

# *Nirrangaw* : A Social Psychological Process in an Island Community\*

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## Introduction

This paper deals with the conceptualisation of a social psychological process relating to the ability of Gozitan managers and business leaders to cope with their most pressing problems. The approach adopted to investigate this process involved (a) an analysis of published statistics about Gozo; (b) psychometric interviews with twenty Gozitan managers and leaders followed by a one-day workshop; (c) in-depth interviews and focus group meetings with twenty-four Gozitans involved in business and management; and (d) an analysis of a database of opinions expressed by prominent persons during conferences organised in Gozo.

## The Scene

Available published regional statistics on the demographic and economic conditions of the Maltese Islands indicate that in Gozo unemployment rates are relatively higher and employment rates are relatively lower than they are in mainland Malta. Gozo is therefore forfeiting the benefit of maximising the utilisation of its human resourcefulness due to the lack of employment opportunities. As a result the Gozitan community is also losing out on the possible contribution that resourceful people could make to generate new and alternative economic activities. Given these realities, how come that Gozitans survive and often thrive?

## Individualism or Collectivism?

An analysis of ideas and proposals expressed in a sample of papers presented during conferences organised in Gozo showed how a number of prominent Gozitan persons perceived the situation in Gozo. These persons included high-ranking politicians, business persons, academics, consultants,

high ranking religious people and others active in the Gozitan political, economic and social scene, whose interest was not only that of describing what is going on but who were also attempting to make a difference by acting on their concerns.

Gozo's twin conditions of smallness and 'double insularity' lead to commercial and social isolation. These conditions, plus the related problems of how to deal with resultant feelings of uncertainty and inaccessibility, emerged as the main concerns by these presenters. They were observed as undergoing a painstaking process of differentiating between the two islands, generally concluding that not all is well in Gozo.

The frequent use, in the papers sampled, of the collective pronoun "we" alongside phrases such as *together*, *jointly*, *collectively*, *collaboratively*, *participatory schemes*, *spirit of co-operation*, *synchronisation*, *community effort*, *collective effort*, *collective goodwill*, and *joint ventures*, markedly pointed towards a collaborative spirit among Gozitans.

From the interviews, on the other hand, it emerged that Gozitan social relations are often characterised by mistrust (fear and suspicion) and powerlessness (distancing and bypassing). Examples of commonly used expressions that related to high levels of mistrust include: *you have to keep an eye on them*; *you have to be careful not to get bitten*; *we would like to know exactly what is being designed*; *they are a small family-run businesses and they do not trust others*; *there is a lot of back-stabbing*.

There therefore emerged an apparent contradiction between expressions relating to the Gozitan collective spirit by speakers during the conferences sampled and the strong individualistic approaches expressed during the interviews and focus groups.

This paradox can be explained as follows. When faced with a crisis situation characterised by

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\* This is an abridged version of the paper by Azzopardi and Mann (2006). The full version, published by Psydoc, Saarland University, Germany is available online and can be accessed on <http://psydok.sulb.uni-saarland.de/volltexte/2006/756/>

changing conditions and uncertainty, and acting within the constraints of formality and in response to institutional demands, Gozitans tend to adopt a collectivist attitude to manage the crisis. Yet as the level of formality decreases and the situation becomes more stable, Gozitans tend to shift to a more individualistic mode. Both collectivism and individualism are therefore significant factors that influence the Gozitan social process and mental mode – depending on the degree of formality and the level of uncertainty that dominates the situation.

**How do Gozitans Cope? Formal and Informal Schemes**

On the ‘formal side’ of the Gozitans’ basic social psychological process (left side of Figure 1),

‘mistrust’ and ‘powerlessness’ are conceptualised as the governing values. Gozitans tend not to trust formal structures and they feel helpless when confronted with problems of power associated with government’s bureaucratic procedures or other forms of institutional authority, symbolically (and sometimes concretely) associated with the larger island Malta.

But Gozitans have learned how to overcome the mistrust and powerlessness by reverting to informal processes (right side of Figure 1). Activating the *nirrangaw* (Maltese, pronounced *nirran-jao*, j as in jar) process they turn to their informal network of friends, relatives or friends of friends, gatekeepers to the power, and so resolve their most pressing concerns.

