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Nirranġaw – A Basic Social Psychological Process in an Island Community

Abstract

This contribution proposes a qualitative research strategy and method to attempt to inquire into problem solving processes which people apply in one particular location, at a specific point in time. With insights from the paradigm of action research embedded within a phenomenological perspective, the research combines a preliminary deductive analysis of secondary quantitative and qualitative data with a grounded approach to inductive analysis to generate and inter-relate data emanating from a wide range of real life qualitative sources. By externalising the tacit processes which small-island managers and business leaders consistently fall back on to solve their day-to-day problems, the research outcomes illuminate distinctive ways that people in the action scene both 'just manage' to survive as well as to thrive under restrictive conditions. The paper concludes that the core social psychological process of *nirranġaw* both enables and inhibits the small island's residents in developing their resourcefulness.

1. Introduction

The paper proposes a qualitative research strategy and method that help conceptualise a basic social psychological process to provide an answer to the question: 'How do we manage to cope with our most pressing problems characterised by smallness and restrictive geographical conditions?' It relates to one of the authors' (henceforth referred to as the 'main researcher') personal experience of attempting to research human resource development in his home island of Gozo.

Gozo is the second largest island in the Maltese archipelago that includes Malta (390 sq. km.), Gozo (67 sq. km.) and Comino (2.5 sq. km.). The Maltese islands are situated in the Mediterranean Sea, 100 km. from Sicily and 290 km. from North Africa. According to the 1995 census, the total population of the Maltese islands is 378,132; that of Gozo 29,026.

2. The Research Question

The research set out to find an answer to the basic question: *X' sa nħawdu*? (Maltese expression, pronounced: shsan-how-do) – "How do we manage?" (AZZOPARDI, 2002) The answer to that question, it was hoped, would explicate a better understanding of how we cope with our most pressing problems in Gozo through our one and only natural and relatively abundant asset: our human resourcefulness. To find an answer to this question, an investigative direction – and ultimately a substantive focus – was needed. Having considered strategic routes available in the social sciences, the main researcher chose a largely phenomenological rationale and qualitative methodology. This choice did not exclude the potential contribution a small amount of existing quantitative data could also make to the inquiry at its outset. This purposefully comprehensive strategy, it was hoped, would allow the researcher to:

- view phenomena under study as a product of human consciousness

- produce an organic and holistic understanding of actors in their action scene

- consider myself and my local 'co-researchers' as active creators of our own social order, and

- develop along the way an informed account of a core coping process that had deep explicatory power at this particular point in time – the turn of the century.

To complement this emphasis, a community-based, action-research tactical approach was also adopted with the hope of understanding the situation better by trying to enable some changes within it. Since the changes were unclear, a self-directing, action-oriented management development programme was proposed. This was begun by the two authors and a third consultant who worked with a group of twenty Gozitan managers, professionals and business leaders who seemed interested at the time in 'doing something' to develop themselves, their organisations and their community. To operationalise the above largely qualitative research strategy and the developmental action-research tactic, a grounded approach to inductive analysis (GLASER, 1978) was employed to raise and conceptualise data from a rich source of real-life scenarios. These data complemented some initial quantitative and qualitative secondary data that were publicly available also at the time of the inquiry.

The inductive grounded approach required the main researcher to enter the field of his inquiry – his own small island 'action scene' – with as few preconceived ideas as possible. By doing this, he intended to uncover hidden or tacit ideas, themes, images and perceptions that might be influencing the mental framework of his co-research participants – the managers and leaders in Gozo, a 'sample' that included the researcher himself who was also curious to learn more about his own mental models. By thus exploring into, uncovering and externalising taken-for-granted natural ways of 'doing things here' – in research terms, called 'fracturing' the data, codifying and inter-relating the ideas raised from the data, and finally writing the ideas out as text – he was able to transform recurrent tacit practices of coping into preliminary explicit ideas of knowing.

This explicit knowledge then became, at a higher level, the basis for a conceptualisation of the basic social psychological process that informs the study. This core concept accounts for how Gozitans continuously cope with their most pressing problems on their small island – in short, our own 'Gozo-made' modes of change, of learning and of development. Subsuming much data, this core category explains how we 'just manage' to make our life viable under our restrictive geographic and economic circumstances (AZZOPARDI, 2002).

3. Research as a Voyage

A critical review of the process and content of the inquiry reveals how the level of inference in understanding rose as the study progressed. An extended metaphor can describe this four-year journey: the research voyage began on the steady and stable 'ground' of a landmass, advanced out over a shaky 'pier' above a tidal waterline, to take the researcher deep out over his head into the insecure depths of the open 'seas'. Figure 1 below depicts the initial stage of the research as a voyage:

A review of hard facts produced by publicly available official statistics distinguished the demographic, employment and educational conditions of Gozo from those of 'mainland' Malta. The major implication drawn from this review was that Gozo was forfeiting the benefit of maximising the utilisation of its human resourcefulness due to the lack of employment opportunities that would satisfy the needs of a substantial category of its best-qualified people, particularly its younger generation.

Figure 1: Early Extraction via Deductive Research Process
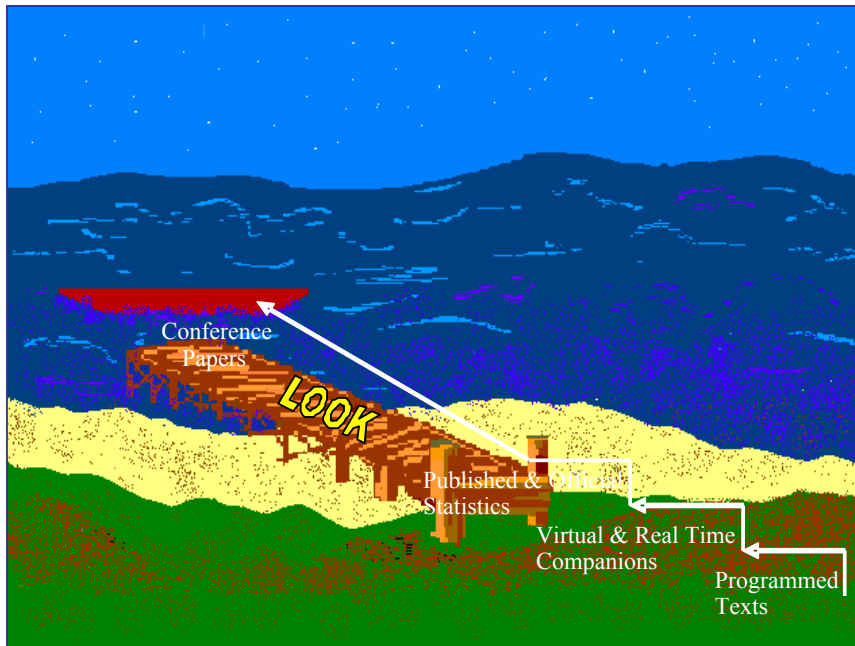
The researchers' reaction to this implication was that the Gozitan community was at the same time also losing out on the possible contribution these same resourceful people could make to generate new and alternative economic activities through their much needed energetic managerial and leadership capabilities. The implications thus helped to focus attention in the research on how managers and leaders develop in Gozo and so addressed a preliminary concern of the study: how to approach the development of our island's human resourcefulness from a socio-economic perspective that took account of micro organisations, self-employment and small family-run businesses/partnerships. These small collectives cannot afford to support the development of people in the same ways as large-scale organisations invest in employee development, on which the perspective of most extant literature in human resource development is based (GARAVAN et al., 1999).

