclosing the incident, even with their closest ones, for fear of being judged.

Finally, some people also suffer 'enacted stigma', where others choose to direct verbal or physical or societal violence at them. Doctors and medical professionals might shame those who have decided to have an abortion, and so women might refrain from speaking to their caring physicians, for fear of being shunned and shamed.

In spite of the fact that abortion care is healthcare, abortion stigma is present even in countries which have decriminalised and legalised abortion. Reproductive justice is anchored in human and reproductive rights and seeks to ensure that people are treated fairly. Abortion stigma is rooted in society's views arising from essentialist belief frameworks.

People subjected to abortion stigma are at risk of suffering from a variety of negative effects including psychological consequences and discrimination. Society must strive to uphold women's right to access a healthcare procedure without suffering from any stigma.

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Women, illness, disability

WOMEN, INVISIBLE ILLNESSES AND SEXUALITY

Perceptions of healthcare professionals towards clients with invisible illnesses can influence clients' behaviour and interactions, affecting medical decisions, quality of care and also health outcomes

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INVISIBLE illnesses include chronic medical conditions with debilitating pain and fatigue, such as myalgic encephalomyelitis (chronic fatigue syndrome), lupus, fibromyalgia, and Crohn's disease among many others. In recent years several studies have identified a high prevalence of sexual dysfunction in women diagnosed with invisible illnesses. Research has especially pointed out that the widespread pain and the emotional alterations derived from this disease directly influence the arousal, frequency and sexual desire of these women. Although the aetiology of sexual dysfunctions in patients with chronic pain has been poorly addressed, researchers say that since it is a multifactorial problem, some of the influences are general to all dysfunctions and others specific to each disorder.

Scientific literature associates these alterations as pharmacological, physical and psychological. There are various medications, mostly antidepressants, which can affect the sexual functioning of these women while physical fatigue and muscle pain, linked to intolerance to exercise, have been related as the physical causes that most influence sexual dysfunctions.

Hypersensitivity to pain affects the sexual relationships and increases the feelings of tiredness. This situation, in turn, increases the possibilities of pleasant activities, and therefore, rejection of these encounters. Women with invisible illnesses showed an increase in pain during intimacy that was associated with sexual dysfunction and with the pain threshold.

Dyspareunia (difficult or painful sexual intercourse) and vaginismus (painful spasmodic contraction of the vagina in response to physical contact or pressure, especially during sexual intercourse) were the complaints reported most frequently by women with chronic pain. Olson, Zimka & Stein's (2015) findings suggested that women with fibromyalgia register a significant decrease in orgasm, self-pleasure, sexual activity and satisfaction, as well as vaginal dryness during penetration.

Similarly, Sanabria & Estrada (2019) argued that sexual dysfunctions were linked more to psychological than physical factors, since there is empirical evidence that the impact of pain in sex life depends on the coping styles of each person. Thus, these realities that emerge out of the findings of this research all point towards the need for sexuality and sexual expression to be given priority and be addressed holistically.

The presence of mood disorders in women with chronic pain is also generally one of the psychological factors that most often caused loss of sexual desire and decreased pleasure. Anxiety, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, lack of understanding, history of abuse and lack of support from partners have been factors that have also been related to these alterations in the sexual response. However, Shaver and colleagues (2006) identified that the widespread pain in fibromyalgia is associated with sexual dysfunction and that the coexistence of major depression does not have any additional negative effect on sexual functioning. Although anxiety and depression are linked to sexual dysfunction in women with fibromyalgia, it has been found that pain is the factor that most influences this difficulty.

The majority of women diagnosed with fibromyalgia claim to have difficulties during their sexual relations. Indeed, Sanabria & Estrada (2019) claimed that the psychological component is the one that most affects the sexual response cycle. On the other hand, Olson et al (2015) stated that the loss of sexual interest of patients with invisible illnesses could be a consequence of the constant stress caused by the loss of autonomy from being sick. The lack of social support or dissatisfaction with the partner influence the physical and mental health of these women.

The perceptions of healthcare professionals (HCPs) towards clients with invisible illnesses can influence the clients' behaviour and interactions, affecting medical decisions, quality of care and also health outcomes. HCPs tend to describe their encounters with clients with invisible illnesses as problematic. The reason why HCPs often overlook patients' sexuality are varied, but include personal embarrassment, the belief that sexuality is not as important as the patient's main problem, insufficient sexological training or a concern about increasing patient's anxiety when asking about sex. As a result, patients rarely receive holistic care that may include sexual health.

In response to the above implications, I am conducting a study with two key objectives. The first endeavours to provide a less medicalised and more humane, empathic and compassionate, outlook of women's sexuality enabling the understanding of women with invisible illnesses holistically and how the invisible illness has redefined the women's sexuality. An intertwining enterprise is to gain a better understanding of these women's experience of matters concerning intimacy and sexuality within the Maltese healthcare system.

