MAPPING THE RAINBOW Researching the diverse colours of the LGBTIQ community

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Dr Marceline Naudi & Dr Claire Azzopardi Lane (Eds.)

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The fact that Malta has ranked first in ILGA-Europe's Rainbow Index in relation to LGBTIQ legislation and policy since 2015 is something that we will always be proud of. We are certain that these legislative and policy shifts have impacted on the lives of the LGBTIQ community in Malta often in positive and life changing ways.

Despite this, we are aware, that the transformation of society takes time. As evidenced by the studies presented here, a number of challenges remain.

It is for this reason that in 2018 the government launched its second LGBTIQ Equality Strategy and Action Plan and established the Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics (SOGIGESC) Unit within the Human Rights Directorate with the aim of mainstreaming LGBTIQ equality across all spheres.

The increasing number of students choosing to focus their dissertations on LGBTIQ related themes is, in and of itself, a reflection of the reduction in stigma and the increased visibility that LGBTIQ persons now enjoy.

We pledge to take on board the evidence that such research brings to light and to continue to prioritise the respect for human rights and equality and to engage with academic institutions, legislators, policy makers, service providers, and civil society in the work that we do.

Hon. Dr Edward Zammit Lewis
Minister for Justice, Equality and Governance

As an educator, turned politician, I applaud all efforts that aim to generate knowledge particularly when they address issues of equality and inclusion. The Malta we live in today is significantly different from the one I grew up in.

We are a society more open to diversity, whether it be in relation to the influx of foreigners, the greater visibility of LGBTIQ persons, the contribution of persons with disabilities in all spheres or the dismantling of gender stereotypes.

The collaboration between the various partners involved in this project is the perfect example of how the expertise and resources of different entities can help us achieve common goals.

From the studies presented here, it is clear that we still have some work to do to ensure that all LGBTIQ persons feel safe and included throughout their lifespan, from childhood to old age. We must continue to work on convincing all that a society that is more equal, is stronger, more sustainable and benefits us all.

Hon. Rosianne Cutajar
Parliamentary Secretary for Equality and Reforms

Foreword

This project was the result of a collaboration between the University of Malta's Department of Gender and Sexualities, the Europe Direct Information Centre, the Human Rights Directorate and the Malta LGBTIQ Rights Movement.

While research symposiums are regularly held by the University of Malta to present the work of its students, this was the first to focus exclusively on LGBTIQ related themes. A call for abstracts was issued early 2019 and nine pieces of work were eventually selected.

The LGBTIQ Research Symposium was held on the 10th May 2019 with three panels focusing on Non-conformity & Institutions, Social Issues and Education. Themes included: the role of the anti-gender movement in the continuing struggle for LGBTIQ equality; the experiences of LGBTIQ people of faith; the continued invisibility of intimate same-sex partner violence and older LGBTIQ persons; and sexual orientation and gender identity issues in schools. Eight of the nine presentations are represented in this publication.

Our thanks and appreciation go to Dr Marceline Naudi, Dr Claire Azzopardi Lane, Dr Mark Harwood and Colette Farrugia Bennett who partnered with HRD's SOGIGESC Unit in the organisation of the research symposium and to all the graduates for being willing to present their work and contribute to the ensuing publication.

Gabi Calleja
Head SOGIGESC Unit, HRD

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NON-CONFORMITY
& INSTITUTIONS

Gender nonconformity and the “culture of death”: an ecofeminist perspective on “gender ideology”

Janaina Rocha, Masters in Gender Studies, University of Malta

Janaina Rocha, studied in Brazil (UFRGS) and Portugal (University of Evora), and graduated in History with a focus in contemporary and gender studies. She has been involved in feminist and LGBT movements since 2012, and has come to be a supporter of Queer Theory and Ecofeminism.

> "Do we by any chance want to ignore that homosexualism brings various diseases? (...) An epidemic is forming and they even want to legalize it!"
>
> Pastor Alberto Santana, heavily influential in Peru, 2016.[1]

> "They're a small minority and we're going to step on them like they were lobsters, amen! Like lobsters because they're nothing!"
>
> Said by an aged woman during a manifestation in Peru, 2016.[2]

> "The UN promotes sexual abuse against children and incapable and corrupt governments accept it", proclaims a sign held during an anti-gender manifestation in Costa Rica, 2018.[3]

#ConMisHijosNoTeMetas

The hashtag, "don't interfere with my children", has since 2016 been one of the main flags in the Latin American anti-gender movement. While referring to the defence of minors and the family (in a very restrictive, cis-heterosexual structure), the expression has been mobilised in varied contexts and its associations serve as an example of the subjects reached by mobilisations against "gender ideology", featuring attacks on teachers, artists, academics, activists and people simply living their lives.[4] It is essential to note that not only gender and, consequently, sexuality are on the table, the discourses are rife with associations (either direct or through the same actors) with racism, xenophobia and ableism, nationalism and conservative liberalism as overarching backgrounds.

In Brazil, there was the criminal impeachment of a leftist president and election of a pro military authoritarian; in Colombia, there was the rejection of peace accords that would put an end to a 52 years long civil war that left more than 8 million dead.[5] These are only two of the most stark examples, just in Latin America, of the results of successful anti-gender organisation. Through messages in the streets, hegemonic christian churches and, especially, social media, this movement has canvassed massive interest, very notably across both higher and lower classes – often including messages containing death

1 Idem

2 Idem

3 Idem

4 Clacai and Centurion, 2018, illustrates some occurrences of censure against teachers (the famous "School without politics"), cultural spaces (the crackdown on the "Queermuseum" in 2017 an emblematic example) and activists and academics (many who have in the last few years fled their countries).

5 Clacai and Centurion, 2018

and sexual abuse threats against the gender nonconforming[6].[7] A transnational campaign for the "elimination of alterity",[8] deals with matters much beyond the scope of personal beliefs and well into public health and safety, many a time in contexts replete with human rights violations (Brazil, for instance, presents some of the worst life conditions for queer people and women in the world;[9] Peru is the third country in number of rape reports[10]).

Tracing back to the nineties

The concept of "gender ideology" reportedly has its origins in the catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy, from as early as 1998.[11] One of multiple transnational reactions to feminist advancements, it comes in direct response to the adoption of the concept of gender (as opposed to sex) in two United Nations gatherings: the International Conference on Population and Development (Cairo, 1994) and the IVth World Conference on Women (Beijing, 1995).[12]

It is indisputable, upon reading both reports, that "gender" is used solely in reference to women, and any problematisation beyond a gender binary or gender conformity is absent as such. Nevertheless, this shift was interpreted by the catholic hierarchy as an epistemological threat. In direct opposition to the United Nation's call, a "theology of complementarity of the sexes"[13] is then strengthened, considering a gender perspective (or rather "ideology") as "destructive of the human being"[14] when it doubts the "natural existence of a natural man and a natural woman".[15]

An anti-community

The narrative put forth by proponents of this anti-gender movement, while frequently arguing for a defence of "nation" and "tradition", can by now in fact be considered a transnationally articulated literary genre[16] sporting efforts to

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6 By gender nonconforming, I refer to all those who in any significant way depart from cisheteronormative norms, be it through diverse gender and sexuality identifications or defiant gender presentation and behaviour.

7 Muelle, 2017:179

8 Idem:175, my translation

9 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:142

10 Clacai and Centurion, 2018

11 2017:149, my translation

12 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:149; Luna, 2017:35

13 Luna, 2017:36, my translation

14 Amaya, 2017:154, my translation

15 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:149

16 Amaya, 2017:153

emulate formulas from scientific and legal discourses when in the context of political deliberation.[17] It is integral to recognise, as a starting point, that the mobilisation caused by the multifaceted concept of "gender ideology" relies on the mental composition of both a community and an anti-community[18] on warring sides of a starkly drawn (if not necessarily consistent) frontier, presenting as such a complex process of subjectification for analysis.

As a whole, the fight against a supposed "gender ideology" demands in the first instance the "renaturalisation of the body, sex and desire",[19] appealing to an imagined unified Other that, in its claimed antagonism to the laws of nature, composes a dire danger to society as a whole. Reoccurring tokens elected for protection are above all "the children" and "the family", along with "culture" and including human life itself.[20] The same anti-community identified with a "gender ideology" is therefore considered as the source of a "culture of death"[21] and legitimately subject to elimination. These mobilisations translate a dispute of values into a restriction of rights, a moral panic cycle utilised for the justification of authoritarianism.[22]

The catholic church maintains significant influence, although not a monopoly, in anti-gender thought and action, having had through the last two decades a leading role in spreading this narrative misrepresented as anti-hegemonic.[23] The politic and the pedagogic are enmeshed in the production of identification among apparently dissimilar subjects,[24] though I argue here precisely that what can be seen superficially as dissimilitude corresponds to underlying foundational mutualities.

Global influence

Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Mexico, United States, France, Spain, Germany, Croatia, Hungary, Slovenia, Australia.[25] In multiple iterations across the globe (not limited to the scant examples above), the anti-gender movement constitutes a unity in that it presents a common body of arguments

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17 Luna, 2017:11
18 Rondon, 2017:133
19 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:144, my translation
20 Idem:150
21 Rondon, 2017:130
22 Luna, 2017:6, 33; Amaya, 2017:165
23 Muelle, 2017:184
24 Amaya, 2017:153; Luna, 2017:40
25 Amaya, 2017; Clacai and Centurion, 2018; Kuhar and Ales, 2017; Muelle, 2017

and worldview throughout.[26] "Gender ideology" is a widespread terminology, at times substituted for "gender theory" (for instance in the case of France).[27]

Strategies are shared as well, with the school and education policies constantly considered a valued territory, seeing as the moralisation of education serves across the board as a front for diffuse demands in opposition to feminist and queer advances.[28] Organisations from the United States for instance make appearances both in Europe and in Latin America, making the unity of this political system even clearer.[29]

The spread of the movement depends, evidently, on many intertwining factors, both global and local. The level of influence of the catholic church is seen to be chief amongst those: Latin America's insipid secularism,[30] Eastern Europe's re-traditionalisation after traumatic experiences with authoritarian atheism.[31]

Self under construction

The subjectification incorporated in the anti-gender movement has as context a world in which identity politics have taken a foreground utilising a notion of subject typical to western modernity,[32] one that takes internal coherence as fact and difference as means for exclusion.

The term *identity* is dear to current political lexicon, and oftentimes is defined through a *difference paradigm* that privileges an understanding of the self in opposition to a dissimilar Other. However, while "identification is often most consequential as the categorisation of others, rather than as self-identification",[33] similarity and difference exert dialectical influence on one's subjectification and are empirically indivisible components of the same process. Citing Jenkins, identity is a "multi-dimensional classification or mapping of the human world and our places in it,"[34] and it's a dynamic reality rather than a given state – identification. Instead of inherent, it "has to be made to matter".[35]

Identity can be a valuable tool to empower agency and provide a sense of belonging, it can offer meaning and stability, but it cannot be parted from

26 Amaya, 2017:158; Luna, 2017: 32; Rondon, 2017:130
27 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:144
28 As examples, Amaya, 2017:158 on Colombia, Cesar and Duarte, 2017:144 on France
29 Amaya, 2017:159
30 Luna, 2017:9
31 Jovanovic and Markovic-Krstic, 2011:427; Kuhar, 2015 apud Amaya, 2017:158
32 Luna, 2017:6
33 Jenkins, 2008:15
34 Idem:15
35 Idem:7

power relations.[36] It implies classification, which is necessarily hierarchical in the dualistic mentality that pervades western thought,[37] a rift that makes identity politics at once a vulnerable strategy for equality movements and a convenient mind set for those who seek to support an unequal status quo. Comprehending the process of identification that surrounds and supports anti-gender mobilisation is integral to an effective analysis of this reality. It produces "citizen subjects"[38] in a project of nation, simultaneously specific to each case and common to all. A moral panic cycle (configuration of a given target as a threat to society, massification of an interpretative matrix, effort of elimination of the factors of disorder)[39] lays the terrain for polarisation. An active amalgam of subjects is formed, effectively bringing to the political debate populations that in other circumstances could refrain from engaging, a "vigilant public",[40] and this goes to show the failure of many supposed democratic systems in consistently hearing the many voices of the people.[41]

The anti-gender movement is undoubtedly created and fomented by a religious and political elite, but it is a disservice to disqualify the agency of those that bring it into life,[42] at once a conditioned mass and situated individuals that pursue their own interests and react to that which is identified as a threat. One may discount neither the weight of emotion nor that of reason in this assessment, and more questions must be asked about the inner workings that make this storm tick.

An ecofeminist lens

A common thread between researchers of the anti-gender movement is the interpretation of "gender ideology" as an empty signifier. Its themes are seen as too vast to make sense together, in such a way that to amass supporters it is articulated as a term void of meaning, no more than a symbolic glue.[43] "Gender ideology" is thus said to simply "express political opposition's nonconformity", a "counter-discourse" developed as a tool by a conservative elite,[44] a "fictionalization of the enemy".[45] While I do not entirely disagree with

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36 Plumwood, 1993:63; Jovanovic and Markovic-Krstic, 2015:421

37 Jenkins, 2008:6; Plumwood, 1993:61

38 Rondon, 2017:142

39 Luna, 2017:33

40 Amaya, 2017:155

41 An aspect very apparent in the case of Latin America and Eastern Europe, precisely the two most impacted regions.

42 Amaya, 2017:159

43 Amaya, 2017:160

44 Amaya, 2017:152–154

45 Muelle, 2017:174

these assessments, one must note that they focus on pragmatism from elites coupled with mass naivety from their endorsers, a duality that in my view does not correspond to reality – it depletes the collectives behind the anti-gender mobilisation of rationality and agency, and in that I believe one loses sight of the subjects to be analysed and, as a result, of available strategies on the part of social movements seeking to weather this political environment.

An ecofeminist analysis, as I perceive it, takes as a base the observation that presently globalised societies share a pervasive, primarily western "'logic of domination' that divides the world in bifurcated hierarchies",[46] and thus ideally calls for a "materially based analysis of alienation, hierarchy, and domination that [links] the mutually reinforcing structures of the economic, political, social, and gender hierarchies".[47]

Two chief concepts here are those of transversal dualisms and master identity, systematically rendered in Plumwood's Feminism and the Mastery of Nature (1993).

The author's baseline definition of a dualism is "the process by which contrasting concepts [...] are formed by domination and subordination and constructed as oppositional and exclusive."[48] Rather than a neutral or factual duality, a dualistic system does not allow for equality. Furthermore, dualisms as culturally expressed are transversely reinforced, one pair mapping onto multiple others in the development of meaning.[49] Overarching examples would be a man-woman dualism that historically corresponds to culture-nature, to mind-emotion, to rational-irrational – overlaps and mutual dependencies denied, and superiority and inferiority ever conceptually present.

The idea of a master model follows this framework. Taken as the measure for that which is human (as opposed to animal), it "has been arrived at by exclusion and devaluation of women, women's life-patterns and feminine characteristics, as well as by exclusion of those others and areas of life which have been construed as nature".[50] Masculine, white, western (among a plethora of other privileged characteristics that contextually vary in prominence), it is the basis upon which modernity was construed, and "'naturalise[s] domination', to make it part of the very natures or identities of both the dominant and subordinated items and thus to appear to be inevitable".[51] This master identity is emblematically embodied in colonial practices, defined as a "process of active reduction of

46 Cuomo, 2001:4
47 Gaard, 2011:29
48 Plumwood, 1993:131
49 Idem:31–47
50 Idem:28
51 Idem:32

people, the dehumanisation that fits them for the classification".[52] The catholic church has historically taken part in such processes, a dynamic which has not been left in the past but extends into the present through the preservation and promotion of certain discourses. Hence, where the concept of "gender ideology" spawns from and where it gains support, is no coincidence.