This concern directed the voyage off the 'mainland' onto its first steps beyond *terra firma*, to explore possible underlying conditions that might be motivating this scenario. As the main researcher walked over the less stable planks of the 'pier', he sought to elicit the concerns of participating commentators through an analysis of a series of recent conference papers topical to the research problem. These fortuitously were being presented at three separate conferences held in Gozo during the period of the study, two at the start of the millennium and the third in March 2001, as below:

1. "The Effects of EU Membership on the Island Region of Gozo", organised by the Gozo Business Chamber on 28th January, 2000, and subsequently published in book form in July, 2000 (BRIGUGLIO, 2000)

2. "Improving the Employability of the Workforce in Gozo", organised by the Bank of Valletta plc on 13th April, 2000, and subsequently published in book form in 2001 (BANK OF VALLETTA, 2000)

3. "Defining the Socio-economic Character of the Island Region of Gozo", organised by the Gozo Business Chamber in collaboration with the Ministry for Gozo, The Central Office of Statistics, The Gozo Centre of the University of Malta and the Bank of Val-

letta plc, on 23rd March 2001, the proceedings of which have not been published as at August 2005.

These documents were anticipated to produce a preliminary credible account of the current situation as perceived by prominent stakeholders. Presenters at each conference ranged from high-ranking politicians (Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, Minister for Gozo, Speaker of the House of Representatives) to business persons, academics, consultants, the Bishop of Gozo and other observers of the local political, economic and social scene.

Accessing this first qualitative database enabled the main researcher to start 'animating' his action scene: observing people whose interest was not only that of describing what is going on but people who were also attempting to start making a difference by acting on their concerns. There was another characteristic of the conference-based database that elevated its potential as rich data for qualitative analysis: the presenters were a mix of people with varying political and personal agendas. Some were wearing their official hats and therefore were obliged to reproduce the official rhetoric of the entity they represented (often located on the larger island of Malta), while others in their personal capacity (sometimes based in Gozo, sometimes not) were free to deliver their views (and pose their questions!) unobstructed by the shackles of formal representation. Thus, the main researcher was intrigued to read between the lines of these various modes of delivery and interaction. They provided an excellent resource to start generating fresh questions and perspectives to understand the problematic nature of processes through which local stakeholders on the smaller island of the two engage and adapt in resolving the challenges they think they face.

The twin conditions of smallness and 'double insularity' (Gozo as a small island alongside the larger island of Malta) were seen to promote commercial, social and, at times, even spiritual isolation. These conditions, plus the related problems of how to deal with resultant feelings of uncertainty and inaccessibility, emerged as main concerns that were afflicting the co-research participants. To resolve these problems, Gozitans were observed undergoing a painstaking process of differentiating between the two islands – deprived as they felt they were of the necessary statistical data that would officially confirm crucial differences – to convince authorities accountable to Malta that not all was well in Gozo. Did something need to be done to integrate Gozo with Malta, socially and economically, possibly by relinquishing the traditional view of Gozo as an appendix of Malta? To get closer to Malta so that Gozo would start to be perceived and treated as an integral part of the country: an island within an island? These images soon came to form the main contextual conditions of the inquiry and stimulated the main researcher's curiosity tremendously to find out more.

Up to this point no particular inferences had been made. Themes had been deduced from the readily available facts and figures in the official statistics and written conference accounts (extant secondary data) and from the contradictions apparent in the verbalisations of some conference presenters (new primary data). Given the seemingly insurmountable problems implicated by these concerns, however, the main researcher was both fascinated by the formidable challenges confronting Gozitan managers, professionals and leaders, and perplexed by the thought of how they have managed to survive so well so far.

This intrigue – to continue the metaphor of the research as a voyage in its later stages in Figure 2 below – pushed the main researcher off the already unstable pier of deductive analysis out into the rough open 'seas' to learn more about how we Gozitans actually manage and solve daily problems on Gozo: *how do we cope*? This time the main researcher found himself in a process of inductively generating his own informed accounts – from new, further primary data – through direct interaction with his co-research participants. Immersed in uncharted tidal flows and choppy waves, he began swirling from one qualitative source of information to an-

other, generating more ideas, themes and concepts that would come progressively to throw light on and construct meanings of how we manage our local concerns in the context of own small-island conditions. Qualitative primary data were sampled from the following sources (see Table 1 for details): in-depth interviews; a one-day management development workshop; focus groups; the researcher's own research diary; chance conversations and popular expressions of wisdom; and two consultants' interviewing of twenty Gozitan managers, professionals and leaders who had expressed interest in the action-oriented management development programme which the action research had encouraged in response to the Conferences.

Figure 2: Later Immersion via Inductive Process
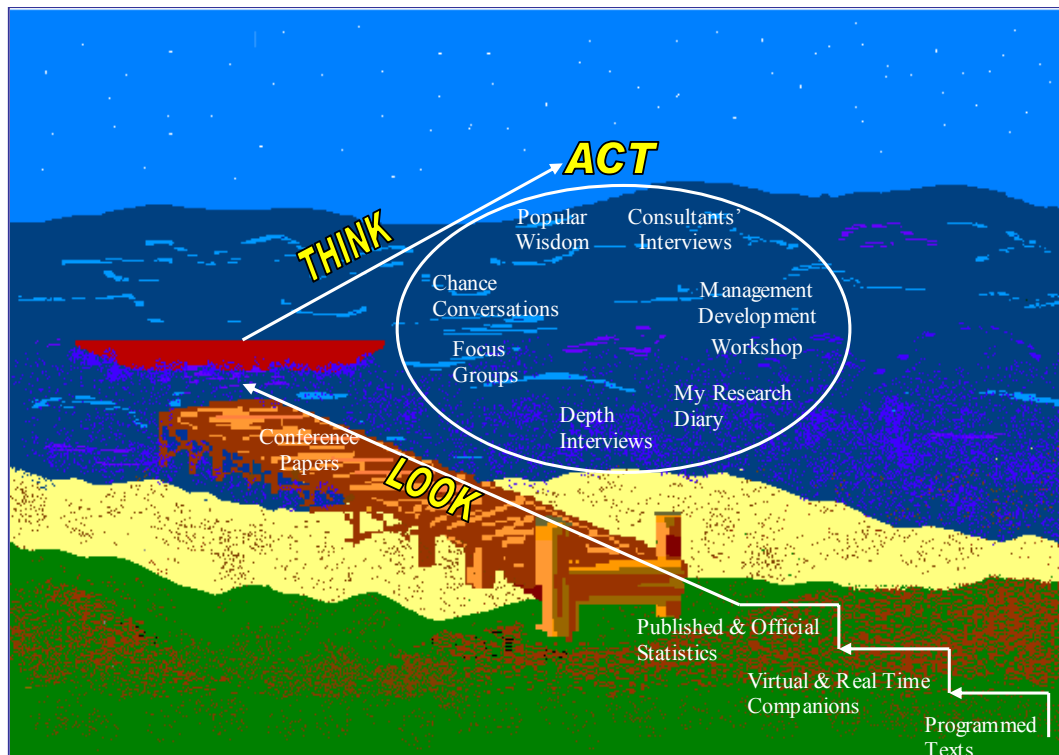
For the purposes of operationalising the research, the sampling procedure that was adopted followed the key criteria or foundations proposed by GLASER (1978) in order to ensure that the researcher:

- maintains **theoretical sensitivity** by entering the research process with "as few predetermined ideas as possible – especially logically deducted, a priori hypotheses" so as to remain "open to what is actually happening" (GLASER, 1978, p. 3) in the data,

- uses **theoretical sampling** for the collection of data, being guided to look for further evidence and where to look for it by the emerging ideas themselves, while constantly remaining alert to events happening in the action scene,

- analyses data by **constant comparison** of incidents-to-incidents, incidents-to-concepts and concepts-to-concepts – simultaneously collecting data, coding and writing memos until 'theoretical saturation' is reached,

- sorts and re-sorts memos and data indicators to explore and account for links and interconnections until a higher level series of ideas emerges that **fits** the real world of the research participants, **works** by explaining what is happening in the substantive

area of the inquiry, and **is relevant** because it is not preconceived but has emerged from the data itself, and remains readily modifiable if new data emerge.

