



# Societas.Expert

## Social Wellbeing

THE FACULTY FOR SOCIAL WELLBEING RESEARCH MAGAZINE FOR ACADEMICS, STUDENTS, ALUMNI,  
STAKEHOLDERS AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC IN COLLABORATION WITH CORPORATE DISPATCH

EDITORIAL PANEL

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Content



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December 2020



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## EDITORIAL

# Not just another face in the crowd!

*Following the successful publication of the first edition of [societas.expert](#) we are now in a position to submit the second edition, with possibly a third in the coming months.*

The Faculty for Social Wellbeing in its endeavour to democratise its knowledge, is committed to create effective partnerships with stakeholders in the social field.

Corporate Dispatch has been a long-time supporter of this Faculty and together we have worked to promote justice and equity as two values that should be at the base of everything we take on in our society. To this end, the vast majority of its academic staff members, research support officers, as well as its students, we are involved in community engagement - from activism, to advocacy, to consultation, to research, to participation on boards, to volunteering and other.

The enormous volume of community engagement which takes place within the Faculty needs to be showcased and shared in the public domain. For this reason, the Faculty in collaboration with CI is dedicating the second edition of its research magazine to community engagement and the Faculty's endeavour to ensure that no one in our community is 'just another face in the crowd'.

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# Introduction

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The Faculty for Social Wellbeing, besides being an essential institution within the University of Malta, is also a Faculty which has a strong sense of community belonging, “a sense of membership and mutual concern that enables needs to be met” (Leviten-Reid et al., 2020, p. 18). In the case of the Faculty, perhaps differently from other Faculties, the sense of belonging and solidarity is with persons who are among the most vulnerable members of society. Faculty members - whether academics, students or administrative staff – are aware of their connection and commitment to others which “has been found to foster citizen participation, collective action, and civic engagement” (Leviten-Reid et al., 2020, p. 18). Within the Faculty, these three elements abound but are not always visible or acknowledged, and much less advertised. Although the concept of not blowing your own trumpet is one to be lauded, bringing community engagement into the spotlight, as this magazine sets out to do, has a number of advantages. First of all, it can highlight the connection between the Faculty and its stakeholders, including service users, who are, ultimately, the beneficiaries of the Faculty’s operations. Through the various community engagement initiatives of its members, the Faculty allows its stakeholders to drive its operations and make them relevant to society and its wellbeing. Secondly, knowing about community engagement initiatives can encourage more community engagement and make this the declared norm within the Faculty. In this way, alongside teaching/learning and research, being engaged in the community could be acknowledged as the third arm of University life. The third advantage is that, through this magazine, the contributors will have the opportunity to create awareness about their particular involvement in the community. This could be seen as a form of advocacy and will raise the profile of the Faculty in being attuned to societal needs. It could also provide faculty members with points of reference and information about areas where they lack expertise.

Social wellbeing is made up of many facets and knowing which of these facets is not being addressed and requires attention will contribute to the Faculty’s holistic involvement in the community. The magazine, besides highlighting a number of areas which the Faculty is involved in, also uncovers areas which do not feature so prominently. This will help the Faculty identify research gaps and areas where more investment is needed.

Having the different interests and passions exhibited as they are in this magazine, is testament to the Faculty’s richness and to the contribution it is making to society. Dedicating the magazine to community engagement is also a confirmation of the Faculty’s commitment to this important aspect of its functioning. May this magazine serve as an acknowledgement and appreciation of the various forms of engagement being undertaken by the Faculty members and may it encourage more participation and collaboration between the Faculty and its stakeholders.

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Leviten-Reid, C., Matthew, R. & Wardley, L. (2020). Sense of community belonging: exploring the impact of housing quality, affordability, and safety among renter households. *Journal of Community Practice*, 28(1), 18-35, DOI: 10.1080/10705422.2020.1718050.

# BETWEEN A ROCK AND A SEA

*Dr Andrew Camilleri*

*Research Support Officer*

A deep furrowed brow. Something was troubling my friend studying in the UK while discharging his weekly priestly duties in his local parish. He had been informed that the last flight coming to Malta would leave the following week. His choice: stick it out with his flock with the risk that if he were to be sick and things take a turn for the worse, he would die alone away from his family and friends, or come back to Malta and serve his parish in exile while finishing his studies here. A tough choice; he came back.

And yet the migrants currently stranded out at sea were not afforded the luxury of this heart-wrenching choice. Returned to a well-documented situation of torture and inhumane treatment, some of them not making it all the way back home. I was left to wonder, why was my Maltese born, Maltese speaking, Maltese looking (do we have a look?), Maltese passport wielding friend offered a flight, quite literally opening the airport for him and his abroad-staying ilk while the other migrants were left out, some to drown or disappear?

I can already hear the battle-cries from all those who seek to defend Malta's sanctity. Why should we take care of them? We have been abandoned by the EU. We are in a medical crisis. It's all the fault of those money-grabbing NGOs who provide a ferry service. Why don't they solve their own problems at home (in certain instances, facing certain death or inhuman treatment, even if others could be more opportunistic economic migrants). Why don't you keep them at your house if you are so in love with them? Malta for the Maltese. We are overrun. We have no space. Resources are limited. The economy is failing, etc. etc.

And I must admit that some of these arguments do hold water. It is not a normal time, resources are scarce. Solidarity is more extinct than the dinosaurs, in this field. The EU is nowhere to be seen and I wonder whether the NGOs are solving an immediate problem only to create a larger one, much like giving a drug addict drugs to temporarily abate symptoms of withdrawal only for these symptoms to come back stronger and the dose required larger, instead of working towards the underlying causes.

I have no solutions, however, as a community researcher within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing who looks at constructed identities within communities, the contrast was too stark not to notice. On the one hand, a piece of paper claiming you are Maltese or a resident entitled you to one of the most comfortable flights of your life to Malta. A black/brownish skin and a debated reason for leaving Libya, on the other hand, was almost a surefire misadventure which at best resulted in a return to the place you so desperately left and at worst, death.

Constructed identities always serve political purposes to obtain power, organise it or gain access to resources. At their most successful, we barely question them. I mean isn't it obvious that being born in Malta makes you Maltese? And yet why do we celebrate Pete Buttigieg's alleged connection to Malta yet doubt whether biracial persons truly are Maltese? But what is it to be a Maltese really, to speak a language, to look a certain way, to be born somewhere? And so on, the discussion goes. But at their worst, identities fail to normalize the power

struggles they are masking. In which world does a piece of paper claiming your country of residence decide whether you get a first-class flight, with few passengers, to bring you back to Malta or potentially drown in the Mediterranean? Even if, realistically, the chances of having contracted Covid-19 are actually higher (at that point Africa had a much lower rate of infection than Europe and the US, where most of the ex-pats on the flight came from), the Maltese government lauded by the Maltese population was ready to risk hospital beds and mass community for a piece of paper.

And so that makes me question, in a tense and volatile environment, can Maltese leadership use this crisis to be rid of the shackles of international law and morality, and in so doing win the home vote? Is this the crisis where we get to take off the European and internationalistic make up we have tiredly sought to cake our face with? Is this the moment where we will make desperate and misguided sea crossers choose between a rock... and a sea?

# BECOMING COMMUNITY - A POSTHUMAN PERSPECTIVE

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During the past decades, posthumanism has established itself as an autonomous field of study, revolving around 'new materialism' as a theory which centralises the role of matter in understanding reality (Coole & Frost, 2010). Posthumanism attempts to link understandings of human subjects with the non-human, in order to better understand the world. It regards matter as "not a thing, but a doing, a congealing of agency" (Barad, 2007, p. 210). Matter is not separate from meaning making, as both are entangled and "mutually articulated" (Barad, 2007, p. 152). This article draws on posthuman perspectives (Braidotti, 2019, 2012; Barad 2007, 2003) to discuss the ongoing formation of communities, as they bring people together through shared understandings of their human condition. This view regards communities as dynamic, unfinished and in a process of 'becoming'. Posthuman knowledge recognises that the state of becoming is full of potentialities. It also regards human beings as "neither pure cause nor pure effect but part of the world in its open-ended becoming" (Barad, 2007, p. 150). I draw on this perspective to highlight the possibilities of community engagement to act as a force that creates spaces for commonalities to be productive through encounters that encourage the sharing of strengths, fears, vulnerabilities, hopes and aspirations.

From a posthuman perspective the notion of 'becoming' results from relationships between multiple phenomena. Becoming signifies a fusion of matter and discourse and is based on the understanding that interconnections between different entities form the basis of life. This notion regards becoming as emerging out of various possibilities occurring at each moment and as coming into existence through the entanglements of social and material phenomenon, which are not distinct entities (Bar-ad, 2007, 2003). The implications this perspective might have, suggest that community-driven affirmations are not merely the result of haphazard causality and effect. Community engagement forms an integral part of the world in its "open-ended" and "differential" becoming (Barad, 2003, pp. 821-829). Community building within and outside institutions (Cassar & Cremona, 2017) is not separate from global forces and is dependent on human solidarity based on mutual collaborations and sense of belonging that embrace the knowing that communities are capable of evolving through interconnections with human and non-human entities.

Becoming community entails "a stabilizing and destabilizing process" (Barad, 2007, p. 210), that is dynamic and enmeshed with material-discursive practices of transitioning from one state to another (Barad, 2007, p. 142). This ongoing activity does not merely occur in space and time "but happens in the making of spacetime itself (Barad, 2007, p. 140). The process of becoming community develops simultaneously with past, present and future reconfigurations of the world. It happens between the "no longer" and the "not yet" and is fuelled by a force that "traces the possible patterns of be-coming" (Braidotti, 2012, p. 32). The development of community is often embedded in rituals of performativity and reconfigurations of personal and social worlds, enmeshed with each other. A community becomes aware and sensitised; it becomes a vehicle for activism against racialisation, oppression and brutality. New desires, hopes and expectations are generated through becoming community. These require material, social and cultural "apparatuses" (Barad, 2007, pp. 141-146), that also include components that carry an emotional element, such as excitement, pain, disappointment, despair and curiosity, which are vital for motivating communities. Barad explains that the function of apparatuses is inherently part of becoming:

apparatuses are not mere instruments or devices that can be deployed as neutral probes of the natural world, or determining structures of a social nature, but neither are they merely laboratory instruments or social forces that function in a per-formative mode. Apparatuses are not merely about us. And they are not merely assemblages that include nonhumans as well as humans. Rather, apparatuses are specific material reconfiguring's of the world that do not merely emerge in time but iteratively reconfigure space-time-matter as part of the ongoing dynamism of becoming (Barad, 2007, p. 142).