The second objective seeks to explore health service providers' perceptions regarding women with invisible illness and to analyse possible consequences of these perceptions in terms of how HCPs construct invisible illness and treat the woman living with it and how to improve on the care provided. The overall purpose is to put this issue at the forefront whilst giving agency to women with invisible illnesses and ultimately improve holistic care provided to them.

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DISABILITY AND HUMOUR: COMIC OR TRAGIC?

How can disability, traditionally viewed as a tragic and pitiable phenomenon, be associated with humour? Can persons with disabilities produce and appreciate humour?

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It is not so much about whether it is politically correct or not to laugh and joke on disability, but about the attitude and intent behind the joke

RECENTLY, I was invited by Dr George Cremona to participate in his radio programme *Ngħidu Kelma*. Dr Cremona asked me whether, as a person with a disability, I feel offended if people joke about disabilities. This question was asked as an introduction to my current research with persons with disabilities and their experiences on this topic. The aim is to collect short stories from persons with disabilities and their families, in which disabling attitudes and events in society elicit unexpected replies, reactions or behaviour on the part of the persons with disabilities, thus transforming the former into humorous, and potentially educational and political, situations.

These stories compel us to question: where is the line between funny and offensive humour? How can disability, traditionally viewed as a tragic and pitiable phenomenon, be associated with humour? Can persons with disabilities produce and appreciate humour? What is the difference between disability humour and disabling humour? And where did all this start?

Having a disability in itself is not funny. Indeed, many disabilities bring with them pain, deformities, and other inconveniences. Historically, these characteristics were used to amuse non-disabled people. We have all heard of court jesters and circus clowns, often people with dwarfism, who were used for the entertainment of non-disabled audiences. Starting in the Middle Ages up until the 1940s freak shows slowly became fully-fledged commercial ventures. These shows often included people with severe bodily impairments who were sought out and exhibited as 'freaks of nature' and 'human oddities'. People paid money to go and see them. Even if they were often abused and ill-treated, for many persons with severe impairments, this was their only way to earn a living. Meanwhile, however, these shows were generating the notion that one can look at another who is deemed to be different, and denigrate them.

With the development of science and medicine, explanations to the various impairments were offered, and these freak shows slowly lost their appeal. 'Freaks' started being viewed with sympathy and pity, rather than fear and contempt. With new understandings of disability, the growth of the disability rights movement, and anti-discrimination legislations, these shows were banned. Television, cinema, and other media replaced them, and although their representation of disabled people is not always empowering, positive developments have taken place. Some disabled people have themselves been using media and humour as a political tool to educate, raise awareness and change mentalities (Nevares Araujo, 2019).

Albrecht (1999) claims that "[d]iscovering humour in disability is difficult because we have to be able to laugh at ourselves" and that "disability humour can also be liberating. In some instances, laughing at oneself or with others redefines the experience." Like when I was boarding a train and forgot that I had a heavy bag at the back of my wheelchair, so when I lifted the front wheels to board, I fell backwards and ended up looking at my legs in the air… I started laughing and could not stop.

In the gap between the actual event and the surrounding people's reactions there was my transition as a disabled person into the mainstream world again. Through my reaction (of laughing at myself) I prevented being stigmatised and pitied, and when everyone started laughing as they pulled me back to the upright position, it brought us all together – disabled and non-disabled, transcending dis/ability, 'equalising' us.

Or when I was abroad on holiday and we met a street artist who, upon seeing me, started to mime 'wheeling' along with his arms. I felt that the artist was showing me he was not afraid of crossing the gap between our two worlds. I so appreciated the gesture that I went next to him and we started 'racing' across the square, much to the delight of the people in the surrounding cafes. I felt one with everyone, because the laughter was not 'at my expense'. Everyone was laughing with me not at me. It was a situation in which humour was created in the surprising outcome of an interaction between a disabled body and another that are not. As Bingham and Green (2016) state, "disability humour enlightens others about the disability experience, affirms the humanity of individuals with impairments, counters the widespread view that disability is a tragedy, and challenges stereotypes."

To go back to the initial question asked by the radio presenter, therefore, it is not so much about whether it is politically correct or not to laugh and joke on disability, but about the attitude and intent behind the joke. Humour is highly individual, and the line between humour and offence is a very fine one. But, as Clarke (2022) puts it, "the 'person inside' – the person that I have always been – is still there, and humour, for me, is one way in which to both demonstrate and reaffirm this."

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Crime

CRIME: WHY ARE WE SO FASCINATED BY IT?

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CRIME is a frequently encountered topic in normal conversations. Who has never heard statements such as "Did you hear what happened? The person must be mad", or "The types of crimes are getting worse and worse."

