

**From “Me” to “We”:  
The Journey of Young Married Couples’ Experience  
towards the Co-construction of Couplehood**

**Yanica Richards Chircop**

**Institute of Family Therapy Malta**

**September 2017**

**This Thesis is presented  
in partial fulfilment  
of the Masters in  
Systemic Psychotherapy  
IFT Malta - 2017**

## Acknowledgements

---

Presenting this thesis would have not been possible without the support and encouragement of several individuals. I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Dr Charles Azzopardi, systemic family therapist, as my academic supervisor, who not only provided professional advice but also his support and guidance. I thank all tutors at IFT Malta for their encouragement. I also wish to thank my family, friends and colleagues for their care and reassurance. Last but not least, I express my appreciation to my husband, Nelson whose loving support, patience, emotional presence and inspiration helped me make it through.

## Abstract

---

*This study focuses on couple identity development as it tries to explore how couples develop a unified couple identity, whilst negotiating a balance between their sense of “togetherness” and “individuality”. The review of the literature presents the most prominent theoretical perspectives and understandings on “we-ness”. It also highlights theoretical underpinnings which might explain partner’s patterns of interactions of closeness and distance. This study called for Maltese young adult couples who have been married for a period of two to five years. Five couples were recruited, whereby semi-structured interviews were used as a means of data collection. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected as a method of analysis and interpretation of data collected. Five superordinate themes emerged. Findings indicate that emotional connectedness, relational security, negotiation of balance between togetherness and separateness, mutual active participation and boundary-making seem to enhance couple’s co-construction of a unified couple identity. Couples’ narratives explained the significance of the individual self and autonomy whilst co-constructing couple identity. Results also highlight the challenge that couples go through in negotiating a balance between “me-ness” and “we-ness”. This is especially for the wives, who seem to struggle more in emphasising their sense of individuality as opposed to their male counterparts.*

**Key Words:** we-ness; couple identity; marriage, communication; commitment; emotional connectedness

## Table of Contents

---

Table of Contents.....	5
1. Introduction.....	9
1.1 Preamble.....	9
1.2 Research Question.....	10
1.3 Area of Study.....	10
1.4 Aims of Study.....	12
1.5 Rationale for the Study.....	12
1.5.1 My Personal and Professional Curiosity.....	12
1.5.2 Understanding Couple Identity Development and It’s Therapeutic Implications within a Maltese Context.....	13
1.5.3 Marital Stability and Satisfaction.....	14
1.6 Definition of Terms.....	15
1.7 Conceptual Frameworks.....	15
1.7.1 Attachment Theory.....	15
1.7.2 Family Life Cycle Ideas: Courtship to Marriage Transition.....	17
1.7.3 A Systemic Perspective.....	18
2. Literature Review.....	22
2.1 Introduction.....	22
2.2 Couple Identity Development: Understanding “We-ness”.....	22
2.3 Negotiating a Couple Identity.....	23
2.4 A Balance between Togetherness and Separateness.....	25
2.5 Developing a “We” Language.....	27
2.6 Emotional Inter-dependence: Attunement, Connectedness and Intimacy.....	28

2.7 Emotion Regulation, Communication and Conflict.....	31
2.8 Socio-Cultural Context and Gender Differences.....	33
3. Methodology.....	36
3.1 Introduction.....	36
3.2 Research Approach, Methodology and Rationale.....	36
3.2.1 A Qualitative Approach.....	36
3.2.2 Why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis?.....	37
3.3. Research Setting.....	39
3.4. Ethical Considerations.....	39
3.5 Research Design.....	39
3.5.1 Sample Selection and Recruitment.....	39
3.5.2 Participants.....	40
3.5.3 Recruitment Criteria.....	42
3.6 Data Collection.....	43
3.6.1 Interview Procedure.....	44
3.7 Data Analysis.....	44
3.7.1 Translation of Transcripts.....	45
3.8 Validity and Quality.....	45
3.9 The Researcher and Reflexivity.....	47
4. Analysis of Findings.....	49
4.1 Supra-Theme 1: Developing Emotional Connectedness.....	51
4.1.1 Theme 1.1: Mutual Emotional Attunement.....	51
4.1.2 Theme 1.2: Sharing different levels of intimacy.....	53
4.1.3 Theme 1.3: Sharing mutual respect towards each other and the relationship.....	54
4.2 Supra-Theme 2: Feeling Secure in the Marital Relationship.....	55
4.2.1 Theme 2.1: Appreciating individual differences without fixing each other.....	55

4.2.2 Theme 2.2: Negotiating conflict and open dialogue.....	56
4.3 Supra-Theme 3: Re-Positioning and Negotiating “I-We” Identities.....	57
4.3.1 Theme 3.1: Re-positioning of the individual self vis-a-vis Couple Positioning.....	59
4.3.2 Theme 3.2: Negotiating Individual Differences.....	61
4.3.3 Theme 3.3: Negotiating time together vis-a-vis time apart.....	61
4.4 Supra-Theme 4: Mutual active participation in negotiating a couple identity	62
4.4.1 Theme 4.1: Work-life-balance - Making time vis-a-vis finding time.	63
4.4.2. Theme 4.2: Role Assimilation - A choice rather than an unconscious decision.....	64
4.5 Supra-Theme 5: Co-constructing and Negotiating Boundaries.....	65
4.5.1 Theme 5.1: Mutual adjustment of boundaries with extended family..	65
4.5.2 Theme 5.2: Negotiating boundaries and time out with peers.....	66
5. Interpretation and Discussion of Findings.....	68
5.1 Introduction.....	68
5.2 Developing Emotional Connectedness.....	68
5.3 Feeling Secure in the Marital Relationship.....	71
5.4 Re-Positioning and Negotiating “I-We” Identities.....	74
5.5 Mutual active participation in negotiating a unified couple identity.....	75
5.6 Co-constructing and Negotiating Boundaries.....	78
5.7 Other important findings.....	81
5.8 Connecting Theme: A mutual dance of communicating distance and closeness.....	82
5.9 Reflexivity.....	83
5.10 Therapeutic Implications.....	85
5.11 Research Limitations.....	85
5.12 Directions for Future Research.....	86
6. Conclusion.....	87

References.....	88
APPENDIX.....	100
Information Sheet.....	101
Statement of Consent.....	103
Interview Guide.....	105
Transcripts in Maltese.....	108

# 1. Introduction

---

*“The more connections you and your lover make, not just between your bodies, but between your minds, your hearts, and your souls, the more you will strengthen the fabric of your relationship, and the more real moments you will experience together.”*

*Barbara De Angelis*

## 1.1 Preamble

We live in a relational world. Human beings are, in various ways and forms, inter-related and inter-connected with one another. I view relationships as the basis of our existence, driven by our human basic needs to love and feel loved; to connect and feel connected. Romantic relationships are one way of living and experiencing this love connection which, for many is the gateway to marriage, which seems to be the ultimate relational status several couples opt for (Moore, McCabe & Brink, 2001). This romantic engagement allows for an “I-We” connection which occurs when partners engage with one another in a mutually open and present way (Halling, 2008), to form a *unified couple identity* (Kwang, 2010).

This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to focus especially on the couple identity development (Azzopardi, 2007) in the first five years of marriage. In

so doing, it takes into consideration the socio-cultural context of participants, which is that of Catholic Maltese young adults aged between 23 and 30 years old. This chapter introduces the area of study, aims, rationale for the study, as well as the conceptual frameworks and theoretical understandings that guided my work.

## 1.2 Research Question

This study aims at answering the following research question: **how do couples negotiate the interplay of an “*I-We*” identity to co-construct their *couple identity*.**

To capture couples’ experience of a “we” narrative, I followed on Singer and Skerrett’s (2014) proposition of “SERAPHS”. They postulate that we-ness is defined by these seven elements: security, empathy, respect, acceptance, pleasure, humour, and shared meaning and vision. I added to this, and inquired about financial and household management, as well as, family of origin involvement as I think this might also provide relevant insight.

## 1.3 Area of Study

“We-ness” has been described as a crucial component of resilient, successful and satisfying relationships (Skerrett, 2003). It is created between the couple, defining each individual partner in the context of togetherness, in dyadic formation or as Azzopardi (2007) names it “couple identity development”. Other terms used in

literature, referring to couplehood, include, *relational formation*, *we-ness*, and *togetherness*. Whilst I opt to use the term *unified couple identity* (Kwang, 2010), all other terms will be used interchangeably as deemed necessary.

In understanding couple identity development, the aspect of intimacy comes into play, and is worth attention. I am curious to also understand the shared experience of intimacy between the couple. As emphasised by Miller and Stiver (1998) such understanding could possibly serve as useful in helping couples co-create alternative stories in therapy and in their daily interactions. The word intimacy may for most couples have a sexual connotation. Thus, I hypothesise that couples may feel hesitant to openly share their narratives and experiences around intimacy, given the taboo that still surrounds sex within the Maltese context.

Whilst I hypothesise that the process of “we-ness” starts much before the actual ‘marriage’, I wonder how this is similar or different to the courtship years - is it a continuation of courtship relational identity or has its beginning upon marriage?; How did this develop and change over the years? Cate and Loyd (1992) note that courtship “sets the foundation for the later quality and stability of marriage” (p. 2), through the development of dyadic interactions and processes. However, cultural shifts from traditionalism to modernism to post-modernism led to a diminishment of social scripting of interpersonal relationships, in which courtship is no longer lived as a couple but rather on an individual level (Cere, 2000). This shift in courtship may influence dyadic formation after marriage.

## **1.4 Aims of Study**

This study aims to explore “*how*” young Maltese couples, in a heterosexual marriage, co-construct their unified couple identity, in the first five years of their married life. In so doing, it tries to understand the factors that might enhance couple identity development within a Maltese Context. It therefore takes into consideration the dyadic processes and patterns of interactions between the partners. However, this study acknowledges that couples continually re-construct their dyadic relationship, as is also highlighted by Yerby (1995).

Another aim is to gain a better understanding of *how* young couples manage to maintain their sense of individuality (the “I” position), whilst negotiating a sense of togetherness (“We-ness”). In this regard, socio-cultural factors are of significance in understanding this process and the hurdles that spouses go through in this transitional life cycle phase.

## **1.5 Rationale for the Study**

### **1.5.1 My Personal and Professional Curiosity**

This area of study is highly influenced by my personal journey of couple identity development. I, myself am a newlywed and, together with my husband, we are in the process of co-constructing our unified relational narrative, whilst also negotiating an “I-We” balance. I find that whilst this is a unique and significant shift in our loving

relationship, it is also complex and challenging. I am therefore curious to understand how other married couples experience the developing shared narrative of their union. On a professional level, as a trainee therapist, the findings of this study will surely guide my work with couples, considering that couple work is an area I aim to specialise in.

### **1.5.2 Understanding Couple Identity Development and It's Therapeutic Implications within a Maltese Context**

It is noted that many couples struggle to maintain a healthy balance between growing as a couple and growing as individuals. This is one reason why this study is of significance. Bowenian Theory proposes that at the heart of all couple difficulties is the universal struggle to balance the interplay between forming close attachments (we-ness) and individuality (separateness). Similarly, in the local context, Karen Bishop (Times of Malta, 2014), a Maltese Systemic Family Therapist, explains that this struggle is one of the most common problems couples seek therapy for:

a lot of couples struggle with maintaining a balance between the 'I' and the 'we', that is between their individual identities and needs vis-à-vis what the couple needs to grow together as a pair.