To invoke the existence of a "gender ideology" is a "naming practice" that involves the unwavering definition of an excessive, transgressive Other.[53] It must be acknowledged that, consequently, this process "circumscribes the contours of those who are normal", producing antagonist objectified-subjects that are at once excluded and necessary for identity building.[54]

Some leading examples of supposed "gender ideologists" are queers, feminists, atheists, communists, environmentalists.[55] Multiple authors demonstrate perplexity over how such a naming practice congregates apparently dissimilar elements on both sides of this dualism: Amaya (2017) for instance offers the term of "perfect storm" as a junction of distant phenomena merged by circumstance to unanticipated effects,[56] whereas Rondon (2017) suggests an "abrupt synchronization of emotions" generated by cultivated panic regarding sexual matters and overflowing to unrelated ones, and concludes this result must come about through a disregard of internal differentiation.[57] I argue, however, that the very logic that sustains a divide between "normal" and "queer" is the exact same employed to polarise the naturalness of masculine superiority against feminists, the civility of religion against the bestiality of imagined disorder, the essence of being human against the respect for and protection of a lesser nature, the citizens deserving of rights against the threats to society. Dualisms that equally transversely match here are those of health and disease[58] (the frequent image of homosexuality as an issue of public health[59]), virility and, paradoxically, both passivity and hypersexuality (a very clearly gendered and racialised distinction),[60] the value of social usefulness granted to but a few.[61]

In short, I assert that the anti-gender movement empirically demonstrates that it is built through a dualistic system in which difference (not strictly limited

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52 2010:745

53 Rondon, 2017:132–133, my translation

54 Luna, 2017:41, my translation

55 As summarised by Rondon, 2017:140–141

56 While he does at least recognize hegemonic masculinity as playing a part in sustaining some societal structures, Amaya, 2017:164

57 2017:132–138, my translation

58 Twine, 2001:39

59 Luna, 2017:31

60 Lugones, 2010:744

61 Twine, 2001:41

to gender difference *tout court,* at that) can only be interpreted and made to matter as inequality, and one cannot effectively deal with their emergence and impact without that in mind.

Necropolitics

Regarding this phenomena, as in any other, one cannot isolate its discourse and have its materiality discounted. The coloniality of gender[62] – the coloniality of the master model – is "a message written in bodies".[63] It is biopolitics, a means and an end to violent population control, a criterion to judge who deserves to live a livable life[64] and those who do not have such a right.[65]

Gaudenzi (2017) contributes the idea of bio-legitimacy as a "contemporary apparatus for the production of rights"[66] that makes the embodiment of certain social truths that which marks one as citizen, as human, as deserving of life, precisely the battle that the anti-gender movement wages in multiple yet unifiable fronts. When life itself becomes an object of contention, the body constitutes a central territory of subjectification processes, and gender nonconformity, cast beyond intelligibility, may be defined as that which nullifies one as a subject. A biosocial auto-production is, thus, the other side of the coin.

Allied to the term "gender ideology", there is that of "culture of death", alluding to a supposed threat to human life when gender is questioned (often referring to issues of reproductive freedom like abortion, or even homoparental adoption). It is interesting that ecofeminist thought also utilises the expression "culture of death", but conveying the exact opposite conclusions (that restrictions of gender are tied into restrictions of life).[67] This dissonance is evidently caused by two very different understandings of life's meaning and value, but both bring me to the usefulness of having in mind the concept of necropolitics.[68]

> "The perception of the existence of the Other as an attempt on my life, as a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security – this, I suggest, is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself."[69]

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62 Lugones, 2010
63 Muelle, 2017:175, my translation
64 Concept expanded on Butler, 2004.
65 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:145: Muelle, 2017:181–191
66 Gaudenzi, 2017:102, my translation
67 Plumwood, 1993:30
68 Mbembe, 2003
69 Idem:18

Mbembe (2003) offers the idea of necropolitics as the most basic contours of modern power (this not limited to the state), questioning the idea of reason and unreason as the main foundational categories of the political subject or community, exchanging this long privileged dualism for the concrete reality of life and death.[70] The author affirms that "sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not",[71] a statement which remarkably resonates with Butler's queer theory and whose value should be evident for feminist analysis. Gilmore's description of racism as "[state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of] group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death"[72] illustrates fairly well this perspective and is equally relevant to other transversally mapped structural oppressions. The necessity for macro, population-level analysis cannot be skirted.

Body people[73] coalition

As some final considerations, I would like to reflect on how we should go about facing this wave of "re-traditionalisation", on what could be effective as a countermeasure.

Among the identified variables to the success of anti-gender mobilisation is the extent to which gender studies and feminist movements are settled and institutionalised in a given context.[74] I agree with Cesar and Duarte (2017) that an essential problematic is that of the impermeability demonstrated by various social movements when they build on atomised and rigid identities, fracturing as a consequence and offering an advantage to a neoconservative field that presents itself as "ultra cohesive".[75]

There is also a distinct lack of "social pedagogies"[76] that could reach beyond academics and activists. To ignore feelings and subjectivity is counterproductive in that it not only puts forth the master model but alienates the very communities that one should involve as a priority.

Furthermore, although developed as a much needed counter to universalism, the difference paradigm[77] does not indicate very well a path to coalition. Submerged in identity politics, the fluidity of identification is suppressed in

70 Mbembe, 2003:13–14
71 Idem:27
72 2007, apud Spade, 2013
73 In reference to Rosemary Ruether's New Woman, New Earth, 1975
74 Amaya, 2017:161
75 Cesar and Duarte, 2017:151
76 Amaya, 2017:166, my translation
77 Idem:19

discourse and practice, and if being truly inclusive is the objective – as I believe it must be – agency has to be valued through radical pluralism.[78] An interesting concept that could aid in collective, counterhegemonic identification is that of "body people",[79] as it offers a contingent identification to all those whose embodiment is continuously marked – in other words, those who are dualistic clustered on the flip side of the master model. Finally,

> "[...] a crucial element seems to be that cooperation and alliances are facilitated by shared framing and therefore also by a focus on issues rather than identities."[80]

Gender nonconformity is under attack not only on the part of anti-gender movements, but on that of a dualistic system as a whole. Issues related to it affect the distribution of life chances[81] – access to education, to housing, to employment, to healthcare, reproductive freedoms. These concerns are, not at all coincidentally, similar to those of indigenous people or of economically marginalised populations. Why disaggregate these oppressions? Why diverge from lived reality in the name of exclusionary community building? "Gender ideology" and analogous concepts will persist until we – western and globalised societies as a whole – learn to "seek material change in the lives of vulnerable populations"[82] without exclusionary paternalism but rather as historical reparations of the privileged and engaged pursuit of freedom of the marginalised.

78 Jovanovic and Markovic-Krstic, 2015:422
79 Twine, 2001:51
80 Verloo, 2013:910
81 Subject ably discussed by Spade, 2013
82 Verloo, 2013:908

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Did you just say Catholic and gay?! Living the conflict arising from an incongruence between one's faith and sexual orientation or gender identity

Dr. Angele Deguara, PhD Anthropology, University of Malta

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Introduction

This study is about the conflict that may arise from contradictions between one's beliefs and one's sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

It explores the lived experiences of LGBT Catholics as they struggle with the dilemmas arising from their non-conformity to Catholic sexual morality in contemporary society. The conflict that may arise from these contradictions is multifaceted and complex. It tends to leave its toll on the psychological and emotional wellbeing of LGBT people of faith (Subhi & Geelan, 2012). It may also have an impact on their social interaction patterns, their relationships and their religious participation. There are those who eventually manage to embrace both the sexual and spiritual aspects of their identity rather than reluctantly having to give up one of them. However, not everyone manages to do this successfully (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Yip, 1997a).

Methodology

The study formed part of my doctoral research in social anthropology. It was based on two years of participant observation with Drachma LGBTI in Malta between January 2014 and December 2015 and a short but intense time with Ali d'Aquila in Palermo in the summer of 2015. Both communities provide a safe space for LGBTIQ individuals to reconcile their spirituality and their sexuality. To supplement the participant observation, I also conducted 25 in-depth, unstructured interviews with LGBT Catholics in Malta and in Palermo. My informants were adult, well-educated men and a few women in their thirties or early forties for whom the Catholic Church and faith occupied a significant place.

Catholic upbringing: contextualising the study

Being brought up in a traditionally Catholic society and holding dear the tenets of the Catholic faith tend to present a seemingly irreconcilable paradox for those whose sexual orientation and/or gender identity does not conform to the religious teaching they were brought up with and which they learned to embrace. My LGBT study participants were moulded into the Catholic tradition through socialisation at home, at school and during catechism classes. Many of them were also active in their parish communities or were involved in religious groups such as Legion of Mary, Youth Fellowship, Charismatic Renewal Movements or the Focolare Movement. A number of my gay male informants also spent years in religious formation.

Being Catholic becomes automatic (Day, 2011) within such contexts, as reported by other authors writing about Catholic communities in other parts of the

world (inter alia Inglis, 2007, García, Gray-Stanley & Ramirez-Valles, 2008; Hall, 2015). Noah, one of my Drachma informants, told me, "in Malta you don't choose to be Catholic. Catholicism is part of your shadow. It made me what I am today".

Catholicism for many of my informants carries much more than a cultural, symbolic or national significance. It is more than an ascribed nominalism as may be the case with an increasing number of Christians (Day, 2011).

Tyrone, who founded Drachma, told me that Catholicism was always important in his life, first as a religion, and, as time went by, as spirituality: "If I had to find five adjectives which define me in a profound way, being Catholic would be one of them".

The Catholic upbringing of my informants also instilled in them notions of what makes a 'good' Catholic. They were taught that good Catholics are heterosexual, do not have sex outside marriage, get married in Church and have children (Meek, 2014; Wolkomir, 2001).

My LGBT informants both in Malta and Palermo grew up in a society where homosexuality was not yet part of the social and political discourse as it has recently become, a factor which made it difficult for them to make sense of their sexual desires and to identify with them.

It was also a society in which the Catholic Church was still the most powerful agent in determining sexual morality, a role which it retained well into the 20th century. The more liberal attitudes characteristic of other Western cultures after World War II seeped in very slowly into Maltese society (Savona-Ventura, 2003).

Therefore, the realisation that one's sexuality does not conform to these accepted norms and values leads to a multitude of feelings, emotions, dilemmas, questions and struggles. One is faced with the ordeal of having to accept the fact that, as defined by the hegemonic culture, two aspects of oneself are incongruent.

The conflict

Studies in the social sciences and in psychology have consistently shown how LGBT Christians struggle with the incongruence arising from their seemingly irreconcilable faith and sexual desires (inter alia Dillon, 1999; Gross & Yip, 2010; Grubbs & Exline, 2014; Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013; Levy & Edmiston, 2014; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Mahaffy, 1996; Rodriguez, 2010; Schuck & Liddle, 2001; Subhi & Geelan, 2012; Subhi et al., 2011; Thumma, 1991; Toft, 2014; Wilcox, 2002, 2003; Wolkomir, 2001; Yip, 1997a, 1997b).

Conflict may take various forms and is experienced on different levels. It can be personal or interpersonal. It may involve psychological, social, cultural, moral, ethical, relational, theological and spiritual dimensions. It may span over a relatively short period of time or it may involve years of unrelenting tension and despair at times even leading to suicide (Subhi & Geelan, 2012).

Conflict with the Church

The official teaching of the Catholic Church is the main source of conflict. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (Catholic Church, 1994, p. 625 paragraphs 2357–59) clearly denounces same-sex relationships and considers them to be "objectively disordered", "a grave depravity", "contrary to the natural law" and calls on those attracted to same-sex others to lead a chaste life. One of my informants described these teachings as "the three paragraphs that brought about so much pain". Indeed, they have been the cause not only of a great deal of pain but also of confusion, fear, guilt and anger as LGBT Catholics struggle with understanding their role within the Church, their relationship with God and, more pertinently, their own sense of identity.

Considering their upbringing and their involvement within the Church, my informants are hurt by the judgement of the Church they love so much especially once they embrace the idea that their sexuality was given to them by God. They feel misunderstood and unjustly labelled as sinners. They feel pushed into the periphery and excluded from the sacraments which mean so much to them. They are angry and hurt by the homophobia they experienced within the religious communities which were so important to them.

LGBT Catholics perceive the Church's condemnation of their sexual desires as God's judgement. Consequently, they tend to experience a strong sense of guilt and, especially in the beginning, anger at God. Yet, they react in different ways to the Church's teaching. Some are Assimilators who remain loyal to the Church, despite their hurt; Deserters turn their back on the Church while Affiliators seek refuge in faith groups such as Drachma and Ali d'Aquila. My informants tend to question the authority of the Church as the sole interpreter of the scriptures. Some are angry at the hypocrisy of the Church considering its history of paedophilia and the many homosexual priests within its ranks. However, although they may disregard Church teaching on sexuality and tend to reconstruct their sexual morality, the Church hardly loses its significance. Even deserters are reluctant to let go completely. They yearn for the Church's blessing and would have preferred to have remained within its fold.

Conflict with God

Church teaching leads LGBT Catholics struggling with their sexuality to believe that they are not loved and accepted by God.

This can be a rather devastating experience (Schuck & Liddle, 2001). They think they are 'bad' or 'evil' and not worthy of God's love. This instils in them various emotions such as fear and anger (Grubbs & Exline, 2014) as they develop a very turbulent relationship with God who is initially perceived as a judge. However, as they learn to accept themselves and their sexuality, their relationship with God also changes. With time, the image of God as judge is transformed into an image of unconditional divine love (Gross & Yip, 2010). Informants refer to their relationship with the divine as a journey whose point of departure is extremely dark, characterised by many negative feelings and emotions which eventually give way to more positive sentiments such as self-acceptance (Yip & Page, 2013). When initially faced with the inconsistency between their sexuality and faith, they pray to God to make them 'normal', to remove the burden of their sexual feelings and thoughts. When this does not happen, their hope turns into fear and anger as they consider themselves to be victims of creation. They are afraid God will punish them, that they will go to hell. At the same time, they blame God for their sexuality since they believe he is their creator. They know they are sinning but at the same time they believe that their homosexual desires are beyond their control. The Trans* Catholic in my study was angry at God for giving him the wrong body and at the same time he feels guilty for wanting to make changes to his body.

One important breakthrough in all this unrelenting tension is when they acknowledge that God and the Church are separate entities. When they manage to convince themselves that God loves them and, contrary to the Church, will not judge them, their image of God changes in line with a more positive image of themselves. This correspondence between self-perception and divine imagery has been reported by others such as Benson & Spilka (1973), Marcellino (1997) and Stroope, Draper & Whitehead (2013).

Conflict within oneself

Personal conflict is experienced in a profound way by LGBT Catholics who have to deal not only with the knowledge that they are sinning against God and the Church because of their sexual desires and lifestyle choices, but also, and more importantly, because they have to come to terms with their sense of who they are. Their internal conflict is not only about their actions but also about their sense of being.

Due to their Catholic upbringing, their religious self becomes an integrated part of their identity from childhood. In contrast, their sexual self is something they become conscious of later on in life. Especially when they realise that their sexual orientation or gender identity is alien to their religious self, they become confused and traumatised. They believe that they are the only ones having such 'evil' desires. They have many questions regarding how they may live as LGBT Catholics; how they may express their love physically and whether they are viewed as bad persons in the eyes of God. After all, for LGBT Catholics who are committed to their faith, there are only two accepted alternatives when it comes to sexual relationships: living 'in sin' or celibacy (Meek, 2014). The trauma is even more severe if one lives in a highly religious family environment (Subhi et al., 2011; Wetzel, 2014).

This dilemma of coming to terms with an LGBT identity is further compounded by the fact that until relatively recently hardly anything was ever written about the issue (Epstein, 1978). Within the local context, homosexuality was decriminalised in the 1970s but culturally it remained a taboo. The heteronormative values propagated by both Church and society which my informants learned to embrace are incongruent with their emerging self. Catholics whose sexuality does not fit heterosexual norms are made to believe that being Catholic and LGBT is impossible. When they were growing up, my informants used to go to confession regularly and for some this used to be traumatic especially if they had to confess sins related to sexuality such as masturbation. The absence of a clear sense of spiritual direction as to how LGBT Catholics should live their faith as sexual beings, further exacerbates the confusion (Meek, 2014). Their enormous sense of guilt may lead to depression, trauma and other forms of psychological maladjustment (Creighton, 1990). Individuals may even contemplate suicide (Subhi et al., 2011).

Feelings of guilt could be so strong that one may end up transferring the evil attached to one's thoughts or actions onto oneself. Joseph, who is now married to the man he loves, believed so much that his homosexuality was a bad thing that he used to think that he was intrinsically bad. Guilt tends to abate with time and with the necessary support. Indeed very few informants continue to feel guilty over the years although occasionally doubts may return.

LGBT informants also used the word 'shame' to describe the feeling instigated by being watched by God. Kurt used to write to God in his diary about his "shame". His daily prayer used to end with, "God, take me [Mulej ħudni]" and suicidal thoughts often crossed his mind. Debbie struggled for twenty years, "fighting with myself, in denial because of my faith". Once she met a German woman and, "there was something so strong between us I couldn't deny it. One day she asked me to go to her hotel and I felt a strong attraction to her and all

we did was hug and I went home and I tried to wash it out of me, to scrub it out of me". In church she could not look at the crucifix, "because of the shame. I wasn't obeying God, I wasn't obeying his commandments, I wasn't obeying the Church. I couldn't handle the weight any more. It was like carrying a haversack full of stones".