Table 1 specifies the sources and amounts of information accessed throughout the research voyage to generate primary and secondary qualitative data. Partial use was also made of computer-aided qualitative data analysis software. Although this software is equipped with sophisticated features that include sorting, report generating, code-mapping and even hypothesis-testing, its use was limited only to expedite and facilitate the coding and memo writing processes. It allowed the researcher to store all the sources of information in one qualitative database that could be expanded, retrieved, examined and analysed promptly and effectively.

At this stage it became clear that the research was moving from an initially deductive stance to a more inductive approach to inquire into basic processes. This type of inquiry – that searched for some governing variables that influence Gozitans' 'folk-frame of mind' in their day-to-day struggle to make ends meet – obliged the main researcher to make the most of his latent creativity to conceptualise systematically a core process, whilst at the same time remaining faithful to and recurrently grounded in the phenomena of his empirical sources.

The first challenging theme emerging from the initial stages of this inductive process was the apparent contradiction lying behind the largely collective spirit expressed and documented by commentators in the conferences. This seemed to contrast sharply with the strong individualistic approaches in Gozo to 'managing' that began emerging from a more sensitive, grounded analysis of the primary qualitative database.

The constant use in the conference proceedings of the collective pronoun "we" alongside collectivistic-related terms and phrases like *together, jointly, collectively, collaborative and participatory, spirit of co-operation, synchronisation, join forces, whole community, collective effort, spirit of collective goodwill, amalgamation,* and *joint ventures*, markedly pointed towards a predisposition for a high collectivistic attitude that would appear to dominate the mental model of the Gozitan manager and leader.

But one participant, clearly and explicitly (albeit cautiously), challenged this perception. He described Gozitans also as 'self-centred individualists'.

> ... [S]elf-centred individualism which is characteristic of some of our countrymen, is due to a large extent, to the system of central administration, geographically and effectively away from our people.

(CAUCHI, 2000, p. 5)

It was observed that we Gozitans tend to change our preferences according to the immediate situation we find ourselves in. When faced with a crisis situation characterised by changing conditions and uncertainty, and acting within the constraints of formality and in response to institutional demands, we tend to adopt a collectivist attitude to manage the crisis. Yet as the level of formality decreases and the situation becomes more stable, we tend to shift to a more individualistic mode. Both collectivism and individualism were therefore found to be significant factors that influence our mental model – depending on the degree of formality and the level of uncertainty that dominated the situation being managed. These kinds of observations prompted the main researcher to inquire further into the participants' mental processes, to explore the possible main influences that could account for informing our action strategies.

Source No.	Method	No. of Participants	Length/Time	Remarks
1	Depth Interviews	10	2 to 3 hours	Conducted one-to-one in various locations (one on telephone) with public and private sector managers/business people. Average age of interviewee: 45 years
2	Repeat Depth Interviews	5	30 minutes (average)	Same participants as from Source No. 1
3	Focus Group 1	8	2 hours and 15 minutes	Participants from public and private sectors – positions varying from clerk to supervisor to manager. Average age: 35
4	Focus Group 2	6	2 hours	Participants from public and private sectors – positions varying from clerk to teacher to manager. Average age: 31
5	Chance Conversations and Popular Wisdom	Numerous	N/A	Continuous process of observation and informal probing
6	Research Diary	N/A	N/A	Recorded events and ideas from October 1998 through September 2002
7	Conference Papers	22 papers	20 minute delivery/ 2500 words (average)	Two conference proceedings published, one not published
8	Consultants' Interviews	20	1 hour and 30 minutes (average)	Depth interviews with managers and business leaders by visiting consultants in preparation for individual feedback from psychometric self-assessment questionnaires (referred to as POTTER, 2002 in text)
9	Management Development Workshop	17	One day	Workshop organised by researcher and facilitated by him and two visiting consultants

Table 1: Sources of Primary and Secondary Qualitative Data

Uncovering the governing variables (and their properties) – mistrust (fear and suspicion) and powerlessness (distancing and bypassing) – that inform our action strategies required a moderately low level of inference, as these traits were relatively directly observable in the primary qualitative data. Examples of commonly used words and expressions in this database (from the interviews, from focus groups and so on) that related to high levels of mistrust include: *doubts; you have to keep an eye on them [workers]: you cannot trust them; you have to be careful not to get bitten; suspicious; procedures of dubious validity; we would like to know exactly what is being designed; lack of trust; behind your back; all of them are small family-*

run businesses and they do not trust; they [the workers] do not believe you; back-stabbing; lack of sincerity; cheating.

As these indicators were compared with other incidents and with concepts emanating mainly from popular wisdom and with direct reflection on what actually happens in the action scene, the main researcher started to produce more culturally hidden or taken-for-granted meanings. These analytic comparisons led to higher levels of inference as he induced other meanings that were less evident directly in the data. Through this process, hypotheses could be drawn and formal and informal processes of how 'we manage' conceptualised.

The above section on the research process has used the metaphor of research as a voyage to portray the main researcher's odyssey from comfort and re-assurance on stable land (extant quantifiable official database), to preliminary shaky first steps out on the pier over shifting water (*in vivo* qualitative database from conferences), into deeper meanings ebbing and flowing beneath the high sea's surface (subtle, tacit, 'invisible' sometimes seemingly contradictory behaviour from new qualitative data purposefully sampled). This iterative process, it is suggested, helped to generate a fuller understanding of the core coping strategy of this small island community – which includes of course the chief action researcher. We now proceed to elaborate the twin features of the basic social psychological process that appears to explain how people in the local action scene cope with their challenges – including the researcher's own challenges in his research.

4. The *Nirranġaw* Process – an Enabler?

If we start by reflecting on the 'formal side' of the coin (left side of Figure 3) of our basic social psychological process, we conceptualise 'mistrust' and 'powerlessness' as governing values or variables of which Gozitans are very much aware: we do not trust formal structures and we feel helpless when confronted with problems of power that have to do with government bureaucratic procedures or other forms of institutional authority, often symbolically (and sometimes concretely) associated with the larger island Malta when located there.

> *When I have a problem, first I try to solve it on my own. If I do not manage I go to my brothers for help, and then to some close friend. If it is a problem with the authorities, I do like the rest of the Gozitans: I go to some Minister or to someone very close to one of them ... It's useless to keep beating about the bush and try to solve the problem according to the procedures because they [people in authority] keep you in a state of suspense and anxiety and you never manage to arrive at what you want.*

(Interview – Gozitan Manager and Businessman)

But Gozitans have learned how to overcome the mistrust and powerlessness by naturally reverting to the other side of the coin (right side of Figure 3 above). Activating the *nirranġaw* (Maltese, pronounced *nirran-jao*, j as in jar) process: we turn to our informal network of friends, relatives or friends of friends, 'gatekeepers' (BALDACCHINO, 2000) to the power, and so resolve our most pressing concerns.

Nirranġaw is a verb in the first person plural, derived from the Italian *arrangiarsi,* literally meaning: 'we set things right' (AQUILINA, 1990: 1235). In its infinitive form, the verb means:

1. to put right, rectify

2. to improve oneself, look better

3. to be the cause of trouble to someone

4. to settle a difference peaceably, come to an agreement.

