

# Relationship Education for Families in Transition Between Different Cultural Value Systems

A Maltese perspective

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Malta offers a unique backdrop to the study of marriage. Together with the Philippines, it is the only country where it is not possible to obtain a divorce, although a divorce obtained overseas is recognised in Malta. The unity of the family and the need to uphold marriage as a permanent relationship continue to be important values that are embedded in our culture. Indeed, only 3.4% are officially or de facto separated in Malta (NSO 2005). The influence of a child-oriented family and the high level of marital satisfaction are more pronounced than in Anglo-American literature (Abela, Frosh & Dowling 2005). In the meantime, the attitudes and behaviour of Maltese teenagers and young adults in relationship is at times risky (NSO 2005) and is not in tune with how they would in fact like it to be (Zammit 2004, Borg Xuereb 2005, Bugeja 2008). More needs to be happening in terms of relationship education with this sector of the population.

Furthermore, young, married working women and women with a higher level of education and their husbands are finding it difficult to reconcile a traditional belief system based on traditional gender roles and the emotional wellbeing of the family with the new challenges of their own family life (Abela 1998, Azzopardi 2007, Borg Xuereb 2008).

As a clinician who works with couples and families in general, I believe that couples and young people are looking for emotional connectedness when they engage in or embark on relationships that they desire to be meaningful.

It is with this framework in mind that I would like to highlight the gaps that exist in the area of relationship education, as well as the factors that promote it. Again, the Maltese context – where the majority of couples have to attend premarital courses before they get married, as well as parentcraft courses on their transition to parenthood – provides us with the possibility to understand how relationship education can be more helpful to the younger generation of couples than it appears to be now.

## Introduction

As a clinician who works with families, I believe that couples and young people are looking for emotional connectedness when they engage in or embark on relationships that they desire to be meaningful. In the meantime, in Malta, younger generations, including young Maltese married couples, are facing new challenges in their relationships as they find themselves caught in transition between different cultural value systems. It is likely that this is also the case elsewhere for other young couples who live in big cities, but whose parents hail from traditional cultures. Novels such as *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri (2003) or *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith (2000) reflect this phenomenon.

In this chapter I would like to highlight the rapid social change that Malta is going through. In the light of this change, I would like to review what is being offered in terms of relationship education. The gaps in provision will also be highlighted.

## Married Life in Malta

Malta offers a unique backdrop to the study of marriage. Together with the Philippines, it is the only country where it is not possible to obtain a divorce, although a divorce obtained overseas is recognised in Malta. Values surveys demonstrate that the unity of the family and the need to uphold marriage as a permanent relationship continue to be important values that are embedded in our culture (Abela 2000). Indeed, only 3.7% are officially or *de facto* separated in Malta (NSO 2005) which marks an increase of only 1.3% on the 1995 national survey and a 1.9% increase from the 1985 census survey.

Despite the low increase in separations, marital conflict was not highly prevalent in my national survey on the subject matter in the local context in 1998 (Abela 1998). Only 20% of marriages were estimated to be in distress at that point in time and this figure includes those couples who were officially or *de facto* separated. This finding tallied with the one reported by Tabone (1995). We certainly need to gauge this again given that we are citing data which is ten years old. Nevertheless, when I carried out my research on marital conflict, I feared that given the strong belief in marriage as a bond for life, I might find an inordinately high level of marital conflict and violence among Maltese married couples who were trying to keep up a front but in fact were living in turmoil in their own homes. I was pleased to find that despite a tight research design, which was also very sensitive to social desirability effects, there was a high level of marital satisfaction and a predominantly constructive approach to dealing with disagreement and conflict.

I believe that one of the main explanations for the successful transmission of this legacy of family life from one generation to another lies in the strong social fabric which is characterised by social control and a cautious attitude to change. The Maltese archipelago, with a population of 400,000 inhabitants, has a face-to-face community with a high degree of social visibility (Sultana & Baldacchino 1994). Moreover, parents continue to exert a great influence on their children, given that although younger generations tend to marry in their late twenties, most of them continue to live with their parents until they get married. According to Tabone (1995), after marriage, 68.3% continue to live in the same town or village of one (or both) of their parents. According to anthropologist Sybil Mizzi (1981,1997), the family system, the size of the island and the Catholic Church have a great influence on the Maltese family value system in general and make change happen very slowly. A. M. Abela (2000) agrees on the influence of