It is worth noting that although when my informants were experiencing such conflicts, homosexuality carried much more social stigma than it does today, they were much less concerned with social judgement and completely devastated with feelings of guilt and lack of self-worth. Their main concern was that they were perceived as bad in the eyes of an omniscient God. This is also evident in Debbie's attempt at "washing" and "scrubbing" away her feelings of being dirty after her bodily contact with the German woman in the hotel room. It is perhaps because, as Douglas (2002) suggests, their sexual desires could not be classified according to the traditional classificatory boundaries, and therefore felt dirty, polluting or taboo. Considering that initially LGBT informants tend to hold a rather harsh view of God, any attempt at reconciling one's beliefs with one's sexuality is even more difficult (Lapinski & McKirnan, 2013).

Conflict with others

LGBT Catholics may also experience conflict with significant others although this tends to be less intense. Disclosing one's deviant sexual orientation or gender identity to others is often an ordeal which LGBT Catholics would rather avoid. Telling others about one's sexuality is not done in a vacuum but is embedded in everyday experiences of how homosexuality is constructed and related to in one's social context (Plummer, 1995). Therefore individuals may delay revealing their 'secret' for years, suffering in silence, praying that they will change and dreading the consequences if they do not. The dilemmas start presenting themselves even before the point of disclosure with informants experiencing a great deal of anxiety not only about when to find the right moment to speak to their significant others but also how to tell them, whom to tell first and more importantly, that they do not happen to hear about it before from someone else. 'Coming out' is a big step. They know that once they are 'out' to others, they may be subjected to ridicule, discrimination or rejection. Challenging the heterosexual imaginary (Ingraham 1994, p. 203) and disregarding the morality structures of the Church have their consequences.

LGBT informants may experience conflict with significant others particularly in the early stages of 'coming out'. Conflict with significant others tends to be quite dramatic although often short-lived. Being in a relationship complicates matters further. Friends and siblings are more likely to accept LGBT individuals than parents when they 'come out' to them (Brown & Trevethan, 2010, p.

271) especially if the parents are religious which is the case for most of my informants. Consequently, individuals may resort to selective disclosure or controlled information as a risk management tactic (Kaufman & Johnson, 2004). They may not 'come out' to everyone in the family taking into consideration the circumstances and the risks involved. There is no conclusive research regarding whether it is mothers or fathers who find it the more difficult to accept the news. My ethnographic research confirms that there is no general rule although mothers are generally more understanding and supportive.

Individuals may also choose not to reveal their sexuality within religious communities or to employers for fear of being pushed out or discriminated against such as when Gabriella said nothing about her lesbian relationship during her involvement in a parish committee. 'Coming out' to a religious community is a very tough decision because of the homophobia that tends to characterise such communities. There were those who revealed their homosexuality and had to bear the consequences. Some had to relinquish their previous role in the community. Others decided to leave, acknowledging that since they cannot be open about their sexuality or their relationships, they no longer belong. Others were shunned or made to deny or repress their homosexuality.

Conclusion

Eventually, many tend to find ways of resolving the crisis by finding an acceptable balance.

With time, most of my informants stop being the "Orthodox Catholics" (Inglis, 2007) they were in the past and tend to become "Creative Catholics" who do not stick rigidly to the rules of the Catholic Church.

They tend to distance themselves from the Church on matters related to sexuality without relinquishing their Catholic identity and their wish to be embraced by the same Church. They also tend to explore alternative ways of living their spirituality (Inglis, 2007). Some LGBT Catholics even manage to emerge out of the conflict proud of their sexuality while others continue to have doubts, to question, to seek therapy and to wish they were 'normal'.

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SOCIAL ISSUES

Narratives of older lesbian and gay persons: Exploring disparities within social and health care support in Malta

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The background context

Research on sexuality and ageing is relatively limited (Simpson et at., 2017). It is therefore unsurprising that the needs of older adults remain generally unknown. Indeed, many service providers are unaware that LGBTI[1] persons are also potential users of their services (Hughes, et al., cited in Fredriksen-Goldsen, Hoy-Ellis, Goldsen, Emlet, & Hooyman, 2014). This notion has resulted in older LGBT persons becoming medically underserved and at a higher risk of health problems than their heterosexual counterparts, thus calling for a much-needed enquiry into making these services accessible (Erdley, Anlam & Reardon, 2014).

Older persons came of age at a time when their environment attempted to "normalise" them by means of psychological or medical treatment, physical and psychological abuse and denial of health care access (Witten, 2012).

The voice of the older LGBTI community in Malta seems to be repeatedly forgotten even within a context of gay affirmative policies, and Malta rating as first among European countries by the ILGA-Europe Rainbow Index (Vella, 2017). Establishing a growing acceptance of the LGBTI population in the Western world is not enough to secure an environment in which the identity of the person can continue to develop and flourish in a space that is free from negative attitudes, stigma and discrimination (de Vries, 2015). When reaching older age, and by keeping the person at the centre of care, it is argued that one cannot properly provide an adequate care plan if both history and future fears of the older persons are disregarded (Pugh, 2012). The main purpose of this study was to voice the stories of older lesbians and gay men in terms of how they are experiencing older age, in particular with relation to health care and social support. The research adopted a qualitative methodology, which is set to provide a deeper meaning and understanding of social phenomena. More specifically a narrative inquiry, that of the Biographic-Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) was utilised.

Originally this research study set to inquire the lives of lesbian and gay men above the age of sixty-five (65). For gay men, this initial target population was not challenging to reach, however the same could not be said for the lesbian cohort, possibly due to further invisibility, fear and discomfort in being interviewed. This phenomenon seems to concur with other gerontological research as lesbians are more likely to hold reservations about their identity in 'going public' and are seen as an ignored and invisible sub-population (Averett and Jenkins, 2012; Heaphy, Yip and Thompson, 2004).

Eventually a total of six (6) participants, who identified as lesbian or gay, over the age of fifty-eight (58) years and who are living in Malta were chosen and

1 lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex

interviewed for the purpose of this dissertation (see table 1). A total of two women aged 58 and one aged 67 accepted to be interviewed and formed part of the lesbian population, while the gay male population consisted of one aged 73, 67 and the other 58. The reason for accepting the 58-year-old participant, was because he was the third person willing to be interviewed, to which his narrative was one embedded with deep experiences into health care and social support, and who made use of the services provided by the department of active ageing and community care. Such narrative was deemed highly relevant by the researcher in respect to the research matter.

Pseudo Name	Gender identity	Sexual Orientation	Age	Occupation
Joseph	Male	Gay	73	Sugar craft cake decorator (Retired)
Karl	Male	Gay	67	Activity coordinator (Retired)
Peter	Male	Gay	58	Hairdresser (Retired)
Charlotte	Female	Lesbian	66	Teacher (Semi-retired)
Therese	Female	Lesbian	58	Marketing officer
Elisabeth	Female	Lesbian	58	Accountant

Table 1: Participants

It's interesting to note that during the interviews, the men were very gay affirmative, and comfortable in self-identifying as gay. However, the same cannot be said for the women. At the start of the interview, the women interviewed made it clear that they do not feel the need to identify as lesbian, and that they are against the idea of labelling people. They also added that they don't want to be associated with such a term due to its negative connotations. One exception to this ideology was one participant who felt more comfortable identifying as gay rather than lesbian.

Results

The pink route travelled

In reaching older age all participants spoke about their past, of having "no support as youngsters have today, so you had to find your kind, which was something very difficult" (Therese).

Others disclosed how they were tormented in knowing that they were different from what was considered the norm, to the extent of attempting suicide a number of times, as disclosed by one of the participants. Others highlighted escape routes such as that of entering into heterosexual marriages, leaving the island or joining the priesthood.

All participants led active lives, some in paid work, while others in volunteering, rendering similar life patterns to that of younger days, as Elizabeth expressed: "Life as myself, is an older version of myself 20 years ago". Maintaining a healthy lifestyle for Karl is important as it enables him to look and feel young, as he disclosed: "I keep myself active through sports and make sure my testosterone levels are maintained." Leading active lives may keep loneliness at bay, but this comes at a price, which not all are able to afford, as some struggled even with basic necessities, in particular, rent and nutrition. Therese also stated that "as you get older you have less opportunities because people think you have gone over the hill, and people give you less attention". In reaching older age, Therese came to value more the reconnection with family and friends together with the importance of being in good health.

Relationship with health care and social support services

In general, participants do not recall having experienced discrimination, however Peter's story in particular was different. Peter recalled a couple of incidents where he felt mistreated due to his sexual orientation. One episode was when he took his husband to the emergency department due to heart problems where he recalled the staff asking all sorts of questions regarding the role of Peter in all of this, and eventually sent them to the Genitourinary Clinic instead. As he disclosed: "that really hurt me…eventually we had to go to a private clinic and when the consultant saw…his heart scans, he [was] admitted immediately to the general hospital as he was going to die". Another episode was with the support services, who would not allow for a male carer to assist with his activities of daily living (ADLs) as he was told that due to his marital status and his sexual orientation, he would have to be supported by a female carer.

Overlooked: where does one belong?

The general feeling expressed by the participants was that they do not bother to interact with the local gay community as they felt that there is no space for them and that the gay community is split, “we are not a united gay and lesbian scene at all, and that’s a shame!” (Therese). A sense of fear is also expressed by being associated with social gatherings organised specifically for LGBTI persons as Charlotte stated: “In Malta I don’t go for the fact that someone would bash you, Malta is too small”. Karl disclosed how most feel defeated when reaching older age as he stated: “gay older persons feel resigned, poor them, and don’t have anywhere to go.” (Karl).

Nearing the end of the rainbow

All participants hoped that given the option they would age-in-place, as they all dread the idea of being sent to a care home. Some held the belief that they would ‘die young’, while others did not give much thought to it and lived day by day, while others took the necessary measures and retrofitted their home. The idea of later-life however did come with deep concern as Therese stated: “the worst part of that is when you start to get old and you end up in an old people’s home. That scares the hell out of me, and it scares the hell out of a lot of us, because your parents die and your siblings don’t want to take care of you”.

From invisibility to visibility

All participants disclosed the hopes of someday having the option of a gay friendly care home, or exclusive premises. They feel that since Malta is the leader of LGBT rights in Europe, this is the next big thing which the government should embark on. Ideas were disclosed of transforming abandoned buildings into an exclusive LGBT care home, to even allocating a wing within St. Vincent de Paul Residence (SVP).

What troubles the participants is the fact that if they are to be placed in a random care home which is run under a heteronormative culture, where they would be stripped of the freedom to express themselves. “(T)hat would be very hard, that you would not be able to speak about or share your story with others” (Peter). It was further elaborated how inclusivity is to be transmitted in the approach to service, irrespective of how one identifies, placing great importance on the type of language used, “there needs for more tactfulness on this matter, more sensitivity” (Peter).

Discussion

A rigorous approach was used to extract, an array of themes that began to emerge from the thematic analysis. Each of these thematic aspects were contrasted to, and examined with, previous research. The following diagram shows the themes which emerged from this study:

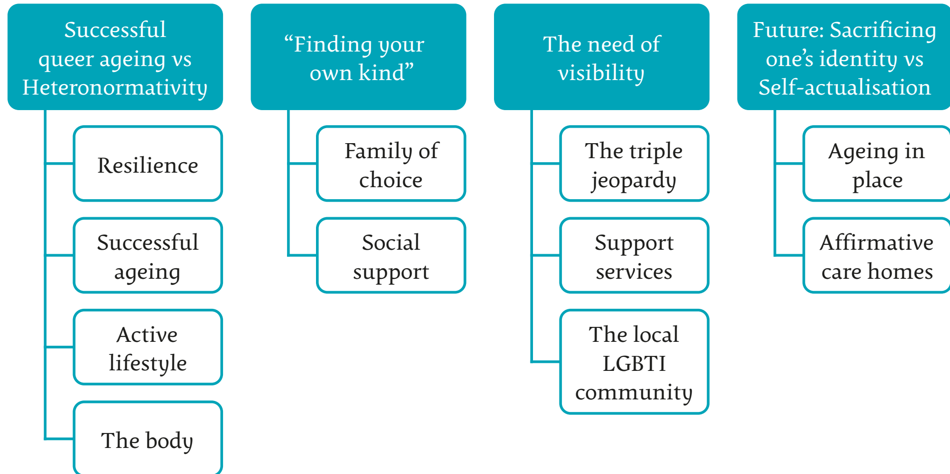

Diagram 1: Emerging themes and sub-themes

Successful queer ageing vs. heteronormativity

All the participants disclosed how throughout their lives they subscribed to the idea that the heteronormative culture and discourse were the socially appropriate and acceptable ways of life to follow. Deviating from the norm, and choosing a different life course, was not an easy route to follow, an ideology that echoes the findings of Vella (2013); and in fact, some of the participants spoke about how they had to escape the system and leave the island, while others simply endured psychological distress in trying to convince themselves, at times unsuccessfully, that being gay was not a sin. A common trait which emerged is that of 'resilience' as, despite having their own limitations, participants remained active within their sphere of life and have adapted successfully to older age. As defined in Rowe and Kahn (1997), successful aging entails having high active engagement within society, high physical functioning and low risk disease. In leading active lives, and by means of contributing to society, participants disclosed how such acts are executed through means of caregiving to friends and family; and volunteering.

Anticipating the future role of acting as the primary caregiver to family members as was stated by Therese, places her in the heteronormative practice of the adult child-parent dynamic as described by Muraco and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2014). This sense of future duty as expressed by Therese falls in line with Bonnici (cited in Formosa, 2015) as he states that, for many Maltese caregivers, providing care to a family member is considered as a duty.

In the context of active ageing, all women interviewed spoke of how they will continue to work, even though two are approaching retirement. However, a good part of the reason for remaining in paid work is also the financial motive, as all female participants stated how nowadays employment has become imperative to maintain a relatively good lifestyle. They acknowledged how important it is to remain part of the workforce, a point of view that is worthy of note as 76% of the general Maltese population view older persons as great contributors to the workplace (European commission, cited in Formosa, 2015). In this context, it is thus imperative that workplaces remain safe places and that equal opportunities are provided, irrespective of one's sexual orientation.

"Finding your own kind"

The title of the above theme is quoted by Therese. The importance of having a good support network as one enters older age was deemed to be imperative, and participants spoke of support consisting of two types: that of having a good close circle of friends and the ideal situation of having a life partner as opposed to loneliness.

Having, throughout their life, experienced a lack of understanding towards their lifestyle, and in being different to the norm, the participations have along the years established strong ties of friendship and a good support system. As highlighted by Kushner, Neville, and Adams, (2013); Heaphy, (2007); Snyder, Jenkins, and Joosten, (2007), such strong ties are equated to 'family of choice'.

Joseph explained how, even though he is in a relationship with his husband, his close circle of friends has always been there and continue to be a great part of his life. The nature of such friendships correlates to Gabrielson and Holston's (2014) definition of family of choice, where, it is stated that (a) it replaces relatives' roles, namely those who are related by blood such as 'siblings', (b) is characterised by longevity; that of having a long history with the person, relationships of 25–30 years, (c) provides safety and intimacy and commonality; common understanding and values and (d) holds great trust and reciprocity in support.

Most participants, also spoke of social support in terms of life partners as being the ideal type, as was also highlighted in Muraco and Fredriksen-Goldsen (2014). As further stated in Goldsen et al., (2017) such persons enjoy better overall

health benefits. Joseph explained, in fact, how his husband brought him peace of mind and security in knowing that, no matter what, he had someone to turn to for support, in sickness and in health. This notion is also in line with the findings of Vella, (2013) wherein it is stated that such bonds among couples brought about a sense of security.

In Malta, the safeguards that marriage can provide can be legally acceded to by means of a civil union or civil marriage. (Vella, 2017). Both Joseph and Peter explained how shortly after this became law, they applied and were soon recognised as a legally married couple. As Joseph further disclosed, even though he was not as comfortable with getting married due to his age, he saw that such a union would place their relationship at par with that of heterosexual couples meaning that Joseph and his partner would enjoy the same rights and benefits. Marriage is seen as opposed to having the relationship not recognised which leads to 'disenfranchisement', defined by Doka (2002) as a loss which cannot be publicly acknowledged, therefore is not publicly supported.