Becoming community also entails embracing contradictions and affirming diversity. Making community does not exclude individualities and subjectivities. In acknowledging the potentialities of the posthuman condition, Braidotti affirms that “We-Are-(All)-In-This-Together-But-We-Are-Not-One-And-The-Same” (2019). Acknowledging difference is central in the formation of community in its “differential becoming” (Barad, 2003, p. 818). Posthuman ontology conceptualises becoming as “occurring upon relational continuums upon which exist human and nonhumans, mutually inclusive yet retaining difference” (Kumm et al., 2019, p. 343). Working with differences in community engagement signifies reconfiguring the taken-for-grantedness of binaries surrounding class, gender, race and ability and mitigating their influential power. ‘Posthumanizing’ (Braidotti, 2019) community also means working with conflict to determine ethical agency that ensures social justice, equity and equality. The relationalities involved in becoming community require ethical responsibility and accountability that present themselves with every possibility (Barad, 2007, p. 393). Ethics signify responsibility not as obligation but as a consequence of relationality (Barad, 2010, p. 265).

Communities embrace uncertainties and imagination and engage with what is outside of them. This implies acknowledging and facing the possible fragmentation and disintegration of communities. Communities embody the intertwining of knowing and not-knowing, especially when confronted with complex issues of social justice:

There are no solutions; there is only the ongoing practice of being open and alive to each meeting, each intra-action, so that we might use our ability to respond, our responsibility, to help awaken, to breathe life into ever new possibilities for living justly. The world and its possibilities for becoming are remade in each meeting. How then shall we understand our role in helping constitute who and what come to matter? How to understand what is entailed in the practice of meeting that might help keep the possibility of justice alive in a world that seems to thrive on death? How to be alive to each being's suffering, including those who have died and those not yet born? How to disrupt patterns of thinking that see the past as finished and the future as not ours or only ours? How to understand the matter of mattering, the nature of matter, space, and time? (Barad, 2007, p. x).

The multiple trajectories leading to becoming or unbecoming community open up encounters between matter and human beings through various reconfigurations of what is yet to happen (Barad, 2007, p. 182). Being attentive and “alive” to the numerous possibilities of becoming is an ethical call in itself (Barad, 2007, p. 396) and implies that being responsive to life in all its forms is imperative for becoming community.

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# THE NEW ERA IN SOCIAL WELFARE REGULATION

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Regulation in its proper form for the purpose of monitoring is a deep-rooted practice. The test of time has resulted in less impact on the functions of regulation than its modes. At present, the concept of regulation encompasses the continuous and engrossed control exercised in a public manner, based on a legislative mandate involving activities that are generally regarded as necessary for society. Majone (1996) highlights that such a legislative mandate implies that regulation is not achieved simply by passing a law but requires comprehensive knowledge and intimate involvement with the regulated activity.

Hence, the role of regulating an activity requires detailed knowledge of its operations, ability to shift requirements as the condition of the activity dictates, the pursuit of energetic measures upon the appearance of an emergency and the power through enforcement to realise conclusions especially relating to policy.

Recent eras have also led to the evolution of the transformation of social welfare provision, with movement towards privatisation, decentralisation and non-governmental organisations' involvement, thus making the role of the state inclining towards an "enabling" one. Hereafter, the regulatory function gains further importance when a direct link with the most vulnerable groups in society is concerned (Benish et al., 2017). In this regard, a gap in scholarly work on the regulation of social welfare services remains, both in literature on social work and welfare and in literature on regulatory governance. Furthermore, existing literature seldom explores the ways that the regulatory function is perceived and practiced at the grassroots, nor does it consider the professional dilemmas involved in regulating social welfare services.

## **PARADIGM SHIFT FROM QUANTITY TO QUALITY**

As the role of "market-type" arrangements in the provision of social welfare services continues to evolve, in particular with key social sectors becoming ever more subjugated by private and non-governmental organisation service providers, regulation aspects dictate vigilant considerations. As rightly identified by Gilbert and Gilbert (1989), the choice of the state is not whether to regulate or otherwise, but merely the form and degree that regulation should take. Whilst in a comprehensive sense, the purpose of regulation is to enforce order, consistency and standards, the common reasoning is also to prevent detrimental practices as well as ensure enhancement of the quality of service provided to service users. Specifically, for social welfare activities, regulation focuses on issues of costs, quality and access whilst safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable persons. Indeed, in Malta the Social Regulatory Standards issued by the Social Care Standards Authority are enacted through a Legal Notice, that bound service providers to offer social welfare services following the principles of service users' rights, protection, safeguarding and service quality management.

Levi-Faur (2011) emphasises that the regulatory process consists of three stages: standard setting, monitoring and enforcement. On a local level, since May 2018, such stages are enforced through the enactment of the Social Care Standards Authority, wherein Social Regulatory Standards for the various sectors working with vulnerable groups are set in place. Such standards are developed following a thorough process of research and consultation and finally consolidated in a legal manner. The aforementioned Authority also endorses

the implementation of monitoring and enforcement aspects in order to ensure compliance with the pertinent standards and regulations. Consequently, such practices lead towards the issuance of recommendations in order to rectify the shortcomings identified.

To this end, regulatory literature identifies a continuum when comparing the attitudes that inspectors may take when conducting their work. At one end, one may utilise the deterrence approach, where the focus point is discipline and strict enforcement through distant and hierarchical relations. At the other end, the consultative approach as utilised by the Social Care Standards Authority concentrates on helping the regulated entity to achieve compliance utilising dialogue and guidance as the main regulatory tools (May & Winter, 2012). In this regard, the success rate of regulation in social welfare on a local level can be attributed to the consistent use of the latter approach in order to ensure collaboration and inspiration of service providers to improve quality whilst retaining the necessary focus on the service users.

In the millennial era, where the role of technology, specifically artificial intelligence, is increasingly dominating every aspect of life, further research into the establishment of links in this area to social welfare is imperative. Predominantly, such technology can lead to further simplification of bureaucratic processes that can facilitate the regulatory process further. For instance, such technology can ease lengthy processes such as those of licensing social welfare providers operating in diverse fields. Alternatively, using mobile apps, regulatory bodies can facilitate the investigation processes on social welfare services as visual or auditory proof can be enabled.

Nevertheless, such technology in the social welfare sector needs to be reinforced with central concepts such as social auditing in order to complement its role. Similar to the aims of a financial audit, wherein verification is conducted on how money is being spent, a social audit analyses programmes and services with the aim to improve as well as ensure more insightful social, environmental and community objectives. Such systematic evaluation is envisioned to support service users comprehend and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses, accomplishments and let-downs of certain social welfare services. Social auditing is also a method utilised to increase community involvement, consolidating links with service providers and promoting transparency, accountability and value for money principles.

## CONCLUSION

“No real social change has ever been brought about without a revolution... which is thought carried into action” Goldman (1910).

The implementation of regulatory principles in the field of social welfare necessitates distinct conceptualisation of its roles and dominant approaches. In return, such methods utilising the necessary technology and evaluation methods can strengthen the regulation of service provision whilst ensuring the best interests of vulnerable persons.

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# COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING!

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In line with Martin Luther King Jr (1957), I believe that “life’s most persistent and urgent question is, ‘What are you doing for others?’” for the ramifications of doing-for-others or helping, in reference to counselling research and practice, far exceed the mere acts of doing and helping and the benefits reaped by those on the receiving end. I am therefore writing this short article to explain how my affinity for helping has shaped both my existence and livelihood so far.

To start on a personal note, my relationship with helping dates back to my childhood. Since I am the youngest of a family that holds dear the core value of social responsibility, I had plenty of role models to learn from while growing up. Yet, because social responsibility in the form of doing-for-others and helping can take many forms, I first had to identify my preference and abilities in relation to doing-for-others and helping before I could make the most out of my need to help. It was then during this experimental phase toward becoming useful to others that I learned about my deep sense of “empathic concern” (Batson et al., 2015, p. 1) for humanity, which moulds my accrescent passion for social justice. Indeed, empathic concern is a sense so palpable and enduring within me that in adulthood, I proceeded to hone it through my academic path within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing; specifically, the Master of Arts in Transcultural Counselling offered by the Department of Counselling.

Thus, in brief, my human attributes coupled with exposure to my family’s core value of social responsibility started me on a search to identify my preferred brand of social responsibility, which in turn led me on an academic path in helping that is still unfolding today. Further, to practice an honourable profession that, besides transforming me into a socially just advocate and change agent, provides me with hope, existential meaning and purpose; channels my feelings of distress into what is known as a helper’s high which in turn improves my mental and physical health; empowers me to reciprocate the help received throughout my lifetime; positions me favourably in other people’s eyes; plus gives me access to financial security and a rewarding career. Indeed, I could write volumes about my personal gains from helping.

It is, then, my heightened awareness around and appreciation of all personal gains and privilege derived from helping that inspired me to title this article as I did as, at face value, doing-for-others and helping are easily misconstrued as “purely altruistic” (Ngozi & Thanh, 2020, p. 215), or even worse, saintly acts. Holding such naive preconceptions about doing-for-others or helping is indeed risky and overshadows the fact that elements of self-interest and self-preservation are always present in everything, we, mere mortals, do (Batson et al., 2015).

Conversely, I equally do not write this piece to depreciate doing-for-others, helping or the helping professions in which the ultimate goal is to increase another’s welfare. Undoubtedly, it is likewise mistaken to devalue doing and helping, or simply chalk them off as “purely-egoistic” (Ngozi & Thanh, 2020, p. 215) or predominantly “selfishly motivated” (p. 216) behaviour just because they happen to reward doers and helpers with inevitable personal gains and privilege. A constellation of gains and privilege, I dare add, that doers and helpers work hard for, as even this reflection about reaping coincidental benefits is an intensive soul-searching exercise

couched in humility, courage and respect for mankind. Not to mention, the academic commitment professional doers and helpers make and see through in order to become warranted in addition to being effective and ethical in their pursuit of benefitting others. Hence, this piece is written in a sincere effort to be candid and clear as well as publicly acknowledge and share the endless blessings a lifetime of helping has brought to my table rather than anything else.

To fast forward and elaborate on my present professional endeavours as a Research Officer within the Faculty of Social Wellbeing, this is where my privilege to impact my community through socially-just, inspired research hailing from my keen sense of empathic concern extends. Specifically, a substantial part of my work, namely within the Department of Counselling and under the direct supervision of the Head of Department, revolves around studying the effectiveness of local school-based counselling in selected and highly transcultural areas, as well as the effects of having limited to no access to school counselling for students with high psycho-socio-emotional and behavioural needs. These are just two counselling research projects inspired by social justice that happen to overlap with my still emerging academic path and strong need to help others, especially clusters of voiceless and overlooked children and their families. Most importantly, the results of these investigations have the potential to impact the provision of school counselling in Malta. However, just as importantly, work on these counselling research projects teams me up with other like-minded and like-hearted researchers-professionals who, through their experienced and ethical approach, inspire and encourage me to do even more and better on a daily basis for the collective good.