These are common comments that one often hears in everyday life. Crime seems to activate that curiosity within us, perhaps in a way that enables us to distinguish between good and bad, between us and them. No matter the reasoning, the fascination with crime remains, as is shown by the various crime programmes featuring in television series and at the cinema.

I am sure that you all can think of some 'crime' programme that you watched avidly, or crime books and tabloids that you have devoured whilst asking yourselves 'what is next?'. A more worrying aspect of crime programmes is when viewers start siding with the criminals. Most of the time, these criminals commit theft against someone who deserves it: take as examples *Lupin, The Italian Job, Sopranos, Peaky Blinders and Money Heist*. Although most of us will not want a criminal to get away with crime, we do not mind siding with a criminal in fiction. Maybe because they are doing what we would secretly love to have the courage to do but which our conventional upbringing does not allow us to do?

This fascination lies in both the fantasy and real worlds. We fear crime but at the same time we are captivated by it. Criminologists analyse crime, scientifically, asking questions about why crime occurs, the extent of crime, society's response to it and why do certain people commit crimes while others do not. Society is more enthralled by crime stories, by the portrayal of crime, by the underworld, by the mystery of crime.

However, society is equivocally worried about crime. One wonders why we are so fascinated by crime. The answer might be found in the analysis done by Lettieri (2021), a forensic psychologist. He maintains that most of us are in balance, keeping in check the 'demonic' or what Freud calls the 'id'. We have all probably envisaged killing someone at one point of our life. David Buss (2006) found that 91% of men and 84% of women have imagined killing someone. However, most of us do not act on the impulse – our fear of being caught, our compassion, our guilt all stops us from acting out our impulses. Lettieri calls this the 'virtue' that is in all of us. The impulse to commit crime is always present but this is balanced out by 'virtue'.

Thus people commit crime because their 'virtue' has failed them. Other researchers have tried to justify our fascination with crime, be it the fact that it makes males feel more masculine, or women getting tips on how to defend themselves. However, it could also reflect what Vicary and Fraley (2010) found on women's interest in fictional crime stories as being related to their fear of victimisation. This would give them a sense of security through feeling in control and gaining knowledge about crime, albeit in the fictional world.

These ideas seem to be a justifiable way of trying to explain why we are fascinated by crime, however could something more basic be at play? If we believe that in all of us there is an instinct to commit crime, watching crime stories might be a safe way of distancing ourselves from something that disturbs our consciousness but at the same time is very present. Is it a way for us to portray a civilised saintly image while a criminal self exists in all of us?

The worrying side of watching a lot of crime stories, being real crime or fictional is that it tends to distort our image of crime and criminal investigation. Normally, the media portrays sensational stories, crimes that are not everyday occurrences. The overconsumption of these stories can cause serious issues on the perception and fear of crime as well as on the creation of stereotypes of criminals.

People

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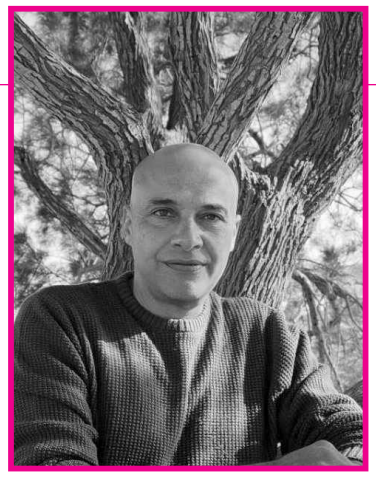

Where are you from and where do you live?
I am from Mosta and live in Mosta as well.

Have you ever involved in the community?
Yes, I was enrolled with the Scouts and was part of the MUSEUM.

What is your role at the UM?
Assistant Technical Manager in the Electrical and Plumbing Section

How long have you been working at the UM?
33 years, since 1991.

What is the secret with managing a large team of personnel with different characters?
You need to listen and understand everyone and then take the best decision.

What is your favourite pastime?
Cooking and gardening.

Are you interested in sports, if yes, what is your favourite sport?
Not really no, but I enjoy watching snooker.

Do you practice any sport?
Unfortunately, no.

What is one experience you recall when you were young?
When we used to go running around in the valley and cooking in the open.

Do you like travelling? Which is the country you would keep visiting?
Yes, I love travelling. Spain.

Do you like watching series on television?
I have none, I do not watch television series.

What are you afraid of when you grow old?
That I would become dependent on others.

INTERESTED in learning more about crime, criminals, and society's reaction to them? Why not come and read a degree in criminology where we address these and other issues? A degree in criminology prepares you to work in the criminal justice field (policing, corrections, and the courts), in combatting financial crime and in gaming to mention a few areas of interest.

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What is one item you cannot live without?
Food.

Do you believe in God?
Yes.

Do you have pets?
Yes, a parrot and a rabbit.