The need of visibility

The sense of visibility could not be said to be the same for older LG persons. In comparison to men, lesbians like other women, also experience limitations in income, due to a history of career disparities (Orel, 2004), which in turn may impinge on their health insurance, leaving their care needs unmet in later life (Heck, Sell, & Gorin, 2006). Similar local statistics also indicate how older women are at greater risk of poverty (Formosa, 2015). When living just above the poverty line, Therese explained that trying to live a healthy lifestyle comes at quite an expense which could only be maintained if one has a decent income. As she further explained the daily struggles she faces, becoming aware of the food she buys, as basic necessities in maintaining a healthy balanced diet have become expensive. On a general local context, this falls in line with Formosa (2015) when stating that poverty follows a disabling effect which results in the inability to consume 'normal' goods and services, affecting their diet and nutrition as well as leisure activities.

The concern that policies should better cater for providing better access to LGBT sensitive and specific care (Houghton, 2018), Peter stated how there must be more visibility and understanding to the needs of older LG persons especially by those working within support services.

This sense of invisibility, does not only manifest within the wider social community but also with the LGBTI community itself. This reality was expressed by almost all the participants, as they are made to feel discriminated against on the basis of their age, as in Malta the gay spaces and activities are geared and more focused on the younger generation.

Future: Sacrificing one's identity vs. self-actualisation

When considering the future, all participants expressed that ageing in place, within their home, surrounded by significant others and friends, as supported by Knocker, (2012), seemed to be the only viable option in retaining their sense of self and overall wellbeing. Expressing helplessness and hopelessness when facing the future fear of ending up in a nursing home, most participants felt that they would have to sacrifice their true self as reiterated by Goltz (2010), who reported that entering into a care home would be a form of punishment for LG persons, with Karl conveying how older LG persons end up totally institutionalised, with no liberty of expressing their true selves.

Peter further explained how he would not be able to take part in any activities which would entail talking about his life story, due to the fact of living with people who are of a different mentality, and who may not accept such narratives. This aligns with Margolis (2014), who opines that when seeking long-term care there lies the pre-occupation that the LG person's sexuality would not be recognised, tolerated or accepted. Retiring in a residential home in a heteronormative setting may re-awaken certain anxieties, leading the person to undo any behavioural mannerisms, which may be deemed abnormal by others, and potentially identifying the person as a target for humiliation.

When thinking about their future selves, and if they were no longer able to live independently in their own homes, the option of a gay affirmative care home would enable them to live in a safe environment free from all forms of judgement and ridicule. It is also believed that such provision should be the government's next bold move as being the leader in LGBT rights across Europe.

The hopes of someday having such LGBT affirmative care homes, which would provide an inclusive and safe environment free from potential discrimination ties in with what was stated by Barrett in Willis, Miegusuku, Raithby, and Miles, (2014). This finding also coincides with the AARP survey which reported that older LGBTI persons would feel more comfortable if providers were specifically trained on LGBTI needs, as well as to have care providers who themselves identify as LGBTI (Houghton, 2018).

Conclusion

This collection of narratives provided an in-depth look into the lives of some older lesbians and gay men, and their own understanding of what it means to identify as an older Maltese lesbian or gay person. The results which emerged from this study delineate the importance of understanding where they are coming from, the societal factors which shaped the person they are today and how this has impacted their outlook towards social and health care support.

The ‘gayby boomers’, have brought about a new demographic to population ageing in Malta, like no other generation before. From the six narratives explored, a sense of uncertainty emerged, showing that there is an unconscious conflict between living the life of an older affirmative LG person, and the inherent need to conform to heteronormativity in order to be adequately cared for, with this notion becoming even more pronounced in later life.

In fact, it seems that the denial of true self comes with the fear of living old age in institutionalised care which is built around a heteronormative culture.

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Developing an understanding of the experiences of parents whose child has come out as homosexual

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Introduction

Overview of the literature

Gay men and lesbian women frequently choose to hide their homosexuality from others due to fear of rejection and discrimination (Chur-Hansen, 2004). Nevertheless, as time progresses, homosexual individuals are increasingly disclosing their sexual orientation to their parents (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). Although studies focusing on parental reactions to coming out as homosexual are limited (Saltzburg, 2004; Goldfried & Goldfried 2001), the ones available revealed that the most common reactions include: disbelief, denial, intolerance, rejection, sadness, anger, shock, and self-blame (Ben-Ari, 1995; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Saltzburg, 2004). Most literature suggests that about half of all parents express some sort of negative reaction (LaSala, 2000; D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005). Fathers are generally more negative than mothers towards finding out that a child is homosexual (D'Augelli, Hershberger & Pilkington, 1998; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). However, many parents who initially showed a negative response to their child's coming out often become more tolerant and supportive over time (Holtezen & Agresti, 1990; Saltzburg, 2004).

The child-parent relationship often experiences a degree of breakdown in cases where parents react negatively to their coming out. These individuals are often less close and less involved in their relationship with their parents in comparison to their heterosexual correspondents (Ueno, 2005). This places homosexual individuals at an increased risk of social isolation and depression (Saltzburg, 2004). Parents who are more positive in their reactions, often experience an improved relationship with their children. Thus, their children are more resilient and have an overall enhanced well-being (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

Finding out that a child is gay is often defined by parents as one of the most difficult experiences in their lives, particularly during the first year after disclosure (Herdt & Koff, 2000). The process of acceptance depends on a number of factors and experiences that the family had gone through. This is why some parents might require more time to attain acceptance (Goldfried & Goldfried, 2001). One of the most common feelings that parents have during this time is the loss of plans they had made for their children (Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998).

Parental support towards a child's sexual orientation has been highlighted in the literature (Sheets & Mohr, 2009; Needham & Austin, 2010). However, parental support cannot be competently offered unless these parents are

helped in dealing with their own fear, shame, and other feelings that they might go through upon finding out that their child is homosexual (Shpigel & Diamond, 2014). This might be particularly problematic for parents who had no prior notion of their child's sexual orientation (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005). To help them better face this news, parents often seek support during this transitional period, and are often referred to therapy. Irrespective of such interventions, acceptance cannot be forced onto parents, and although few, some parents still refuse to accept their child's homosexuality (Shpigel & Diamond, 2014). In view of the fact that homosexual individuals long for parental acceptance of their true identity (Diamond, et al., 2011) innovative measures can be implemented to help parents better adjust to their child's coming out.

The present study

As highlighted in the previous section, research on the parental experience following the child's 'coming out' has often been overlooked. Most of the available studies focus on the homosexual individual's experience (Saltzburg, 2004). This work focuses on the parents' side of the story. The presented findings will be beneficial in helping other parents to deal with their child's disclosure of homosexuality with the hope of making adjusting to such a reality easier for both parents and homosexual individuals.

What do parents go through when they find out that their child is gay? This is the main research question behind this study. The parents' initial reactions to finding out that their child is homosexual and how this influences them, is also discussed. Whether disclosure affects the parents' relationship with their children in any way, how parents adjust to finding out that their child has a homosexual orientation, as well as interventions that parents feel might have helped them better adapt to this reality, are also put forward.

Method

Participants and Data Collection

It was decided that the informants of the study would be made up of both parents of individuals with a homosexual orientation and individuals with a homosexual orientation. Although the study focuses on the parental experience after a child's disclosure of homosexuality, individuals with a homosexual orientation were also involved. This was done to increase the credibility and validity of the results through data triangulation (Bryman, 2008).

The data was collected through five focus groups with parents and three focus groups with homosexual individuals. A total of nineteen parents and seventeen homosexual individuals participated in the study. The initial sample of both parents of individuals with a homosexual orientation and the homosexual individuals themselves were recruited from a local religious support group. The remaining participants were recruited through snowball sampling. Although the latter did not attend the religious support group, all the participants were of Roman Catholic faith. The demographics of the participants is presented in Figure 1.

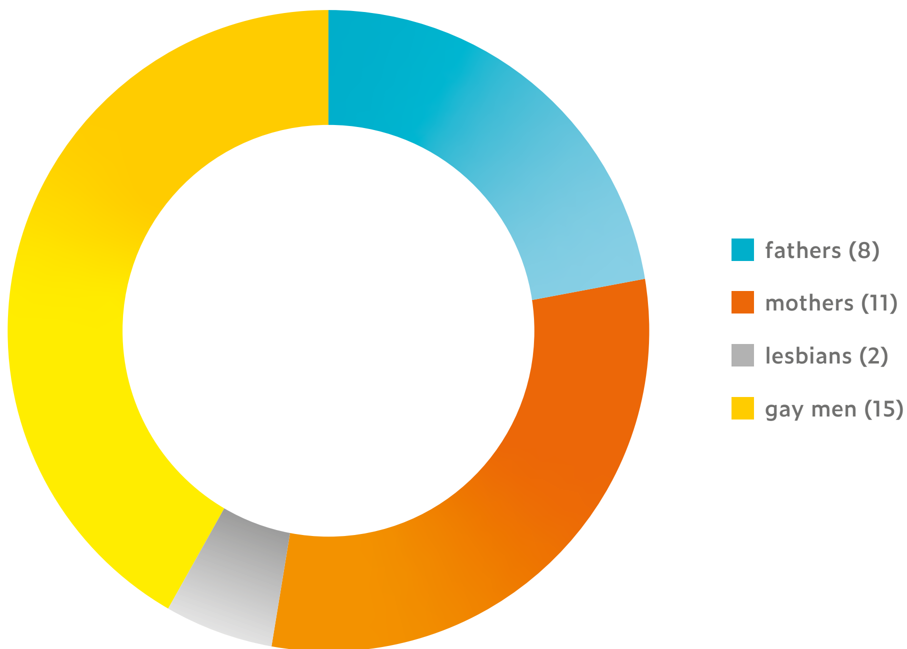

Figure 1: Demographics of the participants

Analysis and results

Thematic analysis was carried out following the detailed guidelines presented by Braun and Clarke (2006). Generally, the findings derived from the focus groups with both parents and homosexual individuals coincided with each other. However, the narratives given by the parents were more in depth when compared to the responses given by homosexual individuals as the parents were talking about their own experience.

Parental reactions to coming out

Almost all parents reacted in one way or another to learning that their child was homosexual. A number of homosexual individuals stated that they did not expect the reaction they received from their parents. Although reactions varied, initial negative reactions were more predominant. Generally, fathers' initial reactions seemed to be more negative than mothers' initial reactions. Parental reactions were grouped as emotional, cognitive and behavioural. Emotional reactions were the most common and included shock, sadness, shame, confusion, and anger. The theme of shock was very dominant. In fact, Marthese stated "I couldn't speak to him, I grabbed the car keys and went for a drive". Thomas added that "my father was angry and yes, it was a bit unexpected". Although less common, there were positive emotional reactions which included relief and resilience. Connie stated that "at that time I started crying heavily. They weren't tears of sadness, but more a sense of relief".

Most of the cognitive reactions arose once the initial emotional reactions started fading. In the early stages after coming out, several parents mentioned that they had hoped that their child's homosexuality was just a phase and that they were initially in denial. Emily expressed that "I know that at a certain point in their lives people question who they are, so I continued to hope". Behavioural reactions came at a later stage. Such responses often formed part of the coping mechanisms used by parents to deal with the news of disclosure. Rita admitted that "I felt extremely stupid and ignorant, and I needed the facts".

Dealing with coming out

The four main themes identified were seeking support, education and information, maintaining normalcy, and religious coping. Most parents took their own initiative in seeking support. Participants stated that support from others was crucial in helping them sieve through their mixed emotions, allowing them to move forward and reach acceptance. Marika expressed that she was there to support her son after his coming out yet "at the same I needed someone to support me". More than half of the parents stated that they either had no previous knowledge about homosexuality or had various misconceptions and homophobic tendencies. Andrew who came from very religious roots stated that "I was against it before, and I couldn't stand them because that is what I was taught". He admitted that getting the right information about homosexuality was very important in his journey towards reaching acceptance. Only parent participants mentioned that they tried to maintain normalcy after their child's coming out by trying to limit its impact on general family functioning. Religious coping was achieved through support and information

from members of the clergy, prayer and their personal relationship with god. Andrew said, "I prayed God to help me".

Implications of coming out

The two major implications of coming out were the effect on the child-parent relationship and on the parents' own lives. Some participants mentioned that initially their relationship became distant and awkward. Antonio had stated that his father had told him "I live my life and you live yours". In most cases the child-parent relationship was restored once initial negative reactions had faded. More than half of the participants revealed that eventually the child-parent relationship was better than before coming out as it became more trustworthy. Marthese proudly expressed that "when he had a partner, he told me straight away, whereas before he never used to say anything".

The majority of parents felt that their child's coming out influenced their own life. Most of these implications were positive. The most common response by participants was that after their child's coming out they became more educated about homosexuality. "I realised that the church has it wrong somehow" (Antida) and this resulted in decreased prejudice and judgments towards homosexuality and other minority groups which were not necessarily related to sexual orientation. A number of parents felt the need to become active in the LGBTIQ community.

A negative implication was that parents initially went into their own closet and hid their child's sexual orientation from others protecting their child and themselves. Joyce said that "I felt uneasy going to the grocery shop".

Factors influencing parental adjustment

The most common factor influencing parental adjustment was that parents who supported more traditional religious beliefs found it harder to reach acceptance. Christian stated that "if there wasn't religion, it would have been more helpful". Parents who had previous contact with homosexuality through their profession and other encounters were more likely to be more accepting. Other life experiences or hardships also affected adjustment both positively – "when I saw him like that I said I'd rather he was gay than dying" (Andrew) and negatively – "it was tough, I was dealing with four major issues at the same time" (Antida). General family functioning was only mentioned by parent participants. In fact, participants stated that good general family functioning prior to coming out facilitated acceptance. Being in a homosexual relationship, age of parents, media, social media, and legalisation of civil gay rights, were only mentioned by homosexual individuals. The sense of stability in homosexual

relationships "gives more peace of mind to parents" (Maronia) which facilitated adjustment.

Parental acceptance

The last theme was parental acceptance and suggestions for improving parent's acceptance after coming out. Almost all the participants stated that even those parents who initially reacted negatively to finding out that their child was homosexual eventually reached some degree of acceptance. Rita expressed that "acceptance comes in doses, I realise there were times I thought I had accepted it but there was still room for improvement". Alan said that although his parents accept that he is gay, they do not support gay marriage and "it would be an awkward moment for them". Only one participant mentioned that his relationship with his father was destroyed after coming out. Another participant stated that although he has a relationship with his father, he does not feel accepted and the topic of his sexual orientation is avoided. When it comes to improving parental acceptance, the general consensus was that there needs to be more education in order to change society's perception of homosexuality. Ralph said that "we have moved forward, but mentality takes time to change, which is why the people in the street need to be educated, because education brings a change in mentality".

Conclusion

General discussion

Both parents and individuals with a homosexual orientation expressed that coming out was a difficult experience (D'Augelli, Grossman & Starks, 2005; Saltzburg, 2004). Apart from a few exceptions, in general, parents always reacted towards their child's coming out. Although reactions were mixed, the initial reactions were often negative (Ben-Ari, 1995; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Saltzburg, 2004). The first reactions were categorised into emotional, cognitive, and behavioural (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). Through such feelings (emotional) parents were able to develop an understanding of what it means to be homosexual (cognitive) and become more tolerant of gay culture (Phillips & Ancis, 2008). This in turn, led most of them to accept their child's homosexuality (behavioural). Although previous literature suggested that parents move through stages of grief similar to those experienced after the loss of a loved one, this research concluded that this is not always the case (De Vine; 1983–84; Robinson, Skeen & Walters, 1989; Savin-Williams & Dube, 1998). Furthermore, a number of homosexual individuals

stated that they did not expect the reaction they received from their parents upon disclosure of homosexuality. This confirms that parental reactions to coming out may be different and unpredictable (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

D'Augelli, Grossman and Starks (2005) stated that coming out is a challenging period for parents. Participants elicited four main ways of dealing with coming out which included seeking support, education and information, maintaining normalcy, and religious coping. This coincides with more recent findings (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

The results from this study suggest that coming out can have a number of implications on the child-parent relationship. A number of parents stated that their child's coming out did not impact their relationship with their child. However, some participants mentioned that initially their relationship with their children became distant and awkward. This coincides with Ueno (2005) who stated that a degree of breakdown in the child-parent relationship often occurs in cases where parents reacted negatively to coming out. In most cases the child-parent relationship was restored once initial negative reactions faded (Goodrich, 2009; Savin-Williams, 1998b). Boxer, Cook and Herdt (1991) stated that coming out intensified already troublesome child-parent relationships. The findings of this study verified this. Nevertheless, more than half of the participants revealed that the child-parent relationship eventually became more open and they felt that trust in their relationship was enhanced (Goodrich 2009; Phillips & Ancis, 2008). D'Augelli, Grossman, Starks and Sinclair (2010) attempted to differentiate between the impact of coming out between gay men and lesbian women, and their parents. The results of the present study were not conclusive in this regard. This was mainly due to the fact that the majority of participants were parents of homosexual men. Thus, there is the need for further research that focus on the child-parent relationship which take into consideration differences of coming out between sexes.