Besides a counselling researcher, I am a counsellor by profession and certainly at heart. The ability to practice counselling is what I call the cherry on my professional cake as, besides maturing my empathic concern into ethical helping, it enables me to help clients illuminate liminal spaces in their lives, which is my foremost motivating factor. Indeed, I believe that no one should go through life's obstacles and challenges alone. Also, that a genuine helper's involvement at critical points in a client's life can make all the difference between a client's choice to switch gears and start living a fulfilling life or otherwise. Through the counselling relationship, I am therefore able to help individuals, couples, families and groups empower themselves by identifying goals along with possible solutions to problems and attain optimal mental health and wellness as well as relational and career goals. Moreover, being trusted with people's most intimate and unravelling life narratives is, for me, more than an honour and a privilege, as apart from helping clients, each circular interaction is yet another lesson in life, another opportunity for me to become a better person. Finally, but importantly, counselling practice keeps me close to my community's pulse, which sequentially informs both my counselling research projects and practice. Thus, after taking everything into consideration, community involvement is truly a perpetual blessing in my life; precisely, the gift that keeps on giving!

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# THE ESSENCE OF DIALOGUE

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Paolo Freire argued that the essence of dialogue is comprised of reflection and action. 'Praxis' he argued, is 'reflection upon the world, in order to transform it' (Freire, 2000:51). Such a process, if it is to be authentic, necessarily involves dialogue and reciprocity, a situated relational practice. My encounter with Freire, back when I was an undergrad, certainly steered me in a particular direction. I see little point in learning if it isn't to be shared. I see little point in knowledge if it isn't to be questioned, interrogated and held to account. And I see little point in knowledge if it isn't to be used to challenge injustice or transform lives. Over the years, my ideas have evolved in response to a changing context, with new voices and new perspectives. I remain unapologetically political, in my academic work, in my teaching, in my practice and in the way I embrace, live, understand and experience the world. Challenging as it may be at times, I try to embrace hope as a political act towards understanding, social justice and transformation.

And so, I write this piece from my living room. I'd rather be sat on a beach somewhere, but Covid-19 put me in my place, and here I am, trying to compile a piece on my 'community engagement' and 'the benefits which have resulted from them'... and I'm struggling. There are moments when it is difficult to see any positive outcome. The virus has demonstrated our shared vulnerability, and it has also exposed the structural violence that continues to destroy lives - some more than others. For vulnerability is not shared equally.

For the past 16 years I have been working in the field of asylum and forced migration. I have engaged as a researcher and academic, as an activist, as a youth worker, as a mother, as a returned Maltese migrant – for I am all of these things and much more – engaging with others in an effort to create something better, looking for spaces of convergence and the opportunity to transgress borders, metaphorical and physical, be they gendered, ethnic, national, political, or whatever. These 'others' have included my colleagues at university, refugees and migrants, policy makers and politicians, diplomats, lawyers, youth workers, teachers, social workers, doctors and other professionals, activists, mayors and religious people. The conversations are moulded by our individual and evolving situated experiences, influenced by the broader surrounding contexts and multiple belongings: our families (be they near or far), our classrooms (be they physical or virtual, in a building, or in a field), our place of worship (be it a church, a mosque, or on a rock near the sea), political, economic and social institutions (be they local, national, or beyond), our natural environment and relationships with friends, furry, feathered and otherwise...the conversations, the disagreements, the alliances, the tears, the fears and the beers have been many, across different contexts, in different spaces, at different times.

Locked inside, there is very little that we can do in the physical field right now. But the field migrated to a virtual space, and, as I write, my phone beeps, reminding me of an ongoing conversation on *Whatsapp*. We have a drop-in space for young people who came to Malta as refugees that has now shifted online. The group has continued with its weekly English conversational classes, it is a virtual space where the members discuss the day, share jokes and their favourite music. The group is made up of refugees living in Malta (some of them are quarantined in Hal Far), it includes volunteers living in Malta, and also our volunteers who have had to

return home, as far as the United States, and yet they remain with us still and are very present. Just like the virus that got us here, we too have transgressed borders.

That is where I am at right now, rejecting the dichotomy, for nothing is all good, or all bad.

The present detention policy is illegal, and this is particularly frustrating since it comes on the back of years of advocacy that resulted in the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruling that Malta violated articles of the European Convention on Human Rights ensuring the right to liberty and security (Art 5) and prohibiting inhuman or degrading treatment (Art 3). There are more than a thousand young men held in quarantine as I write, caught in some kind of infectious loop with no exit strategy. The physical structure of the centre itself (despite commendable efforts on the part of the management and staff) places the residents at a much higher risk of exposure and protecting themselves against infection is nigh on impossible. And once again, the Government of the day has used the context of 'exceptional circumstances' to justify some of the gravest violations of human rights. Echoing the deportation of 223 Eritreans in 2002, and the attempted illegal push-back of 2013, we witness human rights violations that can never be justified or excused. The recent push-back of a boat of refugees and migrants who had reached Malta's Search and Rescue area, resulted in unnecessary loss of life. Returning them to Libya, a context acknowledged by the Government and the international community as being at war and responsible for the most grotesque human rights violations, leaves me with a sense of frustration, anger and deep sorrow. In her reflections on the Nazi atrocities that occurred during World War II, Hannah Arendt (1951) concluded that the "world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human" (299). Those who pleaded with us to save their lives were not Maltese. They were beyond the protection of a Nation State, outside a political community. To be human, part of the human community, was not enough to be saved.

My coffee has gone cold. My writing has been interrupted by zoom meetings and texts – from friends and strangers, asking me how they can help. They too are angry, they too are hurt, and they too want to be a part of a solution that embraces justice, compassion and hope. They include refugees who have crossed the Mediterranean Sea in a boat, people who call Malta their home. And I guess this is the other part of our collective story. I hope that this virus may serve as a humbling experience and an opportunity to reflect on where we go from here. We are not in control. We are fragile. We live connected, inter-dependent lives. We are ultimately all faces in a crowd, trying to make sense of it all..

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# THE WAR THAT MADE ‘ME OR NOT’ JUST ANOTHER FACE IN THE CROWD

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An unusual advert published in a local newspaper in the midst of summer 1999 calling for potential volunteers and donations in view of the Kosovo war, landed me in a post-war hotspot. I was not shy to voluntary work since I had been frequently dragged along to various hands-on activities by my parents; both of whom are very active in different social fields mainly related to disability and addictions. After having surpassed the screening process, within a few days from the cease fire I flew in to Tirana, Albania wherein the Maltese Dominican community in Durres helped coordinate the journey to Pristina, capital of Kosovo. Landing in Albania was already an extraordinary experience in itself; for instance, the absence of monitors indicating the location of the conveyor belt to collect luggage. Luggage were just piled up outside the exit of the airport! Once in the city, Durres, no strolls were allowed as I was warned that it is dangerous for a woman to roam about. Also, opening the shutters that heavily covered the bedroom windows was prohibited as this would attract snipers. Just one evening in Albania which definitely served as an appetiser of what was yet to come.

A daring 10-hour trip through the picturesque and winding mountains in a van which just survived as we made it through the Albania-Kosovo border before its steering mechanism decided to call it a day. In the city area, we were stopped at various points by military personnel wherein payments were expected for us to be allowed to proceed. The bridges to get to Kosova, as known by ethnic Albanians, did pose a challenge as some were severely damaged or even totally ruined as a result of NATO bombings. A night spent in a hotel in the capital which felt more akin to a military base rather than the “usual lodging”. However, the buildings in this area were mostly intact. Our mission was to head towards the town of Peja, known as Pec by most of us, one of the badly hit towns located just a 2-hour drive away from Pristina. Being brought up in a country wherein the sound and smell of fireworks is the rule of the day particularly during summer months and gifted by the experience of smelling the traditional “hobza” (loaf) just out of the oven, an overpowering and distinguishing smell struck. The smell of burning buildings and of the stench of decaying bodies accompanied us for weeks until, thankfully, the torrential rain cleared the air. We learnt that entire families were burned alive in their homes after being blocked from fleeing into “safer” places.

Apart from attending meetings held by organisations such as the UNHCR, our work related to running a survey of the households that congregated in the area so as to set the groundwork for other groups of voluntary workers that were expected to come into action after us. The first few weeks were characterised by frequent and at times heavy gunfire especially during the night so we had to maintain lights-out to avoid being targeted and crawl rather than walk around the house. Strolling on solid ground rather than stepping into the attractive fields was standard so as to avoid being blown off by implanted mines and IEDs whilst completing a socio-demographic overview of the territory. One major stumbling block was communicating with locals, where relying on the services of an interpreter was the only available option, hoping that the message conveyed was loyal to what was meant to be. A number of overwhelming experiences couldn't go unnoticed such as the seeds of hatred that were sown for decades culminating into the crisis as we know it. Feelings of hate intertwined with evident fear were observed through narratives shared by locals. Also, hundreds of people walked into our office daily desperately asking for jobs which we could not offer as it was beyond our capacity.

One particular overwhelming encounter relates to when a mother of a new-born desperately begged me to allow for the escape of her son/daughter. Other bewildering experiences include witnessing car accidents where no wardens turn up or no forms are compiled as no insurance policy holds in the circumstances. Yet, in such times of crises, when social cohesion is threatened and/or disrupted, a number of phenomena surface. These include people opting to rent out their houses at relatively hefty sums to organisations and volunteers, thus being constrained to live with extended family members. Others breaking into vacated households, loading appliances and furniture into trucks visible to anyone passing by, which became the new norm. Interestingly, no purchased goods came with a valid 2-year warranty but, for instance, if one were selling a sofa the vendor would just jump into it as proof that it is free from mines. Also, ironically, one could see the setting up of stalls where most goods sold would be the items donated by organisations in response to the crisis such as tarpaulins. Other experiences include listening to stories of professionals, including gynaecologists and economists, painstakingly narrating that they were denied the opportunity to practice because of their ethnic origins whilst highlighting that they were forced to home school their own children as they were marginalised for a decade. In a nutshell, this might seem quite surreal particularly to those whose experience of war boils down to what they have learnt through film watching. A 5-week roller coaster of emotions and experiences which definitely served as an eye-opener and changed me. We flew back through Macedonia and, at the border, we came across the lived experiences of people who struggle to flee to a better place queuing up for hours, days and nights hoping to cross the border.