(AQUILINA, 1990, p.1182)

Figure 3: The NIRRANĠAW Process: Enabling our 'Just Managing'
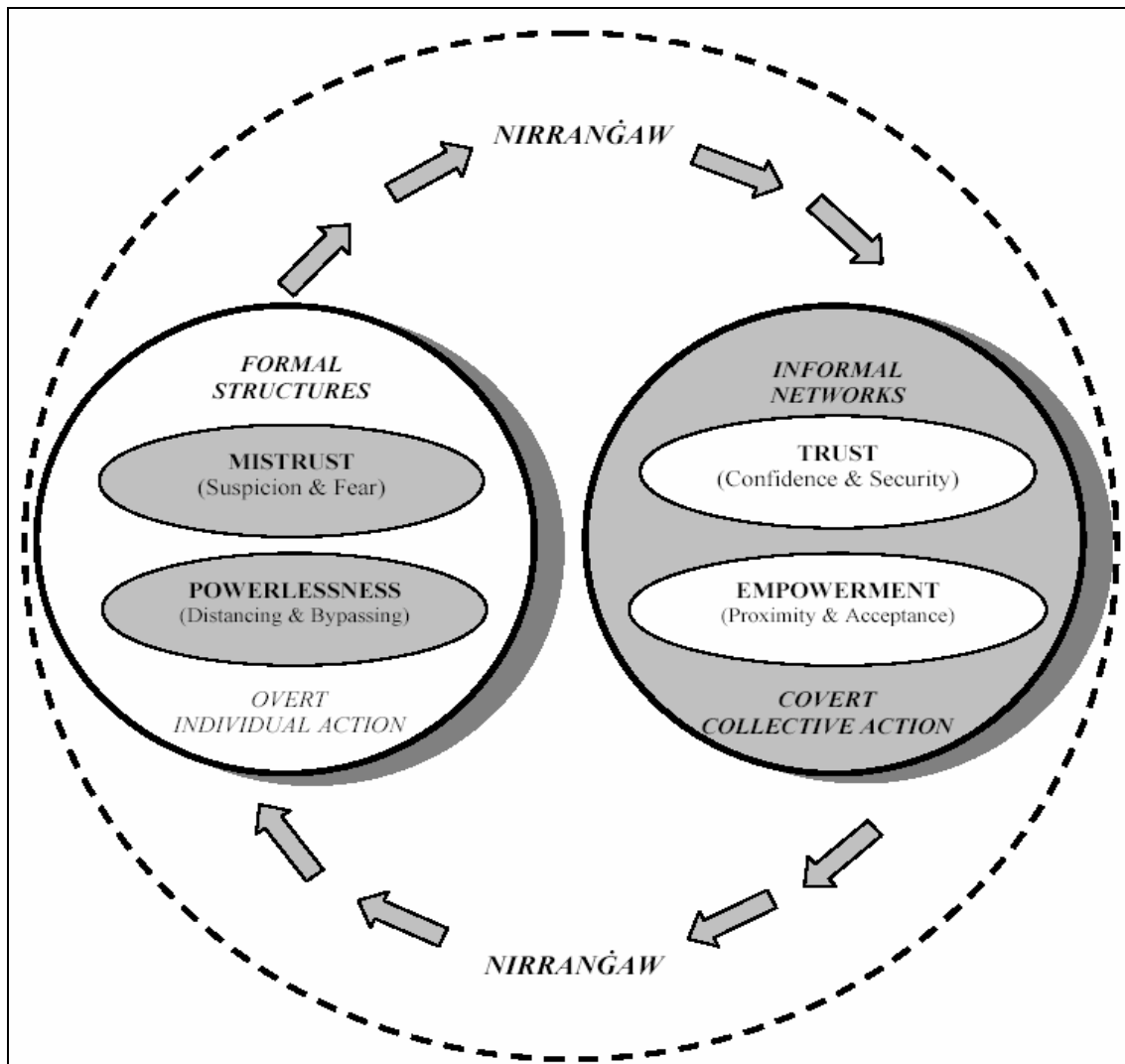
The verb *nirranġaw*, in its various verbal forms, was commonly used by the research partici-
pants in the sense of meanings 1 and 4 above, that is, to set things right and to come to an
agreement or settle differences peaceably. But the real meaning of *nirranġaw*, however, goes
beyond these two definitions, depending on the context in which it is used. Notwithstanding
the constant occurrence in everyday language and in the database (excluding the conference
papers which were delivered in English), the forceful significance of the word did not occur to
the main researcher immediately. The verb is so commonly used in everyday conversation, an
integral part of Gozitans' daily struggle to survive, that during the initial stages of inquiry its
potential significance, relevance and validity to the study were overlooked. But to the core
research question (*X'sa nħawwdu?* – 'How do we manage'?), *Nirranġaw* is the *in vivo* answer!
The potential in the word and its power as a key process was stimulated by an account from
the wife of the main researcher – not from a seminar but a Sunday sermon!

The commentary below from the main researcher's diary reveals this unexpected 'divine inspi-
ration':

> *The priest was explaining how many Christians in Gozo tend to misuse or perhaps abuse the sac-*
> *rament of reconciliation (traditionally known as confession), by transforming it into a tool of*
> *laundering their conscience periodically. "We think that we can feel at liberty to do anything we*
> *want because we know that we can 'fix things (nirranġaw) with God', and start a new page in our*

spiritual lives, over and over again. This is a dangerous practice which is negatively effecting our daily lives and behaviour as Christians in our relationship with our neighbours."

The correlation then occurs to me that if we are capable of twisting and breaking the law of God, knowing that ways and means of reconciliation do exist, what could prohibit us from doing the same with the law of man? If we have learned how to consistently 'fix things' with the Almighty, we must have also learned how to 'fix things' with the mighty!

This incident provides the missing central link, the heart, to my conceptualisation and their properties of a number of codes displayed in complete disarray on the flipcharts hanging on the wall of my study.

(Research Diary, 1998-2002)

Figure 4 below is a representation of one of these charts at a relatively advanced stage of the inquiry.

Figure 4: Concepts/Properties/Categories: But where is the Heart?
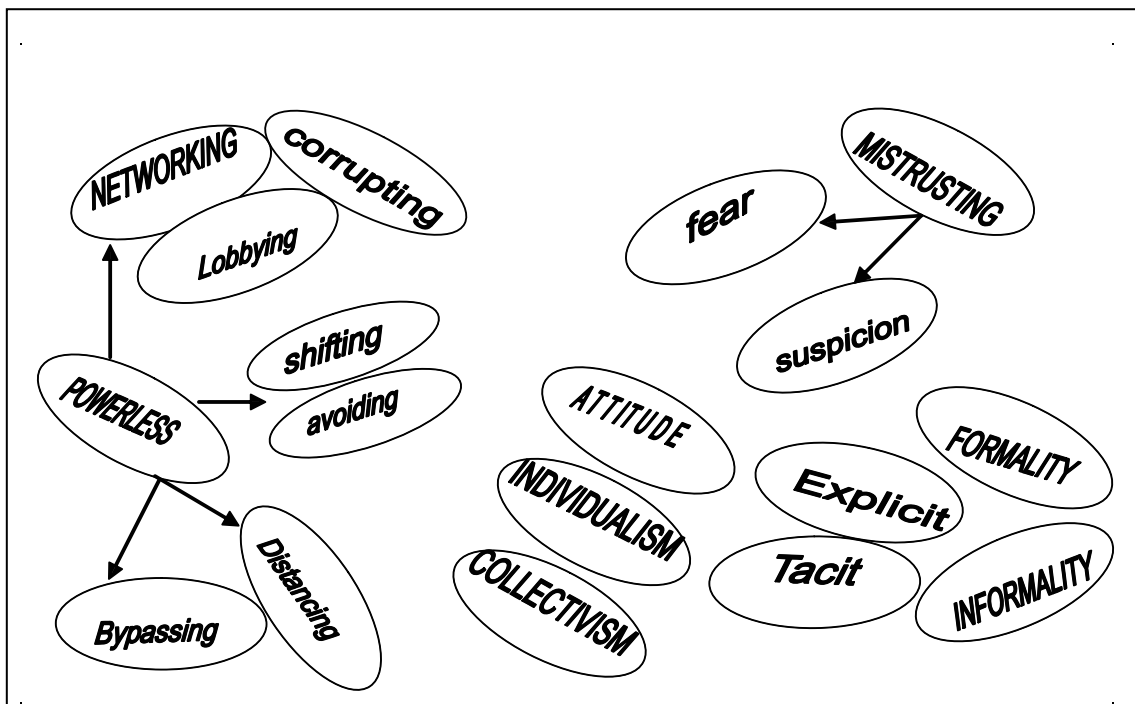
Although links could be established between the various codes, concepts and properties, the depiction still lacked a core linking element, a life force, perhaps a process that would subsume and inter-relate the various themes, processes and ideas with one another to provide a higher level, more coherent explanation of the variations that had emerged.