Locally, Azzopardi's (2007) longitudinal study on expectations of marriage is unique in highlighting an understanding on the significance of couple identity development. Indeed, Azzopardi (2007) calls for further local research in this area: "...togetherness and separateness .... need further research, contextualizing them within a shifting

Maltese culture” (p. 256). Thus, this study is of significance due to its uniqueness in this regard, especially considering that similar research to this is still very new in the local context.

The findings from this study might have implications for therapeutic interventions with couples, since the balance between an “I-We” identity may need to be considered when addressing couple issues around intimacy, relational adjustment, emotional connectedness, and satisfaction amongst others. This study thus provides insight of the experience of “we-ness” within a Maltese context which might be different than that of other cultural contexts.

### **1.5.3 Marital Stability and Satisfaction**

Research suggests that “we-ness” is a strong predictor of marital stability (Bodenmann et al., 2008; Gottman, 2011; Siegel, 2012). Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz (1992), using the Oral History Interview with married couples, found that a lack of “we-ness” is one factor which can indicate whether a couple will divorce or not. In light of this, working towards identifying the factors that help marriages survive has important implications for couples, therapists, and society at large. Whilst an understanding of “we-ness” can help us reach towards a theory of marital quality and stability, this study acknowledges that each couple relationship is unique and a general understanding of marital stability might be limited.

## 1.6 Definition of Terms

***We-ness*** - describes the couple's sense of *togetherness* as a *unified couple*. It does not only refer to the actual doing of things together in its physical sense, but also to the emotional and cognitive connectedness. In text, this is also referred to through the use of the following statements: "we" and "us"

***Me-ness*** - describes a sense of *individuality* and *separateness*. It refers to individual growth and aspects which influence each partner and the couple identity. In text, this is also referred to through the use of the following statements: "me" and "I".

***Unified couple Identity*** - refers to a mutual sense of "us" or "we". This is not at the expense of losing one's individual identity. To the contrary, it is a state in which each partner maintains one's individual identity, yet at the same time is able to feel and think in terms of "we" and "us" when thinking about day-to-day tasks, activities, and long-term plans.

## 1.7 Conceptual Frameworks

### 1.7.1 Attachment Theory

Attachment Theory, as based on the joint work of John Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1988) and Mary Ainsworth (1989), provides an understanding of couples' attachment styles, sense of security with others, and insight on how individuals "deal with basic

emotions, [and] engage with others on the basis of these emotions” (Johnson, 2009, p.410). Thus, it might provide insight as to why some couples develop a unified couple identity whereas others may struggle to do so.

Attachment develops during infancy (Bowlby, 1980; Ainsworth, 1989; Ainsworth & Bowlby, 1991) and continues throughout adult romantic relationships (Clulow, 2001; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Ainsworth, 1989), in which spouses’ interactions and patterns of communication are guided by the partners’ attachment style: secure, anxious-pre-occupied, dismissive-avoidant, or fearful-avoidant (Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Attachment styles are similar to Minuchin’s (1974) ideas of how relationships are meshed: *adaptable*, *enmeshed*, and *disengaged*. These come into play during moments of distress, conflict and emotional intensity between the couple (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999), influencing the interplay between emotional *closeness* and *distance*, which in turn influence couples’ “we-ness”.

The theory proposes that parental responses influence and shape childhood attachment patterns, in turn, leading to the development of adults’ *internal working models* (Bowlby, 1969), which set ground for later social and emotional development and attachments. Internal working models, or *scripts* (Byng-Hall, 1985) are mental representations of individual’s understanding of the world, self and others, which shape one’s feelings, thinking, and expectations in adult romantic relationships (Bretherton & Munholland, 1999). These come into play in shaping couples' patterns of interactions, as well as, emotional *closeness* and *distance*. Thus, Byng-Hall's (1980, 1995a, 1995b) concept of *distance regulation* is crucial in understanding the couple's interplay of negotiating a “too close / too far” relationship” (1995a, p. 51). He

explains that if such balance is not reached, children, or extended family members are triangulated in, to regulate *distance* and *closeness* between partners. Thus, adding to the complexities in negotiating a unified couple identity.

### **1.7.2 Family Life Cycle Ideas: Courtship to Marriage Transition**

The concept of *family life cycle* is significant in understanding the developmental transitions that influence couple identity development. Mc Goldrick and Gerson (1988) describe the life cycle as “circular” and “repetitive”, in which, development / disruption in family life stages influence individual development, which in turn influence further family development. Mc Goldrick and Carter (1989) divided this process in six stages. The second and third stage, are relevant to this study: *families through marriage* and *families with young children*. This is useful in my understanding of the developmental transitions couples go through when progressing from one stage to the next, whilst negotiating a unified couple identity.

The marriage phase of the life cycle marks the concept of “coming together” of two separate families (Morris & Carter, 1999). The couple’s main goal is to work on forming a new family system and therefore differentiate themselves from their families of origin. The concept of family roles, rules and boundary making are crucial at this stage. Enmeshment with family of origin and parental over-involvement might cause disruptions in the couple’s successful negotiation of couple identity, leading to triangulation and marital instability (Mc Goldrick & Gerson, 1988). This disruption will in turn disrupt the developmental progress in moving from one stage to another (Mc Goldrick and Gerson, 1988). Francelle Azzopardi (2009) reports that, within the

Maltese context, parental and in-law interference highly contributes to marital breakdown.

Mc Goldrick (1989) argues that whilst the process of becoming a couple is often perceived as simple and natural, it is, in fact, one of the most complex and difficult transitions of the family life cycle. This romanticized view of marriage may be the result of couple's inadequate preparation into marriage leading in turn to high levels of distress and difficulties (Morris & Carter, 1999). Barnhill and Longo (1978) proposed nine transitions that families have to negotiate to move from one stage to the next. The first transition is that of couple commitment which is of huge relevance to this study. They state that "the major process for the developing family is the breaking away from the family of origin and developing a life-long commitment to the new family" (p. 472).

### **1.7.3 A Systemic Perspective**

Given the systemic nature of this study, systemic theories and ideas are crucial in understanding dyadic processes. In Bateson's (1979) view "everything is connected to everything else", thus the whole cannot be understood except through the relationship between its parts. This is significant in understanding the interplay between the "I" and "We" identities.

The concept of *family scripts* is relevant in understanding how couples "negotiate their personal scripts, derived from their respective families of origin, into one coherent script" (Azzopardi, 2007, p. 34). Such scripts give meaning to the patterns of

interactions that develop between the couple, creating dyadic stability and change (Bateson, 1980). The concept of *corrective* and *replicative* scripts (Byng-Hall, 1985) is crucial in the development of new systems, in this case the negotiation of a new couple identity.

The notion of communication and meta-communication (Watzalwick et al, 1974 & Hoffman, 1993) is crucial in understanding communication patterns (Haley, 1963), boundaries, and power dynamics (Minuchin, 1974) in the negotiation of couple identity. This relates to the process of mutual construction and exchange of meanings based on circular causality and “feedback loops” (Bateson, 1972) which come into play in the development of a unified couple identity.

Murray Bowen was a pioneer in putting forward the concept of “*individuation*” and “*togetherness*” (Bowen, 1976). The core of his theory has to do with individual’s ability to differentiate between *emotions* and *thinking* (Bowen, 1976). Bowen’s concepts of *differentiation of self*, *triangulation*, *nuclear family emotional process*, and *emotional cut-off*, are crucial in the understanding of *separateness* and *togetherness* and the “emotional stuck-togetherness in families”, referred to, by Bowen, (1976) as “*undifferentiated family ego mass*”, which is significant within the Maltese context, given the close proximity of families. Spouses with high levels of differentiation are more able to balance their sense of *separateness* and *togetherness* (Kerr and Bowen, 1988), whilst those with low levels of differentiation have more difficulties to cut-off from their family of origin and “separate themselves from the past in order to start their lives in the present generation” (Bowen, 1976, p. 84).

*Transgenerational* theories provide an understanding on the “rules which govern the communication of acquired practices, behaviours and beliefs between generations” (Lieberman, 1979). It is believed that family rules, roles, conflict patterns and emotional bonds are passed on from one generation to the next, possibly explaining the invisibility of loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark’s, 1984). This is highly significant in the Maltese context, given the close proximity of families.

Dyadic formation is considered as being embedded in individual’s life dominant and unique narratives, which shape partners’ thinking and experience (Dallos & Draper, 2005) of relational development. Thus, one can argue that when two persons join to form a *unified couple identity*, they enter a process of co-constructing narratives. In this way, connections and meanings are co-created (Morgan, 2000). White & Epston (1990) explain that interpretation of events, in this case, couple experiences, is influenced by family traditions and culturally shared narratives.

Marriage is in itself a social construct, thus socio-cultural views on couplehood are profound. *Social Constructionism* is of high relevance to the understanding of couples’ shared experiences, “*social constructs*”, and “we” discourse. Spouses’ experiences are viewed as an integral part with their socio-cultural views and beliefs (Gergen, 1985), in that, whilst individuals make their social and cultural worlds, these worlds make them (Gergen, 2001; Potter, 1996; Shotter, 1993). In this regard, spouses’ realities are seen as inter-subjective (Pare, 1995) and socially constructed through language and culture (Anderson & Goolishian, 1988; Freedman & Combs, 1996). Sprey (2009) argues that marriage is unthinkable without the evolution of language and speech. This is significant given the interpretative-phenomenological

methodology of this study, which acknowledges the uniqueness and equal recognition of participants' shared experiences, as embedded in a Maltese context.

In understanding stories of “we-ness”, issues around gender, equality, sexual intimacy, and power come into play (White and Epston, 1990; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Freedman, 2001). In this regard, *Feminist* theory is quite influential in systemic work. Feminism provides valid insights on the notion of gender equality (Fox & Murray, 2000), especially with regards to women's emancipation and equal shared division of roles (Freedman, 2001). This is of high significance considering that all the participant female spouses are employed. Furthermore, despite this shift in equality between the sexes, within a Maltese context home chores are still considered as the wife's responsibilities, whereas men are more responsible for financial management.

Similar to *social constructionism*, feminist approaches view the notion of gender in line with social and cultural constructs of gender ideals (Ferree, 1990). Thus, current religious, political and social norms may influence the development of a unified couple identity, which might be conflictual with the conservative narratives and relational scripts of in-laws. These socio-cultural constructs around gender differences seem to affect the process of couplehood, love, marriage, intimacy, communication and closeness.

## 2. Literature Review

---

### 2.1 Introduction

One of the challenges of intimate romantic relationships is the construction of a unique shared narrative (Dallos, 1997). This journey is characterised by a fundamental process which consists of co-construction, assimilation and consolidation of a couple identity between partners (Scabini & Cigoli, 2000; Scabini & Iafrate, 2003). This section provides an understanding of the literature around “we-ness” and other related aspects which seem to influence and contribute to the negotiation of a unified couple identity.