My plan was to return to Albania the following summers to teach children how to read and write in English however motherhood changed my life considerably so I engaged in endeavours within the Maltese shores. Working in various local schools, I came across a series of hardships young people and their families face; such as not being able to afford buying the school uniform, missing on lunch, as well as health and mental issues. Situations which kept me busy organising activities such as lunch clubs, workshops and various fundraising campaigns aimed at easing people's burden. Despite moving into academia, I'm still very active in the field through policy advising and implementation particularly in areas related to young people hailing from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This is exacerbated through the current pandemic that is being described as a war against an enemy invisible to the naked eye. Despite the fact that a number of services are in place, as in any war and post-war era, a significant number of people suffer whilst sitting in silence. A number of unknowns do prevail but undoubtedly more research and hands-on field-work is needed post Covid so as to address the potential harm done to the social fabric.

# COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND ORGANISATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY: FRIENDS IN NEED

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The working life of an academic has been conceived as an interplay of equally important roles, namely teacher, researcher and public intellectual. Strong academia is thought to be one where there is meaningful engagement of all three purposes and domains (Star, 2004). Being an organisational psychologist by profession and a resident academic within the Department of Psychology I get personally interested in how different organisations function in order to reach their aims and objectives. Furthermore, it is also very positively intriguing for me to see people succeed in their work-life endeavours and in their career progression. Moreover, I feel enriched and better able to offer a good service to my students when the knowledge I impart is filled with the experiences which I bring back from what I learn within my community practice. Such are the reasons for my heavy involvement in performing outreach because I believe that my knowledge as an academic and scholar within our University is undoubtedly enriched and better passed on to students.

As Director of the University of Malta Cottonera Resource Centre, my main role is to meet stakeholders in this region of our Islands. The remit of the Centre is that of providing courses and services to people in the area bringing them closer to education and to better life opportunities. The Centre offers courses in 3D printing and robotics as well as Ordinary Level MATSEC revision courses in various subjects. Also, very popular is the Xjenza Manija Summer School for children aged 8 to 12. Furthermore, we offer counselling and legal advisory services through students under supervision in collaboration with the Department of Counselling and the Faculty of Laws at the University of Malta. The centre is also working on opening a regional library which will be an annex of the University of Malta Main library and will eventually also offer Career Advisory Services in collaboration with the Centre for Labour Studies also within the University of Malta. We are also embarking on new projects in order to involve youth and make them comfortable with our learning environment. At the moment, we are working on a project which will combine Artificial Intelligence with Emotional Intelligence where a series of 10 lectures will be held for youth wishing to explore this area. Financial Literacy is also an area of exploration at the Centre where we have carried out workshops with young children and published research on our findings in this area.

In 2018, a new Authority regulating the quality of Social Care Standards was launched by the present government. My role as chair of the board of this Authority is to provide direction and to oversee the operations which are mainly addressed at the continuous improvement of care services for our elderly citizens, persons with a disability and children who make use of residential homes. The greatest challenge faced by the Authority still yet in its infancy is the Covid-19 situation and the quick restrictions put in place in order to safeguard all clients making use of residential homes. Within this authority, I am also involved in the Research Advisory Group where the Authority has commissioned the Faculty for Social Wellbeing at the University of Malta to carry out research on Local Adoption Barriers.

Another contribution I give is that of technical member of the Senior Appointments Advisory Committee within the Office of the Prime Minister. This Committee is responsible for recruiting all individuals interested in government top level positions. My role here is that of an Organisational Psychologist where I administer and

interpret a set psychometric test. I have also been involved in adjustments to the psychometric test which is administered so that it is better suited to the remit of the committee.

The final contribution that I currently give and which I will mention for the purposes of this article is linked to my most recent appointment which is that of Chair of the Malta Psychology Profession Board. The board is constituted by Chapter 471 of the Laws of Malta namely the Psychology Profession Act. Mainly, the Malta Psychology Profession Board is responsible for vetting applications by those individuals who want to work as psychologists in Malta. Other functions that we perform are those of monitoring the Continuous Professional Development of psychologists, giving guidance on professional development at all levels within the field and collaboration with stakeholders on various matters including employment roles of psychology graduates, psychology practitioners and psychologists operating within the public service.

Community engagement should be at the heart and soul of what academics do in their daily lives. Research should inform practice and our practice in the community should lead us to ask questions answerable by research studies. As academics it is also our role to think about the best possible research designs which will be addressed towards giving us the best answers to our queries on best practice in community engagement. Furthermore, it is our duty to enable our students to think critically and to prepare them for the real world of work most particularly in course programmes where the possibility for work-based learning is limited. In framing the intended skills and attributes of graduates, universities need to be engaged in a process that requires an understanding of the future workplace into which graduates will emerge and the skills that employment in that workplace will require (Langworthy & Turner, 2003). This can only be achieved by our continuous involvement as academics in the community enabling us to present multiple, real-life scenarios in our classes for our students to reflect upon. This involvement in community engagement is also intended to pave the way for future psychologists to be employed within both private and public sectors with solid knowledge about evidence-based practice.

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# VOLUNTARY WORK, MY IDENTITY AND THE COVID-19 EXPERIENCE

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I have always been surrounded by experiences of volunteering. My family, grandfather, aunts, uncles, cousins and their circles of friends were always involved in parish work and in the local band club. As one of the younger cousins, I was always taken to activities. I have a very fond memory of selling raffle tickets during fundraising events for the Ħaż-Żabbar and Baħrija parishes, going to homes singing Christmas Carols, and helping out during fundraising events.

I joined my parish's youth club, became the leader of its folk group and then a member of the local Third World Group, where I also met my husband. We married and migrated to U.S.A. and immediately became involved in parish work. After two years, we returned to Malta and Professor Peter Serracino Inglott approached me to help a group of parents address an educational dilemma Malta had. This led to the Parents' Foundation for Education where I was elected on its first Board. Memories of me, as a young mother, driving home at 02:00 after board meetings are still with me, including some adventurous drives in mists, storms and fogs (pre-mobile time). This also gave me an opportunity to be part of a board responsible for creating a school from which my own children benefitted. Talk about serendipity!

Since then, I have used my professional skills and expertise to help different associations. I cannot remember a time when I was not involved in volunteering, be it within an organisation or on an individual basis. I cannot imagine myself not involved in Civic Society and in voluntary work, it is part of my identity.

My present voluntary work is directly linked to my career. I am involved in various local and international organisations in the areas of dyslexia and counselling as an executive council member, an official, or a member. I have sought funds for activities and events for such associations and their members. Each successful activity brings great satisfaction as I see its benefits to individuals and communities. Whenever I can, I try to organise such activities in collaboration with my place or work, namely the University of Malta. These experiences have allowed me to grow academically, professionally and personally. My academic and professional work would not be so enriching without my voluntary contribution to these associations. Indeed, I think that this culture has been ingrained in me, and allowed me to be more deeply involved in my career and to look at the monetary payment received for my work as separate from my profession; which I also regard as a vocation. I suppose this is also influenced by being brought up as the daughter of a village doctor and a mother who was extremely kind and gentle with my father's patients, where a number of them would give my father gifts from their produce, such as rabbits or chickens as appreciation as they could not pay the doctor's fee. No one was ever turned away from his clinic.

I feel very fortunate that my university, employer and Dean encourage community engagement and volunteering, indeed see it as a duty of being an academic. My faculty puts this at the heart of its identity, so much so that the Faculty of Social Wellbeing actually has a committee which addresses this issue and continuously organises events to promote this. In its description, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing (2020) notes that "many of the members of staff engage with the community through their contribution to government boards and committees, to non-governmental organisations and professional associations" (para. 5).

## WELLBEING

I have never carried out any academic research on voluntary work. I have just lived it from the day I was born. It was therefore interesting to see my life experiences conceptualised through the literature, mostly from the psychological and sociological disciplines.

Voluntary work is an important aspect of personal and communities' wellbeing as well as an important economic contribution to society. According to the International Labour Organisation (Medina, 2011): Volunteers constitute a far more significant share of the workforce of nations than is commonly recognized. Data generated by the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project in 37 countries (Salamon et al., 2004) revealed... Approximately 140 million people in these countries engage in some volunteer activity in a typical year...the equivalent of 20.8 million full-time equivalent paid workers...these volunteers make a \$400 billion contribution to the global economy. (p.3)

The literature reports that volunteering attributes to our wellbeing (e.g. Farrell & Bryant 2009; Tanskanen & Danielsbacka, 2016; Thoits & Hewitt, 2001). Van Campen et al. (2013) reported that "from a subjective well-being point of view, helping other people through care giving and voluntary work increases the subjective well-being of those providing the help" (p. 45).

Pinquart and Sørensen's (2003) meta-analysis on wellbeing of informal caregivers presented positive effect, life satisfaction, perceived better quality of life and lower depression levels. They referred to meaningfulness, rewarding of behaviour, love and affection. Lyubomirsky et al. (2005) and Roberto and Jarrot (2008) concluded that helping others enhances feelings of confidence in one's competences, experiences of satisfaction, the creation and strengthening of relationships and social connections.

## THE COVID-19: A FINAL REFLECTION

Marmot and Wilkinson (2001) argued that voluntary work positively affects one's health, health behaviour, self-care, and wellbeing, even in times of unemployment. They explained that deprived underlying functions of unemployment, such as time structure, organised activity, collective purpose, purpose to get out of bed, social contacts, and status elicited from being employed are addressed through voluntary work when unemployed. Malta seems to have risen to this occasion and the media is full of quiet heroism and commitment. Indeed, my own son-in-law decided to leave home to manage a local hospital. This has affected his studies and his personal life. He is very aware of his decision and has no regrets. Indeed, this has given him meaning in the present local and global situation.

I am presently living this reality differently, unfortunately more as a spectator than an actual volunteer. Due my family situation and (I have to extremely reluctantly admit) my age, I have to stay inside to abide by recommended social distancing directives issued by local authorities. This is my responsible contribution to the present situation. I try to do as much volunteering as I can virtually. I feel frustrated that I cannot help more. When this feeling overwhelms me, I read Milton's Sonnet 19 on how he coped with his blindness, particularly the last verse: They also serve who only stand and wait.

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# WORKING WITH PERSONS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY THROUGH SELF-ADVOCACY

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In a crowd, in a street and in most community settings, persons with intellectual disability are conspicuous and absent at the same time. They are conspicuous because having a cognitive impairment is often (though not always) accompanied by particular physical features that mark a person as someone with an intellectual disability and because, in turn, the label 'intellectual disability' unfortunately still evokes very negative connotations. They are absent because persons with intellectual disability still encounter significant hurdles in their bid to be active participants in their community 'on an equal basis with others' as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations 2006) requires. Working with persons with intellectual disability therefore entails striving towards the removal of disabling barriers and towards enabling them to be accepted for who they are.

It is very important to point out that this work is done with persons with intellectual disability and not simply for them. This approach is in line with the slogan of the disabled persons' movement 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton 1998), a slogan which speaks to the need for persons with disability to be the ones in control of their own lives and to be actively involved in decisions concerning them. For persons with intellectual disability, the principle underlying this slogan is best realised through self-advocacy, and it is in this area that I have carried out a lot of work over the past fifteen years.