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'; And there was 'tacit', 'explicit', 'formality' and 'informality'. But what process could possibly subsume all the polarities and contradictions into a meaningful whole?

Nirranġaw meets the grounded methodologist's criteria of **fit, relevance, workability** and **modifiability** (GLASER, 1978) that place it at the centre of the process. The process enables managers and leaders in Gozo to identify the problem and to resolve it, thus making 'life viable in the action scene'. It is the basic social psychological process constantly being used by

the stakeholders to resolve their most pressing problem of survival in an island within an island severely conditioned by smallness and double insularity and completely dependent on its main sister island:

> *I solve the problem by giving orders to my subordinate heads of sections and they will see how to fix things (**jirranġaw**) on their own.*

> (Focus Group – Gozitan Public Sector Manager)

This manager takes it for granted that her subordinates have an innate capability to fix the problem on their own, without any need for her to 'micro-manage' (or interfere in) the problem-solving process. *Nirranġaw* also means modifying rules and regulations according to our needs and as they may best suit us:

> *All these regulations, but we in Gozo are a republic in a republic, if we do not like the rules or if they bite our pockets we know our way around them and to hell with the rules ... there's always a way out of it (**tirranġa**).*

> (Interview – Gozitan Businessman)

Nirranġaw knows no boundaries and may take place at all institutional levels, including the highest – the Courts of Justice:

> *Even at the law courts ... the lawyers ... fix things (**jirranġaw**) behind your back and you are like an idiot.*

> (Interview – Gozitan Businessman)

In civil-service career progression we see it:

> *My career in the civil service was constantly influenced by one person, a colleague of mine who although starting his career after me has always managed (**irranġa**) to take the best positions in government.*

> (Interview – Gozitan Public Sector Manager)

Nirranġaw is an all-inclusive process that provides remedies for every problem:

> *Somehow you always find a remedy (**tirranġa**).*

> (Interview – Gozitan Businessman)

The *nirranġaw* process has emerged as an 'informalising' core process that transforms the *prima facie* weaknesses or negative traits of bureaucracies into strengths or positive and resourceful routes of survival and reveals the real basic drive that enables the community to thrive. Through *nirranġaw*, mistrust is transformed into trust, and its corollaries of fear and suspicion become superseded by feelings of confidence and security:

> *Not only the Gozitans, at first they feel insecure, it's something natural, because of lack of trust, the attitude is: we'll fix things (**nirranġaw**) first.*

> (Focus Group – Gozitan Private Sector Manager)

Powerlessness is transformed into empowerment, while distancing gives way to close personal encounters in an atmosphere of brotherly relations and collegiality. Similarly, whilst preferring to distance themselves from formal structures and to bypass formal rules and regulations, 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 what would be termed the corrupt or immoral practice of bribery and the irregular twisting of rules and regulations (under 'normal' conditions) are reframed into a culturally acceptable way of operating that characterises the intuitive way we cope here:

> *The clients know the laws better than I do, even though very often they are people of low education. They look at us with suspicion and anger because they know that they know more than we do. Someone leads them before they come to us. ... They come with details that show that they had already fixed things (**irranġaw**) with someone else.*

> (Focus Group – Gozitan Public Sector Manager)

Empowerment 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. Investing in informal networks is considered pivotal for success: *Ahjar habib fis-suq minn mitt lira fis-senduq*. This old proverb confirms the deeply ingrained belief that it is much better to have a friend who has contacts than to have a large sum of money in your chest:

> *You should go to the managing director. But I go first to people I know, there's contact, network, informal channel, then I go to the top, not straightaway to the top – first you try to fix things (tirranġa).*

(Focus Group – Gozitan Private Sector Manager)

> *We were always at a disadvantage [when compared with Maltese] and therefore we have found a way of overcoming the system and to settle matters (nirranġaw) the way it suits us best.*

(Focus Group – Gozitan Public Sector Manager)

> *The employee tells you: 'I don't care.' Of course he doesn't care, because he knows that the people at the top will fix things for him (jirranġawlu) and then he tells you: 'you don't want to settle the matter for me (tirranġali), but I will manage (nirranġa) anyhow'.*

(Focus Group – Gozitan Public Sector Manager)

Formal structures are modified through the *nirranġaw* process and transformed into informal networks to overcome the inhibiting barriers imposed by formality. This enables stakeholders to deal with their pressing problems in an atmosphere of informality that conforms more with their natural way in Gozo of 'just managing'.

5. The *Nirranġaw* Process – an Inhibitor?

So having solved our problems (or are these puzzles?), we Gozitans return to our daily routines. But in returning, do we seek to question our basic assumptions that have just influenced our action strategy? Or to ask whether it would be feasible to seek out different ways of acting resourcefully? In other words, does the core process that helps us succeed in the first place also inhibit us from questioning the suitability of our action? It is as if we are very aware of the formal side of the coin – our mistrust of distant authorities and powerlessness in the face of bureaucracies – but is the informal side – our trust and empowerment within a small community that happens 'naturally' as a practising principle – out of our reflective awareness? "We are rarely aware of this type of theory of action [our informal side above] because it is ingrained in us from early childhood" (ARGYRIS, 1991, p. 86). The grounded approach to this inquiry, like ARGYRIS and SCHÖN's (1974) 'ladder of inference', has helped the researcher to become aware of, conceptualise, and codify a largely tacit property that is taken for granted within this core process (see Figure 5 below).

Now we can hold both sides of the Gozitan *nirranġaw* process up against the unified framework of ARGYRIS and SCHÖN's action science (1974). We find our locally constructed, Gozo-made mode – the basic social psychological process explaining the action scene – enshrined as what is called theoretically a 'single-loop' mode of learning and development: single loop because it does not re-cycle to address governing variables that influence the stakeholders' assumptions and beliefs underlying their behaviour in the first place. Action science distinguishes between single-loop and double-loop learning, and also between espoused theories and theories-in-use (see Figure 5). Single-loop learning occurs whenever "an error is corrected without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system (be it individual, group, intergroup, organisational or interorganisational)" (ARGYRIS, 1992, p. 8). Double-loop learning invites questioning and reflection and seeks to identify assumptions underlying people's patterns of thought. It occurs when "mismatches are corrected by first examining and altering the governing variable and then the actions" (ARGYRIS, 1992, p. 9). *Nirranġaw*, the basic social psychological process accounting for enabling how we 'just manage' in Gozo,

appears to restrict us to single-loop learning and to inhibit our shifting into double-loop, critically reflexive learning:

> *Gozo has always been an appendix of Malta. It's in-built in us not to protest about things that aren't right, but to accept and live with them. We have learnt to suffer. We don't try to get what is ours.*

<div align="right">(Participant 13 – POTTER, 2002, p. 32)</div>

> *[Gozo] is driven by envy ... It's not changing. The mentality is constant.*

<div align="right">(Participant 12 – POTTER, 2002, p. 29)</div>

Figure 5: The Nirranġaw Process – Restricting us to Single-Loop Learning?