Should animals have the same rights as people?
Yes, the important thing is that they are not hurt.

What is your favourite meal and drink?
Maltese meat roast and wine.

What is one value in life that guides you?
Sincerity.

Which is your favourite season?
Definitely summer!

The role of unprocessed trauma in criminality

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ADVERSITY can be classified into two adaptive problems: threat which is denoted by harm imposed by others, and deprivation, denoted by insufficient environmental input. When people experience trauma, some may have the necessary life infrastructure to develop healthy coping mechanisms to it, whereas there will be others to whom no such resources are available and for whom the traumatic event, or often multiple events, forces them to develop a negativistic view of others, the world around them, and ultimately themselves. Such people may adopt means of coping which may develop into psychological risk factors for offending, known as criminogenic needs. The experience of adversity during formative childhood years may result in issues with the development of one's personality, leading to problematic behaviour.

This pathway starts with the experience of adversity, necessitating survival, which prompts the person to develop functional responses. These responses, when exercised, cause neurological changes in the brain, and the result is the cognitive, emotional and social development of the person. Drug and alcohol use are a common means of escaping the effects of past trauma, increasing the risk of the user entering a vicious cycle of crime and re-traumatisation. In fact, there is high correlation between having experienced adversity in the first years of life and substance misuse later on.

Early trauma may result in later crimongenic behaviour via a number of mechanisms. One is the neurological impact that trauma may have. Prolonged stress impacts the functions of the brain's prefrontal cortex, for example polyvagal theory postulates that one who is consistently exposed to trauma may shut down their prefrontal cortex for periods at a time in order to respond to the fight/flight/freeze instinct, during which time behaviour and emotional regulation and complex brain operations are impossible.

Another mechanism is attachment. When attachment is disrupted by maltreatment from the attachment figure, the development of interpersonal relationships, self-regularisation, mentalisation and the development of self-concept are stunted. Those abused by attachment figures dissociate from their emotions in order to be able to maintain the attachment they need so badly with the abusive figure. The sense of loss, rejection and envy caused by maltreatment by care providers may drive victims to exert antisocial behaviour in an effort to exert control over others that they not feel that they have on their own lives.

The third mechanism is the cognitive and attitudinal impact of trauma. Those who suffer abuse are more likely to develop a negative view of themselves, others and life in general. This may result in unruly behaviour as a defence mechanism. This unruly behaviour will cause the child to suffer alienation and more rejection which will only fuel the behaviour even more.

The penultimate mechanism is that of social learning and abusive behaviour. Those who are exposed to abuse learn to be abusive to others.

The last of the mechanisms are those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) symptoms. These can be a result of any of the above traumas. Symptoms of PTSD are strongly correlated with an increase in frequency and severity of delinquent and antisocial behaviour.

Traumatised persons will continue to seek refuge in what is familiar, gravitating towards traumatic life situations that re-enact their original traumas. This has implications towards rehabilitation and reintegration in a small island state where it is almost inevitable that one returns to their originating situations after serving a custodial sentence. It also explains why some people who rehabilitate and reintegrate pro-socially back into a community, are still at risk of returning to a criminogenic lifestyle.

This is, however, not to say that there is total correlation between trauma and crime. Many traumatised individuals do not exhibit criminogenic behaviours. There are individual and social protective factors that may mediate a non-criminogenic lifestyle. Individual protective factors are such as having a level of self-control; low depression; and a positive sense of identity. Social protective factors are such as high achievement – either academically or in employment – and positive relationships. Education variables such as engagement, achievement and graduation lower the risk of the development of criminality after trauma.

The link between trauma and crime has strong implications for the way the Criminal Justice System (CJS) in Malta operates. When any CJS is not trauma-informed, it stands to traumatise people further. From the moment of arrest; to the methods of interrogation; to detention practices; to court procedure; to the processes of custodial and non-custodial sentences – from start to termination of sentence; and to the rehabilitation and reintegration practices during and post termination of sentence, the system can be traumatising and retraumatising for those with a history of trauma – which as it turns out is the majority of people within a CJS. The narrative within a non-trauma-informed CJS is generally one that labels clients by their problems rather than consider their behaviour as a result of whatever happened to them. This risks further propagating the cycle of shame that these people are already all too familiar with. The focus should be on the needs underlying their unruly behaviour.

Adopting trauma-informed practices, which are now common practice in countries like Norway, which boasts the lowest rate of recidivism in the world, and the United Kingdom where trauma-informed practice is spreading through the CJS, would give us a far better chance at rehabilitation and at the successful reintegration of those who enter any part of the Maltese Criminal Justice System.