Broadly speaking, self-advocacy means speaking for oneself and being directly involved in decision-making processes that affect one's life, whether directly or indirectly. For persons with intellectual disability, it means being provided with support to be a self-advocate. Such persons often need support to be able to understand information that may be too abstract or complex for them to process unaided. They may also need support in understanding the pros and cons of different choices, in appreciating the practicability of implementing some decisions, in weighing the consequences of different choices, and in discerning what is the best choice for them in any given situation. They may even need support in reflecting about their will and preferences and in articulating these in a clear and assertive manner. Finally, they may also need support in implementing a decision, which may range from something practical – like being given a lift to and from home – to more complex courses of action – such as dealing with the negative outcomes of a decision that the person had taken. Consequently, for persons with intellectual disability self-advocacy very often entails being provided with support by someone who can guide them through these different processes without ending up taking decisions in their stead.

The most significant community-based work that I carry out in this area is that of being a support member of a self-advocacy group. In this type of group, the committee members are persons with intellectual disability, who are provided with support to conduct meetings, to take decisions and to act on them. I do this work through Grupp Flimkien Naslu, a group that I had helped set up in 2004 and which I still support. Over the past sixteen years, the group has offered opportunities to make friends and to socialise, for members who have an intellectual disability as well as for support members. These relationships continue to grow outside the group as well and the group members often seek out support members when they need help in their everyday lives. Support members are uniquely placed to act as mentors, advisors, or simply as friends because they are not related to the person with intellectual disability and do not work with them in a professional capacity.

Community engagement is not only about academics lending their expertise in areas of community development that are relevant to their work, but also about ensuring that the voice of those living particular realities in their respective communities is also heard at the university. Persons with intellectual disability are experts by experience (Care Quality Commission, 2020) and it is important that they are supported to make their voice heard in different fora. My work entails co-lecturing with speakers with intellectual disability on self-advocacy and conducting inclusive research. The latter involves doing research with persons with intellectual disability as co-researchers, thus supporting them to actively participate in the whole research process from choosing the research topic through to conducting the research and disseminating findings.

As a supporter of self-advocacy work, I am aware of potential pitfalls. I have sometimes erred too much on the side of caution by assuming that a person with intellectual disability needs support in something that they can do on their own. And I have sometimes erred on the other side – assuming a person can understand something when in fact they need support. Self-reflexivity is therefore very important and an essential part of the process of reflection on one's own role as a self-advocacy supporter is listening to the person.

I find my involvement in self-advocacy work very fulfilling. It enables me to put to good use all that I have learnt and taught along the years about the best ways of removing disabling barriers for people with intellectual disability and about promoting their empowerment. It also enables me to witness just how much a person can flourish when they are given support. And it has enabled me to learn much about life from the perspectives of persons who have different life experiences. My dream is that we create a world where the absence of people with intellectual disability in the mainstream of society becomes conspicuous, and the conspicuousness of the negative connotations attached to label 'intellectual disability' are absent.

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# AGAINST THE ODDS

*Maris Catania*

*Doctoral Candidate*

Gambling has been around for centuries and will always be part of our culture. The internet has taken over so many of the things we do. We cannot function without the internet; it has not only enhanced and given new possibilities for work, but new methods for communicating. Nonetheless, the internet has also given an opportunity for new social issues, one of them being online gambling. Malta has been making profits from this industry for quite some years. This did create some negative media about the island and perception of Malta as a tax haven for these high profit organisations has been augmented, but it has also given a rise of opportunities to our island and its residents.

When I graduated from the university of Malta with a psychology degree, I was doing different jobs to finance my MSc degree. I happened to stumble across a job at Unibet (now known as Kindred Group), which was one of the first online gambling operators to get its licence in Malta. What started as a temporary job ended up as my career for the last eleven years. As I started working in this industry, I raised questions around its ethical practices. I was very sceptical about this industry, about why people would place money online to place bets, to play endless games and to use their time in this manner. Nonetheless, I could see the ultimately unique innovation that the industry can contribute to consumer protection. All of the customers' activity is stored and the data can be retrieved at a later stage. By building a bridge between the research from the psychology field and the possibilities from the data of the online gambling operator, I started looking at different empirical papers and how this written knowledge can be applied to the practical work. In 2012, the first pilot project started with Unibet. The project consisted of looking into the communication of each individual and if this frequency of communication was either increasing, becoming impatient or abusive, this would be escalated to the responsible gambling department, which consisted of myself at the time. I started looking into ways of detecting at risk gambling at an even earlier stage and looked into an algorithm to determine whether a customer was showing chasing losses behaviour. The data was there, available at the click of a mouse, and I could see at what time the customer made a deposit, withdrew and even if a deposit did not get through. What followed was something that the industry never expected. Instead of contacting the customers to play more, we started contacting the customers asking them if they are fine with playing on this level and whether or not they should play less or take a break.

A few raised eyebrows, but the organisation wanted to do the right thing, and we continued with this approach. Whereas the common misconception is that the online gambling industry wants to get money from problem gamblers, it was evident that the problem gamblers were the major drain on the company. Primarily, they complain, threaten and harass customer service employees. These same gamblers will try anything to get their money back, even getting lawyers involved and regulators in some instances. What is even more difficult to control, is when these gamblers go on social media and place so much negativity on the brand; it takes years to build a brand, but only a few minutes to destroy it. By contacting these gamblers, financial harm for these individuals was diminishing. There was another major revelation that we noticed. Due to the fact that customers who were on the verge of losing control and chasing their losses were being contacted to control their gambling, there was a higher uptake of deposit limits. More customers were using limits and less customers were using self-exclusion, thus the number of customers taking long breaks, with a high probability of not coming back was decreasing. The fact that a proactive consumer protection measure was being employed actually helped

the business shift from a quick financial win to a more sustainable financial gain. This change in perception helped the industry identify the importance of helping consumers rather than squeezing out most of the money. Due to this proactivity, customers were also not reaching the psychological strain that we had seen before, and therefore there was a decrease in abusive communication. This also prevented employees from getting burnt out and therefore drove less leavers for these issues, and greater employee motivation seeing that the company actually cared about their customers.

This paved the way in my career to where now, 8 years after the detection system was rolled out, I still have the possibility of furthering the work in consumer protection by using real behaviour data. I have the trust of a major organisation where I can research and innovate in the field of responsible gambling without any questions asked. I am encouraged to push boundaries and implement initiatives that are not possible otherwise. I have met inspirational people. I have worked with treatment centres and discussed how we can minimise harm together. I have listened to several life stories of reformed problem gamblers with awe and amazement. I have spoken in endless conferences across Europe, including the European Parliament, about the role online gambling companies should take. I helped in organising the first responsible gambling conference in Malta. I have worked with the most renowned researchers including Professor Mark Griffiths and Dr Jonathan Parke, amongst many others. Above all, I have taken phone calls on Sunday mornings to help a customer get his life back on track. I have taken phone calls with someone my own age who lost so much gambling after he lost his mother and motivated him to seek help.

I will continue working on minimising harm. I will keep on being more and more curious. Gambling has been around for centuries and will always be part of our culture. We just need to make it safer, every day, a little bit more.

# THE BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

*Jamie Bonnici*

*Research Support Officer*

In 2019, the Faculty for Social Wellbeing collaborated with the Local Council of Msida to engage in a community-based research project. This project, titled 'Empowering Communities through Networking: A Participatory Action Research Approach', aimed to identify the strengths and weaknesses that exist within the community, in order to recommend redirection of existing resources that may fill any gaps present. The experience of being a part of this project highlighted the importance of involving research participants as co-researchers in the process of generating knowledge about a particular community.

## **WHAT DO WE MEAN BY 'COMMUNITY'?**

Prior to discussing community development, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term 'community'. There has been a significant amount of debate regarding the definition of community by scholars involved in this area. In a theoretical paper on the topic of community development, Bhattacharyya (2004) draws upon Durkheim's idea of solidarity as "a shared identity (derived from place, ideology, or interest) and a code for conduct or norms" as well as the notion of social capital, which encapsulates the "networks, trust, and mutual obligations enabling people to take collective measures to address shared problems" (Putnam, 1995). Viewing community from this lens leads to a definition in which:

Understanding community as solidarity (shared identity and norms) serves to define the concept in a distinctive and intrinsic manner, making it possible to distinguish a community from all other types of social relations. We can say that any social configuration that possesses shared identity and norms is a community. The term is thus freed of the incidental baggage of territoriality, ethnicity or level of industrialization of the economy. (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 12)

## **WHY DO WE NEED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT?**

Community development has been defined as an endeavour which has the aim of building agency and solidarity amongst members of a particular community, whilst being guided by principles of the needs felt by such members, the notion of self-help, and participation. Community development can encompass any activity - whether this refers to economic development, safeguarding minority rights, or caring for the environment, culture, or elderly population - which seeks to promote "the fostering of social relations that are increasingly characterized by solidarity and agency" (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 14). Hence, adopting a participatory action research approach to community development is a fitting methodological decision since, according to Baum et al. (2006) this approach prioritises the active involvement of people forming part of the community in the research process.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that the economic growth of a society has become less relevant when it comes to improving quality of life, whilst it is increasingly important to look into how the members of a community relate to one another. This assertion becomes particularly pertinent when one considers the evidence about the detrimental effects on quality of life which accompany deficits in social relations. Indeed, recent findings from the national study into the prevalence of loneliness in the Maltese population have shown that more than a third of Maltese people experience at least a moderate degree of loneliness (Clark et al., 2019).

The value of community development has become increasingly important given the social changes brought about by modernisation. Although modern advancements of industrialisation in society have ushered in numerous benefits, such as improvements in literacy, longer life expectancies, and greater job opportunities, they have also been accompanied by a destruction of the solidarity that exists in communities. This erosion of solidarity has been attributed to the “commodification of life” which is an inherent aspect of industrial capitalism (Bhattacharyya, 2004, p. 16).

### **THE MSIDA COMMUNITY: A PILOT PROJECT**

For the purposes of our research project, the central town of Msida in Malta was chosen as a community whose members could collaborate on a pilot project for potential adoption by other communities or towns across the Maltese Islands, whilst bearing in mind that different communities may experience variations from one town or area to another. This town was selected for two primary reasons. Firstly, Msida is a geographical hub due to its central location, which means that the community has experienced significant sociodemographic changes in recent years, as have the individuals who reside in it. Such changes were believed to have resulted in the need for community development which could enhance the understanding of the present needs which exist in the community. Secondly, Msida was selected due to the fact that it is the location which the University forms a part of, and therefore engaging in collaborative research would be more manageable from a practical standpoint.