the Catholic Church and asserts that the Maltese have a much stricter sense of morality than their European counterparts. When comparing the values survey of 2000 with that of 1994, he notes a growing disapproval of infidelity and abortion. However, he also reports that the Maltese are less willing to tolerate abuse and very few are ready to bear a spouse who is violent or alcoholic. They are also increasingly willing to break off a marriage if the partner is unfaithful or unsatisfactory on a sexual level. It is understandable why couples in the aforementioned circumstances are increasingly in favour of divorce. Failing that, many Maltese are resorting to annulment, an option that gives couples the right to remarry. From statistics passed on to me from the Family Court in Malta, the number of annulments granted has more than doubled in recent years, increasing from 82 annulments in 1995, to 139 in 2000, 218 in 2006 and 178 in 2007. Annulment not only enables civil marriage but, when declared by the Ecclesiastical Tribunal, gives the right to remarry in church.

We do not have statistics available regarding separation according to years of marriage in Malta, but casual observation reveals that the majority of those who are separating tend to be younger. However even if all of those with relationship difficulties belonged to the younger generation, we could still argue that we are a 'minority' culture when it comes to marital satisfaction (Abela, Frosh & Dowling 2005) when compared to the Western world, where at least one in every three marriages (and at times one in every two) breaks down.

### **What about adolescents?**

In a national survey on the sexual behaviour of children aged 14 to 16 years of age that was carried out in 2003, it emerged that around 13% had engaged in sexual intercourse and twice as many had experienced heavy petting (Bugeja 2008). Less than 20% of those who engaged in sexual intercourse used condoms regularly. Use of the contraceptive pill was much less popular. According to Bugeja, this is among the lowest use of contraceptives recorded in the international literature. The low use of contraceptives was explored by Bugeja by way of a national survey in which 1,300 young persons participated. Furthermore, as a result of his ongoing interaction with young people, he found that many youths considered the use of condoms a sin and admitted that they were not planning the sexual act while dating each other. However, when asked to have sex, they found they were unequipped to resist pressure and abstain. Moreover, those who consented to sex felt unable to negotiate the use of contraceptives.

This change of attitude regarding sexual activity has led to an accelerated and unexpected rise in births outside marriage, from 12.9% in 2001 (Demographic Review 2002) to 16.8% in 2003 (Demographic Review 2004), escalating to 20.1% in 2005 (Demographic Review 2006). It stood at 24.9% in 2007. Of course, this situation has contributed to a complete change of view of what is a family for the younger generation.

In 2007, 29% of such births were from teenage mothers and another 26% from mothers aged between 20 and 24. From qualitative research carried out with teenage mothers and young fathers, we know that when teenage mothers discover that they are pregnant they experience the news as a shock. All of those interviewed experience psychological and financial hardship but adjust to the situation over time (Zammit 2004). Young fathers however resent their newly acquired status at such a young age and find it more difficult to adjust and carry the responsibility of having a child to bring up (Borg Xuereb 2005). These teenagers and young adults need a

lot of support from their parents to cope with the responsibilities they have to face.

Recent research (NSO 2005) reveals that some parents are out of sync with and at times unable to supervise their growing children. Regular use of the internet, which reaches 97.8% of students between 13 and 16, is completely unsupervised in 25.5% of cases. Up to 68% of students make use of their computer in their own bedrooms or study, yet 66.6% of parents and guardians with internet access at home do not know of the existence of internet-filtering software. In the study, it emerged that up to 25.6 per cent of students browsed websites or chat rooms with violent and/or pornographic content. Up to 21% of these youngsters also fixed meetings with persons they came to know by chatting on the internet, with 69% of boys and 18% of girls going to meet these persons on their own. Around 48% of youngsters who get to know people they chat with make use of text messages sent from their mobiles to arrange to meet up with them.

Paceville is an entertainment town that our teenagers want to explore over the weekend, not least because some of their peers boast about going there themselves. In Malta, children are allowed to drink alcohol at the young age of 16. Younger children do so underhandedly once they find themselves in an environment where drink is everywhere. In the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs Study (2007), 87% of Maltese fifth formers (15/16 year olds) had been drinking alcohol during the last 12 months, compared to the average of 82% in Europe.

Moreover, 55% of these school children reported drinking more than 5 drinks in a row during the last 30 days. Amongst the negative effects of alcohol, 15% reported performing poorly at school or work, 5.9% of respondents engaged in sex under the influence of alcohol and then regretted it the next day, whereas 10.1% had sexual intercourse without a condom.