Family, community, work

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: THE REALITIES BEHIND HOUSEHOLD FINANCIAL DECISION-MAKING

Caring responsibilities and perceptions of the breadwinner role are central to the understanding of gendered responsibilities in marriage. The personal is therefore also political

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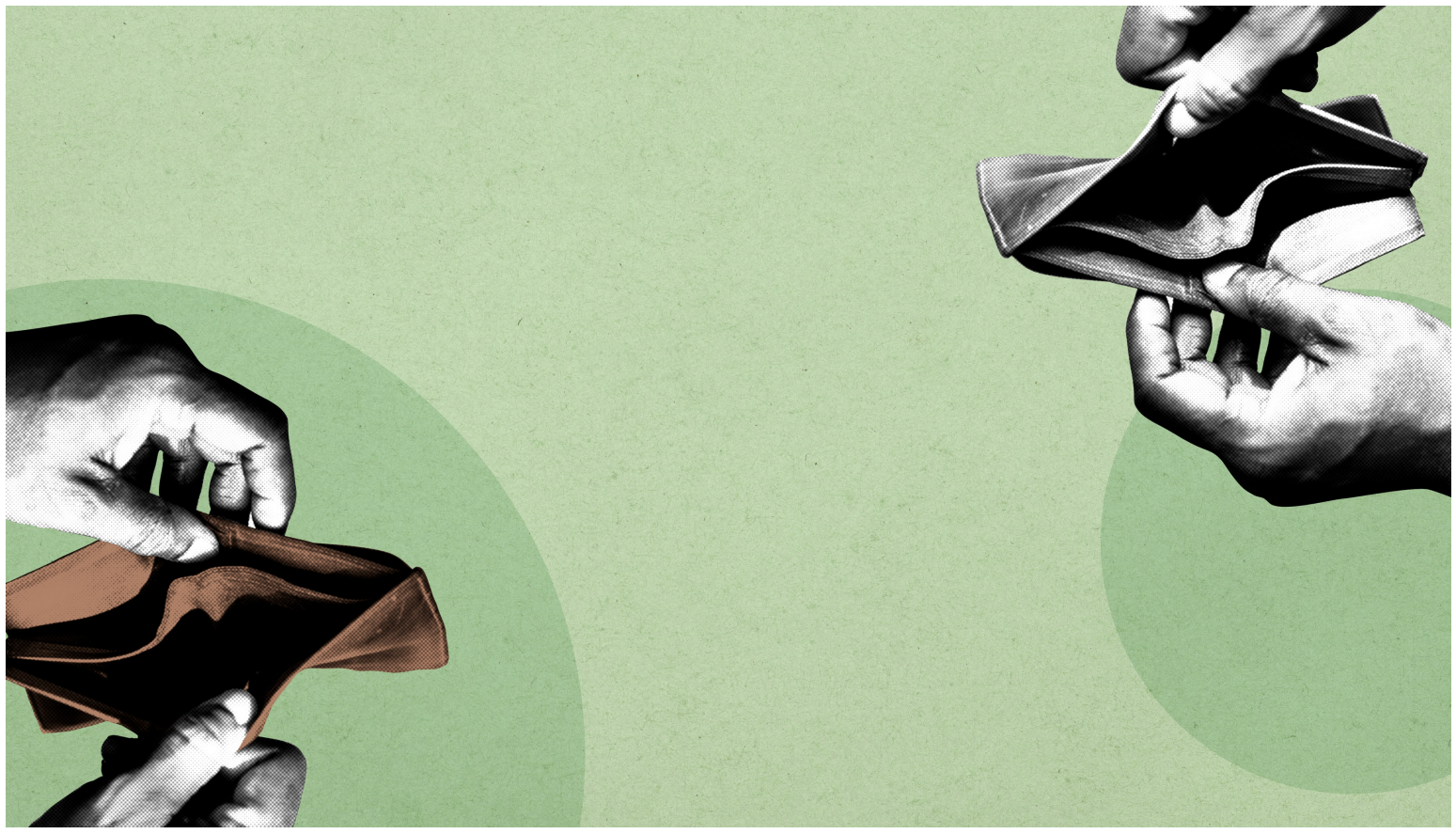

Looking closely at the money-management system adopted by couples may mirror a couple's gendered practices and even more so reveal underlying gendered power dynamics present within the household

AS the Maltese expression goes, *'mill-bieb 'il ġewwa'* – "behind closed doors" – what happens at home stays at home. Many a time no one dares mention the management of a couple's household finances. The topic of money in marriage is considered to be a personal topic. Its intimate nature and secretive aura make it even harder to research and delve into, than say, a couple's sexual relations. In other words, money in marriage remains taboo!

The household is, most of the time, understood as a unit in itself, with little or no consideration given to the fact that it is the individuals who really make up what we call 'the household'. At the end of the day, it is the individuals who bring their salary home and not the household.

Such a unitary approach of the notion of the household nearly automatically entails the equal sharing of resources but in reality, what this does is risk leaving internal realities and struggles among married couples unknown.