### 2.2 Couple Identity Development: Understanding “We-ness”

Couple identity development (CID) refers to the concept of becoming “We”, in the identification of a couple (Burke & Tully, 1977), thus forming a sense of *togetherness* as opposed to an “I” position or sense of *separateness*. “We-ness” refers to a couple’s mutual investment in their relationship and in each other (Gildersleeve, 2015). It involves a sense of reciprocity; negotiation of each other’s perspectives (Skerrett, 2003, 2004); and acting in the best interest of the relationship (Skerrett & Fergus, 2015), thus creating “relational wisdom” (Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Singer and Skerrett, (2014) remark that for couples to develop a “we” identity a “shift in consciousness” is required, in which partners shift from an “individual consciousness” of their personal needs to a “consciousness of the relationship”. They argue, that this “we” consciousness is the root of trust and positivity in each other, and the relationship, which according to Gottman (1999, 2011) are the key to a sound “marital house.”

Various research has shown that a sense of “we-ness” and mutual inter-dependence is linked to higher levels of satisfaction, better mental and physical health (Fergus, 2011; Godwin et al., 2013; Rohrbaugh, et al., 2012) and marital resiliency (Skerrett, 2003). Singer and Skerret (2014) describe relational resilience as the couple’s ability to learn and grow from moments of hardship and develop a “stronger connection” in working through their conflictual patterns. In this regard, we-ness plays a crucial element in the couple’s capacity to “generate positive emotions” and diffuse conflict (Gottman, 1999, 2011; Gildersleeve, 2015).

### **2.3 Negotiating a Couple Identity**

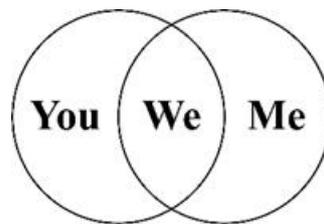
One can argue that in dyadic relationships, there is this blurring of self and other that is hard to quantify; “where one partner ends, and the other begins, becomes grey” (Hart, 2014, p.1). Aron et al., (1991) acknowledge that this cognitive distinction to separate the self from the other in an intimate relationship can be quite challenging. In my view, this distinction requires active awareness and consciousness of the self, the other and the relationship.

Partner's sense of self shapes the relationship, (Leary, 2008) which in turn shapes the self (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Rusbult et al., 2009; Aron & Aron, 1996, 1997). It is in this mutual shaping between the self and relationship, that the couple identity emerges (Kwang, 2010). This process is referred to by Kwang (2010) as *couple identity negotiation*, for which he proposes three models: one partner takes over another and the couple identity becomes more prominent than the self (*the forfeited self*); partners have mutual influence on each other and on the relationship, in which, both couple identity and partners' unique selves are prioritised (*the negotiated self*); the couple identity becomes almost entirely informed by the personal identity (*the imperialistic self*).

Couples who work towards having a *negotiated self*, experience more relationship satisfaction and commitment due to the balance between *me-ness* and *we-ness* (Kwang, 2010). In line with this, Burke and Cast (1997) highlight that couple identity takes place in the formation of the interplay between a sense of togetherness and separateness. In this way, partners go through a process of reconsideration of personal narratives about the self and the partner, in the negotiation of a "*unique relational identity*" Azzopardi (2007, p.141). On the other hand, Brewer and Gardner (1996) argue that the couple identity operates on a group level, in which, the self and other, are no longer viewed as separate entities (Acitelli, 1993), and the self and other are not separated.

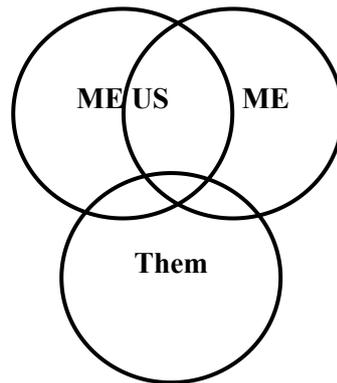
## 2.4 A Balance between Togetherness and Separateness

Negotiating a balance between an “I-We” identity is a complex process but not an impossible one (Burke & Cast, 1997). Gildersleeve (2015, p. 6) argues that “a healthy sense of we-ness emphasizes two distinct “I’s” in addition to the prioritized third entity, i.e., the (couple) relationship” as depicted in the below diagram. Burke and Cast (1997) propose that successful relationships have a balance between an “I-We” identity, which comprises a feeling of both *togetherness* and *separateness*. In fact, various research studies highlight that the healthiest relationships are those which maintain this balance (Aaron & Aaron, 1997; Feeney, 2007; Reid et al., 2006). This links with Bowen’s concept of *differentiation of self*.



This balance is highly influenced by each partner’s “*mental representation*” of togetherness (Fisher & Crandell, 2001). Thus, attachment theory and ideas on family scripts provide valid explanations and understandings in this regard. Such balance does not come naturally, but is achieved through a process of active and conscious relational processes. This involves different shifts, including, emotional involvement, physical space and cognitive consciousness (Singer & Skerret, 2014), which require active participation of both partners towards increasing self-differentiation whilst developing a solid self in the relational sphere (Bowen, 1976).

Couples do not live in a vacuum, independent from others. They live in constant relational dynamics with family members, friends, colleagues and society at large. Thus, in my opinion, this balance between an "I-We" identity may be partly influenced by a fourth entity - the extended family, which I refer to as "Them", as depicted in the below diagram:



I think that couple identity development, cannot be fully understood without understanding external influences, such as that of in-laws and extended families, which seem to influence dyadic processes and boundaries. Indeed, Berger and Keller, (1964) argue that family relations and dynamics account for the formation of future relations with friends, colleagues, and partners. This also links with an attachment perspective of adult romantic relationships. Furthermore, as proposed by Bowenian theory, such balance between *togetherness* and *separateness* is only possible through mutual differentiation of partners from their respective families of origin (Bowen, 1971).

In this regard, Schnarch and Hendrix's debate on differentiation seem relevant. Whilst Schnarch's approach, the Sexual Crucible, promotes individuality and differentiation, Hendrix's approach, Imago therapy, promotes relationship over individualism, with

its focus on empathy and fusion (James, 2007). Their debate on whether differentiation from family of origin enhances relational formation or otherwise intimate relationship enhances differentiation (James, 2007), is of significance.

## **2.5 Developing a “We” Language**

Partners’ discourse and language use can offer an understanding of the couple’s sense of “we” orientation as opposed to an “I” orientation. Indeed, several studies focused on “we-ness” through examining couples’ discourses of using “we” as opposed to “I” pronouns (Hinneken et al., 2016; Seider et al., 2009; Rohrbaugh et al, 2008; Rohrbaugh et al, 2012). It is noted that the use of pronouns, such as, “we”, “us” and “our”, are related to a sense of we-ness, indicating a sense of togetherness and a couple oriented position. On the other hand, pronouns, such as, “I”, “me”, “you”, “mine” and “yours” seem to indicate separateness and an individual oriented position (Reid et al., 2007; Rohrbaugh et al, 2012). Seider et al., (2009) found that older couples’ discourse included more “we” oriented pronouns when compared to that of middle-aged couples. I wonder whether this is related to the longer relationship duration (time-bound) or otherwise to the experiences of events that older couples might have gone through (event-bound), making them to develop more a sense of togetherness.

Schwarz et al., (1998) argue that this analysis of language and discourse allows for an unbiased measure of partners’ shared accounts, compared to traditional self-reports and content sharing. This is due to the fact that language use is less controlled compared to the shared experiences and behavioural displays during interviews

(Seider et al, 2009). Thus, this highlights the significance of discourse analysis in this study, in order to provide deeper insight of the couples' sense of togetherness and separateness. In so doing, cultural connotations of a Maltese discourse play significant role in the understanding and meaning of participants' language use, which may take a different meaning or connotation when translated in the English language.

## **2.6 Emotional Inter-dependence: Attunement, Connectedness and Intimacy**

In negotiating a sense of “we-ness”, couples engage in a form of emotional inter-dependence (Sels et al., 2016), in which they engage in a mutual influence of each other's emotions, cognitions and behaviours (Berscheid and Ammazalorso, 2001; Rusbult and Van Lange, 2003; Butler, 2011). Emotions are considered an important element in dyadic formation, as they become a way “to create and modulate connections and relationships” (Bertrando, 2015, p.5). Thus, the emotional aspect deserves attention in understanding CID, especially since most partners describe their dyadic relationships in terms of emotions (Fitness & Strongman, 1991). Indeed, Bertrando (2015, p.5) states that “any human system is (also) an emotional system”, in which emotions “develop within and through the system”, in this case, the couple dyadic system. This idea is similar to Murray Bowen's, Family Systems Theory, which views the family as “an emotional unit.”

This study acknowledges the systemic relational existence of emotions, described by Bertrando (2015) as follows:

any moment I am together with (at least) another person, a system of relationship is created, and emotions are part of it. Moreover, even when I am

alone with myself, I live, anyway, in relation, with thoughts, fantasies, expectations, connecting me to other people; they have emotional connotations too. Because such connotations are unavoidable, intrinsic to human systems, and inseparable from them (p.5).

Empathy between partners influences *togetherness* and *separateness* in the relationship (Azzopardi, 2007). However, I find the notion of attunement as rather powerful, as it goes beyond the cognitive understanding and feelings of emotions of others (empathy) (DeYoung, 2003). It involves “opening oneself to another’s emotional experience” (Knudson-Martin & Huenergardt, 2010, p. 370), whilst creating a sense of “feeling felt” (Siegel, 2007) which in turn co-creates feelings of connectedness and we-ness. In order for couples to reach such stage, emotional safety and a sense of security are essential (Muro et al., 2015; Singer & Skerrett, 2014). Attachment influences partners’ ability to empathise and feel attuned with one another (de Waal, 2008; Decety, 2011; Swick & Freeman, 2004), thus Attachment theory provides valid insights in understanding individual’s emotional connectedness and its interplay in dyadic formation.

In this regard, intimacy plays a crucial role. What is intimacy and what’s not, is subjective, and influenced by social constructs and life narratives, depending on one’s gender, culture, religious beliefs, and educational level. It can range from love, to trust, to emotional connectedness, to sex, thus comprises multiple connotations. Lewis (2010) proposes an extended view of intimacy, suggesting that it consists of eight stages/levels: physical, aesthetic, recreational, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, sexual, and unconditional love. She argues that most couples tend to reach the first three

stages of intimacy and skip all the way to number seven, indicating that most couples struggle to achieve intellectual, emotional and spiritual connection. This, she states, is the reason why many couples feel unfulfilled in their relationships, resulting in conflictual and difficult relationships. For couples to achieve deep levels of intimacy, a sense of *safety* and *connectedness* need to be present between spouses (Lewis, 2010; Singer & Skerrett, 2014).

Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz (1992), found that couples who scored low on we-ness experience poor levels of connection, intimacy. Indeed, they state that “these couples are probably living parallel lives, in the same home, but never really joining together any more” (p.311), resulting in blaming one another, avoiding responsibility, and avoiding dyadic dialogue about their problems. They further emphasise that most couples who scored low in “we-ness” had difficulties in communicating effectively on a couple level due to their different perceptions. This in turn increases the occurrence of loneliness and isolation, favouring narratives of *separateness* and *distance* rather than *togetherness* and *closeness*

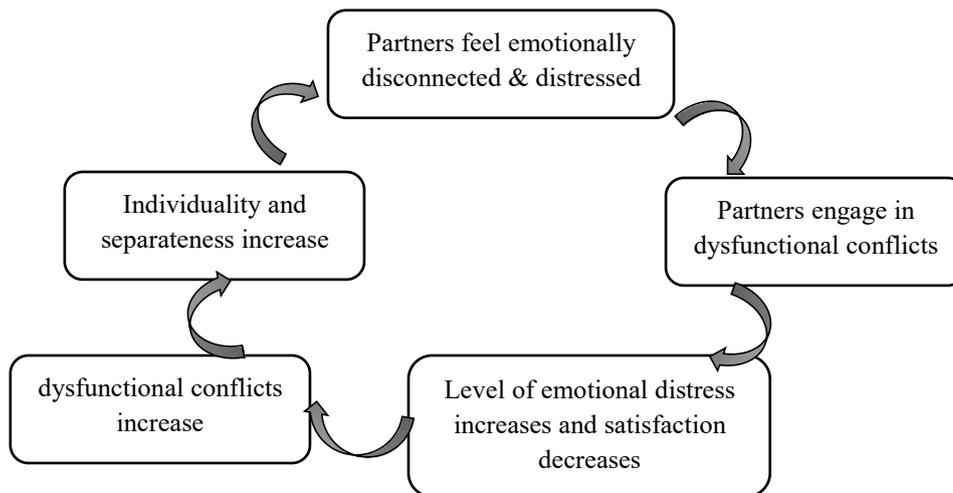
I think that emotional involvement is inevitable, regardless of gender. However, research shows that emotional involvement is more associated with the female gender (Tingey, 1993), despite the fact that research shows that men who show higher emotional involvement, tend to experience more marital satisfaction than those who perform less emotional involvement (Erickson, 1993). Systemically, Erickson’s (1993) study showed that the more men engage in emotional work, the more women become involved, thus, reinforcing a cycle of interaction in which both engage in mutual emotional performance (Higgins Kesler, et al., 2000). Schoebi et al., (2010) highlight,

that couples' emotional interdependence is influenced by socio-cultural ethos. In view of this, participants' experiences of emotional connectedness, intimacy and communication are to be understood within a Maltese context.

## **2.7 Emotion Regulation, Communication and Conflict**

From a Batesonian perspective, emotions are considered as messages of communication, in which, spouses communicate information about their relationship rather than content (Watzlawick et al., 1967; Bateson, 1972). In the presence of emotions, partners can decide to either co-operate or compete with one another (Dumouchel, 1995). Whilst co-operation may lead to finding common grounds and co-authoring "we-ness" and stories of intimacy (Strong et al., 2014), competing may lead to dysfunctional patterns of communication, making conflict resolution more difficult to achieve. Indeed, Singer and Skerrett (2014) emphasise that we-ness enhances couples' ability to generate positive emotions in times of conflicts and disagreements, in turn increasing conflict de-escalation and commitment.

Research (Conger, Rueter, & Elder, 1999) shows that, emotional distress influences couples' conflictual patterns of communication, in that, the higher the emotional distress, the more dysfunctional conflict is; thus, enhancing a sense of *separateness* whilst reducing the couple's ability to negotiate we-ness, as depicted in the below diagram:



In Gottman's (1994) view, "the balance between negativity and positivity seems to be the key dynamic in what amounts to the emotional ecology of every marriage" (1994, p. 67). He emphasises that couples who engage through the four "corrosive" (2014, p. 110) communicative behaviours of *criticism*, *contempt*, *defensiveness*, and *stonewalling*, which he refers to as the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", have a high probability of marital dissolution and divorce. Thus, one can argue that for couples to develop a sense of we-ness, they are to engage in more functional patterns, through respectful, empathic and validating responses. In this regard, first order theories provide valid insights.

*Respect* plays a pivotal role in couplehood. "We" is made up of two "I"s, thus respect allows the space for both partners to feel free to grow individually as well as together (Singer & Skerrett, 2014). This provides a sense of security in the relationship. In this regard, Harvel Hendrix's (1988; 2008) notion of *stretching* and *accommodating* the other is significant in understanding respectful behaviour. Eckstein et al., (2014)

describe four elements of respect: *respect for differences*, which includes compromise; *responsibility*; *review*, which emphasizes communication, understanding, awareness and reflection; and *release*, which refers to a willingness to forgive. These are important elements of marital resilience, since they reduce contempt between partners (Frei & Shaver, 2002).

In the process of negotiating a couple identity partners engage in a process of “co-regulation”, in which each of the partners regulates or dysregulates each other’s emotions and physiological sensations, thus co-creating emotional patterns (Sbarra and Hazan, 2009; Butler and Randall, 2013). The process of emotion regulation is highly influenced by family of origin interactions and attachment styles. Thus couples with secure attachment are more able to regulate emotions and reflect on the emotional functioning of self and others (Fonagy, 2001). Emotion “co-regulation” is significant for the couple to develop emotional stability, which is crucial for the couple’s relational and psychological well-being (Kuppens et al., 2007; Houben et al., 2015). Thus, one can argue that emotional inter-dependence is an essential element both for each partner’s individual well-being as well as for their relational well-being.

## **2.8 Socio-Cultural Context and Gender Differences**

Definitions of what constitutes a “healthy relationship” differ across historical times and cultures (Skerrett, 2016). In contemporary times, where much emphasis is placed on independence and individual success, a sense of “We” may often become undermined or obscured in the shadow of an “I”-oriented position. Indeed, Mc Adams

(2013) argues that in Western cultures, stories of individualism are more favoured, highlighting self-reliance, achievement and overcoming adversity. Thus, favouring a “we” story and couple identity, is not an instinctive process in our culture, making stories of interdependence and mutual caretaking more difficult to achieve (Singer and Skerrett, 2014). In this regard, I think that the use of social media, career-driven choices, parenthood, and peer-relations, may influence the process of negotiating a unified couple identity.

Men and women seem to share different realities of marriage, in that, for men it is the “end of aloneness” and the start of companionship, whereas for women it is connected with motherhood (Coontz, 1988). In line with this, Azzopardi (2007) argues that women are more inclined towards *togetherness* and *closeness*, whereas men seem to seek more for *separateness* and *distance*. This seems to pose a huge challenge for heterosexual couples to achieve a mutual satisfying level of “we-ness”.

Gender differences influence the negotiation of roles and tasks in couplehood. Whilst I think that couples may bring forth a narrative of equity, traditional roles and gender stereotypes may prevail in practice, mainly in household and financial management. Research shows that household work is typically associated with the female gender (Tingey, 1993), whereas, financial management is more associated with male responsibilities (Horrocks, 2010). Indeed, this is a dominant narrative in the Maltese context.

Maltese couples tend to follow the tradition of buying a house before getting married, which is possible, for the majority, through acquiring a bank loan. I thus, hypothesise, that all participating couples have to deal with the financial distress that this might pose. This is significant given that research shows that financial disagreements are the primary factor causing marital dissatisfaction (Dew, 2008, 2009; Grafova, 2007; Gudmunson et al., 2007).

Malta is a small island and thus extended family ties seem to remain strong. Hence, issues around boundary making, parental over-involvement, and loyalties might feature as dominant narratives, influencing dyadic formation. Therefore in the local context, marital satisfaction, happiness and togetherness may be influenced by the emotional closeness that exist with in-laws and extended families. Furthermore, whilst religious beliefs and practices, as based on Roman Catholicism, do not seem to have a strong connotation for the young generations, religious family practices and traditions may still shape and influence Maltese couples' dyadic formation.

## 3. Methodology

---

### 3.1 Introduction

This section describes the research method and methodology employed in this study, followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations taken, recruitment procedures employed, and sample participants involved in this study. Also, discussed in this section is the tools used as means of data collection and data analysis.

### 3.2 Research Approach, Methodology and Rationale

#### 3.2.1 A Qualitative Approach

I opted for a qualitative approach as it considers five features: studying of *meaning*, *representations* of different perspectives, *contextual* conditions, explanation of human *social* behaviour and the use of *multiple sources of evidence* (Yin, 2011). These are crucial in systemic research as they coincide with systemic views on difference, meaning-making, contextual and social constructionist ideas.

This study aimed at understanding young Maltese couples' experience of couple identity development. In so doing, I sought to capture an in-depth understanding of couples' shared narrative. Thus a qualitative approach proved to be well-suited in studying 'meaning' and 'quality' of the lived experiences of the phenomenon under study. Furthermore, a qualitative approach seemed appropriate as it aims to answer questions about the 'what', 'how' or 'why' of a phenomenon, as opposed to the 'how

many' or 'how much' associated to the quantity nature of quantitative methods (Walliman, 2011; Mason, 2002; Merriam, 2009).”

The context, in which participants live, is crucial in understanding participants' experiences, views and beliefs. This study is held in a Maltese context. Thus a qualitative method seemed apt as it “covers contextual conditions - the social, institutional, and environmental conditions within which people's lives take place. In any ways, these contextual conditions may strongly influence all human events”(Yin, 2011, p. 8). In this regard, I opted for IPA as the main methodology.

### **3.2.2 Why Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis?**

I opted to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as the main research methodology. When compared to Narrative Analysis and Discourse Analysis, IPA seemed more suited for this study due to its emphasis on participants' experiences, context and contextual factors (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2010; Shinebourne, 2011; Smith, 2004), which fit with the systemic nature of this study. Indeed, IPA, as developed by Jonathan Smith (1996), allows the researcher to have an exploration of idiographic subjective experiences with a specific emphasis on social cognitions (Smith, Harré, & Van Langenhove, 1995). This fits with social constructionist views.

IPA has its theoretical roots in phenomenology, as originated by Edmund Husserl (1999), through his work on the concept of consciousness, hermeneutics, and symbolic-interactionism. Interpretation of phenomena is viewed as an interpretative

process (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2010), influenced by the researcher's involvement in the generation of meaning and co-construction of the participants' stories (Chapman & Smith, 2002). Thus, as opposed to other methodologies, IPA acknowledges the researcher's engagement with the participants' texts. This allows space for self-reflexivity and positioning of the researcher.

Couples' experience of couple identity development varies from one couple to another. IPA is, therefore, a powerful methodological tool, in that, it acknowledges both participants' unique stories and common experiences, as it incorporates 'lower order themes' to 'higher order themes' (Smith, 2004). This is, thus, another reason why IPA is suitable for this study, due to its emphasis on *difference*.

IPA explores how people ascribe meaning to their experiences in their interactions with the environment (Smith, Jarman and Osborn, 1999). In so doing, the concept of language and discourse becomes significant to understand the meaning of experiences shared by participants (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Thus, even though IPA is the main research methodology of this study; I think that concepts stemming from *discourse analysis* can be useful to examine the role of language in describing participants' shared experiences. Discourse analysis considers verbal reports as behaviours in their own right, influenced by one's context (Potter, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1995). It is therefore useful to help me interpret couples' experiences and perspectives in light of the language and discourse participants use.

### **3.3. Research Setting**

This study was conducted in partial fulfilment of the Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy within the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT), Malta. It is held within a Maltese context, with Maltese couples.