Most of the implications of coming out on the parents' lives were positive. Through education, participants were able to eliminate any misconceptions and stigma that they might have had about homosexuality, making them more accepting as individuals. Participants also pointed out that education helps to decrease prejudice and judgments towards other minority groups which were not necessarily related to sexual orientation (LaSala, 2000; Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015).

Participants with strong religious beliefs reacted more negatively to finding out that their child was homosexual and took longer to reach acceptance (Savin-Williams, 2001). Some participants mentioned how at a certain point, they felt the need to question their religious beliefs and the teachings of the church. Such findings were also evident in Maslowe and Yarhouse (2015) where

parents even went as far as leaving the organisation that they had followed all their lives. However, none of the parent participants in the present study left the Catholic Church.

General family functioning was identified as one of the factors influencing parental adjustment. Crosbie-Burnett, Foster, Murray & Bowen (1996) suggested that like any other major life event, coming out may impact the stability of the parents' relationship depending on how the couple approach it (Olson, 2000). In fact, most participants stated that good general family functioning helped them adjust to the news that their child was homosexual. One particular mother was going through a separation and found it more difficult when her son came out as she had to deal with the news on her own.

Two of the parents were social workers by profession. Having worked in a professional setting where they encountered homosexuality, as well as having the knowledge and experience in helping others going through similar experiences, facilitated the adjustment for these parents. Beeler and DiProva (1999) had suggested that parents who have continuous contact with homosexuality are more likely to be more accepting. Similarly, parents who had friends and colleagues who were homosexual said that this made it easier for them to reach acceptance. Saltzburg (2004) suggested that parents could identify a mentor from the gay community in order to help facilitate parental adjustment.

Phillips and Ancis (2008) stated that during the adjustment period, parents encounter 'turning points' or 'milestone' events. In this study, other life experiences influenced parental adjustment to coming out. Experiences which included death of a child and near-death experiences made parents realise that sexual orientation is something which they can live with. Nevertheless, having more than one major issue to deal with during the same period can impede parental adjustment.

Parents are often concerned about the stability of their child's future because homosexuality is often associated with unsafe sex practices and promiscuity (Maslowe & Yarhouse, 2015). The findings of the present study suggested that parents whose child was in a long-term homosexual relationship found it easier to reach adjustment. In addition to this, the legalisation of gay rights gave individuals with a homosexual orientation the possibility of getting married and having a family of their own (Patterson, Risking & Tornello, 2014). This gave parents more peace of mind which further facilitated parental adjustment.

Participants mentioned that older parents found it more difficult to adjust. This might be associated with when their own beliefs were formed. Crandall and Eshleman (2003) suggested that a person's individual beliefs are established early on in life. Thus, it is implied that the beliefs of parents who are older in age

were established in a historical period where attitudes towards homosexuality were more negative. Therefore, it is not necessarily the age of the parents which is influencing their adjustment, but rather their personal beliefs. The need for future studies about parental adjustment to learning that a child is homosexual and the age of the parents are needed to clarify this.

Limitations of the study

The qualitative nature of this study means that the results obtained cannot be generalised. The fact that all the participants were of Roman Catholic faith means that the experiences of parents coming from other religions or who are non-believers, were not considered in this research. Another limitation is the fact that participants of this study attended a support group.

Proposals for policy

1. The initiation of educational programmes for the community about homosexuality and how to deal with being homosexual. Proper education about homosexuality might lead to a decrease in social stigma.
2. To educate parents about the possibility of having a child with a homosexual orientation. This might be done by including the topic as part of the state parental education courses. This might reduce negative reactions such as shock.
3. The development of a social services structure which offers free professional assistance to both parents and homosexual individuals who are dealing with coming out. Such a structure would help offer such services to individuals who are less financially stable.
4. The promotion of current available services offered by NGO's, the state and other private organisations. In a world being taken over by technology, promotion should be targeted through the media with a focus on social media as it is available to a larger number of people.

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The Broken Rainbow: Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence

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Insight on same-sex intimate partner violence (SSIPV)[1]

About fifty years ago, same-sex relationships were not included when researchers and feminist activists focused on intimate partner violence (IPV) because the issue of IPV/DV was viewed as 'wife abuse' in both patriarchal and heteronormative marriage and society. At the time lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals were mostly closeted since same-sex attraction was viewed as pathological, deviant behaviour, sinful, and/or a mental disorder/sickness; prior to the 1970s same-sex relationships were illegal in most countries (Potoczniak, Mourot, & Crosbie-Burnett, 2003).

The first book regarding lesbian violence was first published in 1986, while in relation to gay men and abuse, the process was slower and started in the 90s. Nowadays, SSIPV is not particularly visible and spoken about, society rejects its importance and it remains a topic which still requires further exploration (Baker, Moniz, & Nava, 2012). One possible reason may be that society upholds the myth that only men are perpetrators, women are victims, and violence is only likely to take place in heterosexual relationships. SSIPV also challenges gender-based assumptions in relation to manifestations of IPV, its cultural narratives and stereotypes (Baker, Moniz, & Nava, 2012). There is also a lack of research available locally regarding SSIPV. To date only one research study has been carried out by a social work student at the University of Malta, back in 2014 (Mifsud, 2014).

Literature

Prevalence

Modern studies indicate that SSIPV seems to be increasing. Some studies affirm that it is even more likely to occur in even higher numbers than amongst heterosexual couples (Banks & Fedewa, 2012). It affects one-quarter to nearly three-quarters of LGB individuals. This data is comparable to reported rates of IPV occurring in abusive heterosexual relationships; still data is at best only an estimate of the phenomenon (Banks & Fedewa, 2012).

Studies show that amongst the LGB community, bisexual female women seem to be more at risk, both in heterosexual and lesbian relationships, owing to the role that jealousy plays in IPV which may lead to more frequent triggers of violence (Banks & Fedewa, 2012).

1 SSIPV is defined as a 'pattern of violent or coercive behaviours whereby a lesbian or gay man seeks to control the thoughts, beliefs, or conduct of an intimate partner or to punish the intimate partner for resisting the perpetrator's control' (Potoczniak, Mourot, & Crosbie-Burnett, 2003).

Visibility and acceptance of LGB relationships may have increased, however some individuals may not feel comfortable disclosing their identity. Fluidity also affects data collection, since individuals marking male or female may not constantly actually fit in those binary boxes. Another aspect when researching SSIPV is that not everyone who engages in same-sex relationships, identifies as gay[2] and the gender of a current partner may not reflect the gender of previous partners (Stiles-Shields & Richard, 2015).

Myths

Existing myths about the LGB community and SSIPV cause further damage for same-sex victims as they may create barriers against receiving and providing adequate services (Duke & Davidson, 2009). One myth about lesbian relationships is that these relationships are a Lesbian Utopia. The idea of an abusive lesbian relationship may not be seriously considered, as it challenges the notion of a 'safe lifestyle' among women (Stiles-Shields & Richard, 2015).

Women fighting with other women and men fighting with other men is considered mutual battering, since society tends to believe that LGB individuals cannot be in 'real' abusive relationships (Duke & Davidson, 2009).

Obstacles in seeking help

Research regarding help remains scarce (Banks & Fedewa, 2012). Research states that services and professionals have different attitudes towards SSIPV when compared to heterosexual IPV; professionals tend to view SSIPV as being more negative and harmful. Such views or lack of support may be due to a heteronormative society, stigma, lack of knowledge regarding strategies and preventive care, prejudice, and/or homophobia (Rodriguez & Alfonso, 2005).

Some research also shows that professionals perceive SSIPV as less serious and not likely to get worse (Banks & Fedewa, 2012). Lesbian and bisexual women within shelters tend to be referred to as, 'the battered women', masculinised butches, or 'cat fights' (A.Younglove, G.Kerr, & J.Vitello, 2002). Gay male victims are viewed as the feminised gay male partner, which tends to 'minimise' the violence that occurred as the victim is viewed as weak and not masculinised, or the relationship is degraded by insinuating that they are promiscuous (Younglove, Kerr, & Vitello, 2002).

2 Research to date is impacted by how the researcher defines sexual orientation.
One might be involved in same-sex relationships but does not necessarily identify as LGB (Stiles-Shields & Carroll 2014), might be still questioning, or is Bi or is MSM (Duke & Davidson 2009 & Danica et al. 2006).

Lack of consideration of intersectionality is a potential barrier to receiving the needed help and leads to multiple oppressions (Duke & Davidson, 2009). LGB victims may not seek help or disclose the negative aspects of their relationship as they may fear that it will have a negative impact on their community (Baker, Buick, Kim, Moniz, & Nava, 2012).

LGB victims may find it harder to leave the relationship, owing to the perpetrators threatening to expose their sexual orientation if it is unknown to family, friends and colleagues, thereby affecting job security and family dynamics/relationships (Peterman & Dixon, 2003). Since same-sex couples deal with the further stress of being part of a sexual minority, they find it difficult to open up about the abuse as society may perpetuate the stereotype that the relationships are not 'natural' (Peterman & Dixon, 2003).

SSIPV victims who are not 'out' yet might feel as if they are living in a 'double closet' since they have to state that they identify themselves as LGB and that they are in an abusive relationship (Duke & Davidson, 2009).

Victims may find it difficult to open up to their friends about the abuse due to sharing mutual friends within the LGB community where disclosure may lead to embarrassment, abandonment and fear of ending up without a relationship and friends (The Gender Centre, 2005).

Lesbians tend to develop trust issues during and after the abuse and strive more to make their partner happy with the hope that the perpetrator will change (Evans, 2006). Gay perpetrators may blackmail an HIV-positive victim and hide his medication (Strudwick, 2016). Furthermore, gay victims may struggle due to the stigma related to masculinity, social expectation and in turn, may be labelled further for not defending themselves (Dunne, 2014).

Moreover, bisexual individuals carry a 'double marginality' owing to the ideology of the LGB community which may not include them as equal members within the community, whilst the heterosexual community stigmatises bisexuals since they experience same-sex attraction (Duke & Davidson, 2009).

The Gay-Affirmative Theory (GAT) & Gender and Sexual Diversity Therapy (GSDT)

The GAT which is also known as LGBTIQ affirmative therapy, published by Davies (1990), aimed to rectify the discriminatory psychotherapeutic practice that LGBTIQ individuals face or have faced (Davies & Dominic, 2000).

LGBTIQ-affirmative practices are vital when working with SSIPV victims. A good service provision is highly important as clients have usually experienced trauma which may have been ongoing for various years and where it may have been difficult to talk about the abuse (Ruckle, 2013).

Since 2012 GAT has moved towards seeking a way forward to include everyone after it was observed that it focused only on gay individuals, thereby transitioning to Gender and Sexual Diversity Therapy (GSDT). GSDT includes asexuality, polyamory, trans-individualism, and celibacy, focusing on all aspects of gender and sexual diversities (Cormier-Otaño, Davies, & Dominic, 2012). GAT and GSDT help individuals to better understand gender and sexual minorities, and the discrimination/stigma they may experience (Guay, 2013). It aids professionals to work through heteronormative biases/prejudices and as a result, tackle these biases inherited by mainstream cultures, gaining knowledge and ability to support all individuals and perform effectively (Cormier-Otaño, Davies, & Dominic, 2012).

GSDT strategies that can be implemented to improve service-provision

In relation to policies, an equality policy would require team members to be ethically affirmative; this will ensure all service-users are treated in an equal/dignified way (Edinburgh University, 2013). Consequently service-users should be referred to by their preferred pronoun (Crisp & McCave, 2007). Further policies to conform to the introduction of the latest laws are also crucial.

Creating a safe environment for SSIPV victims within the shelter/service can easily be set up by identifying a shared space and placing a sticker indicating 'safe space' along with a rainbow (Davies & Neal, 2000).

Training for staff will allow them to reflect and become aware of how the culture affects their behaviour at work. An awareness questionnaire can be used during training to help them think and relate to their personal beliefs/stereotypes (Ruckle, 2013). Training can also aid knowledge on sexual orientation issues and unique barriers LGB individuals face and eventually combat discrimination from other external professionals or service-users (Meyer & Bayer, 2013).

Gender-neutral bathrooms and/or spaces aid to offer a safe facility for the service-users and prevent intimidating and unsafe situations. This may be a financial burden to implement and may put a burden on donors as they might not agree. Management should be prepared for such situations and plan ahead (Ard & Harvey, 2010).

Forms/Documents should have a blank option in the preferred-gender section and asking for preferred pronoun is essential as it is the right of the service-user and adheres to the law. The management should also keep records of discriminatory incidents by employees on the grounds of homophobia and biphobia (Ard & Harvey, 2010).

Collaboration by the management with LGBTIQ groups, such as the Rainbow Support Service, for training, informational material such as leaflets/ resource tools and interventions will help them to get involved and get to know the spectrum further (MGRM, 2016).

Campaigns are necessary to identify ways in which DV/IPV service-providers can outreach victims of SSIPV and promote awareness and should include pictures of same-sex couples, inclusive messages, neutral vocabulary and further relevant information shared on their websites (Duke & Davidson 2009).

LGB victims can be asked to give feedback about the service (Pennant, Bayliss, & Meads, 2009).

Research methodology

Owing to the lack of local literature in relation to SSIPV, the researcher aimed to explore whether the services offered locally are effective for LGB victims and how they can improve the strategies implemented. To explore this, the methodology below was used.

Research design

The qualitative rather than quantitative research method was chosen as it aims to get a deeper meaning of particular human experiences and generate theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). To be able to answer the research question, the researcher wanted to obtain an insight into the participants' experiences when working within the DV and/or LGBTQ field and to explore the professional's opinions and attitudes whilst gathering local information regarding SSIPV.

Sampling method

Purposeful sampling was used for all the interviews with the professionals who had to work within a shelter/service with victims of DV and/or cases with SSIPV victims and were recruited according to the researcher's judgement regarding the pre-determined criteria of the participants and the main aim of the study (Rubin & Babbie, 2015). This was also used with the social worker from the specific LGBTIQ service chosen, enabling the researcher to get information-rich cases in relation to this phenomenon (Rubin & Babbie, 2015).

Data collection

The researcher's main tool to carry out the data collection was face-to-face semi-structured interviews as this method could be planned, the researcher

could refer to the interview guide to make sure all the outcomes were tackled yet, at the same time, could be spontaneous and enables flexible responses (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Six interviews were carried out with settings who offer support to individuals experiencing IPV and to service providers who work with LGBTIQ service users. During the interviews the researcher inquired about the experience the interviewees had when working with SSIPV victims, if they ever worked with clients who experienced SSIPV, if they ever had training regarding the GAT theory, SSIPV, or LGBT terminologies, and the way forward as a setting. Since there are not any shelters for male DV victims, an interview with a local service that offers aid to such victims was carried out, to understand the process better.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, as it is a categorising strategy for qualitative research, and it best fits the researcher's aims as the data would be provided in an organised way (Boyatzis, R.E., 1998). Thematic analysis required the audio-recorded responses to be transcribed, coded, and transformed into themes which also made it possible for the researcher to compare the evidence found (Alhojailan, 2012).

One of the main aims of this study was to explore the services offered to SSIPV victims. Additionally these services/shelters were also evaluated so as to obtain an insight into the effectiveness of training within the DV services/shelters in relation to SSIPV and LGB knowledge-based training.

Results & data analysis

The main emergent themes:

Collaborating with other services, organisations, & shelters

All of the services collaborate with Appoġġ or collaborated with each other at one point or another when tackling different cases. However, it was implied that further networking and collaboration is needed, especially between the LGBTIQ support service and the DV shelters and services to work further on SSIPV since they have different knowledge and expertise and as a result, can build a bridge.