Espoused *Nirranġaw*   **Theory-in-use *Nirranġaw***
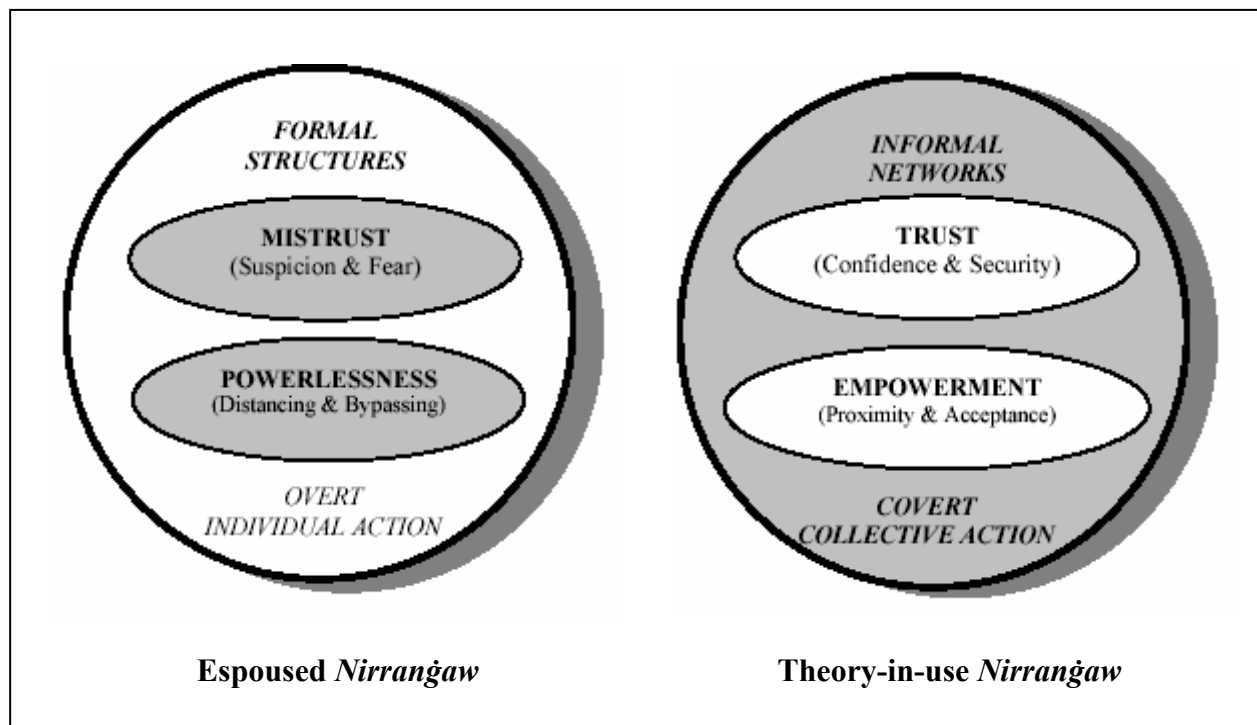
When activating the *nirranġaw* process, our local 'action strategy' produces the expected 'results/consequences' of solving the immediate crisis. Yet it also keeps us entrapped within a 'functioning system' that has always worked to help us 'just manage' to solve our most pressing problems. So does a single-loop cycle of symptomatic problem solving take us round and round without fundamentally inviting us to refect on our core value assumptions?

Even though Gozitans might become aware during problem solving that there is some mismatch between what we are calling here their espoused theory (the formal side of the *nirranġaw* process) and their theory-in-use (the informal side), they tend to collapse the mismatch of these two different things into a unity – a 'match' – comprised of both the intention and the outcome of their action. This then satisfies their recurrent beliefs and values which they are naturally keen to maintain and so removes the impetus to re-consider and to change:

> *I am a bit afraid of the changes, because I like the way our ancestors lived.*

<div align="right">(Participant 5 – POTTER, 2002, p. 13)</div>

Gozitans seem to be reluctant to reflect critically on the mismatch of their espoused theory with their theory-in-use. If they were to do so, they might then have to do something to change the variables that govern their behaviour. This in turn would challenge underlying

assumptions and beliefs that influence their folk-frame of mind in the first place. Fundamental shifts in their belief systems and values would then be implicated, which – while difficult as a discrepancy to reconcile – might begin to close the gap between their espoused theory and their theory-in-use. But would this take us into more innovative routes of addressing our problems? Figure 6 below illustrates the restrictive nature of our local mode by superimposing the *nirranġaw* process on the single-loop learning model. The capacity for critical questioning, for example, which can differentiate a match from a mismatch in an intention and an outcome, or can challenge the validity of an underlying assumption, is seen below to lie outside the scope of the *nirranġaw* process:

Figure 6: Nirranġaw – a Single-Loop Development Process?
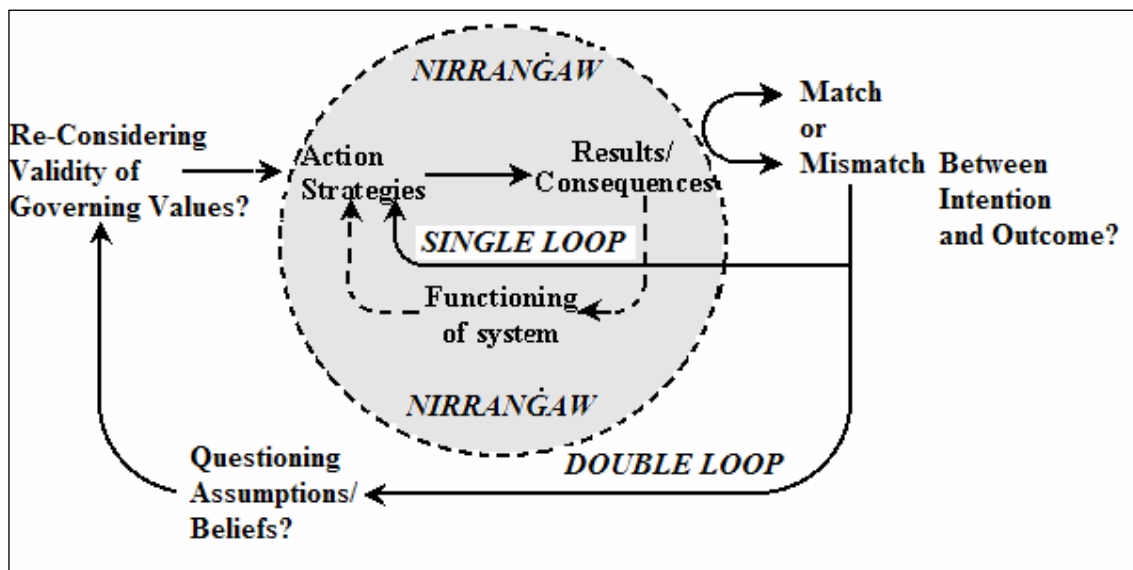
Adapted from ARGYRIS, 1992, p. 8

6. Main Researcher's Reflections on Implications of Research Practice

What are the implications for a small islander of being locked inside a single-loop learning routine? For me there are three. As a Gozitan, the first is the overprotection of the *status quo* hindering us from devising innovative problem solving. What can we do to get ourselves out of the "self-sealing" (ARGYRIS, 1991, p. 87) process we have learned to activate since early childhood and in which we have become highly tacitly skilled?

Before setting out on the voyage, I was convinced I could introduce action learning to provide a developmental process that would help address the trade-off between protecting our local cultural values and modernising our community problem solving processes. I thought I could mobilise the Gozitan business community to start doing something, to change their current low-trust and high defusing practice when they encounter something new or different. Now I realise that, in an action learning spirit, I have first to start with changing myself, to be able to change what goes on around me (REVANS, 1998, p. 85). Like my 'comrades in adversity' on Gozo, I too scored high on the defusing style of managing conflict by avoiding it (in a spirit of collegiate inquiry, I went through the same comprehensive computerised self assessment that my co-researchers did who signed up for the management development programme). POTTER (2002, p. 5) reports 'high defusing' as the "classical Gozo pattern" of conflict han-

dling. According to the EDAC (2000) psychometric feedback report on my own conflict handling mode, over-use of this style can lead, *inter alia*, to disempowerment (powerlessness) and to low trust (mistrust) (POTTER, 2002).