### **3.4. Ethical Considerations**

Honesty, integrity and genuineness are essential elements in research implementation (Walliman, 2011). This study deals with individuals' lived experiences, which can be either of a positive or negative tone. Therefore, ethical issues may arise. To counteract for this possibility, the concepts of anonymity, confidentiality and informed consent were taken into consideration and addressed accordingly. For the purpose of this study, consent for participation was needed from both partners. As suggested by Polit and Hungler (1995) participants' names were altered, to ensure full confidentiality and anonymity. Furthermore, audio-recordings will be destroyed after completion of this research study.

### **3.5 Research Design**

#### **3.5.1 Sample Selection and Recruitment**

IPA requires a sample of participants which can provide a "representation" of a perspective or experience rather than a population (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2010). Thus, participants' sample was purposively selected so as to provide insight into the research topic. Participant couples were chosen through 'snowball sampling', which

proved to be an efficient means in finding couples who met the recruitment criteria. As a result, time consumption was not an issue.

In total, I have been contacted by seven individuals who showed interest in this study. Three couples got to know about this study through word of mouth. Two of the couples were recruited through the use of social media. Two other couples dropped out with no explanation. This left me with five couples, which is a good sample size as it not only “allows sufficient in-depth engagement with each individual case but also allows a detailed examination of similarity and difference, convergence and divergence” (Smith & Osborn, 2007, p. 57).

### **3.5.2 Participants**

This study focused on *couples*. Thus, participants’ sample consisted of five Maltese couples (refer to table 3.1). The majority of participants are in their early thirties, and two in their late twenties, ranging between 26 and 32 years of age. Couples’ characteristics are included in table 3.1 below.

Four of the couples opted for a religious marriage, explaining it to be part of family traditions, mainly wished for by the wives. One of the couples opted to prioritize their beliefs over their families’ religious beliefs, and thus opted for a civil marriage, and also cohabited for a year before the marriage. Also, participants vary in their educational background and work status, as noted in table 3.1. It was astonishing to notice how all the wives happen to be working in a social care setting, whereas the

husbands have more technical and industrial positions. This happened to be by coincidence, and in no way planned for.

<b>Couple</b>	Couple 1: Sharon and Claudio	Couple 2: Roberta and James	Couple 3: Jane and Mario	Couple 4: Julia and Kevin	Couple 5: Claire and John
<b>Age</b>	W: 26 years H: 31 years	W: 31 years H: 32 years	W: 28 years H: 30 years	W: 30 years H: 32 years	W: 30 years H: 32 years
<b>Work Status</b>	W: Operations and Fund-raising Coordinator (Social Care setting) H: Logistic & Operations Manager (Food Trade company)	W: Probation Officer H: Agricultural Officer	W: P.E. Teacher H: Software Developer	W: Nurse H: Software Architect	W: Social Worker H: Training Co-ordinator
<b>Length of Marriage</b>	2 years and 10 months	4 years	3 years	4 years	4 years
<b>Length of Courtship</b>	3 years (they were childhood friends)	8 years	8 years	10 years (they were friends for 3 years before courtship)	4 years (they were friends for 6 years before courtship)
<b>Civil or Religious Marriage</b>	Religious	Religious	Religious	Religious	Civil
<b>Children</b>	No	Yes - 2 year old + expecting	No	No	Yes - 18 months old

### 3.5.3 Recruitment Criteria

This study called for young couples who have been married for a period of 2 to 5 years. Participants were required to be Maltese nationals, in a heterosexual marriage.

Participants were recruited based on the following criteria:

1. Married Couples: This study called for married couples. Why married couples? - Kupperbusch, Levenson and Ebling, (2003) state that “marital interaction is a particularly appropriate context in which to study emotional phenomena because of the wide range of emotional responding that occurs in this critical social relationship”(p.338). In light of this, I opted to understand the experience of couple identity development in the context of marriage.
2. Heterosexual Couples: Given that IPA typically aims for a fairly homogeneous sample, this study focused only on heterosexual marriages to eliminate the multiplicity of various other factors that might be present in other forms of union.
3. Maltese nationals: In line with the concept of homogeneity, this study called for Maltese nationals, to eliminate the multiplicity of various factors stemming from differences in cultural and religious views. Despite the fact that the majority of Maltese people have a catholic religious background, this study did not discriminate between participants who got married by canon law from those who married by civil law.

4. Length of Marriage: Research shows that the first five years of marriage highly predict couple's possibility of having a successful marriage or otherwise end in divorce (Cherlin, 1992; Carrere et al, 2000). Further to this, Huston (2009) found that the honeymoon phase of newlyweds lasts for up to the first two years of marriage. In view of this, this research called for couples who have been married for a period of 2 to 5 years.
  
5. Age: Based on the 2015 Eurostat report, the average age of first marriages in Malta is 28 years for females and 30 years of age for males. In light of this information, couples who fall within the age range of 23 and 35 years old were eligible to participate in this study.

### **3.6 Data Collection**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the aim to allow participants the space to talk about their views, beliefs and experiences. As Smith and Osborn (2007) argue, semi-structured interviews are “the best way to collect data for an IPA study” as they allow space for the “researcher and participant to engage in a dialogue whereby initial questions are modified in the light of the participants’ responses and the investigator is able to probe interesting and important areas which [might] arise” (pg. 57). Indeed, the interview questions were used as guiding probes to inquire about various aspects of their married life (Skerrett, 2016) with the aim to shed insight on the couples’ dyadic formation.

### **3.6.1 Interview Procedure**

Interviews were done on a three week timeframe depending on participants' availabilities. I did interviews in different settings as chosen by participants, which varied from cafeterias to their own house. Interviews were audio-taped and lasted approximately between 60 to 90 minutes, all of which were transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

A discussion with each couple was held after the interview. I primarily inquired about their experience of the interview and was curious about their views and opinions. They reported positive feedback, in which, some of the couples shared that the interview experience provided the space for reflexivity on certain aspects which they had took for granted. This experience provided the space to co-author stories of "we-ness whilst noticing particular aspects of themselves, their significant other, and their couplehood. This reminds me of one instance in which during the interview Julia experienced an "aha moment" and whilst deeply looking at her husband, she uttered with astonishment "you truly did change a lot!!"

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was based on IPA procedures, which is, as described by Smith (2007), an iterative and inductive cycle. The strategy, as proposed by Smith and Osborn (2007) and Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2010), was followed for each interview transcript so as to match out the analysis of findings of this study.

The process included: reading and re-reading of transcripts; note and comment taking through which high and low order themes were coded; emergent themes were developed and sub-themes were clustered together under high order themes; emergent themes, including sub-ordinate themes, were connected whereby some themes were incorporated into the stage of analysis whereas others were discarded. This process led to five superordinate themes.

### **3.7.1 Translation of Transcripts**

Interviews were held in Maltese, as was preferred by the couples. Some of the couples shifted the use of words between English and Maltese language. Transcription of data had to be translated in English. This means that throughout the translation from Maltese to English some expressions which have a cultural connotation associated to their meaning might have been lost. To counteract for this, I opted to include particular phrases in Maltese, which have a connotation to the Maltese culture and language.

### **3.8 Validity and Quality**

The concept of validity is essential to ensure “quality” of the research study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As Patton (2002) posits, “the researcher is the instrument” (p.14) of the credible nature of qualitative research. The validity of this study lies in its trustworthiness of the analysis and interpretation of participants’ accounts, in that the

analysis and discussion of themes depicted are based on participants' views and perspectives, irrespective of whether they meet my views as the researcher.

Various criteria have been developed so as to measure validity in qualitative research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). *Triangulation* is one criterion (Mathison, 1988), which allows for multiple perceptions about a single reality (Healy & Perry, 2000) whilst incorporating varied methods and sources of information in the analysis and interpretation of findings (Smith, 1996). In this regard, I tried to link interpretation of findings to that of other research studies. I did this on both common and divergent perspectives.

The *presentation of evidence* allows space for coherence between the data gathered and researcher's interpretation (Smith, 1996). In this regard, ensuring that interpretations of data are in line with the meaning that participants' attributed to the narration of their accounts is crucial. As a result, interpretations of findings are supported by excerpts taken from the transcribed interviews. To ensure *member validation* (Smith, 1996) I took the opportunity to probe further and deeper during the interviewing process so as to gain a clear understanding of the participants' meaning and interpretations.

*Ecological validity* and *contextual validity* are important measures. Smith and Osborn (2007) imply that most people tend to feel most comfortable in a setting they are familiar with. As a result, all interviews were held in a setting chosen by the couples themselves to ensure a sense of ease during the interviewing process. Furthermore, given the fact that the research study aimed to focus on the Maltese context, all

interviews were held with Maltese nationals so as to ensure that interpretation of findings corresponds to a Maltese perspective, especially given that I am also Maltese.

### **3.9 The Researcher and Reflexivity**

An essential element in qualitative research is the researcher's process of reflexivity on what s/he brings to the interview and research process. I am a thirty year old, Maltese, Catholic female, and a newlywed. Thus, I am also going through the process of co-constructing a unified couple identity with my husband. This explains my interest in this study, which allowed the space for dyadic growth and understanding in my marital relationship.

It is essential to acknowledge the fact that my interpretations of participants' accounts were influenced (Berg & Smith, 1988) by various factors, which in turn may have influenced the interview interaction process and participants' shared narratives and openness or lack of openness to the interviewing process. My personal and professional background, beliefs, gender position as a female, my position as a wife, and my current family life cycle positioning surely influence my perspectives, understanding, analysis and interpretation of data.

Meaning and interpretation of participants' shared experiences is based on a Maltese cultural perspective and lifestyle. My input as a Maltese researcher is worth noting as this influence the interpretation of data, giving it a Maltese connotation. On the one hand, this might have made participants to feel understood and at ease to share their perspectives and narratives, assuming that I may also share similar views to theirs

given our common cultural backgrounds. On the other hand, this might have limited me from being more curious and inquire further about their narratives, thus taking for granted or at face value certain aspects of their shared experiences.

I must acknowledge the fact that I did share similar views and experiences to those shared by the participants. This may be the result of the fact that I am of a similar age and also going through similar dyadic processes, negotiation and formation as a wife, as well as an individual. This once again, might have limited my curiosity on certain aspects being shared. Furthermore, being a woman might have drawn me closer to the females' shared narratives, both on an individual level as a woman, as well as on a couple level as a wife. In conducting this research, I acknowledge the internal dynamic processes that such distinction requires not only as a wife, but also in conducting this research, in which a constant and conscious negotiation between myself as a wife, as researcher, and as trainee therapist are constantly into play. Where one start and the other ends is a complex process.

## 4. Analysis of Findings

---

This chapter introduces the main research findings. Five supra-themes were identified, which represent the major results, presented in table 4.1. Participants' accounts are provided in the form of excerpts. These aim at shedding light at what is being interpreted and discussed in the discussion chapter.

Table 4.1

<b>Connecting Theme</b>			
<b>A mutual dance of communicating distance and closeness</b>			
<b>Superordinate Themes</b>	<b>Subordinate Themes</b>		
<b>Developing Emotional Connectedness</b>	Mutual emotional attunement	Sharing different levels of intimacy	Sharing mutual respect towards each other and the relationship
<b>Feeling Secure in the Marital Relationship</b>	Appreciating individual differences without fixing each other	Negotiating conflict and open dialogue	
<b>Re-Positioning and Negotiating “I-We” Identities</b>	Re-positioning of the individual self	Negotiating Individual differences	Negotiating time together vis-a-vis time apart
<b>Mutual active participation in negotiating a unified couple identity</b>	Work-life-balance - Making time vis-a-vis finding time	Role Assimilation - A choice rather than an unconscious decision	
<b>Co-constructing and Negotiating Boundaries</b>	Mutual adjustment of boundaries with extended family	Negotiating boundaries and time out with peers	

## 4.1 Supra-Theme 1: Developing Emotional Connectedness

Participants' accounts highlight emotional connectedness as a primal factor in their journey towards co-constructing a unified couple identity. This was depicted by three themes which came out strongly in participants' accounts. These include: attunement, intimacy and respect.