Knowledge about SSIPV

Professionals' knowledge in relation to SSIPV is mostly lacking and they believe that SSIPV will be an issue in the future. On the contrary, knowledgeable

professionals remarked that SSIPV is different when compared to IPV, owing to different dynamics within the relationship. Moreover, apart from two professionals, the participants did not make clear statements or did not finish their sentences; this may be because SSIPV is still considered a 'taboo' locally and they might have been extra attentive when discussing issues about the LGBTIQ community.

The service provision & SSIPV

Some of the services had worked with SSIPV victims, whilst others never encountered SSIPV cases. None of the shelters/services interviewed have different arrangements or practices when working with SSIPV victims. It resulted that while one of the participants stated that SSIPV victims are treated equally, they contradicted themselves by stating that the victims had a 'condition'. This sets doubt on whether they really offer an equal service. Referring to sexual orientation as a 'condition' nowadays, especially within the health and social care field, is unacceptable. This continued to demonstrate that knowledge and training are needed.

Barriers faced by SSIPV victims

There are barriers within the shelters, as LGB victims come last, with priority being first given to heterosexual women and their children. Two out of the three local shelters that were interviewed and evaluated appeared to be not well-prepared to cater for LGB victims. At the time of conducting the research there were five shelters that cater for DV victims, therefore not all of the local DV settings were represented and thus findings cannot be generalised for all the local shelters/services.

Managers tend to try their utmost to overcome the barriers encountered by LGB victims and other service users who might discriminate against them. This might help to make SSIPV victims feel protected and valued since the professionals try to face the barriers encountered on a micro-level. While, on a macro-level, the primary barriers include a heteronormative society, lack of awareness campaigns and the double closet.

Training regarding LGBTIQ individuals & knowledge regarding GSDT

Training is offered by the LGBTIQ support service and demand for such training has been increasing rapidly with professionals and educators. It seems that SSIPV is mentioned, depending on the context of the training given. However, there is a lack of training within services and shelters with most participants

not being aware of GSDT and thus having a lack of knowledge regarding GSDT as well as LGBTIQ terminologies amongst professionals. From the results gathered, it was also evident that none of the DV services nor shelters are implementing GSDT strategies within their practice and management systems.

The way forward

The management of the services and shelters, with the exception of one service, do not have a specific plan as a way forward regarding SSIPV. The reasoning behind this is apparently because they have encountered only a few cases.

Main overall finding

The findings of the study do not only show the importance of the awareness and knowledge needed to work to reach the goal that demonstrates that SSIPV does exist, but also outline the need for further research and outreach focusing on why LGB victims do not turn to the services, which was a common finding amongst all participants.

Implications of the Study: Limitations & Recommendations

Lack of Insight into Gay Male Victims' Experiences & SSIPV

The researcher lacked an insight into gay male victims' experiences in relation to SSIPV. In accordance with Rubin and Babbie (2008: 204–8), the sample includes a possible gender bias as the findings include an under-representation of male gay victims; as most of the professionals interviewed worked with female victims and very few cases discussed targeted/focused on gay male victims as only a few professionals had worked with such cases.

Lack of knowledge on GAT and LGBTIQ terminologies by professionals

The lack of knowledge on GAT and LGBTIQ terminologies emerged, as some of the researcher's questions regarding GAT practices were not answered, this could be a limiting factor because the researcher could not delve deeper into the conversation with the interviewees, since the interviewees lacked the knowledge to do so.

Social desirability bias

Social desirability bias could have also served as a limitation since the professionals may have replied to a question about the services 'differently' or not accurately. One reason may be not portraying a negative image of the services, they manage or work within.

Attending & offering further training

Professionals and experts within the DV field would ideally benefit from training to gain the adequate knowledge regarding LGBTIQ terminologies and GAT (Duke & Davidson, 2009).

The importance of training was strengthened by the findings; training helps to provide the necessary culturally competent service for sexual minority individuals and gives a better understanding of the stressors that impact on an LGB individual's life (Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead, & Viggiano, 2011).

The LGBTIQ support service networking with the DV field

The only local LGBTIQ support service should consider further networking with services and organisations within the DV field to further professionals' knowledge regarding stressors faced by LGB relationships. It should also expand the understanding of the dynamics and the stigma LGB individuals face as part of a minority group (Brown & Groscup, 2009).

Eliminating the gender gap in DV

DV services should also employ a full-time male professional to eliminate the present gender gap in the field. Even though at the moment clients can request a male worker, the majority of clients are not aware of this. The fact of having a full-time worker in the DV section could also act as an advocate against DV and might encourage more male victims to come forward. Not every male victim may feel comfortable disclosing personal details to female workers. In this way the service is promoting a stereotype that gay male victims only feel comfortable confiding with women, but it should not be assumed that such victims feel comfortable opening up to female professionals.

There is always an opportunity in this area for further research to be carried out regarding SSIPV locally; interviewing SSIPV victims to get an insight into their experiences within the shelters and when seeking help from services could be a valuable area of study.

Another study, which could be deemed to be vital in relation to SSIPV and services, would be conducting a study of a larger scale on services and the reasons why LGB victims are not turning to them for help.

Conclusion

Data shows that further knowledge, awareness, and training are needed regarding SSIPV locally as these may be lacking within DV shelters and professionals working in the DV field. The LGBTIQ support service should build a bridge and create a better service collaboration/networking with other DV services to exchange the knowledge needed. This outlines the importance of all the services. LGB individuals themselves may prefer to seek aid from a service which does not specifically focus on and aid LGB individuals.

A longer version of this paper can be found within the MCAST Journal of Applied Research & Practice Vol.3, Issue 1 published in June 2019 (Farrugia & Abela Gatt, 2019)

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EDUCATION

Overcoming Pink and Blue: Heteronormativity and Cisnormativity in Primary Schools

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Introduction

This study is based on qualitative research which sought to explore whether heteronormativity and cisnormativity are pervasive in Maltese primary schools. The study examined whether there is discordance between Maltese progressive LGBTI+ sensitive legislation, educational policies and in-house school practices. It investigated four main issues namely: whether teachers are conscious of gaps between policy and practice, the need to address such issues, whether they receive LGBTI+ related information or training and whether they face any obstacles in addressing such realities. The study also sought to establish whether schools are adopting LGBTI+ inclusive policies across the board, whether students are receiving information about family and body diversity; and whether gender stereotypes are being challenged within the classroom. This research was carried out after the Ministry for Education and Employment introduced the 'Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools' policy in June, 2015.

The initial hypothesis was that indeed Maltese public and religious schools offered biased learning programmes for students, mostly reflecting heteronormativity and cisnormativity.

Heteronormativity in educational institutions: a short overview

According to Donelson and Royers (2014), heteronormativity refers to the organised structures that promote heterosexuality as the established norm and anything else that does not fall under that ideology is seen as deviant. Considering that this is the dominant ideology, it is difficult to address it tangibly, especially as its implications in everyday life – whether at home or at school – appear totally natural (Epstein, O'Flynn, & Telford, 2003). Largely, our schools are central in shaping the norms and expectations related to gender and sexuality in the school population (Pascoe, 2005). Apart from silencing sexual desires other than heterosexual ones, the heteronormative framework is crucial in gender regulation (Toomey, McGuire and Russell, 2012).

As Foucault (1977, 1978) argues, our body is shaped by culture and politics. This power upon our bodies and the population is of utter importance for the function of the State and capitalism. The state uses its power over the population by classifying and categorising people within identifiable spaces like male/female boxes in application forms. The male/female gender binary category is dominant in Euro-American societies and is still left largely unchallenged in macro institutions, such as schools. This can be understood as one of the main reasons for violence towards gender non-conforming students

(Toomey, McGuire & Russell, 2012). Wilton (2000) argues that a new imaginary needs to be developed which counteracts and challenges this heteronormative dominant cultural framework. However, this needs to come through grassroots participation in both popular and educational spheres (ibid).

LGBTI+ exposure in the Maltese educational system

The Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta (MEDE), issued a policy in 2015 directed at trans, gender variant and intersex students in schools. This policy presented guidelines for schools and staff on how to address, support, inform and help these students. It encourages schools to cooperate with families, the LGBTI+ community and the wider social community to ensure the best support for these students.

The National Curriculum Framework was published in December 2012 by the MEDE. Although one of the objectives of the framework is 'helping children to regard social justice and solidarity as key values in the development of the Maltese society' (NCF 2012: iii), sexual orientation is mentioned only once. This lack of visibility has been pointed out by a number of local stakeholders as stated in the first part of the report under the feedback section. One criticism stated that there is 'limited reference to gender issues and no reference to sexual orientation issues' (p.4).

According to McGarry (2013), an important way to improve the inclusion of LGBTI+ students is through positive images and messages transmitted formally or informally through the curriculum and included in lesson plans which are then implemented in class. Moreover, positive role models are an important step towards supporting such students.

Local data on LGBTI+ issues in education

The first ever survey to focus on the school climate in relation to LGBTI+ students in Malta was published in 2017 (Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network – GLSEN 2017). The study recorded 139 LGBT identifying secondary students or past students and it revealed some worrying realities. 81.4% of respondents claimed that they had been excluded, and 73.5% reported the circulation of negative rumours about them. Almost one half of respondents felt unsafe due to their sexual orientation, and 27.3% felt so because of their gender expression. Consequently, 28.1% claimed to have avoided PE lessons, 28.1% avoided locker rooms and 22.3% avoided bathrooms due to their sense of insecurity. Toilets tend to feature frequently in discussions surrounding LGBTI+ issues both as gendered spaces as well as for their potential to be dangerous places. The risk of violence faced by LGBTI+ students because of their nonconformity to gender

and sexual norms tends to escalate within such spaces (Halberstam 1998; Munt 1998, 2001; Browne 2004; Girshick 2008; Rasmissen 2009). Ingrey (2012) argues that public washrooms are buildings in which gendered bodies are regulated and punished.

Methodology

This study was carried out in 2018 with a qualitative approach. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the main research tool because they offer a certain degree of flexibility. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to ask further questions and to follow up certain points raised by the respondent during the interview (Bryman, 2008).

After obtaining the formal approval to conduct the research within schools from the MEDE, an information letter was sent to two Heads of Schools.

One of the schools was specifically chosen because it was frequented by a transgender student. Although my research has nothing to do with this individual student, this provided the right educational scenario to answer my research questions. The other school is situated in an ethnically diverse, working class area in central Malta and with a much smaller school population than the other mainstream schools. The participants were two male Heads of School, two female Personal, Social and Career Development (PSCD) teachers and four primary teachers (3 women and 1 man). All the teachers taught classes from year 4 to year 6.

Findings

There were three main overlapping themes that emerged from my research: school uniforms, hair, and gender segregation practices. In both schools in which the research was conducted, uniforms are gendered. The exception is that girls can opt to wear trousers instead of a skirt.

The Head of school B, who came across as very sympathetic towards gender issues stated that he would prefer if all students wore trousers as it is more practical. In fact, in his school, the plans are for the uniforms to be changed to a tracksuit for everybody, because of its practicality.

Another theme which emerged was hair. Hair, like clothing, can be divisive and gendered. Due to its visibility it can cause tension and division amongst boys and girls. The vast majority of girls have long hair while boys have short hair. This issue is tackled differently in the two schools because much depends on the School Management Team. The Head of school B stressed the importance of eliminating such gender stereotypes in his school.

The other theme revolved around gender segregation, for instance how students tend to be divided into two groups or lines according to their gender during assemblies or whenever needed. In this case, it was also evident that such policies depend on the school's ethos, which tends to reflect the values of the Head of school. From my research, I noted a difference in how the two schools approached this issue. In school B, there is an underlying consensus that students should not be divided by gender during assembly and when the students need to stay in a line. This is done to minimise gender segregation. The Head of school B stated that when this happens, it is done by new teachers in the school. When this occurs, he makes it a point to draw to their attention that such gendered practices are not acceptable. On the other hand, the Head of school A stated that teachers are given the liberty to divide their class as they want and in fact the majority of the teachers that were interviewed in school A stated that they divided their class according to gender.

The reproduction of heteronormativity

From the above findings it is clear that heteronormativity and gendered practices are reproduced through mundane and taken-for-granted practices that start at home (the hair) and that continue to be enhanced at school. Although some teachers felt the need to challenge some of these stereotypes, this was generally limited to gender equality issues such as career opportunities in the future. It did not extend to LGBTI+ representation. None of the teachers claimed to have ever used visual representations of same-sex couples since they started teaching. For example, James who is a class teacher from school B seemed rather uncomfortable with the subject of LGBTI+ representation during lessons. He said that he does not use pictures of same-sex couples when talking about family. When asked why he feels uncomfortable using such pictures, he replied that it was because of his personal beliefs.

One recurring reason for the lack of proactive examples in terms of non-heterosexual visibility by both teachers and Heads of school was that they believed that LGBTI+ issues are being tackled by the PSCD teachers. However, my findings suggest that this was far from reality.

Both the PSCD teachers said that during the lessons which specifically taught students about alternative family formations, they did not discuss or even mention same-sex love. Catherine, the PSCD teacher in school B stated that she does not even believe that same-sex relations should be part of the curriculum because one cannot mention all types of families because the concept of family is too vast. Although the curriculum is open to diverse family types, it does not specify which families ought to be mentioned. Teachers are only obliged to discuss same-sex relationships if the subject is brought up by a student.

Such perspectives as that of Catherine and James, which stem out of a personal preference and are further based on the concept of the traditional heterosexual family, may lead to the actual invisibility of alternative family configurations. This type of teaching sidelines all those families that fall outside the 'norm' from blended families, divorced families, single-led households, solo living to same-sex families and couples.

Considering this lack of visibility and representation in the educational experience, children may refrain from asking questions on these issues. It is only if they are exposed to them and feel safe, that they may then ask such questions. In this way the educational system is shrugging off its responsibility of instilling in students a wider understanding of family and relationships, risking ignorance or worse still, incorrect information on these issues.

Surveillance

All of the participants responded in the affirmative when asked if they ever noted students who did not express their gender according to the perceived norm. This shows that educators tend to monitor students' ways of expressing their gender and to speculate about their sexual orientation on the basis of the dominant hetero – and cis-normative ideology.

Students may also act as surveillance agents. Some teachers gave examples of students harassing fellow classmates because they expressed emotions or traits stereotypically associated with the opposite gender. For instance, some classmates made fun of a boy because he is crying. Joanne said, "I had a boy who wanted everything organised, neat and tidy and they used to pick on him". It is interesting to note that, according to one PSCD teacher, when girls are the targets of remarks due to having stereotypical masculine traits, they tend to embrace such comments in a positive way.

Another very powerful agent of surveillance is parents. Educators tend to be scared that parents might oppose visibility to LGBTI+ issues in schools. Beverly stated that she is hesitant in mentioning such issues directly because students might go home and tell their parents. Catherine, one of the PSCD teachers, expressed the difficulty of breaking stereotypes when these are being constantly reproduced at home.

Exclusion of diverse bodies

The arbitrary exclusion of LGBTI+ experiences does not apply only to bullying. I asked Jade, a PSCD teacher in school A, about the subject of body anatomy and sexual intercourse.

When addressing body anatomy, only cisgender male and female bodies which fit the culturally shared expectations of what is supposed to be normal are shown. Trans, intersex and bodies with disabilities are never mentioned. This means that students are hardly exposed to the existence of diverse bodies through formal education. This suggests that intersex students or students with disabilities in class are unrepresented. It is as if their bodies do not matter.

Teacher training and resources

Another theme that emerged from the research is that LGBTI+ visibility is closely linked to teacher training and resources. Lack of visibility may be due to lack of knowledge among teachers or lack of teaching aids provided by the education department.

All eight participants said that they were aware of the Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in School policy. However, six out of the eight interviewed said that they needed training on LGBTI+ issues. The other two, both males and one of them a Head of school, argued that there is no need to give the issue much importance since children are too young to know about these realities.

Discussion: the reproduction of heteronormative ideology within schools

As illustrated by the findings, heteronormative ideology is dominant in most aspects of Maltese education. This is a reflection of society's dominant social belief system. This system is reinforced by the organisational structures within the school and the educational system in general (Donelson and Royers, 2004). I refer to heteronormativity as an imposed ideology to counter the idea that heteronormativity is the natural order of things, a neutral, value-free system, something that has always been and will always be there. In reality it is forced upon us.

Heteronormativity is both generated and reproduced in our schools by those that have the power to choose what and who should be muted or not in the curriculum. As Michael Sadowski (2010) argued, the formal education curriculum is a reflection of the values of those writing the curriculum. It is they who decide who deserves visibility and who shall remain in the shadow. LGBTI+ issues are mentioned only once in the Maltese formal education curricula, reflecting the general mentality of the powerful, that is those that are in charge of planning and designing the Curriculum.