Each partner enters into marriage bringing with them their own particular baggage. The realities behind household financial decision-making and a couple's negotiating strategies about 'their' money are a reflection of the ideologies each partner holds: a reflection of the baggage they carry along.

The individual's socio-cultural background plays a significant role in this matter and it is therefore essential to contextualise this phenomenon. In a small, Mediterranean island like Malta, familial traits with closely-knit extended family ties, coupled with the deeply-rooted influence of religion, traditional norms and patriarchal ideologies, continue to be heavily present.

Moreover, legislation and national policies also have an impact on how marital roles and responsibilities are perceived, both by the couple themselves, one's extended family and also possibly by the community they form part of. For example, caring responsibilities and perceptions of the breadwinner role are central to the understanding of gendered responsibilities in marriage. The personal is therefore also political. Personal and structural elements are so intertwined that the socially-reproduced gendered, stereotypical expectations greatly shape behavioural patterns.

The way a married couple looks at its own financial affairs is not immune to this. The concept of money extends beyond its monetary value. It is also socially constructed and the value individuals attribute to money varies from one person to another.

This same social meaning given to money is then reflected in a couples' financial negotiating practices – even if at times through latent power dynamics. Beneath what we may consider as 'normal' practices, there lies a more complex layer of sense-making. In fact, looking closely at the money-management system adopted by couples may mirror a couple's gendered practices and even more so reveal underlying gendered power dynamics present within the household.

More pertinent inquiries concerning the issue of equality in financial decision-making include determining who has control and who manages the money at home. While control and management are sometimes used interchangeably closer examination reveals that real power rests predominantly with control.

Marriage is not, however, a one-sided, unitary, automatically egalitarian reality, and it is best understood as a partnership having therefore, the 'individual' and the 'shared' reality which brings about a more complex dynamic of financial decision-making in marriage.

With an interest in gender equality, women's empowerment and social reproduction, I am currently carrying out MPhil./PhD. research that focuses on the unearthing of un/equal financial decision-making practices among married couples and the extent of women's financial control and independence in such relationships. This study seeks to understand gendered power dynamics among early career, dual-earner, heterosexual married couples in Malta.

Understanding the lived experiences and gendered power dynamics requires addressing this issue from a critical angle. Adopting a feminist lens, turns the focus on to the participants' own subjective standpoints and further deconstructs the idea of the household and the family as a 'harmonised' unit.

Furthermore, this research considers the interplay between the personal and structural factors and how ideologies go on to influence a couple's financial decisions.

This research does not seek to reach generalised conclusions. Employing a feminist, bottom-up approach facilitates a more profound comprehension of the participants' financial decision-making and the underlying reasons influencing their perspectives on the negotiating practices on the money-management system adopted.

Community development and social work

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AS society gets more complex, social work faces more challenges, not least effects of globalisation, climate change, financial and ecological crises, technological advances and wars. These challenges trickle down from global levels to the daily lives of people. This has led to the intensification of injustices and power imbalances in societies worldwide that are creating more poverty and new forms of social exclusion.

Social workers are always at the forefront of situations of poverty and social exclusion. However, with shrinking resources and an ever-increasing demanding work environment, can they affect the necessary positive change in the lives of people? Can community development add value to social work?

Although community development shares goals and values with social work, it is a discipline in its own right. Social work itself has roots in community practice. Malta, however, seems to reflect a situation where social workers have not exploited these roots enough. Therefore, this study aims to bring out elements that are at the core of community development practice to investigate whether they are significant to local social work practice, especially in this climate of continuous change and challenge.

The United Nations defines community development is a process designed to create conditions of economic and social progress for the whole community with its active participation. For the International Association for Community Development, community development also promotes aspects such as participative democracy, sustainable development, rights, economic opportunity, equality and social justice.

As the International Federation of Social Workers attests, social work is also invariably based on the promotion of rights, equality and social justice. Indeed, social work's systems theories, ecological perspectives and sustainable development are but a few of the social work theories that recognise the importance of identifying supportive and risk factors in a person's living environment which includes the community.

A study that I am currently carrying out under the auspices of the Department of Youth and Community Studies, dissects such theories and other critical factors in social work to underline the significance of going beyond the micro-level of social work and to look towards the macro interventions which align with community development approaches. Seeking to understand the relationship between community development and social work, the study employs two subsequent research designs – namely, participant observation and participatory action research.

Primarily, participant observation was carried out within two projects of two distinct community-based organisations whose practice includes both elements of social work and community development. I was able to observe and draw out from my interaction with the participants – community members and facilitators – the benefits of such an approach and what may be lacking in order to help people gain better skills to take more control of their lives.