### 4.1.1 Theme 1.1: Mutual Emotional Attunement

Emotional attunement is a common factor shared by some of the couples (Couple 1, 3, 5) who seem to share a unified couple identity. This is shown in the spouses' mutual ability to understand each other's non-verbals, attitudes and body postures, which in turn seem to enhance emotional closeness between the couple.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: If, how to say it, if I see that he is sad or he notices that I am feeling sad, he will ask what happened. Or he will pamper me .*

*Couple 5: (Claire and John)*

*John: we know each other very well.. we learned to recognise when we are in a good mood and when not. For instance, when Claire is in a bad mood she acts nervously, and she won't even text me throughout the day, that's how I realise (laughs). Then I message her, I show her I realised and that I'm here.. and I let her take her time to calm down..*

Roberta and James (Couple 2) and Julia and Kevin (Couple 4), who still seem to struggle in negotiating a unified couple identity, showed less of this emotional connectedness and attunement. Roberta's excerpt depicts this:

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: James is reserved. And the fact that, like I'm saying, before I used to immediately recognise when he's not ok. Even now I realise, but it takes me time to notice. After he remains quiet for three days, I then notice something happened to him.*

Emotional closeness is felt in terms of empathic understanding of partner's feelings and experience. Rather than competing with one another, partners expressed a sense of co-operation characterised with a mutual sense of sensitivity, which in turn enhances emotional closeness and *togetherness*.

*Couple 5: Claire and John*

*Claire: once we got married I experienced bouts of anxiety for around two months. Even though there were no changes. I used to feel sad, up to the extent that I did not want to see John. It's like I had wedding blues, like baby blues, but wedding blues. I spent three months feeling anxious and sad, and I didn't know why. John was very sensitive and patient towards me. Thank God I had him as he was very supportive. (To him) You really supported me, if not for your support I don't know what would have happened to me.*

*John: Yes. You did the same when I had my rough patch. You know, we support each other in moments of hardship.*

Contrarily, Julia and Kevin shared a different narrative, in which emotional attunement and sensitivity lack mutuality. This in turn enhances a *separateness* and distance.

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: I show my emotions more than him. I know that he is more reserved, but if he is stressed I realise, and I will ask him.*

*Kevin: mhm that's right.*

*Julia: you barely ask me though, if I am worried or the like... ifhem I try to handle my own emotions, because when I cry he makes fun of me*

*Kevin: it depends on what!*

*Julia: for instance, when my grandma was at hospital I used to cry. He used to tell me, but Julia she's old that's what's expected at her age. But for me it meant a lot.*

#### **4.1.2 Theme 1.2: Sharing different levels of intimacy**

Emotional closeness seems to deepen couples' experience of intimacy. This goes beyond sexual intimacy. Indeed, some of the couples shared a holistic view of the meaning and experience of intimacy. This is depicted in Sharon and Claudio's experience, who's understanding of intimacy, also incorporates the day-to-day "small" gestures towards each other which they consider as special.

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: Intimacy for us eem isn't just the sexual relationship but also the sense of friendship, companionship and mutual affection we share in our relationship. ... We share our intimacy in so many different ways, eem for example when we are vulnerable and expose ourselves to each other, that's one way of being intimate. We are intimate in the smallest of things which we know they mean a lot to the other, for example, Claudio never fails to open a door for me, being when we are shopping or simply opening the car door for me. These for me are special, and make me feel loved. Eem, I know that Claudio enjoys the kiss before we leave the house in the morning so being late or not, when I forget I re-enter the house to kiss him.*

*Claudio: that's true!! (Laughs)*

*Sharon: ifhem, very small things which we both feel that they remind us and help us appreciate what we have and help us build and make our relationship stronger.*

*Claudio: yes, that's it!! Sexual intimacy is important too but not only.*

This level of intimacy is not shared and experienced by all couples. Roberta and James, who are also parents to a 2 year old girl, explain how their role as parents limit their sexual intimacy and connection, which in turn seem to be influencing their couple identity.

*Couple 2: Roberta and James*

*Roberta: first of all at times I will be tired and go immediately to bed and sleep. Most of the time this is how we end up, especially if she cries all night (referring to their daughter). Yes this effects our intimacy a lot... at times we even sleep in separate rooms because of her.*

When asked about what supports this strong emotional connectedness and level of intimacy, couples described communication as a powerful element in their relationship.

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: the fact that we are both able to express our genuine emotions towards each other helps us to grow more intimate with each other.*

#### **4.1.3 Theme 1.3: Sharing mutual respect towards each other and the relationship**

Respect also featured as a key factor in couplehood. Couples described how respect plays a significant role not only when together but also when apart, or in times of conflict.

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Claudio: We show constant respect towards one another even when we are not on good terms or arguing about something.*

Respect is depicted in terms of accepting each other's differences and flaws, allowing mutual space for individuality, thus, creating a balance between individual and couple identity. This will be highlighted in the below sections.

## **4.2 Supra-Theme 2: Feeling Secure in the Marital Relationship**

Couples 1, 3, and 5 shared another common factor, which is, a feeling of confidence and security in the relationship. This theme did not emerge in the narratives of Couples 2 and 4. Indeed, whereas Claudio expressed feeling more secure in the relationship since they got married, this narrative is not shared by Kevin.

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Claudio: ... I nowadays feel more secure and at ease with myself.. Not like before.. eem despite the fact that nowadays I have more responsibility heq, I have more things on mind, and I have more responsibility eem yes I feel more secure in the relationship since we got married.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Kevin: marriage won't stop you from doing what you want to do (here he was referring to cheating) the fact that you're married won't stop you or force you to say no. do you understand? So this idea of being married is bullshit.*

### **4.2.1 Theme 2.1: Appreciating individual differences without fixing each other**

Couples' narratives also highlight their ability to appreciate each other's individual differences, even during times of conflict, without constantly trying to fix one another.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ...by now he got used to me. In the beginning, whenever he used to notice that I am in a bad mood, he used to show affection, and that didn't help, because I would need my time to calm down on my own. So then I used to get more nervous. Now, he understands me and he gives me my space to calm down and then we discuss.*

This does not mean that spouses accept all of each other's flaws. To the contrary, couples expressed a sense of confidence and security in knowing when to accept each other's characteristics and perspectives and when to challenge each other to change and grow both on an individual level as well as on a dyadic level.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Mario: before she used to spend money recklessly. She spent around a year not paying for the loan because she didn't have enough money. Then once I told her, I'm not going to pay the loan anymore, and that helped her to start budgeting.*

#### **4.2.2 Theme 2.2: Negotiating conflict and open dialogue**

Couples' sense of security is also highly related to their ability in creating an open dialogue not only on positive and agreeable factors but also during times of disagreements and conflicts, despite each other's differences. Thus, once again communication features as a fundamental element in the development of a unified couple identity.

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: ehe true. He always moves out of the room and then approaches me to discuss when he is calmer. We have good communication between us. Even when we hurt each other we always create time to explain to each other*

*what was hurtful, and obviously we try our best to avoid repeating the thing which hurts. We also make it up to each other after a big argument in different ways, it depends on the situation.*

On the other hand, Kevin's (Couple 4) difficulty in being open with his wife seems to show a lack of security in creating an open dialogue on their different perspectives.

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Kevin: ehe, I know she nags. So, for instance, I know she doesn't like it when I lie on the bed and my clothes are full of dog's hair, so when she asks I deny it to avoid hearing her nagging.*

James (Couple 1) also seems to share this common narrative, highlighting a process of naturalization in which issues and conflicts resolve on their own. This seems to partly explain the struggles that the couple has in developing a unified couple identity.

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*James: I decided that I don't want to spend my life arguing on non-sense stuff. So as much as possible I keep going on.*

*Int: do you discuss things, it just stops there, how do you live this?*

*James: No, it's like things fall in place on their own. Like I said, there's no point in arguing or in feeling angry. It's useless to stay arguing. I decided that I will not spend my life arguing, so I keep going.*

### **4.3 Supra-Theme 3: Re-Positioning and Negotiating "I-We" Identities**

Reaching a balance between the "I" and "We" was described by participating couples as a challenge. Achieving such balance is a process which requires time, open dialogue, understanding and connectedness. All of the couples mentioned that the first 18 months were the hardest in terms of adjusting to the transition of living together,

develop a different lifestyle, discovering new aspects of each other and settling down as a couple.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: I think it took us eighteen months till we finally felt settled.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: (with a strong emphasis) the first year, yes. till we got used to each other. I knew him, but then other aspects of him start coming out, for instance, when he doesn't close the toilet seat, which really annoys me (She laughs). Now he closes it, but before we used to fight a lot, especially on things which to others may seem non sense but...*

Wives seem to have struggled more in keeping their individual identity and share time with their friends, whereas, the men seem to see less value in going out with friends but rather prefer staying alone at home or otherwise share their free time with their wife.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: I love my "me time". In fact I also encourage him to go out with his friends. It's healthy. I see it as healthy. ...before we used to argue a lot on this but nowadays both of us allow each other this space.*

*Mario: It's a problem because I don't like to go out with friends much, especially if she is at home, not like her. Before she used to just go out. I check with her. For instance, she works on Saturdays so I that's when I plan to go out, but I make sure that I'm back home the minute she is home, so she won't be home alone. Before she used to just go out before even telling me. Now, we discuss and also have a limit, she has a limit of how much she goes out with her friends and likewise me, because in the beginning it was random.*

### 4.3.1 Theme 3.1: Re-positioning of the individual self vis-a-vis Couple Positioning

Partners, mainly the wives, express the effect of this shift from an individual position towards a couple positions. Whilst husbands expressed that this did not have much effect on them, wives shared a different narratives, in which they recounted the struggle in becoming independent and shifting from individual consciousness to relational consciousness.

#### *Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ...till you become independent ... all your life depending on your family, they do everything for you, and then all of a sudden you have to start doing everything on your own. Alright, you have your partner to help you, but it is still very difficult.*

Sharon's narrative, below, describes couples' struggle in which individual identity becomes blurred by the couple identity, thus depicting a sense of identity loss.

#### *Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: ifhem whenever anyone who knows us sees us alone they immediately ask for my husband and vice versa. Ifhem for instance, not so long ago we had a family birthday party and we couldn't find parking, eem so he dropped me off and went to park. I entered the party alone and the first person who approached me immediately started asking me where my husband was and how come he isn't with me. Eeem so eem ehe I think we represent one another. It's like we are one and part of each other.*

Also, Julia describes how through time she and her husband are becoming even more similar, as if turning into one person.

#### *Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: (she laughs) sometimes I tell him that we are becoming similar on certain aspects. It's like you would have spent long time together that then you start becoming similar to each other.*

She also recounts, experiencing identity loss, the minute that she realised that she had given up on going to the beach, an individual interest she used to enjoy doing, but her husband does not.