### **THE RESEARCH PROCESS AS A DESTINATION**

Similar to the common saying that “happiness is about the journey, not the destination”, it became apparent throughout the data collection process that the very act of engaging in discussion with community members and community leaders was, in and of itself, conducive to a positive form of development within the community. Through setting up interviews and focus groups, as researchers we were able to facilitate the sharing of ideas and fostering connections amongst individuals who reside and work in Msida.

The key findings which emerged from our study included the identification of several strengths that were present in the community, as well as potential issues in need of being addressed. For example, the local council’s initiatives were identified as a strength, however these were particularly successful when they focused on events that were tailored to meet the particular needs of certain groups within the community, such as providing assistance to vulnerable youths or families. On the other hand, issues of accessibility and the impact of the physical environment on individuals were raised as potential barriers to civic participation.

Ultimately, this project enabled members of a particular community to engage with one another and take time to collectively reflect upon how their community could improve. Whilst a number of practical recommendations were put forth by the research team regarding possible strategies to overcome any issues identified, the process of engaging in an open discussion may very well have had equally beneficial effects on promoting community development, at par with the researchers’ recommendations.

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# ECONOMICS, END-GAMES & ENGAGEMENT

*Dr Marie Briguglio*

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I grew up surrounded by activists: in the seventies, my mother hosted conversations with other feminists and artists and my father would take me to lengthy meetings where bearded men in bell-bottoms talked about the economy, socialism and democracy. At University, I became deeply involved in student politics myself, as a founder member of the Association of Students of Commercial Studies, and as part of the student council (KSU). I had also embarked on writing satirical scripts for theatre and television, focusing on themes of social justice and the environment. Concurrently, I completed an Economics degree with first class honours - but could not shake off a terrible feeling that maximizing GDP and minimizing inflation rates were not the end-game I wanted to pursue in my career.

In an attempt to reconcile my worlds, I pursued a MSc in Environmental Economics in London under the tutelage of Professor David Pearce and supported by a Chevening scholarship. I realized that I had found a discipline that would help structure much of my thinking going forward: the end-game for economies was not GDP after all, but a kind of development that endures, that brings the greatest possible wellbeing beyond material wealth.

Motivated by the possibility of a better balance between free market economic outcomes and social and environmental considerations, I joined what was then a new organization - the Planning Authority. At the time, it constituted a strong pro-environmental body within the public sector. I also worked on joint projects with the Commonwealth Secretariat, the EU commission, UNEP, Friends on the Earth, various Unions and represented Malta at EU and UNFCCC levels. I started to write occasional research papers (Briguglio, 1999a, 1996b; Briguglio & Briguglio, 1997, 2002; Briguglio & Mercieca, 1998). The rest of my time was dedicated to producing, writing and presenting television series (e.g. Bir-Rispett Kollu/With all due respect, Viva Malta, Tikka/Dotting the Is) spanning social, economic, environmental and political topics.

Several papers, reports and television hours later, I found myself asking: Is any of this making a difference? I was not sure. Reports seemed to remain unread and policy proposals unimplemented. Political whims seemed to matter more than evidence-based policy. Television had a wide reach, yet it too was ephemeral. For fifteen years, I had split my time between policy, broadcasting and academia, straddling the disciplines of economics, environmental science and communication. I wondered whether there was a way to bring these worlds together more effectively.

By this time, Behavioural Science had emerged as a strong force in shaping Economics and, in 2010, I started a Phd in Economics at Stirling University. I wanted to understand: How can the promise of evidence-based policy be reconciled with poor political will? How can behaviour be stimulated to reach environmental goals? How can economic tools be powered by communication? Meanwhile, at the University of Malta, I found support in setting up new units covering topics like Applied Economics Research, Economics of Environmental Policy and Behavioural Economics. These applications were appetizing to several inter-disciplinary institutes and to faculties like the Faculty of laws and the Faculty of Social Wellbeing.

Proposals for research on the interface of economics, the environment and politics were also well met by various research funding bodies, including the EU's Horizon 2020 programme and the University of Malta

Research Excellence Grant. With the help of the Project Support Office at the University of Malta, I seeded collaboration agreements with various public sector organisations aimed at linking research to policy.

Academia demands publications and I became increasingly keen to write papers that took elegant textbook economic theory to the rugged zone of interdisciplinary empirical application. From the economics of Malta's environmental challenges generally (Briguglio & Moncada, 2015), I turned my research focus to waste management (Briguglio 2016; Briguglio et al., 2016), renewable energy (Briguglio & Formosa, 2017) and climatic emissions (Camilleri et al., 2020).

Together with other authors, I extended the scope of my research to the environmental economics in small states (Moncada et al., 2018), developing countries (Bambrick et al., 2015; Moncada et al., 2019), and across the European Union (Briguglio et al. 2018). Insights from behavioural economics also stimulated me to examine links between environmental behaviour and partisanship (Briguglio, Delaney & Wood, 2018) as well as those between environmental behaviour and religion (Briguglio, Garcia Munoz, & Neuman, 2020).

My fascination with the economics of non-market activity gradually broadened beyond environmental protection to other domains, including the economics of art and culture (Briguglio & Debattista, 2017; Briguglio, 2017a, 2019a; Briguglio, Camilleri & Vella, 2020), social preferences (Briguglio & Spiteri, 2018), media (Briguglio & Spiteri, 2019) and trust in government (Spiteri & Briguglio, 2018; Batrancea et al. 2019).

It started to become increasingly clear to me that both market and non-market activities were essential to the achievement of an over-arching social goal - that of wellbeing. The literature on the economics of happiness was fascinating and I embarked on research the determinants of wellbeing itself (Briguglio, 2015, 2019b), conducting several empirical studies on life satisfaction in Malta (Briguglio & Sultana, 2015, 2018; Briguglio, Camilleri & Vella, 2020). This academic research underpinned much of my work as the Chairperson of the Forum for Community Engagement at the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society much as the environmental research nourished collaborations with the Environmental and Resources Authority and the Committee for Sustainability at the University of Malta.

As an academic keen on community engagement, I have found myself in conversation with diverse stakeholders: CEOs in executive lounges, elderly people in day-care centres, room-full of children, bishops at the Vatican, curators in Iceland, scouts, young couples, activists, parish priests, gamers, civil servants, diplomats, volunteers and artists. I may well have been invited to give the talks, but the transfer of knowledge often happens in reverse. In some instances, outreach initiatives themselves seeded academic publications (e.g. Briguglio et al., 2020; Briguglio & Brown, 2020).

I have also found media houses, print, tv, radio, as well as social media platforms, to be keen to share the results of research, if this is communicated accessibly. In a recent experiment I collaborated with artist Steve Bonello to do that in a non-fiction publication which combined environmental economics with cartoons (Briguglio & Bonello, 2018). The Open Access Repository at the University of Malta also has a lot of promise in this regard.

I continue to be driven by that fundamental notion in economics that we should use the resources we have been endowed with - our limited land, our water, our sea, our heritage, our culture - as best we can. The end-game is an economy that is greener, more circular, more human, one that goes beyond short-term material gain to generate wellbeing for all (Briguglio, 2020; Briguglio 2017b). Some consider it immature to still be chasing this ideal. Some interpret outreach as attention seeking. Some positions, requiring the arduous job of silent nodding, are unlikely to ever be on the table. None of this matters as much as the prospect of having failed to engage in the quest of making the world a better place.

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# MY EXPERIENCE OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

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When I was asked to write about my experience of community engagement, I experienced mixed emotions. I was happy to be asked while also humbled. I see community engagement as an intrinsic aspect of my life. The reason is that I believe that I have always been ‘engaged’ in the ‘community’, which for me is an inevitable part of being fully human and an active citizen. To me, engaging with people around us in a way that is influential, impactful and being of service reflects the reality that as human beings, we are all interdependent.

My first forays into community engagement began in my adolescent years with my involvement in my parish and various experiences of voluntary work. During my student and early adult years, this engagement was complemented by my involvement in different committees and leadership roles. These experiences were an essential element of my journey of ‘becoming’ that led me to my chosen career paths: social work and psychology. I am both a warranted social worker and counselling psychologist. I am a full-time academic with the Department of Social Policy and Social Work, and also work with the Departments of Counselling and Psychology. Being both a psychologist and social worker, I find myself in a unique position with regards to being an academic and to my experience of community engagement.

I understand ‘community engagement’ to be an intrinsic, multi-faceted dimension of what it means to be an academic within the Faculty for Social Wellbeing. Broadly speaking, my community engagement activities may be grouped into:

1. My role on Boards and Committees
2. Training workshops/seminars and conferences
3. Practicing as a counseling psychologist and providing supervision
4. Presence in the media

## **BOARDS AND COMMITTEES**

Over the years, I have been a board member on various committees including interviewing boards. I have also been an evaluator of different courses for the National Commission for Further and Higher Education. Furthermore, in the early stages of my career, I was the Executive Secretary of the previous Malta Association of Psychologists for approximately seven years. In the past two years, I have returned to this role in the more recently formed Malta Chamber of Psychologists. I view this role as important in that the purposes of the MCP are to promote the discipline of psychology; to represent psychologists practicing in Malta; and to foster good relations among psychologists, between psychologists and other professionals as well as between psychologists and clients. Apart from being a union that represents psychologists, the MCP also focuses on ensuring ethical standards and practices of psychology in Malta. Another important role of the MCP is that of establishing links with similar unions, societies, associations and federations on the local and international scene.

As Council member, I form part of a team that ensures that the MCP reaches these objectives. I experience this as a great responsibility but also an exciting one. Two most recent examples of our work relate to helping our members adapt to the recent COVID-19 situation, which is challenging for all. We did this by offering

guidelines and training in the provision of online therapeutic sessions. We also organized a webinar on 'The Resilient Practitioner'. These are examples of the MCP reading the signs of the times and meeting the needs of psychology practitioners. We also issue regular press statements on a number of issues such as homosexuality and migration. In an effort to strengthen relations with other professions, we recently held or planned meetings between the MCP and the MACP (Malta Association for the Counselling Profession) and the MASW (Malta Association of Social Workers). In my role as Council member, I also represent the MCP on the Malta Psychology Profession Board. One of the main functions of the Board is the vetting of applications for a psychologist warrant according to the Malta Psychology Act (Cap. 471).

#### **TRAINING WORKSHOPS, SEMINARS AND CONFERENCES**

I have presented papers at conferences and have given workshops or seminars in different fora both locally and abroad. Topics include 'Resilience and self-care for social work practice educators', 'Leading from within: Aligning yourself for full potential', 'Life review and change processes', 'Mindfulness and self-care for social workers' and facilitated a Drachma seminar entitled, 'Rainbow Ways: Stories of gay persons and relationships'. Other training seminars resulted from my PhD research topic: the spiritual dimension of psychotherapy. Some of the training seminars that I delivered include 'Spirituality & Wellbeing' that I gave to educators, 'Spirituality & Health: Help or Hindrance?' to the Association of Private Family Doctors (Malta), 'Spirituality and Practice in Mental Health' that I delivered to a mental health service organization and seminars on the spiritual dimension of counseling and psychotherapy that I delivered to members of the Maltese Psychological Association and the Malta Association for the Counselling Profession.