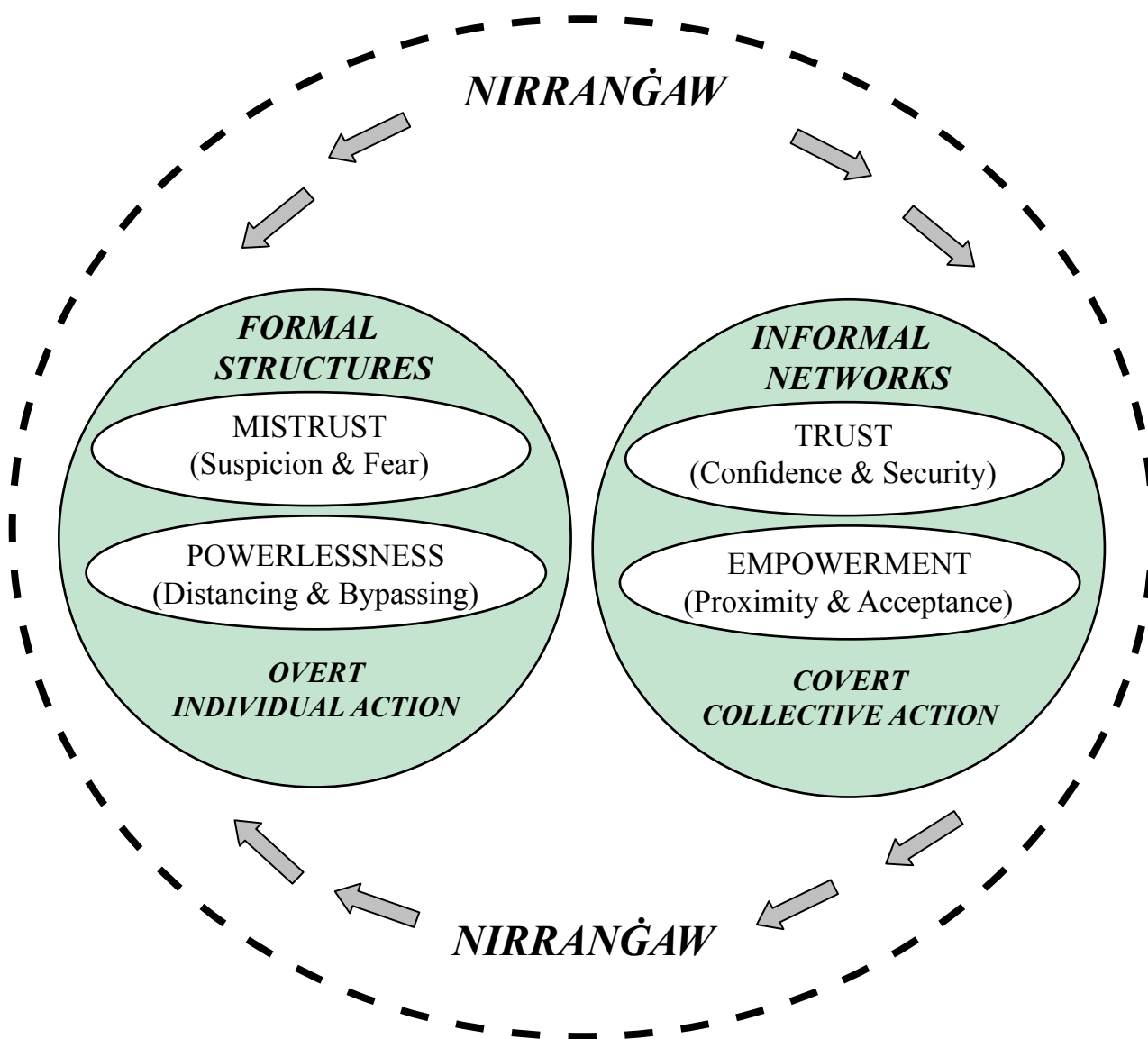


Figure 1. The *NIRRANGAW* Process: Enabling our ‘Just Managing’



Deal done, informally.

The verb *nirrangaw*, in its various verbal forms, was commonly and consistently used by the managers interviewed for the purpose of this study, in the sense of informally setting things right and coming to an agreement or settling differences peaceably. But the real meaning of *nirrangaw* goes beyond these definitions. The term has a deeper meaning, implying the ability to “fix” things, not always along formally and lawfully approved lines. A more profound interpretation of the term came to light to the present authors upon reflecting on the words of a Gozitan priest who was explaining the misuse or perhaps abuse of the sacrament of confession as a mechanism to launder consciences periodically:

“We think that we have the liberty to do anything we want because we know that we can ‘fix things (*nirrangaw*) with God’, and start a new page in our spiritual lives, over and over again. ...”

If Gozitans are capable of twisting and breaking the law of God, knowing that ways and means of reconciliation do exist, what could prohibit them from doing the same with the law of man? If Gozitans have learned how to consistently ‘fix things’ with the Almighty, they must have also learned how to ‘fix things’ with the mighty!

The interpretation of *nirrangaw* as the ability to fix things provides an explanation as to how the various codes, concepts and properties, which appear to be placed randomly in Figure 2, could be linked.