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: For instance, I noticed a difference in going to the beach. He doesn't like to go to the beach and I really love it. But, since we don't go together, I rarely go too.*

*Kevin: but because you choose to not because I stop you from going.*

*Julia: No, because you influence me. We rarely went to swim together... it's not that bad, but yes it feels that I lost part of who I am. ... at times, I say to myself, I used to love going to the beach a lot, see how I became now.*

This struggle seems to be more of reality for the wives rather than the husbands. The below excerpt depicts this struggle for Jane:

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: Yes I do go out alone, yes. People don't understand that I still have a life, emm as some people see us as a couple and so during the one offs that I go out alone, they question me about going out alone. ... ehe this was one of the challenges that we faced.*

Whereas, some of the couples described a natural and automatic shift in positions, others expressed that this process of re-positioning requires a cognitive shift rather than an automatic shift.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: before I used to go out straight after work, especially if any of my friends were also free to meet. He works till five (5pm) and so at around six I used to be home. Nowadays, I know that after work I will go home and prepare food, and will wait for him to come home. I think there's more maturity.*

### 4.3.2 Theme 3.2: Negotiating Individual Differences

The process of becoming a couple requires constant negotiation of partner's differences in personal characteristics and modes of doing things. Whereas some of the couples expressed a sense of ease with each other's differences, characterised by a sense of security and open dialogue, others expressed expectations of change. This seems a reality for some of the wives who expressed expectations of change in their husband's behaviours.

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: I'm used to taking shoes off before entering the house. That's how we do at my mum's. His family are not used this way, so when I started seeing him entering the house with his shoes on, I used to panic.*

### 4.3.3 Theme 3.3: Negotiating time together vis-a-vis time apart

Contrary to common literature, female participants expressed their need for distance and to be away from their husband whilst also investing time with friends. However, it seems that those couples who seem to share a sense of we-ness, struggle less to find such balance despite their differences in perspectives.

*Couple 1 (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: On this we disagree, I need time on my own as I like my personal time and still enjoy myself as I feel that I am along myself as an individual not to be lost yet at the same time makes me appreciate and happy when we later are together. Claudio has different views than me on this.*

*Claudio: I don't have as much time on my hands as she has, and the little free time that I have I prefer to spend it together with her. I feel happier*

*when I am with her than on my own. Unless I use the time alone to have a nap (both laugh)*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: I prefer when we are together, but at the same time I need my time alone. Once a month I go out with my best friend, and I will be looking forward to that day.*

On the other hand husbands favoured time together with their wife or otherwise alone, as opposed to spending time with friends.

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*James: everyone has a different way of spending time alone, for instance I like to go to the fields with the dog. That's enough for me.*

#### **4.4 Supra-Theme 4: Mutual active participation in negotiating a couple identity**

Couples shared two common dominant narratives. Whereas Couples 1, 3 and 5 shared the narrative that a relationship needs hard work to be maintained, Couples 2 and 4, shared a common narrative that things get better on their own.

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Interviewer: how did you negotiate your different routines?*

*James: you'll mature as a couple*

*Roberta: it just happens*

*James: it comes natural. It comes natural then.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: there is no handbook which one can use in order to maintain a happy and loving marriage. It has to be the equal willingness to make things work from both parties and to base the marriage on love, respect and dignity towards each other.*

*Claudio: We saw which methods and ways best work for us and not what others say and expect.*

#### **4.4.1 Theme 4.1: Work-life-balance - Making time vis-a-vis finding time**

Negotiating work-life balance is a challenge for all couples. However, couples vary in their ways of negotiating such balance. Two narratives were shared: those couples (1, 2, 3) who plan and ‘make’ time to be together, and those (couples 2, 4) who try and find time together subject to availability.

*Couple 2: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: heh (laughs) this is a struggle for us. We both are very hard-working and committed individuals and have very demanding jobs which makes it difficult. During the week we have very little quality time but we make it a point to overcome this during the weekend as we plan our time together then...*

Claire and John still manage to create their own time together, despite the fact that they have to attend to their 18 month old daughter. To the contrary, Roberta and James shared a different narrative, in which parental responsibilities take over their time together.

*Couple 5: Claire and John*

*Claire: our time together is important for us, and we do seek to create such time. It's not that easy considering that we have a daughter, and we both*

*work, em (laughs) and then there's the housework too. But we always manage to plan and have our time together.*

*John: we try to get our daughter to sleep by eight or nine, so like that we will have time together, to discuss and all.*

*Claire: That's right!!.. We deeply love our daughter, but our relationship comes first Heq, she wouldn't be here if not of our relationship, so it's useless to invest in her and then we will be on bad terms.*

*John: that's it. That's right!!*

It seems that poor emotional connectedness creates a sense of awkwardness between partners in times when they are alone as a couple, up to the extent that they struggle to find ways of connecting and experiencing *closeness*. Indeed, Roberta and James seemed to struggle to answer such question, and remained silent for quite some time.

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: and then when we are alone together it's like we won't know what to do. (laughs)*

*James: eee that's it! That's how you end up then, because we detached from so many things that when you have some free time it gets confusing. You wouldn't know what to do then.*

#### **4.4.2. Theme 4.2: Role Assimilation - A choice rather than an unconscious decision**

Couples' accounts highlight traditional assimilation of roles, in which, the wives are responsible for household chores, and the husbands have financial responsibility and management. Couples differ on the way that this division of roles is negotiated.

Whereas, “we” oriented couples actively communicated about such role divisions, “I” oriented couples explain that it came natural.

*Couple 5: (Claire and John)*

*Claire: John in the beginning didn't used to do any housework, cooking yes, but cleaning no.*

*John: I'm not good at it.*

*Claire: true (laughs) (to him) but that's how you were raised up ux.. but with time I supported him to get used to some chores. Still he struggles and I can see that in him. So we discussed it and agreed that I will do most of the housechores, but thenhe does other stuff such as the shopping and cooking. This way it works for us and we are both happy.*

#### **4.5 Supra-Theme 5: Co-constructing and Negotiating Boundaries**

Couples' accounts narrate the challenge of negotiating and setting boundaries with the external world, including extended family, friends and also through the use of social media. This requires co-constructing and negotiating their individual position as a couple.

##### **4.5.1 Theme 5.1: Mutual adjustment of boundaries with extended family**

Adjusting and negotiating boundaries with the extended family might pose a great challenge for couples. This is not an easy process for all couples. While some couples expressed a sense of confidence and ease in setting clear boundaries, others shared a difficulty in doing so. Claire and John's narrative shows this sense of union in setting boundaries with their in-laws way before the marriage.

*Couple 5: Claire and John*

*Claire: we were going to do a religious ceremony. We even completed the Cana course. We felt ridiculous the whole entire time because we are not religious; we were just doing it to keep with the tradition u and to also make my family happy. But then we agreed that this is our wedding and we will be hypocrite if we get married in the church, and at the eleventh hour then we decided to have a civil marriage. Like this it felt that it was our day.*

*Int: How did you communicate this with you family memebrrs?*

*John: we basically told them that's our day*

*Claire: we told them this is what we are going to do*

*John: if you don't like, don't come*

Jane's account hereunder depicts how she and Mario negotiated boundaries with in-laws, during times when they were showing over-involvement in her whereabouts and the way she spends time alone.

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ....when his parents were interfering I first discussed with him and then he spoke to them. This way helped to settle them down. But we managed through discussing things out because before we used to argue about it. Then when we finally sat down and discussed things started to change.*

#### **4.5.2 Theme 5.2: Negotiating boundaries and time out with peers**

Getting married seems to bring along with it the social construct of limiting time with friends and peers. Jane's narrative depicts this reality:

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: I have a male best friend, and we do go out together at times, Mario knows him too. Mario's family don't like this. For them he's a guy and it's like I'm going out with a gut for them. They used to argue a lot with me about this, to stop contact but I refused. It's like they couldn't understand that it is just friendship and that my relationship is with Mario. This was a*

*huge challenge for us. Nowadays it got better and they seem to have understood.*

All couples shared a common construct, that of, limiting time out with friends. Kevin, who travels frequently due to work commitments, highlights the cultural connotation that this has within the Maltese context, which is different than that of foreign cultures.

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Kevin: In Malta we are a bit laid back. In other foreign countries they go out every single day. .... after work they go out with their colleagues or friends to have a beer. In Malta we don't do it. Here we go straight home after work, to cook for the husband or the wife. This is the mentality. It's influenced by our families, we're used to having the mother at home cooking and so we keep on following that lifestyle.*

## 5. Interpretation and Discussion of Findings

---

### 5.1 Introduction

This section presents interpretation and discussion of the themes. These will be discussed in light of the reviewed literature. Themes are grouped under the five supra-themes that emerged, which will be discussed hereunder.

### 5.2 Developing Emotional Connectedness

Emotional connectedness features strongly in couples' narratives, highlighting the significance of mutual influence on emotions, cognitions and behaviours. This was also emphasised by several other researchers (Berscheid and Ammazalorso, 2001; Rusbult and Van Lange, 2003; Butler, 2011). Whilst this is lived in unique ways, and forms, by each couple, some of the couples shared a common narrative, in which, systemic empathy (Wilkinson, 1992), emotional validation, attunement, and respect are mutually present.

This seems to support couples to co-create a safe and secure space which seem to enhance a sense of "we-ness". An example of this is that of Sharon, who refers to this sense of emotional connectedness as a "bond", possibly implying a secure attachment that she developed with her husband Claudio. I wonder whether it is this emotional connectedness which in turn leads to developing a secure attachment between spouses,

or otherwise it is the spouses' secure attachment which led them to establish this sense of connection and closeness. Future studies may explore further this feature, through the use of an attachment scale, which this study refrained from using, which is one limitation of this study.

Stories of intimacy seem to have a strong influence on couples' level of emotional connection, favouring a narrative of *togetherness* and *closeness*. Intimacy seem to have a sexual connotation for all couples, indeed, upon mentioning the word intimacy couples started, at first, recounting about their sexual life. This may be related to a Maltese connotation of sex, in which it is considered as a private and intimate activity. However, attuned couples went beyond the sexual connotation of intimacy and described a holistic narrative which also incorporates emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, recreational, and spiritual intimacy (Lewis, 2010). This is also emphasised by Lewis (2010) who argues that whilst through intellectual intimacy couples learn to mirror and validate each other's views, it is through spiritual intimacy that the relationship becomes meaningful, in which the "You" and "I" become "We".

Emotional connectedness and intimacy are induced by effective patterns of communication between partners, possibly indicating the powerful element of communication and dialogue. This narrative was common between those couples who seem to have a "we" oriented position; as opposed to those who seem stuck in an "I" oriented position. This is similar to the findings of Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz (1992), who argue that "I" oriented couples "are probably living parallel lives, in the same home, but never really joining together any more" (p.311). This seems to result

in blaming one another, avoiding responsibility, and avoiding dyadic dialogue about their problems. In this regard, respect is significant in developing a sense of *we-ness*. Respect plays a significant role not only when together but also when apart, or in times of conflict. Singer and Skerret (2014), note that *We-ness* comprises two “I”s which live inside the “We”, thus another form of respect, which also featured in participants’ accounts, is respect towards each other’s sense of individuality, allowing the space to “grow independently and together” (p. 23).