#### **PRACTICING AS A COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGIST AND PROVIDING SUPERVISION**

As a counselling psychologist, I provide counselling and psychotherapy to adults on a number of issues including: identity, relationships, work challenges, anxiety, depression, grief and loss. I find this work to be both challenging and very satisfying. It is a privilege to accompany a person in what is often a difficult period in their lives, and thereby to share their journey.

I also provide individual supervision to social workers and psychologists. For a number of years, I provided group supervision to the Malta Hospice Home Care Team. My understanding of supervision is that it is a mindful process of reflection and learning in relationship that creates transformation in action and in the person of the supervisee. I believe that the three goals of supervision are: client care, professional standards and professional development. I perceive the supervisor and supervisee to be on a journey together with my roles including facilitation, guidance, empowerment and education.

#### **PRESENCE IN THE MEDIA**

Another way in which I engage with the community is through my presence in the media, whether that is writing a blog, or article, sharing articles on social platforms or participating on the radio or TV.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Over the years, the way that I have chosen to engage with the community has been the result of values that I cherish, such as being of service, solidarity, compassion and attempting to create a drop of change in any way that I can. It is a part of my personal journey of life and expression of two professions that I hold dear: social work and psychology. As is often the case, in giving I have received more than I imagined.

# THE EMBALMED 10,000

*Prof. Andrew Azzopardi*

*Dean*

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Situation 1:

Imagine for a moment... the simple liberties of clipping a pod in the Nescafé Dolce Gusto Oblo Coffee Machine turns into a trolley visit (with the typical whiny twisted wheels) and in the background a care worker shouting at the top of her voice as she walks down the hallway peeping unperturbed into one room after another; 'trid te sabiħa?' (Do you want tea sweety?)

.....

Situation 2:

A typical institutionalised conversation in an old people's home:

Care worker 1: Postok fuq dak is-siġġu sabiħ (You are expected to sit on that chair sweet)

[With a pleading tone in his voice...]

Wenzu: Imma hawn irrid noqoġhod ta u ma rridx niekol fil-ħamsa. Anzi irrid grokk Brandy u sigarru bħalissa. (No but I don't want to sit here and eat at 5pm. What I really want at the moment is some Cognac and a cigar).

[...in the most patronizing of tones...]

Care worker 1: Le ħanini t-tabib ma takx permess u jekk ma tobdinix nugżak lin-nurse! Ejja kul, għandna l-minestra lllum. (Oh dear the doctor did not give you permission and if you do not obey me I will tell the nurse. Come on, eat, we have soup today).

.....

Situation 3:

A young disabled man and his girlfriend who live in a residential home and want to have sex but cannot because they are being relentlessly shrivelled by the care workers.

Care worker 1: Jaħasra xi ħlew iħobbha ta. (Look how sweet he loves her)

Care worker 2: Isa ħi oqoġhod pingi magħha. (Come on and stay drawing with her)

[...a few moments later...]

Care worker 1 [...in the typical demeaning of manners]: Time-up ħi, issa għidilha ċaw l-għarusa. (It's time up, say bye to your girlfriend).

Stuart: Imma jien irrid inbusha. (But I want to kiss her)

Josianne: ...u norqod ħdejh. (...and sleep next to him)

[...both Care workers laugh as Stuart and Josianne are dragged away from each other...]

.....

10,000 persons in Malta and Gozo, 'as we speak', are living in residential homes, away from their community, their family and friends, the people they have been brought up with, the grocery shop, the butcher, the streets, the neighbours, the sounds and the smells that they are used to and have been brought up with. Just like the Harry Potter Invisibility Cloak, institutionalisation makes you conveniently invisible.

Let us not be tricked, these people struggle big time to make the 'institution', the 'residence', whatever political correct way we choose to call it, their 'home'; whether it is inmates in a prison cell, patients at MCH, children in homes, old people in residences, disabled persons and people with mental health challenges in units, migrants in their prefabricated abodes, women victims of violence in some secluded townhouse, sex-workers and homeless people in hostels – and the list could go on.

I do understand that some of these people 'in care' might not have any other option. I also recognise that at face value people live in institutions because something in their life did not work out as it should.

But most of the 10,000 are carted-out against their wish and if we are not watchful this risks becoming the new normal in our social welfare system because we think we are doing the right thing as we embalm people!

I am convinced that many did not choose this life for themselves.

Then again, no flower arrangement or fresh smell of detergent or elegant reception or new bedsheets or some other privilege will unstiffen the pain of being away from home. No 'Home away from home' or 'Offering Hope & Comfort' tacky slogans will do it for me.

From where I stand, the people who are in out-and-out need for residential accommodation should be much less than the thousands of people who have been unloaded in these residences.

For example, are we sure these people would be confined to such lodgings had our communities been more hospitable?

- That old lady, Marija, who lost her lifetime partner, developed symptoms of dementia and is 'certified' unable to live on her own;
- or that young man, Massimo, who due to the heroin addiction he has slipped into needs to be treated away from his family because of the dangers there are in the neighbourhood;
- or that young mum, Shirley, who has been punched so many times in her face by her husband that she cannot remember the names of her parents and now has to live in a shelter because the ex-husband still resides in the matrimonial home;
- or that young girl, Irene, who came from Lithuania hoping to find a better quality of life, ended up working as a sex worker to survive and has now been abandoned by her pimp because she got pregnant and is now residing in a shelter with no money she can call hers;
- or that that priest, Fr James, who after dedicating his life to his parish is placed in a hostile looking home for old clerics because he is of no more need to the parish;
- or that Somali man, Jaamac, who left his village back home after his parents and sister got murdered and is now living in a prefabricated box at Hal-Far;
- or that little boy, Jackson, who was the victim of abuse and abandonment and left alone so many times at home and deprived of schooling, good food and love and notwithstanding he is just 8 years old had to be admitted to a Church residential home because no other members of the family 'wanted to get involved';
- or that 14-year-old, Sharon, who doesn't know who her father is and all she knows about her mother is that she is a cocaine addict, now having to live with six other girls she doesn't know and doesn't like because no one else will take her in;
- or that 35-year-old man, John, who has lived in a mental health institution because 12 years ago he lost his parents and slipped into a depression and had no support and ended up in a crowded ward with many other people he did not know and did not choose to live with;
- or that 70-year-old man, Grezzju who was widowed a year ago and all he did was cry for the loss he had

endured of his lifetime companion and his family thought it would be better for him to be 'settled' in a residential home because his children were busy with their careers;

- or that young Belarussian man, Timofei, who thought it was ok to act as a drug mule and got himself into so much trouble he ended up in prison, never once getting a visit;
- or Marika, who is disabled and has been placed in a home because her parents cannot cope with her and raising the other siblings - so she 'was chosen' to go;
- or Wistin, who is repeatedly sent to solitary confinement whilst he is doing his prison sentence.

Surely there were other alternatives we could have at least considered instead of people being lugged out of their private residences;

- MCH should be much smaller, alternative community models applied more aggressively and the mental health strategy implemented speedily;
- families with disabled members should have more access to top notch community individualised services;
- SVPR should never exist to that extent (an estimated 1,800 residents with the new extension) turning that part of Malta into a settlement for the aged most of whom are miles away from home;
- we should be investing in more speckled community services for children to remain with their families, keep strengthening fostering services and make it easier for couples to adopt local children;
- we need to reduce the number of people who reside in prisons by giving alternative punishments instead of incarceration when sentencing is less than 2 years;
- we need to support Dar tal-Providenza by providing resources so that more residents are placed in community homes or helped to relocate in smaller apartments;
- we need to give more psychological and community help to all those who are homeless and provide them with the tools to make a life for themselves.

I am troubled that institutionalisation has taken on a new meaning in present-day social welfare and at times is being considered as the be-all and end-all of our welfare safety net.

Once again, I do understand that there are circumstances that make it increasingly difficult for people to be comforted and taken care of at home; maybe severe challenging situations or abusive contexts, but other than that I believe it is more an issue of our 'modern lifestyle' that leaves very little space for people to engage in the needs of others. Life's currency is turning out to be about 'me', 'my' career and 'my' aspirations – what comes in the way we toss to the side.

As a society we are slowly turning our welfare system into barbicans with overlooking turrets. We are transforming our support programmes into bricks and mortars, paternalistic clinician-patient relationships and pathologising of difference. And where adaptive behaviour is not possible, according to our sophisticated and politically correct protocols, the easiest way of sorting things out will be to erase them from our collective conscious. One way of doing this is that instead of focusing on community services we find it easier (albeit costlier) to create homes and residences, speaking about 'cases' rather than people and negotiating costs of 'bed care' rather than seeking creative solutions that are possibly already implanted in our (very resourceful) communities. One good step in the right direction is that at least we are introducing measures and standards to safeguard quality.

But let's call a spade a spade.

People in care suffer loneliness, deep-seated agonising solitude, lose an interest to live, give up on their ambitions and simply live in a world of memories and their social world changes and life becomes twisted and unrecognisable. This situation has a toll on these individuals.

# THE NEW NORMAL

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Everybody who is anybody is saying that, as a result of the pandemic, we now have to accept this 'new' normal we are living. Some present it as a good thing, while others see it as a sort of compromise that we need to either accept happily or rebel against. Making a sudden, unannounced arrival and creating havoc in its wake, the new normal has become the new kid on the block and, from what we keep hearing, seems to be here to stay. Reluctance to accept it is, somehow, even if subtly, labelled as resistance to change. But what is it that we are being asked to accept? And what, of the 'old' normal, should we be happy to discard? What kind of community, if any, is this new normal going to create?

This new normal has created an emphasis on technology as a means of maintaining contact; an insistence on physical distancing; a total cancellation of events where people are gathered together – be they celebrations, school, sports, religion, culture, dining out or simply family gatherings; a complete ban on travel outside the country; a focus on home as a safe haven; a situation of unemployment or threatened unemployment for many; and an assessment of outings as essential for them to be pursued. From where I am standing, or, perhaps, sitting on the sofa would better describe it, this list seems to be prohibiting many of the things which give many people pleasure and emphasising, besides some positive things, other negative aspects of life, leaving me to wonder what accepting the new normal would look like. The notion of house-arrest comes to mind and, if this were something to be advocated, why is it used as a punishment for crime? Why don't we encourage house-arrest as something which could enhance your quality of life, if it is so positive? And where does your connection to the community come from if you are under house arrest? Can the technological connection substitute the physical one?