So what can we do to gain more trust and empowerment to start resolving our intractable problems, instead of just managing to solve our superficial puzzles (coping through single-loop learning)? Can the *nirranġaw* process itself serve as a springboard to take us out of the same self-sealing cycle that is ingrained in our heads so that we can start to change ourselves and to change what goes on around us? Driven as we are by mistrust and powerlessness in an atmosphere ruled by feelings of suspicion and uncertainty vis-à-vis the formal authoritative structures – and as much as we try to distance ourselves and bypass these structures – we still prefer to hold on to a strong reliance on outsiders' actions, for example, government initiatives and Maltese or foreign 'experts' to provide solutions.

SENGE (1990) helps us to explain this behaviour. In the context of our smallness, aggravated by our over-reliance on our bigger sister island for survival and the dismal presence of innovative business opportunities, we do not afford to risk and to make mistakes. We therefore prefer to defend our turf to protect ourselves from possible outside threats. But what would happen if we started to focus our attention on our own mental models to develop critical awareness of what is influencing our 'habit' to see our problems as existing 'out there'? Would that be a first step to start realising how we contribute to our own problems and what we can do 'in here' to find their solutions?

A concrete example of the first implication of my learning from the research was my re-affirmation that community problems are not community problems unless perceived by others in the community as such – not just by me as chief observer! In effect, in providing an 'answer' for my co-research participants of how they might develop themselves through action learning, I was assuming they recognised the above tension between retaining values and modernising practices the same as I did. My own keenness to introduce action learning as a developmental strategy within the business community over-ran the business community's readiness of a need to develop themselves. Since these tend towards avoidant managerial behaviour, perhaps they did not express their reservations about joining such a radically different initiative – one in which no outside expert would tell them what was wrong and teach them what was right, but one in which they would have to ask tough questions of each other to help each other diagnose their difficulties and then hold themselves accountable for making progress on them. I will not succumb to that temptation again – although readers here might be receptive to them – of proposing ways forward of what 'ought to be done' on behalf of others. It is 'a learning' from my own action research I will not easily forget.

So I continue to reflect regularly on my own action-research practice, including the disappointment in not getting action learning off the ground. To what extent was I, myself, influenced by the same assumptions, images and values that have entrapped my co-research participants – constraining me inside the limiting box of my own *nirranġaw* process? Externalising the *nirranġaw* mode, therefore, becomes the very first step in a long and complex change, learning and development process. Along with SENGE, I have come to understand that once we become aware of our mental models, we can start to manipulate them. To do this we need to join in collective dialogue and to start practicing double-loop thinking so that old habits of the mind and established procedural obstacles are replaced and new insights become possible to act on and experiment with. If we can make progress in doing this we would be addressing yet another important concern of this study: that self-reliant development models and strategies cannot be imported, but have to be locally constructed through a process of empowerment (BALDACCHINO & GREENWOOD, 1998).

This study has suggested we are highly skilled in how to 'just manage'. Just managing may have served our requirements so far, but we might be reaching the critical juncture where if we do not move on to locally develop complementary skills of resourcefulness that would serve us the purpose of shaping our own destiny – rather than overly relying on 'others' to do it for us – we will find it ever harder to make ends meet. So, from 'just managing', can we, as MORRIS (1987, p. 115) puts it, shift our folk-frame of mind to 'manage justly': "In the company of others ... [to] work to mutual advantage, managing our affairs justly, rather than just managing."

This takes me to a second implication from my reflections on my practice of action research: I wonder now with the proposed action learning development programme dormant, does further action research remain viable? My earlier fear had been that the failure to proceed with the planned action learning programme would threaten the comprehensiveness of my inquiry. In the event, this worry was overcome, due to the flexible nature of action research, which is designed to deal with the 'real world' as it is engaged through real practice.

Action learning also is 'designed' for reality: 'real people' tackling 'real problems' in 'real time'. But fundamental to the challenge behind this strategy for developing human resourcefulness is a pedagogical acceptance of the belief in 'learning by doing' and 'learning while doing'. But are these beliefs held sufficiently in Gozo to mobilise readiness for and sustain reliance on this approach? Do our single-loop *nirranġaw* process and our cultural pattern of avoiding conflict reinforce too much the Gozitan reluctance to question and challenge each other? These are fundamental building blocks in action learning, which demands the risk to ask fresh questions out of ignorance, the same requirement characterising the practice of double-loop learning. So although the process of learning through experience is a natural one, akin to daily problem solving, is it that the less confronting process of action research provides a more acceptable starting framework to bring out in awareness the underlying requirements for double-loop inquiry that perhaps make action learning too demanding a starting point in Gozo?

It was my goal as the main researcher to learn and to create knowledge through an experience-based action 're-search' of my own practice and that of my co-research participants. The third and final implication for my continued practice as an action researcher, therefore, is about understanding that complex, iterative process better. Re-searching my own practice meant for me that knowledge could be created on the basis of my own concrete experience of the process of this very same research voyage. Through observing systematically and reflecting generatively on that experience, I could form abstract concepts and generalisations that explained plausibly the life situation of my practice and helped me to decide what to do next. Testing the implications of these concepts in new situations led me to new concrete experiences, and hence to the beginning of a new learning and knowledge-creating cycle (KOLB, 1984; HONEY and MUMFORD, 1989). ZUBER-SKERRITT (1991, p. xiii) summarises this process as "an iterative and cyclic approach of action and research with four major phases: plan, act, observe and reflect", while STRINGER (1999, p. 18-19) proposes a three-phase continually recycling set of activities: 'look', 'think', 'act'.

In the event I have come to agree with STRINGER (1999, p. 19) "that action research can be a complex process" way apart from a "neat, orderly activity that allows participants to proceed step-by-step to the end of the process". Figure 7 below revisits my research voyage as I reflect, *ex post facto*, on the experiential characteristic of this inquiry. To illustrate, I 'looked' at the outset (on the pier) primarily at quantitative data (which were analysed deductively); I 'thought' (in deeper water) about the meaning of emerging dichotomies from the conferences (qualitative and *in vivo* material – inductively analysed); finally I 'acted' trying to promote

action learning. Now begins another iteration subsequent to my doctoral study: I am 'looking again' (attending the Berlin conference, preparing this paper; and so forth).