Going down the hierarchical ladder, the School Management Team (SMT) also has immeasurable power. It can either pave the way for an open and safe space for LGBTI+ pesons and gender issues or it can continue to sideline

non-heterosexual individuals and practices, and while doing so it reinforces the gender binary framework. From what emerged during the interviews, it is evident that policies such as permitting students to wear 'gender neutral' uniforms, gendered hair styles and the introduction of gender-neutral toilets are strictly at the discretion of the SMT. In the case where the SMT lacks the necessary sensitisation towards LGBTI+ issues, it is difficult for the dominant heteronormative and cisgender ideology to be eradicated or even challenged or questioned.

Teachers occupy a crucial position in the hierarchical power structure that continues to reinforce the heteronormative and/or cisgender ideology. As one teacher that participated in my study stated, being "politically correct" for her meant only mentioning the heterosexual family. It is, after all, the stereotypical norm, what is still generally considered to be the 'authentic' family and anything that goes beyond it is seen as extra, beyond the point or even risky. That is what heteronormativity in practice is all about. It is even more worrying when teachers perceive their position as neutral and do not recognise the fact that they are agents of an ideology, hence, they are taking sides. They are on the side not only of heteronormativity and cisnormativity but also of the gender binary which they help reproduce.

One other crucial and very powerful agent perpetuating the heteronormative ideology is parents. Parents monitor both students and the teachers. Both from my study and that of Vassallo (2015) whose study explored LGBTIQ representation in the National Curriculum Framework and the PSCD syllabus, it emerged that teachers are scared and fear how parents might react if LGBTI+ issues are included in classroom material. As one PSCD teacher stated, when they tackle gender stereotypes, it is evident that students are already indoctrinated from home. It is very clear that parents are at the fulcrum of the hetero – and cisnormative ideology and tend to replicate the gender binary system. On this note, one cannot ignore the immense pressure that parents exerted on the Minister of Education in 2015, forcing him to cancel the distribution of books that portrayed LGBT stories in Maltese school libraries.

Conclusion

To conclude, my final research outcome suggests that the Maltese educational setting is pushing a LGBT+ exclusionary agenda.

This agenda is resulting in a lack of visibility of a population that has only gained equal rights in the past five years. Evidently, the educational system has to catch up with national laws and policies to adequately reflect the legal advancements. Although a number of students seem to have been influenced by the social and legal changes pertaining to LGBTI+ issues and they tend to ask

questions related to them, teachers do not address these topics directly in the classroom. Therefore, although Malta has the most progressive law on intersex infants,[1] the educational policy mentioned earlier (Trans, Gender Variant and Intersex Students in Schools) does not seem to build adequately enough on this legislation.

An example of this reported in the original research, is how during the PSCD lessons on puberty, students are divided along gender lines, consequently leaving trans, non-binary and intersex students at a loss regarding to where they belong. Moreover, lessons on puberty are described to be cisnormative and ableist. These lessons also do not inform students that there are diverse body types and that not everyone is cisgender. This leads to a lack of information for the majority of students that are cisgender and lack knowledge about the representation of intersex and trans persons. In short, more training and awareness raising is needed about LGBTI+ issues within the educational system in order to enable a shift in mentality about family and relationships in contemporary Maltese society.

1 Gender Identity, Gender Expression and Sex Characteristics Act (CAP 540)

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Addressing different sexual orientations and same-sex families in the primary school curriculum

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the representation of LGBTIQ people and same-sex families in the primary school curriculum. I will start out by discussing the link between school and sexuality as well as the prevalence of homophobia in primary school contexts. I will then attempt to highlight some of the key dilemmas faced by teachers when it comes to addressing LGBTIQ issues in the primary classroom. Data presented in this paper derives from a study conducted as part of my bachelor's degree in primary education. These findings will be supported by relevant literature on the subject area. I will also make reference to the National Curriculum Framework (2012) and the PSCD syllabi followed in the primary years to provide an overview of the local situation.

School and sexuality

Contrary to popular belief, children do have sexual feelings (Sears, 2009) and schools are not sexually neutral spaces (Kelly, 1992). Yet many consider sexuality to be an irrelevant social justice issue on the educational agenda (Ryan & Rivers, 2003). Although sex and sexuality are deemed as private matters in public domains such as schools (Epstein & Johnson, 1998), children learn many lessons about sexual orientation at school (Renold, 2000). This does not only apply to secondary schools. Renold (2000) and Reay (2001) have both explored young children's sexual identity discourses in primary school settings. Ample research also indicates that children start experiencing sexual response in infancy and start engaging in sexual play in their early childhood years (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). However, between the ages of six and nine, children become aware that these are taboo topics, so they learn to hide such behaviours from adults (DeLamater & Friedrich, 2002).

Redman (1994) argues that schools are heteronormative institutions in which children start learning that heterosexuality is the 'normal' way of life. Even in early childhood settings children start receiving messages on what society considers a 'normal' family structure (Cloughessy & Waniganayakea, 2013). This stems from educators' decisions in terms of resource selection, policies and letters that are sent home. Meanwhile families that have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender parents are continually silenced and kept hidden (Fox, 2007). Homosexuality is also a reality in the lives of children, not only through the media but also through playground chatter and discussions with their peers (Ferfolja, 2007). Students in schools also become aware of the possibilities and limitations of their own sexual identities (Epstein & Johnson, 1998). In one study, LGBTIQ youth reported that they started feeling different from the rest of their peers between the ages of 5 and 7 (Leo & Yoakum, 1992). Another study demonstrated that between the ages of 9 and 12, many children would already

have learnt that homosexuality is not the norm (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013). Thus, like in the outside world, heterosexuality is the expectation in primary schools as it underpins children's interactions and identity work inside and outside the school premises (Epstein, 1997). As they start living out the gendered categories of 'boy' and 'girl' (Renold, 2000), children are from an early age subject to the pressures of what Adrienne Rich (1980) refers to as 'compulsory heterosexuality'. In this process of gender role socialisation, children also start working hard to maintain and construct their gender identities according to their sex (Francis, 1998).

Heteronormativity, that is the assumption that all children will grow up to be heterosexual, is not only maintained through what is said and done but also strengthened through what is omitted and kept silent (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). The lack of positive images of homosexuality in school resources means that children with same-sex parents may never see their family acknowledged in the school curriculum (Pohan & Bailey, 1998). Apart from privileging heterosexual identities, heteronormative institutions like schools also legitimise homophobia which leads to LGBT identities being constantly attacked and disparaged (Jones & Tyrell, 2009). People often assume that homophobia is not an issue in primary schools given the children's young age (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). However, a study by Guasp, Ellison and Satara (2014) found that, in the UK, 70% of primary school teachers reported hearing expressions such as, "That's so gay!" used as insults amongst children. Additionally, in her ethnographic research with primary school children, Renold (2000) noted how young boys start defining their masculinity "through misogynistic and homophobic discourses, and heterosexual fantasies" (p. 321). Unless they presented themselves as 'tough guys' and were good at sports, boys were often considered to be 'gay' (Renold, 2000). Unfortunately, most of this homophobic bullying is often left unchallenged, especially in primary schools (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). In the study by Guasp et al. (2014), only a little over half of the teachers who had witnessed homophobic bullying actually intervened, while 42% did not. These findings shed light on the unresponsive school cultures that indirectly reproduce rather than challenge homophobia.

A deafening silence

So, what contributes to this deafening silence that surrounds LGBTIQ issues in primary schools? To answer this question, I decided to conduct interviews with two class teachers and one PSCD teacher in two primary state schools. This enabled me to gather insights from six practicing professionals who are in direct contact with children. I also interviewed a PSCD Education Officer to better understand what is expected from PSCD teachers as regards the

addressing of LGBTIQ topics. The interviews were semi-structured, enabling me to modify the order of the questions and vary the wording depending on the flow of the interview (Lodico, Spaulding & Voegtle, 2010).

One major finding from my research is that there seemed to be a hierarchy of difference (Robinson, 2013) along which the teachers differentiated and formed their understanding of diversity. In this hierarchy of difference, “some areas of marginality are seen as more significant, or worthy, than others” (Hyland, 2010, p. 394). When asked what they understood by the term ‘diversity’, all the teachers made reference to different cultural backgrounds and five out of six teachers mentioned religious beliefs. Sexual orientation was only mentioned by the two PSCD teachers and one of the four class teachers. I also noticed that two of the teachers tried to shift the focus of the interview away from the topic of sexuality. Vicky, a Year 6 teacher, answered most of the questions by sharing her own experiences of teaching students of different ethnicities. Mary, another Year 6 teacher, explained that she had tried to make single-parent families more visible in her lessons. However, she admitted that she had never considered making references to same-sex parents.

It was also evident from the interviews that the two participating schools are highly heteronormative institutions in which heterosexual families are passively and actively presented as the norm (Redman, 1994). Heteronormative practices continue to reinforce the stigma and silence that surrounds LGBTIQ identities and same-sex families (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2004). Two of the four class teachers believed that children should be taught about LGBTIQ people as this will help them grow into accepting individuals. However, all the teachers reported that they experience a sense of discomfort when it comes to using terms such as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ in the classroom. The PSCD teachers seemed to be more comfortable in this regard. However, both the PSCD teachers as well as the PSCD Education Officer shared the belief that they should only address LGBTIQ topics if they are brought up by the pupils. Thus, although the interviewed PSCD teachers seemed to be willing to make their teaching LGBTIQ inclusive, they still seemed to be fearful of the possible repercussions.

As regards homophobic bullying, teachers from both schools reported that there were instances when they overheard homophobic insults. When asked how they would respond to an incident of homophobic bullying with their class, all the teachers stressed that they were against any form of bullying. Most of them explained that they would treat such an incident just like any other case of bullying, emphasising the fact that we are all different. However, it was found that teachers feel unprepared to specifically challenge homophobic bullying when it does occur. As also found by Buston and Hart (2001), teachers usually refrain from taking sides on the subject of homosexuality. Anna, a Year 4 teacher,

reported that she feels she should remain neutral to avoid hurting the victim or the individual who is against LGBTIQ people. Cindy, a Year 5 teacher, contended that she should not let children know what she thinks about LGBTIQ people and same-sex families because she fears negative response from parents. These findings indicate that these teachers do not challenge children's misconceptions about LGBTIQ people and do not unpack the negative connotations associated with terms such as 'gay'. The interviewed PSCD teachers reported that they would give a lesson about bullying and its effects if they witness an incident of homophobic bullying amongst their students. However, they stressed that they would refrain from using LGBTIQ terms unless they are mentioned by the students themselves. Although educating about bullying is beneficial, Robinson (2005) states that effective anti-homophobia education should not just involve taking action when an incident occurs but rather form part of the mainstream curricula followed in schools. As Ryan (2016) puts it, "educators need to address silences and not just disparaging words" (p. 86) as otherwise heteronormativity is continually maintained and perpetuated. What is more, teachers' uncertainty of how or whether they should respond to homophobic bullying can potentially reproduce rather than challenge homophobia (DePalma & Jennett, 2010).

Fears and challenges

Four of the six interviewed teachers were not only aware of the positive impacts of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum but were also willing to talk about LGBTIQ people and same-sex families with their pupils. However, the fear of negative reactions from parents seemed to be the prime discouraging factor that led teachers to remain silent. This finding seems to indicate "the significant gatekeeping mechanism teachers understand parents to play when it comes to approving or disapproving their curricular choices" (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019, p. 89). However, we should keep in mind that in many cases, parents hold a neutral position or even appreciate teachers' willingness to make their classrooms more inclusive (Ryan & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2018). Yet, even if the parents who oppose the LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum are a minority, they seem to still be powerful enough to discourage and worry teachers and school administrators. Teachers can remind parents how important it is to teach children about our diverse world and to make sure that all children feel safe and included. As suggested by Williams (2014), parents should be made aware that same-sex marriage is legal and that it is the school's responsibility to educate children about different family structures, whilst protecting and respecting children coming from LGBTIQ headed families.

Parents often consider the school as an institution that is separate from sexuality and that should protect children from this 'dangerous knowledge' (Allan, Atkinson, Brace, DePalma & Hemingway, 2008). Only one teacher, Vicky who is a Year 6 teacher, contended that children are too young to learn about LGBTIQ people in primary school. The other teachers reported that they are not concerned with children being too young to learn about these realities, as long as this is done in an age-appropriate manner. For the most part, teachers seemed to be aware of the fact that children are neither ignorant nor innocent of sexual knowledge.

The neglect surrounding children's sexuality education also seems to result from the false idea that learning about homosexuality will actively encourage homosexual behaviour (DePalma & Atkinson, 2006). Contrastingly, the constant encounters with heterosexuality are seen to have no effect. As argued by Sears (1999), homosexuality, unlike heterosexuality, tends to be automatically associated with sexual behaviours. It is imperative to make it clear that education about homosexuality does not aim to push a "gay agenda" or focus on sexual behaviour. The only agenda of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum is to ensure that all children, irrespective of their family background and gender and sexual identities, feel welcomed and included in schools (Fox, 2007).

Another strong inhibiting factor which was mentioned by four of the six interviewed teachers was that teaching about LGBTIQ people can disrespect parents' religious beliefs. As stated by DePalma and Jennett (2010), LGBT equality is unique in being perceived by some people as against someone's religion. Both teachers and parents must keep in mind that people's freedom of sexuality is protected by law in much the same way as race and religion. Principle 2 of the local National Curriculum Framework (2012) specifically states that it "acknowledges and respects individual differences of age, gender, sexual orientation, beliefs, personal development, socio-cultural background, geographical location and ethnicity" (p. 32). It is unfortunate and unjust that because of one group's freedoms, the whole school population is deprived of an open-minded and LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum to which it is entitled, at least on paper. By silencing and marginalising LGBTIQ representations in the curriculum, educators and parents alike would be unconsciously drawing upon religion to justify prejudice (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). It is therefore important to engage in meaningful dialogue with parents who are against anti-homophobia and LGBTIQ inclusive curricula because of their own religious beliefs. Such parents must be made aware that classrooms are not meant to be protective bubbles that shield children from the outside world, but rather spaces where children can engage with and respect the whole spectrum of diversities (Hermann-Wilmarth & Ryan, 2019).

The interviews also revealed that there is a lack of collaboration among the different stakeholders when it comes to implementing an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum. This is often the case because teachers' beliefs and mentalities can determine whether they make references to LGBTIQ people and same-sex families in their teaching (Gerouki, 2010). Both PSCD teachers reported that there were instances when they disagreed with other staff members on this issue. Vicky, who is against the idea of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum, admitted that there were times when she disagreed with other teachers who were in favour of this initiative. Grace, a PSCD teacher, reported that she found opposition from other teachers and LSEs when addressing issues related to gender and sexuality with children. Anna, a class teacher, felt that addressing this topic is the responsibility of the PSCD teachers because they can do a better job than her. These findings seem to indicate that there is a lack of clear guidelines for teachers to follow when it comes to addressing LGBTIQ topics. Hence, it is more likely for teachers to remain silent about these diversities and follow a highly heteronormative curriculum (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2001). This also highlights the importance of a whole-school approach that is required to transform school cultures into truly inclusive ones. Teachers and school administrators must realise "that it is their right, responsibility, and obligation to teach within a social justice framework" (Bellini, 2012).

The local curriculum

Most of the interviewed teachers expressed that the primary school curriculum is very packed. Given that the primary school syllabi of all subjects, including PSCD, do not make specific references to sexual orientation and same-sex families, LGBTIQ issues often compete for space and time in the curriculum (Robinson & Ferfolja, 2008). However, the National Curriculum Framework (2012) recognises that: "an individual is unique and recognises individual differences whether these stem from dimensions of race; ethnicity; gender; sexual orientation; socio-economic status; age; physical, mental or intellectual abilities; religious beliefs; political beliefs; or other ideologies" (Ministry of Education and Employment, 2012, p. 10).

As a primary school teacher myself, I can confirm, that teachers can find many opportunities to address the whole spectrum of diversities in their lessons. An endless number of activities can be incorporated in art, drama and storytelling sessions, to name a few. It is important to keep in mind that the idea of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum is not to have a fixed number of lessons dedicated to this topic. This superficial educational approach is known as "tourist curriculum" and it fails at making diversity a routine part of the children's daily learning environment (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). Such an approach indirectly

gives the message that since these "other" minorities are occasionally featured in the curriculum, they must be less important than the other dominant groups. Rather, the true scope of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum is to make all kinds of difference equally visible and equally important to all children (Sedgwick, 1990).