In the meantime, the younger generation is becoming increasingly secularised. In a recent study on religious beliefs and attitudes of Maltese university students (Tabone et al 2003), we find that:

*Belief in God and the afterlife exist side by side with other beliefs that the Christian faith considers incompatible. This ambiguity in the students' beliefs is even more pronounced when we move to the questions dealing with their behaviour in the areas of sexuality, marriage and abortion ... students make choices not according to absolute values but according to what they believe is the best for them in the circumstances.*

Thus for example 71% of university students approved of premarital sex and 39.6% stated that they have engaged in sexual intercourse.

Another finding that reflects the fast change in attitudes regarding the family life of our younger generation is that almost all (99.8%) of the university students surveyed see nothing wrong with premarital cohabitation, with only 42% seeing it as a proviso that leads to marriage. From the reasons students gave for endorsing cohabitation, the authors of the study gathered that:

*Marriage looms large in the students' imagination. It presents a daunting prospect of personal commitment and financial burdens. The overall picture which emerges is one of deep fear at the thought of marriage which is somewhat allayed by the prospect of previous cohabitation. (p 23)*

### The experience of young married couples

Unfortunately for some, fear turns into disappointment as their expectations of marriage are dashed (Azzopardi 2007). In Azzopardi's qualitative longitudinal study of nine couples on expectations of marriage, three of the couples felt that their romantic expectations were not being met in marriage. Disappointment was already high in the first three months of marriage

particularly for women, who felt more burdened by housework, cooking, shopping and an increasing concern about the relationship.

Maria is a case in point. When she was interviewed before her wedding, her expectations were all very clear to her. In her free time with Joseph, she envisaged cycling with him or watching films (both at home and at the cinema). She also wished for a holiday once a year and expected that both of them would stop working at 8.30pm to relax together. Interestingly, she also expected to say a prayer together with him before going to sleep. Three months into her marriage, we find that she is pretty disappointed with the situation she finds herself in. She says

*...“there were times when I felt a bit disillusioned. Especially in relation to housework. For example, once I was hanging clothes to dry at 11pm on Saturday, instead of going out. I would say to myself ‘look at me how I ended up.’”* (p. 196) She later continues:

*“So about the romance you mentioned earlier, I feel that immediately after marriage, I had to pick it in a bag and throw it away. Because I don’t feel there is space or time to be romantic .... Life has become more practical actually.”* (p.196)

In another Maria’s case and that of her husband Emmanuel, we find that their working day does not stop at 5 pm. Emmanuel is an engineer and he works overtime. He and his wife wish that Maria would stop working when they have young babies. Maria, on the other hand, is following a course in psychotherapy training in the evening. She plans to work privately and flexibly when the children are still young. I believe that both Maria and Emmanuel arrive home late in the evening only to start their second shift at home, so it is no wonder that she finds it impossible to put her feet up at half past eight!

In Azzopardi’s study, there were a number of factors that actually hindered young married couples from reaching their expectations in their first year of marriage. Work-life balance is a major issue that most struggle with. Contrary to a few years ago, both partners now take it for granted that they have to work full-time given the extremely high loans they undertake to buy their own apartment, which on average amount to 100,000 euros, as well as expenses for the wedding reception, which on average amount to around 20,000 euros in Malta. (An average wage in Malta would be around 15,000 euros.) What is more, four out of the nine couples interviewed by Azzopardi felt the need to work longer hours to save for the stage when children are born, as they wish for the mother to stop work to take care of the baby, at least for some time. This obviously leaves little time for the couple to be together. Incidentally, it also postpones child-bearing, which now stands at 28 for women. It is to be noted that, at present, the fertility rate in Malta is 1.45, which is well below the 2.1 needed for the replacement ratio between one generation and another (Demographic Review 2007).

In the study by Azzopardi, most of the men focused more on work as their primary responsibility and – at best – perceived their role as helpers when it came to household chores. However, some women, like Maria, were not even used to doing any housework at home. This is typical of middle class girls in Malta, who are encouraged to study rather than help when still at home. Two other female participants found themselves in the same boat in their first year of marriage. They all complained of a decline in romance in their lives.

A work-life balance was easier to achieve for those couples where the husband freely gave his share of the housework, and also for those couples where the wife was willing to give a much bigger share in homemaking and the husband would invest more in his career or job.