The fact that this new normal comes with its warning about trying to maintain mental health is a bit of a give-away that it might not be so positive, after all. The guidance about how to make this period productive, fruitful, creative; how to maintain our sanity; how to strengthen our relationships; how to care for ourselves; how to catch up on things we haven't had time to do before; how to keep our kids occupied; creates pressure in its own right. We find ourselves being told that, in order to live this new normal well, we have to, for example, have a good laugh every day. What happens if it's time to go to bed and you haven't laughed? Do your chances of remaining sane nose-dive? Does getting somebody to tickle you count? If you laughed because you watched a good film, can you count this both as doing something you enjoy and having a good laugh, or do you have to tick the other box with something else? The recommendations have reached ridiculous proportions, adding another surreal level to this new normal and creating a complex when this level is not met.

While living in this new normal, we are being told that we cannot go back to the way things were, to the 'old' normal. And the underlying implication when this is stated is often, "thank goodness". This makes me reflect on what it is which we left behind which we would want to get rid of. Being able to hug people who are dear to us? Praying as part of a community? Having face-to-face meetings? Going out when and where we want to? Attending a concert or a football match? Going to the theatre? Travelling abroad? Eating out? Going to school? The list of things we have left behind goes on. Whether we would want to get rid of them is debatable to some, but clear to me. These are aspects of life which many of us are missing and which contribute to our feeling of community. At the same time, the life we were living was having an impact on our environment, on our

societies, on our communities. Without these activities, the world seems to be having a breather, seems to be coming to life again. So, is it a case of its either us or the world? Are we not allowed to carry forward any of our old normal into this new normal? Is there any way that we and the world can come to an existence which is mutually acceptable? Can we co-exist as a community?

If we had to look at the way many of us were living our lives prior to the pandemic, the description “frenzied abnormality” would perhaps fit better than “old normal”. And it is this frenzied abnormality that we cannot go back to. Nor do we want to, I would say. And, as I say that, I hear the world breathing a sigh of relief! At the same time, while adjusting to this new normal, which lacks many of the pleasurable aspects of our old normal, we are inheriting some features of the frenzied abnormality which we would like to leave behind. We find ourselves assessing our fulfilment according to our productivity, substituting schools with home-schooling, putting pressure on ourselves to cope, keeping ourselves well-informed or, in other words, being bombarded with things we should be doing. This is the “old normal” that results from frenzied abnormality, that many of us do not want to go back to, surely.

It seems to me that we are at a crossroad – one which we may be unable to leave for a while. However, being forced to stay at the crossroad gives us a chance to reflect on what path we would like to take, accepting the fact that people choose their own paths which may be different from ours. Rather than view the future as the “new normal”, the “old normal” or the “frenzied abnormality”, I would prefer to look at it as an “enhanced normal” which the pandemic has given me a chance to reflect on. I wish to be able to take forward with me aspects of my life which I have worked hard for and which have contributed to my identity; my relationships with family and friends; my enjoyment of particular events; my spirituality; my freedom; my autonomy and my ability to be close to people without fearing them. I wish to leave behind the social injustices created by a way of living which prioritises profit over humanity; the hectic culture of achievement; excessive ambition; the structural inequalities created by consumerist societies; and all the other negative aspects which were, in fact, preventing us from living a normal life in which everybody thrives, including the world. In other words, I wish to live in a community where everyone is welcome and where we all contribute to a better quality of life for all.

I, possibly like many other people, do not want to be told that I have to adjust to the new normal. I want my normality to integrate my past, my present and my future. I am prepared to abide by the instructions of the health authorities to the letter in the hope and conviction that this will lead to overcoming our current situation. In this way, I anticipate that I can, to a certain extent, gain some control over my future and make it resemble a normality that I am prepared, and would like, to live in. A normality which respects the environment and encompasses the common good, allowing the mantra “we’re in this together”, the mainstay of community engagement, to be one of the things which is carried forward into the future.

# THE DEMISE OF SOCIAL THEORY AND THE ‘PROMISE’ OF SOCIOLOGY

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## **THE “PROMISE” OF SOCIOLOGY**

For Wright Mills (2000 [1959]), the fundamental task of the sociologist is to identify how scopic socio-historical forces and individual biographies and agency intersect. A sociology that privileges either of these essential ingredients at the expense of the other, short-changes the discipline’s *raison-d’être* and vision. Such compartmentalisation incapacitates engaging theoretical inflection. It proscribes what Wright Mills (1959, *passim*) calls “the promise” of “the sociological imagination”. What is the state of theory generation in sociology and the social sciences today? Are we realising and reaping the potential that theory-driven social research possesses for enriching, intriguing and enduring sociological analysis? It is these pivotal questions that this piece aims to address. In the process, emphasis is made on identifying and explaining some of the currents that are stemming the development of social theory generation and thus curtailing sociology’s promise.

## **The Scourge of Utilitarianism and Neo-liberal, Bureaucratic Expediency**

From Durkheim’s anomie and Tonnies’ community, to Weber’s rationalisation and Marx’s alienation; from Parsons’ functional pre-requisites to Merton’s social strain; from Tannenbaum, Lemert and Becker’s labelling theory, Goffman’s stigma, to the manifold shades and hues of subculture; from Ritzer’s McDonaldisation, Giddens’ structuration, to Beck’s risk society and Baudrillard, Lyotard and Derrida’s post-modernity - can we even imagine a sociology without these exciting and intriguing concepts? Would we as sociology students have been as attracted and committed to the discipline without the engaging debates on Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Veblin, Weber, the Chicago and Frankfurt Schools, all the above concepts and more. There is some telling and trailblazing theoretical work in sociology and the social sciences today. The rise of a transnational and trans-regional collaborative sociology developing a “world society” theory (Wittman, 2018) is one strong case in point. Such works are however the exception and not the rule. As Outwaithe (2016, p.1) poignantly puts it: “[i]n much of sociology, it often seems that the wave of theory has passed over, often leaving nothing but ritualistic footnotes attached to highly empiricist exercises in “normal science.”

In a social world craving for big data, soundbites and buzzwords that everyone is racing to embrace and laud without the slightest glimpse of critical engagement and forethought, at best social theory is perceived as a tool for the fool meandering and lost in the playground of the inane. At worst, it is not even engaged with, considered or debated at all. The “watering down” of social theory courses on campuses across the UK and the US (*ibid.*) and beyond, epitomises all this, while underscoring a pull toward abstract empiricism and theory void research.

The penchant for atheoretical work and a general resistance to theory is evident across the area’s myriad sub-disciplines. Consider this plea from the editors of the *European Journal of Sport and Society* (Thiel et al., 2018, p. 4):

Lately, the number of papers submitted to our journal, which do not underpin their empirical studies with a precise, informative, and coherent social theory has continuously risen. In some cases, the lack of a theoretical framework even led to the impression that the explanations of the empirical findings in the discussion part were a ‘poking around in the dark’ rather than a justified deduction of assumptions, which could lead to subsequent research. We therefore strongly encourage all authors to unfold the theoretical framework of their studies and to discuss their empirical findings by systematically linking them with social theory.

Politicians, policy-makers and administrators, who are quite often the absolute holders of the purse requisite for the commissioning of social research, edge social scientists towards this theory-abstract position. Their primary objective remains the harnessing of 'credible' and 'robust' indicators. These are often expected to offer insights on prevalence trends in respect of a social problem (requiring some sort of policy response). Studies and their results are expected to be reported in a way that is accessible and intelligible to the policy maker, service manager or legislator. Complex and engaging theoretical inflection, requisite for the development of all fields in the social science is not encouraged. The end result is thus research that is essentially utilitarian, reductive and simply descriptive in scope – an unimaginative, reactionary sociology. Huber (1979, p. 591) had long anticipated the dangers of sociology (and the humanities in general) succumbing to this reality, at a time of theoretical resurgence in the discipline:

In academia, itself a depressed area, the social sciences and humanities have suffered from declining enrollments and shrinking resources to the point where scholars need to ask what various disciplines must do to survive. On the one hand, if we as sociologists, produce only bits and pieces of common sense, albeit dressed up in esoteric language, we may find that no one cares about the games we play. On the other hand, if we organise ourselves to produce knowledge that someone with money – government or business – cares enough to pay for, then we risk reshaping the discipline in unforeseen ways, simply reacting to external forces. In parallel, as the neo-liberal, economic precepts of 'audit', 'cost-effectiveness' and 'accountability' have also come increasingly to bear on setting the social policy and welfare services agenda, more emphasis is being made on commissioning and engaging sociologists and social scientists in service and practice evaluation studies. These are now sine qua non for the requisite 'evidence base' for policy, service and practice development. Such studies often include a mix of methods to assuage the weaknesses and limitations of undue paradigmatic compartmentalisation and to ensure that they are as robust as possible in their scope from both 'breadth' and 'depth' angles. However, results-centred evaluation studies such as these rarely plod beyond the descriptive and the specificity of the practice worlds they investigate. In sum, a rich resource that may be used to investigate and theorise on the wider social world, remains subject (and one may argue even subservient) to bureaucratic expediency. Moreover, a hegemonic agenda is clipping sociology's proverbial wings and assuaging the discipline's potential for complex engagement and insight. As Lempert claims (2018, p. 7), even the areas of inquiry that social scientists today decide to immerse themselves in are tempered a priori by the power mongers shaping normative discourse.

Social science today limits itself to what it calls "engaging in current debates", which are equally politicized and controlled. The very idea that social science is about "debates" that must be politically "current" is itself a fallacy that represents an underlying destruction of discipline and intellectual life.

The zero sum of this reality is the metamorphosis of sociology into a purely pragmatic 'applied' field; desensitised to demystifying established dogma and buttressing rather than resisting mythification and convention. Lacking the requisite space to engage in daring and exciting theoretical exploration, most sociology today simply regurgitates and replicates established truths and power structures. Parallels may also be drawn here with Matthews' (2017) scathing critique on the state of theory in modern criminology. He contends (p. 580) that the surge and domination of liberalism in criminology today is contributing to liberal agenda-driven and low-level theoretical exploration in the discipline. While pushing for the promotion of a liberal criminology, this drive is de-valuing the importance of a "unified body of theory" – a critique that can also be applied to sociology and the social sciences in general across the globe.

## RE-VISITING SOCIOLOGY'S PROMISE

To conclude, what is thus required for sociology to revisit its promise, is to rekindle its mission and passion for theory. The curators of the discipline world-wide must ensure that this passion is transmitted effectively to students of the discipline. Related university curricula must shift from purely pragmatic considerations and effectively zone in on both classic and contemporary directions in sociological theory, demonstrating how these theories may prove pivotal for understanding and explaining current social currents and to anticipate and dwell on new ones. Research programmes in the area must further incentivise and encourage theory-driven work. Moreover, the wider society at large must tangibly recognise the importance of the space to think, theorise, inflect and speculate. At the very least, our universities should be such spaces.

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