Figure 7: From 'Just Managing' To 'Managing Justly'
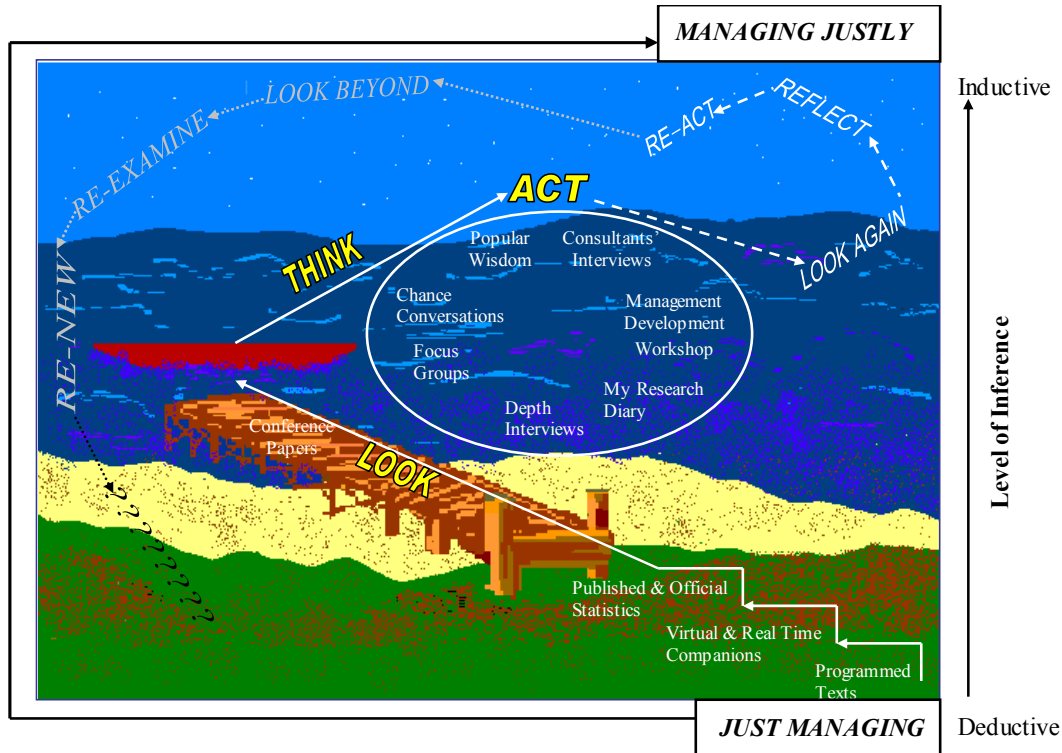
So this research voyage implicates a number of continually recycling action research activities that progressively develop a sharper understanding of the content and process of my own continuing practice as an action researcher (see Figure 8). In the first cycle, I continuously 'looked' (1.1) for relevant information and gathered data to build pictures and images that would best describe the situation first in quantitative terms and then qualitatively bring out the conditions within which we 'manage' in Gozo. 'Thinking' about this information (1.2) – the visible condition – I tried to explore and analyse further and deeper to find out what is actually happening here and then try to explain and interpret the results to answer the question: how and why are things as they are? how do we manage and why do we manage this way? From this process the main research question emerged: *x'sa nħawdu*? (Maltese expression, pronounced: shsan-how-do) – How do we manage? Finally, I acted (1.3) on my provisional understandings, trying (it turned out, unsuccessfully) to mobilise the local business community to 'learn with and from each other' through taking deliberate action.

Figure 8: Developing Gozo Resourcefulness beyond Just Managing
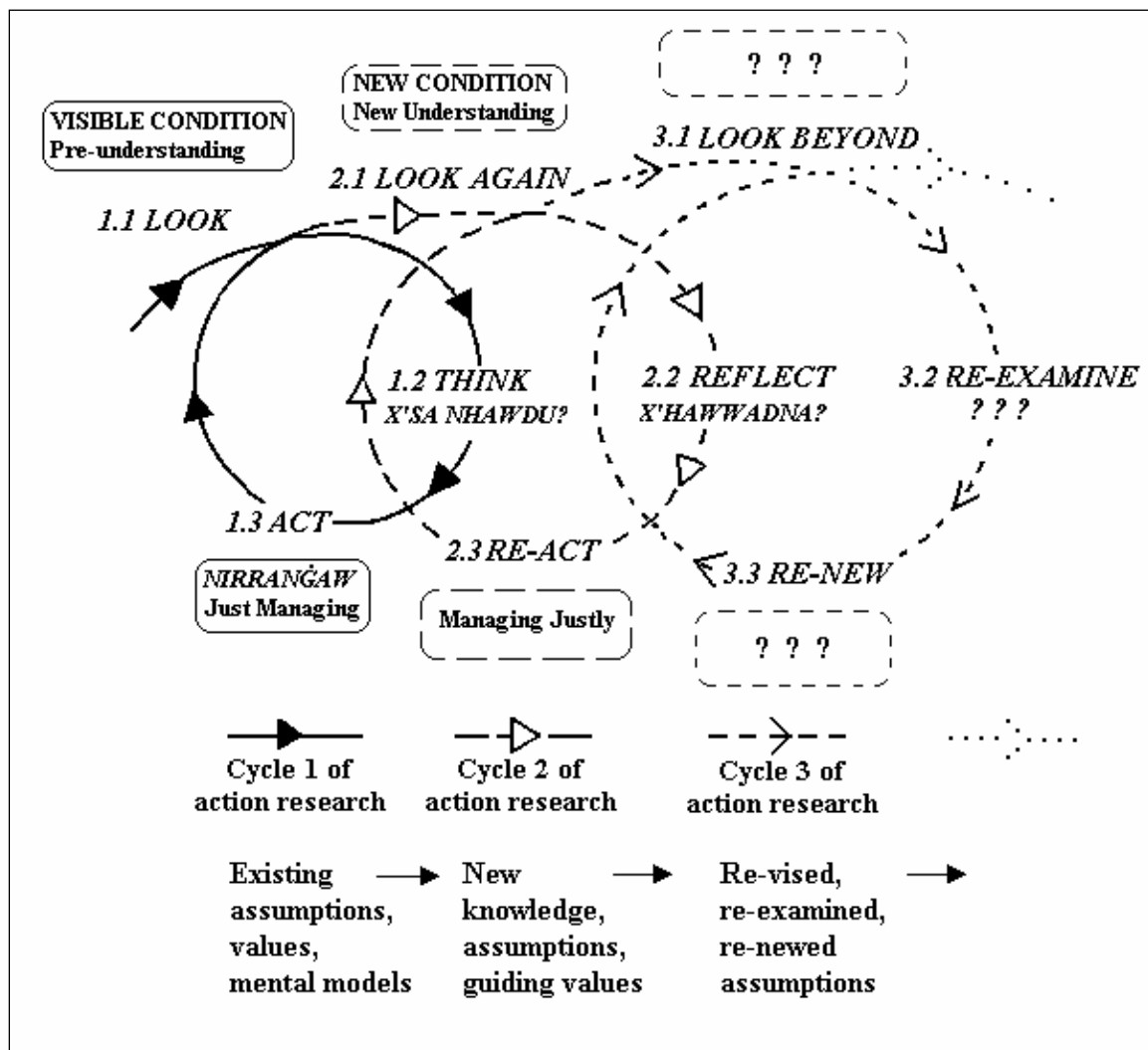
By the end of what I now call Cycle 1 of my action research, I had externalised the basic social psychological process of 'just managing'. But the unsatisfactory result of my action in not mobilising action learning prodded me to understand better the limitations of my own assumptions, values and mental models as a scholarly practitioner. So I began 'looking again' (2.1) at the situation and 'reflecting' further (2.2) on my own practice and experience of the voyage: I took myself through this second learning cycle armed with re-considered knowledge, assumptions and values, re-navigating through the influences on my thinking. My 're-action' (2.3) took me out of the constrictive box of the *nirranġaw* process and helped me to reaction' (2.3) took me out of the constrictive box of the *nirranġaw* process and helped me to re-conceptualise how I could perhaps start 'managing justly'. Is evidence of my new double-loop learning the unswerving clarity I now hold *not* to end this chapter on the level of 'action steps' on behalf of my absent co-research participants in Gozo? How tempting, for example, to 'set a next research agenda' on their behalf that would 'help' them? If I were to do that, I would be contravening the internalisation taking place within me that parallels the shift from 'just managing' to 'managing justly'. As a Gozitan accustomed to avoiding conflict, I can assure the reader such newly won assertiveness does not come easily!

'Managing justly', therefore, means achieving a firmer mastery over my internal self and over my external world. It necessarily includes a commitment to be 'honest' with myself in admit-

ting my ignorance as a pre-condition for my own internal change that is fundamental to the philosophy of action learning and of double-loop learning: I have learned that unless I am able to change myself I cannot change what goes on around me. I have learned that the first actionable step forward to start 'managing justly' the development of human resourcefulness in Gozo is the admittance that "without the power to discard beliefs shown to be wrong ... one cannot introduce action known to be right" (REVANS, 1998, p. 86). This study represents for me so far the two initial cycles of an infinite action research spiral that will hopefully continue to guide me in my future career as a Human Resource practitioner-researcher into another cycle (No. 3 above in Figure 8): to keep 'looking beyond' (3.1) new understandings, 're-examining' (3.2) new assumptions and guiding values, and continuously 're-newing' (3.3) my own practice.

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