On an emotional level, those who were struggling wished for more connectedness and emotional intimacy. This need was voiced more by wives, although one of the husbands, Michael, did complain that his wife had abandoned him following the birth of an unplanned baby. Joe too admitted that the fact that he could not demonstrate affection towards his wife was a problem for both of them. Emmanuel defended his position and insisted that he has a more practical way of showing his love to Maria. In fact, when she had knee problems, he was thinking of buying her a car with an automatic gearbox. Of course, not all the couples were struggling despite the challenges they were facing.

Recent research on the needs of first time parents (Borg Xuereb 2008) reveals that young couples experience the transition to parenthood as *"a journey for which they are unprepared"*, in spite of the fact that over 96% willingly attended parentcraft courses at the main state hospital.

Both women and men experience a statistically significant decline in their marital satisfaction when comparing how they were feeling during the antenatal period with 6 weeks or even 6 months postnatal. Women were significantly more distressed in terms of their emotional wellbeing.

However, there were no significant differences with regards to marital distress and emotional wellbeing between women working and women staying at home. Nor were statistical differences detected between those who planned their baby and those who did not. Unfortunately, the financial income of and/or burden on the couples could not be analysed. This finding is very new because in 1998 I had found that there was no statistical difference between those couples who were still childless and couples who had children between 0 and 5 (Abela 1998). Could it be that the couples' level of satisfaction rose when they were expecting the baby? (See Heinicke, Guthrie & Ruth 1997 for similar findings.) Or are the increasing financial pressures young married couples are facing creating distress, as they feel the added responsibility of having a child? These questions merit further research.

Interestingly, up to 54% of the young mothers resumed employment by six months postnatal. This is quite a high level of female employment for Malta, given that the average rate of married women working was 38% in 2003 (ETC personal communication) and signals the fast pace with which we are moving from a single earner to a dual earner family. Throughout the research project, financial commitments were often perceived as a source of worry and were cited as the main reason why both partners needed to work soon after the birth of the baby.

Women with a higher level of education were more likely to seek employment. In spite of the fact that they held a job outside the home, women tended to assume more responsibilities for household tasks over time. This trend is similar to the one reported by Azzopardi cited earlier.

From the qualitative interviews, it emerged that women who resumed work within the first 6 months following the birth of the baby had strong family of origin support. In Malta, child care centres are not very popular with mothers (Borg 2003). Usually it is the maternal grandmother who provides childcare.

The case of Rose and Louis is however an extreme situation. Rose worked shifts but could not rely on her husband to mind the baby when she went off to work at 5 o'clock in the morning. She had no option but to close down their house and move to her mother's house in winter to protect the baby from the early morning cold. Rose was very distressed about this situation.

In the case of Bill and Esther, Bill did not really empathise with his wife's needs and could not understand how isolated she felt when she stayed at home to look after their baby. Bill was

much happier returning home to find his wife and daughter, but his wife Esther was in distress. She felt that her life had “changed completely and radically”.

On the other hand Moira and Paul were able to work things out as a team in spite of the fact that they opted for avant-garde arrangements. Paul in fact was the one to take parental leave in the early months and Moira went back to work. But even in their case one pay packet was not enough and Paul had to go back to work. Moira’s mother stepped in to baby sit. This flexibility is not always easy especially in a context where everything is new and the couple needs to pioneer a new way of behaving in their own relationship, with the offspring and with their families of origin.

### **A conceptual framework for understanding relationships**

Conceptualising relationships is important to help us understand what kind of relationship education we should be offering. Human beings find it very painful to survive without connecting with others. Bowlby (1969, 1988) has already argued that babies need a safe emotional connection with their primary caregiver. Moreover Hazan and Shaver (1987) later discovered that the quality of the attachment that we develop in our infancy and childhood will colour the way we connect with our significant adult partner in adult life. Each of us will try to repair childhood losses and make up for unmet needs (Dicks 1967). Indeed as Knobloch (2000) put it “*we all marry with our own conceptualisation of the perfect marriage.*” (p.1)

What goes wrong for couples who do not find a good fit between them? It is interesting to note that those who are not exactly happy in their marital relationship struggle for emotional connectedness. This is very obvious in our clinical work with couples. It is also the case in the work by Azzopardi (2007) and Borg Xuereb (2008). Bugeja also found that one of the greatest fears of young adolescents, especially females, is emotional ‘let-down’. Driver et al (2003) report that happy couples rarely ignore their partner. Nearly 85% of attempts by any one partner to interact with the other were met with a positive response. Huston et al (2001) also found that the level of emotional responsiveness between partners is the best predictor of a new marriage after five years.