Thus, ‘fear’ and ‘suspicion’ could clearly be related to ‘mistrusting’ and so could ‘bypassing’ and ‘distancing’ be linked to ‘powerlessness’. Other factors could also be inter-related (‘networking’, ‘lobbying’ and ‘corrupting’), as well as ‘individualism’, ‘collectivism’ and ‘attitude’. *Nirrangaw* could possibly be the process that subsumes all the polarities and contradictions shown in Figure 2 into a meaningful whole. It is the basic social psychological process constantly

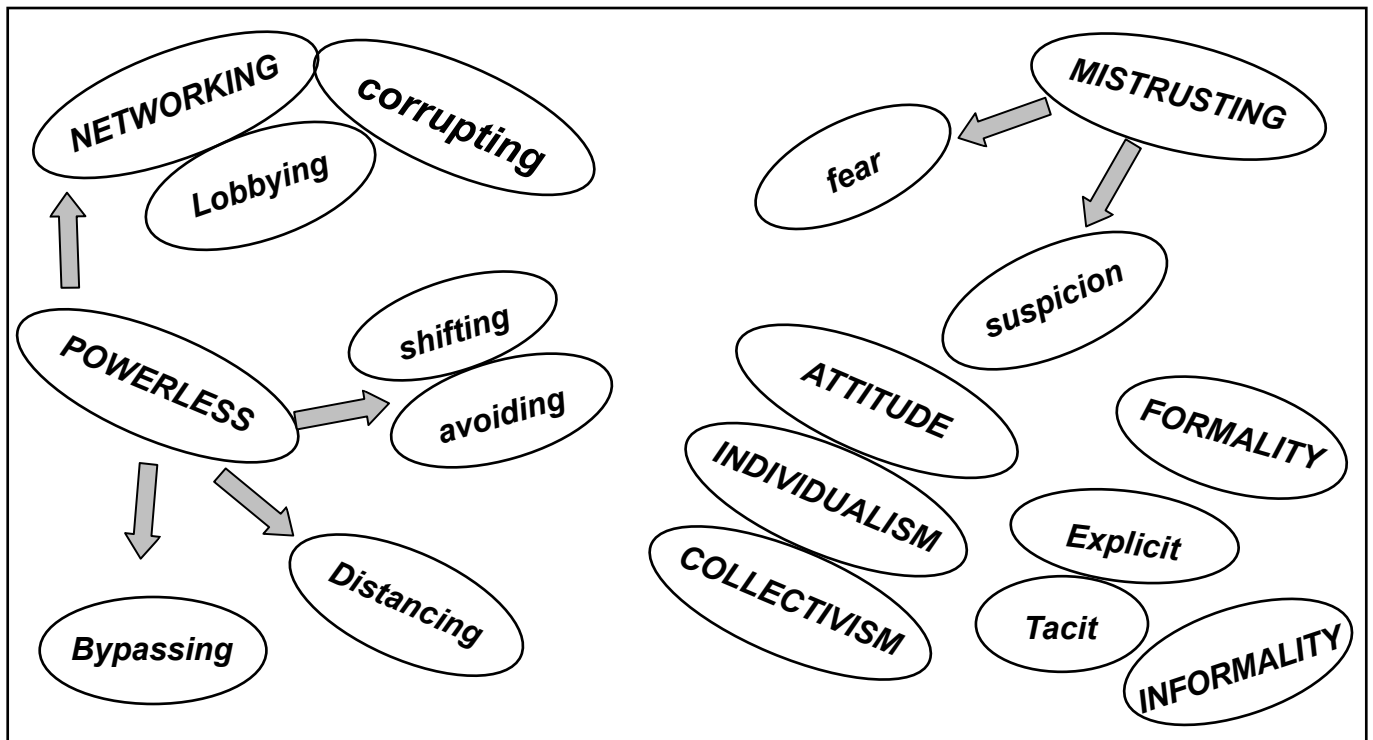


Figure 2. Concepts/Properties/Categories: But Where is the Link?



Coping informally with market realities

being used by the Gozitans to resolve their most pressing problem of survival in an island within an island severely conditioned by smallness and double insularity and very highly dependent on its main sister island.

## Conclusion

From this study, the *nirrangaw* process has emerged as an ‘informalising’ core process that transforms the *prima facie* weaknesses or negative traits associated with bureaucracies into strengths and resourceful routes of survival. Through *nirrangaw*, mistrust is transformed into trust, and its corollaries of fear and suspicion become superseded by feelings of confidence and security. Powerlessness is transformed into empowerment, while distancing gives way to close personal encounters in an atmosphere of brotherly and family relations.

Similarly, whilst preferring to distance themselves from formal structures and to bypass formal rules and regulations, many Gozitans accept the rules and conditions of the informal game in an atmosphere of cordial reciprocity when resorting to their informal networks. In this climate, practices - including bribery - which would normally be considered corrupt and immoral are transformed into a culturally acceptable way of operating.

Empowerment, in this scenario, therefore stems from the ability to build strong informal networks of friends close to power sources. ‘Who you know’, becomes overwhelmingly more important than ‘what you know’ in order to succeed. In this scenario, investing in informal networks is considered pivotal for success.

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