Secondly. the participatory action research, which is still work-in-progress and will entail carrying out research with the help of project participants was chosen owing to the fact that it is based on the same values and processes of community development. The challenge lies in whether the participants will actually commit to such a study given their home situations which may make it harder for them to keep up the commitment. Nevertheless, I believe that this would give me insight as to what elements of community development could work and what the barriers are.

Once concluded, the research shall certainly guide us as to what meaningful approaches boost interventions with people, and subsequently, which skills social workers can gain to enhance their work with their service users. It is hoped that this study will open a debate for social workers in Malta on whether to explore and gain the skills and knowledge in community development for better service provision.

Organisational psychology: its contribution to hybrid work

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THE COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated the ever-increasing demand of hybrid work. Carnevale & Hatak (2020) rightly argue that the changes caused by the pandemic did not augment the complexity surrounding work but also its total immediate environment. This article highlights how techniques and knowledge offered in the field of organisational psychology can help mitigate the challenges offered in a hybrid work environment.

Job analysis is one of the skills or tools which may be used to identify the tasks which can be done remotely and other tasks which need to be done at the workplace. Caldwell (2018) defines 'job analysis' as a means for understanding the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other requirements essential to the performance of each organisational position. It is also the systematic process for identifying the nature and outcomes of a position by determining the specific tasks and activities performed to achieve desired results and the context in which work is performed. Job analysis determines which jobs need to be analysed and their contribution to the organisational mission since every position in an organisation should exist to further the mission and objectives of an organisation.

The outcomes and results of each position must be defined in measurable terms. The process then requires the identification of subject matter experts and participants who will be included in the process. These would be individuals who have a clear understanding of the expectations, requirements, and outcomes associated with the position being analysed as well as colleagues who work with and are interdependent with the position. The ensuing relationships are often critical to the effective performance of any position and should be considered, along with task-related outcomes and expectations. The next step would be to systematically collect information about the job. There are many sources of job information, ranging from job descriptions, classification standards and established performance measures.

Job analysis also requires matching job content with competencies and requirements. Each source of job information can be useful in identifying the factors that are necessary in the successful achievement of job outcomes. Carefully matching job content with those competencies and requirements results in a detailed list of qualities essential for performing successfully. For this reason, job analysis is essential in defining which jobs are best performed on site and which others can be performed remotely. Furthermore, one can also redesign aspects of the job and the tasks assigned in order to have them performed on site or if required in a remote manner.

Another difficulty in hybrid work environments would be the inadequate resources for workers to be able to function effectively when they are working remotely. Moreover, the role in organisational psychology in ergonomic workstations is also highlighted. Training on 'health and safety' and investment or allowance to buy adequate equipment avoiding repetitive strain injuries is also must when there are increased physical complaints.

Organisational psychologists are also able to educate on the interface of work-family balance where flexibility on the job is normally positively correlated to job satisfaction (Scheide Miller & Giblin, 2023) and belonging especially for those employees who are also caregivers. They are also able to provide support when due to hybrid work arrangements, face-to-face communication is somewhat hindered and will facilitate and help employees to reflect on the different styles in communicating required for hybrid work environments. In such instances, leadership workshops also have a direct impact on increased belonging and job satisfaction among subordinates.

It is also known that employees with certain personality profiles are more likely to suffer social isolation when assigned remote work. Research indicates that high neuroticism, lower extroversion and lower agreeableness were associated with loneliness (Schutter et al., 2020). The role of the organisational psychologist here would be to identify such employees beforehand, to avoid experiences of social isolation by correct placement of employees.

The ever-changing world of work requires flexibility in thinking and in the skills which are needed on the workplace. Hybrid work is one of the major changes we have faced in recent years. The role of the organisational psychologist is that of facilitating and supporting such changes for the benefit of the employee which then provides a return on investment on the organisation itself.

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And in closing...

DISCOVERING A GEM IN MALTA

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I arrived in Malta on October 8, 2021, when there were still the last vestiges of the global emergency of COVID-19. With all my belongings packed in a small suitcase, I disembarked on 'a rock in the middle of the Mediterranean'. Little would have I imagined that this place would become my second home for years to come.

I headed to the University just a day later, and as I walked, thousands of doubts popped into my head, something typical when you just move from one's country to a foreign one. But thanks to the amazing professors and students at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies, who made my stay an amazing one, my plan B (going back to my country!) never occurred.

As I read for my Master's degree in Diplomatic Studies at the University of Malta, I had the opportunity to get to know first-hand its corners, and in the process, cultivate friendships that have lasted to this very day. Although Malta did not impress me at first sight, except for Valletta and Mdina of course, it still ignited my curiosity.

Malta and its people have seen (and experienced) the Roman Empire, the Knights, the British Empire, and World War II... among others. As a passionate history buff, you will believe me when I tell you that I have enjoyed several walks around the capital and visits to war museums. There is always something new I want to explore!