Johnson (2007) argues that people’s most basic need is for a safe emotional connection. She goes on to describe attachment theory “as the new way of understanding adult love.” (p.1)

Couples in distress struggle hard to create mutual emotional accessibility and responsiveness. When this is not forthcoming some become clingy and anxious, fearing rejection. Others protest because they feel lonely and isolated or shut down and become increasingly resentful. Feelings of abandonment provoke intense and primitive rage.

By contrast when a partner feels loved it increases his or her sense of self worth. As a young woman told me when I commented on how beautiful she was becoming, she said, “*Peter loves me and tells me so. It makes me feel held and gives me a sense of wellbeing.*”

Johnson argues that our increased knowledge in neurobiological science has continued to evidence this need for emotional connection in relationships. Coan, Schaefer & Davidson (2006) found that holding the hand of a loved one rather than that of a stranger calmed down the neural systems that respond in moments of pain. When we cuddle, oxytocin, a hormone which calms and relaxes us, pumps into our chemical system (Carter 1998). Looking into our partner’s eyes triggers our neurons to mirror what he or she is going through. This empathic nonverbal reaction acts as a healing response to the spouse.

From a cultural perspective the media depicts our desire for empathic emotional connectedness as perfectly within reach. Unfortunately partners who were not brought up in an environment where they saw and experienced this good enough relationship built on empathic attunement often seem to be the ones who respond most to its depiction in the media. They see it as an example of how they would like their marriage to be (Azzopardi 2007) but we all know that it is easier said than done, and that the stories we follow on the media cannot provide us with a personhood which would help us deal with and process stressful moments in our married life.

### What relationship education?

The busy life that we lead is isolating us from people we would normally feel close to who would support us in moments of distress. It has become increasingly difficult even on the island of Malta for women to form spontaneous 'support groups' where they can vent their worries about their husbands and their children and for men to commiserate over their problems at the local *kazin*. This has intensified our need for emotional accessibility and responsiveness from our partners and our families which may not always be forthcoming. The need for a space where relationship education can take place is being felt more than ever before.

I will highlight a number of proposals that seem pertinent in the light of the current situation our families are finding themselves in:

#### 1. Relationship education needs to be part of a well thought out family policy that responds to the cultural changes which our younger generation are facing.

In Malta, we find a whole array of courses, ranging from the ones offered to children in secondary schools under the title of personal and social development to the premarital courses offered by the Cana movement (a non government organisation similar to Relate in the UK, under the auspices of the church), to parental courses including those offered by state hospitals for couples expecting a baby.

Nevertheless relationship education cannot be perceived as simply a matter of courses but needs to be part of a well thought out national family policy that promotes families as the cornerstone of our society.

The different research projects that I have been referring to throughout this paper highlight the value of ongoing quantitative and qualitative research around the needs of the younger generation that would inform our thinking and help us respond in a helpful way in terms of policy.

Thus for example in Malta, in the light of the current research by Bugeja (2008) and Tabone et al, 2003, we urgently need a Sexual Health Strategy to be adopted with the help of experts, and more in-depth research on our teenagers and their parents.

Similarly family friendly measures that promote work-life balance need to be implemented not only in government agencies but throughout the private sector (Abela et al 2004, Borg Xuereb 2008).

Men in particular need to be empowered to share family responsibilities more in the face of the current gender reshifting that is taking place in our society (Abela et al 2004, Azzopardi 2007, Borg Xuereb 2008).

Further to Tabone et al's (2003) statement that young people are afraid of commitment, there needs to be further exploration as to why young adults are feeling this way. Researchers and policy makers need to understand what the issues at stake are for these youngsters. When



we find ourselves between two cultures, there is always the risk that traditionalists take a judgmental stance towards the new generation and vice versa.

## **2. Educational courses have to respond to the needs of the population concerned**

It is of crucial importance that educational programmes respond to the needs of the population concerned. Bugeja (2008) in his doctoral work cited earlier on, carried out a needs assessment of teenagers between 14 and 16 regarding their needs in learning about relationships and growing sexually. Following his random survey on sexual behaviour in this population group, he then carried out 15 focus groups, in order to explore the perspective of the young persons themselves. One extremely interesting finding that came out from all of the groups was the need for education about personal and sexual relationships. Teenagers complained that relationship education was very limited both at home and at school. They wished to learn more about how to start, maintain and end a relationship. Most were afraid of the risks involved in engaging in intimate relationships and highlighted the distress they experienced when faced with emotional let-downs.