Despite the fact that teachers can find several opportunities to make reference to LGBTIQ people and same-sex families in their classrooms, one must still not underestimate the importance of having clear and specific guidelines for teachers to follow in the different subject syllabi. Two of the interviewed teachers stated that such references will make it easier for them to tackle these potentially controversial themes. The absence of such references also make it acceptable for teachers who are against the idea of an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum to refrain from addressing these issues with their students. Teachers also require specific and age-appropriate resources that make it easier for them to tackle homophobic bullying, LGBTIQ people and same-sex families (Guasp et al., 2014). Adequate teacher training is also essential to help teachers challenge gender stereotypes and address LGBTIQ people in their pedagogical practices (Mathison, 1998). The interviews with the teachers also suggest that for a shift in school climate, school policies must include clear and specific references and protections against homophobic bullying and discrimination (Goldstein, Collins & Halder, 2005). Most importantly, teachers must lead by example and reflect on their own biases, values and beliefs in order to cater for the needs of all students and make their learning environments inclusive for all (Meyer, 2010).

Conclusion

Until the time of writing, I still wonder when an LGBTIQ inclusive curriculum will cease to be an issue in our schools. Should schools not be a reflection of today's ever-changing society? How many more rainbow flags and yearly gay prides do we need to finally realise that LGBTIQ people are part of children's worlds? When in August 2015 it was announced that books like The Sissy Duckling, My Princess Boy and And Tango Makes Three were to be distributed in schools, a group of concerned and conservative parents spread hate like wildfire, leading the education minister to release a statement assuring them that these books will be safely kept at the ministry. In my opinion, such a move gave the message that ignorance has power over social justice. A year later, Malta was listed as the most LGBTIQ friendly country and "an instant example of international best practice" in terms of LGBTIQ rights and legislation (ILGA-Europe, 2016). However, while laws may give people rights and protections, they are clearly not enough to deconstruct walls of ignorance and educate

people's minds. It is high time that we stop turning a blind eye to the everyday abuse and alienation that LGBTIQ people experience at school. We must put our money where our mouth is and set an example as accepting and inclusive children of God which, as a nation, we are so proud to be.

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The narratives of gay male teachers in contemporary catholic Malta

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The Repercussions of legitimised masculinity

The hegemonic privileging of absolute masculinity promotes “values such as courage… certain forms of aggression… and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body” (Carrigan, Connell and Lee, 1987 p.148). Men who fail to fulfil such criteria are not only at an increased risk of social alienation but they endure an intricate process in defining their masculinity vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ norms. Consequently, pressures to conform to gender stereotypes from parents, media and peers are pervasive and the perpetration of homophobic violence becomes tolerable.

The resulting societal discrimination, internalised heterosexism (Hetzel, 2011) and disruption in social support networks can precipitate mental distress, impacting one’s psychological well-being (Meyer, 1995; 2003). Consequently, ‘coming-out’ and therefore disclosing one’s sexuality may be an anguishing process (Armstrong and Moore, 2004) and incidence of suicide and self-harm in LGBT populations has been documented (Scott, Pringle, Lumsdaine, 2004).

Interestingly, Borg (2006) refers to the ‘Catholic hegemony’ in Malta as “one dominant culture” (p.61) which “works through education to reproduce its position within society” (p.62). Research by Conti (2011) with therapists who deal with Maltese LGB clients confirms that the predominance of the Catholic Church results in “religious fundamentalism, guilt, parents fearing for their children’s spiritual well-being, individuals fearing that they will end up in hell, lack of acceptance by society and family, and lack of self-acceptance” (p.58).

The heteronormativity of school environments

Considerable evidence of discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation in Maltese schools was reflected in a Fundamental Rights Agency survey (FRA, 2012). Participant responses reflect schools’ resistance to non-normative sexualities and justifies why LGBT students opt for ‘invisibility’ as the safer alternative to possible abuse. Despite the enactment of supportive legal frameworks, LGBT educators are “caught in the dilemma of wanting to be out as role models for young people whilst needing to be […] protective of their identity in the normative gaze” (Biddulph, 2013, p.235). Whilst the separation of personal life from the professional career becomes a strategy that LGBT teachers negotiate to ensure their safety and safeguard their employment (Griffin, 1992), this would require LGBT teachers to isolate themselves from the rest of their colleagues and students. Butler (2004) argues that this ‘paradox of invisibility’, in a society that necessitates their visibility, maintains normatives of power as it preserves a heterosexist view of the world.

A narrative inquiry

The personal narratives of five gay male teachers, who are employed in teaching roles with children and young people aged three to eighteen years in Malta, were re-worked as creative fictionalised accounts (Clough, 2002). Framed by a subjectivist ontological paradigm, this study analysed culturally and historically situated interpretations to elucidate meaning. This methodology reflects my ontological and epistemological positioning since I adopted a phenomenological stance which emphasises how 'reality' is mutually constitutive of experiences as lived and understood through human consciousness. Indeed, this work reflects how the narratives of these gay teachers can be shared and valued as 'knowledge' or as a possible interpretation of reality.

While I intended to bring forth the experiences of Maltese gay teachers, I was highly aware of the subjective implications that my own location within the Maltese context, my values and my interpretation, bear on the research and also on the creation of these narratives. In this context, phenomenology justifies this methodology: "these are my ways of seeing the world I both create and inhabit" (Clough, 2002, p.10). On the other hand, it is via the capacity of effective fictions that "each reader brings to the reading his or her own structures of analyses" (Clough, 2003, p.446) to match the presented version of 'truth' with their lived experience. The validity of a story lies in the hands of "the artfully persuasive storyteller" (Smith, 2002, p.114) who renounces control over the story's meaning to the readers who interweave their own interpretive and emotional responsiveness. Indeed, the commentaries provided after each narrative were not analyses of narratives but a means to encourage further reflection, alternative 'truths'... or endless interpretations.

Ethical considerations

Given the sensitivity of the study, appropriate ethical measures were taken throughout the different phases of this research. The risks and benefits of the research along with steps being taken for the safety of all participants, were discussed with prospective participants. Professional organisational details were kept close at hand to pass on, in the event that anyone of the participants needed further support. All of the collected data was kept confidential and the participants' identity was never disclosed.

The narratives

Albert's narrative

Historically, society has constructed teachers as desexualised subjects. It thus becomes problematic for society when teachers violate their expected asexuality. Similarly, men's work as caregivers in the context of primary education is altogether perceived as problematic. Albert's narrative embodies the hidden, yet pervasive, perceived relationship between male educators and paedophiles. The effect of catastrophic correlations between homosexuality, teaching, gendered behaviours and sexual relationships between adults and young people have left an undesirable effect on the number of males who opt to enter the teaching profession (King, 1994). The uncontrollable paranoia of 'being discovered' is personified through Albert whose unease obliges him to constantly monitor his behaviour and interactions, in order to deflect any suspicions. Albert's narrative is suggestive of the notion that if a gay man expresses his interest in becoming an early childhood professional, "others are prepared to think him perverted, paedophilic, and certainly wrong-headed in his intent to teach youngsters" (King, 2004, p.122). Three teachers participating in this study claimed there were instances when they feared that they could face defamatory accusations in this regard. These participants have therefore internalised the belief that being gay might increase the possibility that they might be perceived as paedophiles.

Furthermore, Albert's narrative shows how, gay adolescents may find it harder to disclose their sexuality to family members fearing a possible lack of acceptance. Albert's dad's initial illusionary supportive stance is sadly obliterated by the expressed belief that his son's homosexuality could be 'cured' through reparative therapy and the subsequent rejection of his son and his homosexuality. The parent's negative reaction is rooted in issues of culture and religion which eventually irradiate the lives of Maltese gay teachers. Instead of providing Albert with the support he desperately required at a most vulnerable moment, Albert's father chucks his son out of the house. Interestingly, three research participants tellingly justified their parents' initial, impulsive reaction suggesting that parents were almost expected to react in such a way, given their urge to protect their children from unavoidable discriminatory social treatment. Implicitly, this suggests that in Maltese society, discrimination as a result of perceived sexual deviance is somehow conceived as inescapable.

Having read Albert's narrative, three participants claimed that many still make "the unfortunate and unjust false connection between homosexuality and paedophilia… a connection that does not exist… how ungrateful and unfair!" One participant could strongly relate to this narrative, given his work as a

Kindergarten educator. He explains that although the events told in Albert's narrative may not necessarily reflect his personal circumstances, he is still "attentive" to his personal actions lest these may be "interpreted wrongly by others whose intentions are bad".

Nick's narrative

Interview data provided by a participant working in a local Catholic Church school was instrumental to bring to light the distinct complexities that these employees face. Nick's story is a representation of educators whose accessibility to employment can be questioned because of 'substantive Catholic life choices' which educators working in Maltese Catholic Church schools need to exhibit.

The developing teenager feels condemned and rejected by the same religion that he has always embraced just because he is sexually attracted to other boys. Rejecting this integral part of his identity and his culture is something which he deems impossible. Although Nick, an assistant Head of School in a Church School practises his teaching vocation with a sense of pride, a subtle, persistent source of tension characterises his employment – he does not disclose facts about his personal life and lets colleagues assume that he still lives with his parents. Leading this dual identity is more secure to Nick yet it also burdens educators like him with an insurmountable sense of guilt for not presenting their true selves.

A confidential Curia document revealed that the Maltese archdiocese were requesting Heads of Catholic schools to discuss new employment terms which would ensure the exclusive hiring of staff who can be safely considered as "practicing Catholics" (Archdiocese of Malta, 2014, p.18). Although no specific reference is made to gay teachers, the conclusions of this document, warned of "decisive disciplinary action" against staff whose "life choices give scandal or run counter to the ethos of the school" (ibid. p.19).

Aspects of masculine hegemonic environments at school, and specifically during Physical Education sessions were recurrent issues that participants raised during the interviews. The instance of physical bullying which features in Nick's story, which is reminiscent of homophobic intimidation in educational settings, confirms the power of masculine hegemony in sport within educational settings.

In reacting to Nick's narrative, all interviewees confirmed the difficulties that they encountered in constructing their identity and how these challenges, often led to their social alienation. None of the participants believed that Nick's narrative mirrored their story from beginning to end, however they all felt they could identify with aspects of this narrative. One narrator claimed that "[he] could really empathise with Nick... The flow is superb and emotional. Very,

very intense in the way it portrays the realities of gay teachers. Gripping indeed. It is a heart-rending story… there were moments where I could see myself in Nick".

Silvio's narrative

The development of Silvio's story is rooted in the description of excruciating harassment shared by teacher participants, which reportedly took place from their late primary school years right through to the end of their secondary schooling. Silvio's story demonstrates how heterosexuality is reproduced through daily classroom practices, where Silvio remains 'invisible' since his needs remain unacknowledged. In Malta, the invisibility of LGBTI issues in education was raised by the MGRM which stated that:… the new National Curriculum Framework (NCF) currently fails to make any specific reference to issues that most affect lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. This continues to render members of the LGBT communities… invisible in the Maltese education system (MGRM, 2012, p.3).

Silvio's narrative addresses aspects on school safety. The passivity of the teaching staff is regarded as compliance with the atrocious acts of homophobic harassment and is representative of the education system's insensitivity to human issues. Silvio's disheartened view of his teachers represents the standpoint expressed by one of the participants who defined his attempts to speak about his bullying experience to a school counsellor as 'pointless'.

Although his engagement in a relationship with his male partner can be perceived positively, Silvio does not feel safe enough as yet to 'be himself' at school, despite being in his eighth year of teaching. The aspect of concealment was again raised in the participants' response to Silvio's narrative as he described how he "could not tell anyone about (his) sexuality till the age of twenty-seven" and that "it was a nightmare hiding this secret". One participant described how the issues that Silvio's story raises "reflect reality" and that "there are many staff members who pass comments that are homophobic… even when you are around and when they know that you are gay".

Manuel's narrative

Manuel, a gay post-secondary lecturer whose life was heavily influenced by a very religious upbringing, struggles between being morally correct and with simultaneously being honest to himself and those around him as his rigid spiritual creed had always instructed. Manuel fears social rejection as he opts to leave the doctrine society which had ensured the invisibility of his homosexuality for years. He experiences an inner conflict between his outward

role as a heterosexual male teacher and his true self which he has difficulty acknowledging, accepting and being. The teacher comes to internalise an innate belief that it is aberrant for homosexual individuals to own sensitive jobs such as his teaching post. Manuel feels the urge to share his 'big secret' but he knows that increased social visibility might put his own well-being at stake. He therefore represents the fears of gay teachers who fear social alienation and perhaps even victimisation by students or fellow colleagues should they become aware of their sexual orientation.

Surprisingly, towards the end of the narrative an emancipated Manuel opts to 'come out' 'publicly', by helping out with a parents' support group even though, ironically, he is not yet prepared to disclose his sexuality to his parents. Interestingly, in reacting to Manuel's narrative, one interviewee who has a managing position at the school where he works claimed that:

I could identify with Manuel since I try to help out students... especially in matters that deal with homosexuality. I somehow feel more confident when these issues arise. I feel it is my duty... my obligation to give a helping hand... even by simply using the right words to address the situation.

Edmond's narrative

Characterised by strong feelings of isolation and loneliness, Edmond's narrative reveals the inherent tensions of living under the double burden of oppression and invisibility. Edmond, a primary school teacher is trapped in a relationship that is compromised by a sense of anxiety and by his partner's own vulnerable state of mind. The narrative necessarily exposes the relational crisis which has taken its toll on both Edmond's and his boyfriend's psychological and emotional well-being. Apart from the psychological strain that often accompanies stressful relationships, Edmond and his partner belong to a 'devalued minority' in society – an aspect which complicates matters for individuals whose sexuality is socially constructed as non-normative.

Edmond's narrative conveys the complexity of social discourse and the tensions that arise as 'Edmond' negotiates his intersecting identities in the professional and personal spheres of his life. This narrative portrays a painful split between the professional identity and sexual identity of Edmond who is indirectly inhibited from being his true self. Rather than being perceived as a whole, the identity of gay teachers seems to be fragmented in a dual identity: a professional self and a sexual identity. Notwithstanding his colleagues' evident loyalty, Edmond chooses to withdraw the more personal dimensions of his identity from the place of work in order to safeguard his own security. This concern impedes Edmond from engaging in genuine relationships with his colleagues.

In reacting to Edmond's narrative, one participant reiterated the artistic characteristics of the narrative and its potential in evoking real-life scenes and 'humane' sentiments. This interviewee explained that:

The way the narrative is written immerses you (meaning, the reader) in the story. It reminds me of difficult moments in my life, which I had to sort out on my own… without anybody's help – and this because I risked revealing my sexuality by sharing my difficulties.

Conclusion

This research has achieved a more authentic understanding of the difficulties that Maltese gay teachers may face in the local cultural context. Although the challenges described in these fictional narratives mirror the conclusions of extra-Maltese research, the authoritative influence of the Catholic Church in Malta has a distinct impact on the lives of these individuals. The socio-cultural embeddedness of the Catholic religion in the life of an average Maltese citizen exacerbates the difficulties that a gay individual may experience elsewhere. With the Catholic Church being one of the main providers of education in Malta, the regulatory discourse on 'deviant' sexualities is maintained. Adopting a dual identity and maintaining invisibility (when and if possible) is for many Maltese educators, the safer option for a stable career.

Formal and hidden educational curricula are not synchronised with legislative advances. Not only does Maltese educational policy fail to address the needs of all students but it is exclusionary in the way it dictates a binary notion of sexuality. Furthermore, teachers who have undergone a local teacher training course may not be professionally equipped to educate on the diversity of human sexuality.

School environments, teaching and learning should mirror the realities of society and should not conversely attempt to hush them. This should be implemented in a way that does not underline 'difference' but through an approach that treats different sexualities with equal importance and respect. This will contribute to an increased sense of safety in educational spaces that would encourage students and teachers to strip off the disguise which cloaks their true self.

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This publication features research conducted as part of Undergraduate, Masters and Doctoral Degrees which focus on LGBTIQ related issues. It is divided into three broad themes: Non-conformity & Institutions; Social Issues and Education and constitutes the proceedings of an LGBTIQ Research Symposium held in May 2019. As interest in LGBTIQ issues continues to increase, the body of knowledge generated serves as a basis for the further development of policy and practice.

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