Following my studies, my career path led me to stay in the halls of the university working at the exciting Faculty for Social Wellbeing. I thus found myself rooted in the University of Malta, an ideal place

that serves as a base for learning history, religion, commerce, culture, law, and international relations, among others. But one thing Malta does not need to learn, and in fact can teach other larger countries, is the value of peace.

If there is one thing for which Malta has created not only curiosity but admiration in me, is its non-aligned stance in international issues. Some realists might think that this is due to being a small independent island state, and indeed it might be so. But it may also be that Malta and its institutions believe in conveying around the world the message of peace, a message that is so sorely needed nowadays.

Looking back, this island served as a turning point when the world was trembling in fear of nuclear war. Remember the end of the Cold War? It took place in Malta! Or, remember the Bandung Conference? Malta joined and communicated the official refusal to side with absolutely no party. Some may even remember how Malta had British and NATO military bases removed some years after its independence. By staying out in the open, Malta sent a message to the world: maintain peace at all costs and contribute to making the world a better place!

Reflecting on my experiences in Malta, I am aware of its geographical wonders and its limestone houses, something anyone can see. What the world does not seem to realise when it comes to Malta is its quiet strength, and the quest for a better world through its constitutional basis, which transcends its foreign policy. In a world where fame and notoriety often overshadow the very essence of things, Malta reminds us that true greatness lies in the commitment to work for what is right.

Sharing the social work journey

Dr Claudia Psaila
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IN celebrating its 20 years since inception, the Department of Social Policy & Social Work organised a one-day conference, Sharing the Social Work Journey, on 9 November 2023 at the University of Malta, Valletta Campus.

It was a celebratory event which included practitioners, Maltese and international academics, pioneers in the social field, and other distinguished guests, and which focused on the uniqueness of the profession and the essential role social workers have. It is a profession that focuses on mobilising the strengths of service users and their environment to deal with complex and challenging situations, while taking into account the impact of the broader context on both clients and their social workers. The profession is centred on the value of social justice, a value that distinguishes social work from other helping professions.

The conference included welcome speeches from Faculty dean Prof. Andrew Azzopardi, head of department Prof. Sue Vella, while Prof. Ana Radulescu, president of the International Federation of Social Workers, delivered a keynote address on 'The role, identity and contribution of social workers in contemporary society.'

This was followed by a video presentation on social work as a profession. Prof. Christine Theuma Wilkins from New York University spoke about the uniqueness of social work as well as the main competencies and core roles of a social worker. The educational journey of social workers was the focus of the address by Prof. Anna Maria Campanini, President of the International Association of Schools of Social Work, while Prof. Elaine Wilson from University College Dublin discussed the role of Erasmus exchanges in the formation of student social workers.

Psychiatrist Prof. David Mamo and psychologist Mark Piscopo discussed the unique contribution of social workers in both their fields of practice. Social workers Louisa Camilleri Serge, Anne-Marie Ciantar, Carl Fenech, Kay Gauci and Mark Pellicano highlighted the complex social issues they deal with.

Participants were taken on a historical journey by a panel of speakers who were pioneers in social work in Malta: Prof. Emeritus Jane Aldgate, Dr Charles Pace, Mr Frank Mifsud, Mr Alfred Grixti and Ms Marija Zahra. Prof. Maureen Cole provided an overview of the development of social work education and practice in Malta, highlighting the arduous process that the establishment and recognition of social work as a profession has entailed over many years.

Four workshops were held on the social worker's status and identity; social workers collaborating across disciplines; social work initial and continuing education; and social work across cultures. University rector Prof. Alfred Vella closed the conference and honoured Prof. Cole for her exemplary service to the development of social work practice and education in Malta.

It was sobering, while strangely reassuring to learn that the challenges social workers face locally are shared globally: lack of recognition; not enough social workers; wages relatively lower to other professions; and high case-loads.

Recognising the unmet demand for more social workers, participants expressed concern about non-social workers performing social work roles. Social work is a warranted profession with legal, ethical and moral duties and obligations. It is therefore essential that it is people who have received education in the knowledge, values and skills of social work, and have been socialised into the profession, actually carry out the duties and responsibilities tied to this profession. It is also a matter of safeguarding the public and acknowledging that it is the vulnerability of persons seeking social work services that is at stake.

The importance of supervision and reflective practice for social workers and students on placement was mentioned by many as a means of providing an excellent service to clients and service users. These positive experiences are a way of applying theory to practice and socialising students into the profession.

The conference was marked by a beautiful spirit of joy, camaraderie, energy and a motivation to carry on. It was a reminder that together, we are part of the solution.

Social workers have a privileged position in that they have a unique relationship with clients and this gives social workers responsibility to be a voice for the voiceless, advocate for clients, to be ethical in their practice, fight the fights that are important, learn to use limited resources creatively, and work within and outside systems and not collude with them and feel powerless.