The above findings stress the need for more in-depth research not only with our teenagers but also with their parents and the educational system that would inform our thinking and help us respond in a helpful way to the younger generation on this important issue. It seems to me that Maltese teenagers often find themselves in increasingly vulnerable and at times harmful situations and would like to be better supported as they are growing sexually.

From the survey on the use of the internet by students cited further above, it appears that many parents are unaware of the dangers that their children are exposed to over the internet and need more sensitisation on these issues. In a world of rapid technological changes, and an environment which does not always provide safe entertainment, parents find themselves at a loss as to how to maintain an authoritative stance with their children and say no to activities that may be harmful. This situation is further exacerbated in poor families who are often socially excluded and find little support from the school and the social services (Abela and Berlioz 2006, Abela and Tabone 2008). This is concerning, as adolescents need to connect with their parents and are asking for more meaningful communication between them their parents and their teachers (Bugeja 2008). Adolescents also need boundaries which they can challenge but which can contain them and help them grow (Coleman and Hendry 2000).

In this respect parents need to be better supported by services in the school and by our social and health services to help their children learn how to relate in a responsible manner. A secondary school headmaster recently explained to me how parents need and expect support from the school not only in terms of the educational achievement of their children but also regarding their upbringing and the stresses they face in their family life.

The premarital courses offered by the Cana movement are a requirement for all those who want to marry in church in Malta. I think that this policy is a step in the right direction given that there is now a whole body of research (Stanley et al 2006) pointing out that premarital courses are helpful to couples and help maintain marital stability.

This initiative should in fact be adopted by the State in the case of civil marriages. The State in Malta and indeed in many other countries lags behind this NGO because no premarital courses are on offer, in spite of the fact that we know from research abroad that non-religious people

profit more from premarital courses that are not religiously oriented (Fournier & Roberts 2003).

The Cana courses in fact offer a fertile ground for research that would help us understand better what helps couples who attend the courses. Recently Cana has been subjecting its courses to ongoing evaluation (Mizzi, personal communication 2008). Such evaluation needs to be further tuned to answer important questions in this regard. For example in Malta, many choose to marry in church, in spite of the fact that only 50% of the Maltese attend mass on Sunday. Nevertheless 75% of all marriages are celebrated in church (Demographic Review 2007). Do couples attend simply because such courses are compulsory? What do they gain (if anything) by attending?

Another interesting research project would look at what exactly courses prepare couples for and what participants experience in real life. From what I could gather regarding Maria's expectations before marriage, it seemed obvious to me that she was cognitively prepared for her marriage. She must have taken her marriage preparation courses very seriously but as Azzopardi (2007) points out, citing Laner and Russell (1995), "*cognitive learning made before marriage during preparation courses cannot replace experiential learning that takes place after the wedding.*" (p.211)

Courses need to expose participants to real-life situations, 'warts and all'. In the study by Rita Borg Xuereb (2008), this was the major criticism forwarded by participants towards the parentcraft course. Parents felt that the course on offer downplayed the demands and responsibilities they would face as parents and was too focused on birth and the care of the newborn. In open-ended questions that were set in the survey questionnaire and in the course of in-depth interviews with 13 couples, 300 suggestions were put forward. These included the idea that preparation for parenthood should start in secondary school and continue throughout life until grandparenting.

The need for support expressed by these young parents was quite marked. Parentcraft courses are not compulsory in Malta. Nevertheless 96.5% attend all of the eight sessions. Furthermore in spite of the busy lives these young parents were leading, they were willing to attend courses preferably after 6 o'clock or on the weekend.

Couples also highlighted the need for more professional support. They complained that visits by midwives were too few and impersonal. They would have preferred to develop a relationship with the same midwife rather than having a different midwife each time they had a visit.

They also called for more emphasis on the relationship between husband and wife and the role of the father in the transition to parenthood. Cowan and Cowan (2000) had also pointed out that doctors and midwives needed to give more importance to fathers and to create a space where both parents could talk about marital issues during the transition. In the Maltese context, parents also wished for courses that would also target the grandparents, given that they helped with childcare.

## Conclusion

In the light of these findings, it is unsurprising that despite the fast pace and rapid changes that contemporary families are facing, the Maltese younger generation – including teenagers, young married couples and first time parents – are all calling for opportunities that would help them enhance their relationships. Human beings are driven to relate and feel very distressed when their relationships get into a rut or break down. It is through meaningful relationships that we grow and our thoughtful endeavours to help people to relate to each other contribute to one way of giving meaning to our human existence.

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