As Bertrando (2015, p.10) states, “any emotion conveys a relationship” including the “emotional states” which are not shared and unspoken of. Retrospectively, I recall the various emotions present in the room, yet unspoken of, which were unique to each couple. Some of the couples brought with them emotions of positivity, lightness, closeness and a sense of connection, in which humour was also present. Others portrayed emotional states of distance, helplessness, unhappiness, marked with lack of humour and low fun elements.

The emotional closeness described by couples, could be noticed in their patterns of interactions during the interview. I recall how couples portraying “we-ness”, showed clear boundaries, allowing each other time and space to share their respective views and answer respective individual questions. Thus, they were mutually involved in shaping the nature of the interview narrative (Strong et al., 2014). On the other hand, couples who lack this sense of *togetherness* manifested signs of interruptions and more diffused boundaries (Minuchin, 1974)

Surprisingly, love did not feature in any of the couples' narratives, except by Sharon, during one of her responses. Whilst I do think that this does not signify a lack of love between partners, I wonder what had contributed to it. Given that Maltese do not usually engage in romantic attributes of verbally expressing love, may be one explanation. Another explanation may be, participants' age and level of maturity as individuals as well as on a couple level, in that, they reached a stage where love is not the most prominent aspect of their relationship. Indeed, Olson and Olson (2000) identified ten categories, predicting strong marriages, in which communication, flexibility and closeness rank highest, whereas love did not feature at all. In line with this, Sternberg's (1986) *triangular theory of love* postulates that love has different forms, describing commitment as one component of love.

### **5.3 Feeling Secure in the Marital Relationship**

Couples' commitment towards each other and the relationship seem to be the basis for partners to feel secure and safe as a couple. This is similar to what Singer and Skerret (2014) emphasize as significant, in order, for the couple to grow towards a sense of "we-ness". This means that relationship is prioritised over other commitments and relationships, including extended family and peer relations. This does not mean that individual needs are neglected. To the contrary, couples expressed a sense of reassurance and ease in meeting their individual needs, whilst also respecting each other and the relationship. This seems to signify a balance between *individuality* and *togetherness*.

Partners expressed mutual confidence in each other's best interest of the "we", in which, the relationship is prioritised even when apart, or making decisions separately. Thus, signifying a secure attachment with each other, built on trust. This reflects the couples' ability to shift from "individual consciousness" to a "consciousness of the relationship" as proposed by Singer and Skerret (2014), who argue that this "we" consciousness is the root of trust and positivity in each other, and the relationship, which according to Gottman (1999, 2011) are the key to a sound "marital house."

As argued by Gottman conflict is inevitable. Partners' secure response to conflict and their ability to generate positive interactions provides a sense of stability and security in the relationship (Gottman, 1999, 2011). Relational security seems to create a sense of safety and trust, allowing partners the space to create an open dialogue on positive and agreeable issues as well as during conflicts and moments of disagreement. The concept of "open dialogue", as originated from the work of Seikkula, refers to an "openness" and transparency in conversations (Olson Seikkula, & Ziedonis, 2014), in this case dyadic conversations. Thus, communication features as a fundamental element in the development of a unified couple identity. On the other

Conflict avoidance, with the hope that things will settle and change on their own, diminishes couples' sense of "we-ness". This portrays a narrative of automatic process of change, as opposed to active participation in changing dyadic processes and interactions. These differences were also noticed during the interview, in which some of the couples felt more at ease to address each other, established eye contact, and disagreed with one another in my presence, whereas, others, directed the

conversation at me, had poor eye contact, and felt uneasy to explicitly disagree and contradict each other, despite the fact that such disagreements were evident through their non-verbal attitudes.

A common narrative between those couples, seemingly sharing a unified couple identity, was the notion of time. They expressed a mutual active creation of space and time to discuss and have an open dialogue not only after conflict but also on other positive issues, such as future planning and individual interests. In such situations, perspective-taking, compromise and respect seem fundamental in supporting the couple to make decisions in the best interest of the relationship as well as satisfying each other's individual needs and wishes.

The usual gender stereotypical *demand-withdraw* patterns of interaction were evident, whereby; the husbands withdraw and distance themselves in times of conflict and the wives demand and seek closeness. However, one significant observation is that those couples who shared a "we" narrative expressed understanding and acceptance of each other's' differences. Sharon, Jane and Claire expressed reassurance and trust that their husbands will seek closeness for reconciliation and communication when calmer. To the contrary, Roberta and James and Julia and Kevin, seem to get stuck in their conflictual patterns, leading them in turn to engage in what Gottman (2014) refers to as "corrosive" communicative behaviours.

Each individual partner brings along in the relationship their sense of self and thus differences between partners are brought forth. Those couples who shared a narrative

of “togetherness” shared another common ability; that of appreciating and allowing each other’s differences, without constantly trying to fix one another. This seems to require a sense of security and confidence in oneself, the other and the relationship. This sense of security and confidence, in turn provides a safe space for partners to challenge and support each other’s flaws when needed, to promote individual growth rather than creating a feeling of being “fixed” (Singer and Skerrett, 2014). Singer and Skerret (2014), argue that it is when couples accept each other’s differences that a true sense of we-ness is created. They further emphasise that acknowledging and supporting differences, including individual growth and interests, is the “deepest form of empathy” (p. 23), which Skerrett (2013) refers to as “flexibility” in seeing the self and the other within the “We”.

#### **5.4 Re-Positioning and Negotiating “I-We” Identities**

Couple identity construction is a process which a couple experiences in the formation of the interplay between togetherness and separateness (Burke & Cast, 1997). This interplay requires a set of boundaries that help keep a healthy balance. As Ruszczynski (1995) states “constant and inevitable tensions between the individuality and autonomy are necessary for the emotional health of each of the partners” (p. 45-46). This balance between individuality and togetherness helps to form the development of the couple’s identity.

Togetherness is described by participants in terms of “being” together and “doing” things together. Couples described how this sense of togetherness provides a sense of

security and *closeness*. This seems to have a meaningful impact on the partners, which further influences their progression towards negotiating a unified couple identity. Contrary to the literature on common gender stereotypes around *togetherness* and *separateness*, all husbands expressed their need for increased togetherness as opposed to the wives' needs for separateness. This narrative was in relation to balancing time together as a couple and separately as individuals, in which the husbands expressed the need for closeness. This seems to highlight a male need for "togetherness" which so far research tends to associate with the female gender. The emancipation of women may contribute towards the wives' need for separateness, considering peer influences and career pressures. Furthermore, the interpretation of such construct might be influenced by my gender position. This might therefore, call for future research studies in this regard based in the local context.

Whilst this balance may be seen as natural and automatic, in practice it requires a constant challenge and lots of hard work by both partners. It is thus a never ending process of negotiating and re-negotiating the "I" and "We" identities as they change through time and experiences.

### **5.5 Mutual active participation in negotiating a unified couple identity**

Skerret (2016) argues that the "we" reflects partners' meaning of the relationship, in which, partners engage in a mutual "lifelong project". This implies the active participation of both partners in co-creating and sustaining their unique couple identity. Participants' accounts depict two dominant narratives around this concept.

On the one hand, Couples (1, 3, 5) portrayed a common narrative of partners' mutual active participation in the co-construction of their couplehood. This seem to represent a narrative that their relationship belongs to them (Skerrett & Fergus, 2015), thus it requires mutual active participation, dedication and willingness to enhance relationship growth and closeness. Furthermore, these couples expressed how they actively discuss and re-negotiate dyadic processes, including division of roles, rules, boundary-making, rituals and work-life balance, moving away from family of origin traditions, thus indicating the application of *corrective scripts* (Byng-Hall, 1985) and *relational wisdom* (Skerret, 2016). In this regard, couples feel "in charge" of altering their relationship according to their dyadic needs and life circumstances (Skerret, 2016).

On the other hand, Couples 2 and 4 described a more passive view, relying on the natural progression of relationships. They portrayed a narrative in which relational circumstances are lived with a leap of faith. Indeed, this was clear in Julia's account, during a moment whereby her husband communicated with *contempt*. She expressed that "there's no point in arguing. After all, with you (to husband) I have to stay". This seems to signify a lack of willingness and motivation to make active, conscious choices and decisions in the benefit of the relationship. One may argue, as was also noticed, that these couples may also struggle to take an active lead in co-constructing their own language, rules, rituals, roles and boundaries, given their narrative of automatic progression of *replicative scripts* and family of origin traditions, as a means of creating dyadic stability. In the course of therapy, Skerret (2016) emphasises the importance of supporting such couples to develop a "relational consciousness" whilst

supporting them “to make conscious, intentional choices about their relationship” (p.55).

This mutual active participation is also reflected in couples’ *work-life balance* and *role assimilation*. All partners are engaged in full-time employment, which poses a huge challenge to keep a mutual balance between, career-driven commitments, household chores, parenting, individual and couple time. It was noted, however, that couples who favour a sense of “togetherness” recounted active participation in creating and “making” time together as a couple, as well, as individually. This requires a process of active planning and thinking not only in terms of time, but also on the quality of time together. On the other hand, those couples who seem to favour an “I” oriented position seem to fall more in the trap of ‘finding’ the time to be together, as subject to availability.

With regards to parenthood, whilst this research recognises the challenges of parenthood, Roberta and James and Claire and John, provided two different narratives, in which Roberta and James’ accounts prioritise a parent-narrative, thus time with her husband is subject to availability and energy as opposed to Claire and John’s “we” narrative, in which the relationship is prioritised over their daughter, and time together is “made” and planned for. This reflects the couple’s ability to utilize their conjoint reflexive faculty in the service of their own change (Fergus, 2001).

Whilst all couples recounted a cognitive narrative of equity and equality in division of roles, its practicality varied greatly. All couples highlighted gender stereotyped, traditional assimilation of roles, in which, the wives are responsible for household chores, despite their full-time employment. Husbands, on the other hand, took on financial responsibility and management. However, couples differ on the way that this division of roles took place. Whilst, “we” oriented couples actively communicated about such role divisions, thus making a cognitive choice, “I” oriented couples explain that it came natural, thus once again reflecting an unconscious, *replicative script*.

In this regard, research demonstrates that traditional division of housework is correlated with low-marital satisfaction for wives and high-satisfaction for husbands (Grote, Frieze, and Stone, 1996). However, other research studies show that husband’s emotional involvement provides higher marital satisfaction for women than participation in housework (Bradbury, Campbell, & Fincham, 1995; Erickson, 1993). Thus, one can argue that “we” oriented couples, who also cherish mutual emotional connectedness, may invest less time and energy on their unequal input, and focus more on their sense of “*togetherness*.”

## **5.6 Co-constructing and Negotiating Boundaries**

Whereas, “We” and *togetherness*, call for a focus on boundary reduction between the couple, this calls for an increase in boundaries between the couple and others. Thus, in understanding the process of couple identity development, it is of significance to

recognise the inter-connectedness that exists between couples and others around them, including extended family, children, colleagues, peers and friends, which may influence the couple's dyadic formation. Boundary-making is a gradual process which involves cognitive and physical distance both on an individual and relational levels, comprising of various stages (Azzopardi, 2007).

Couple's ability to set clear boundaries with the outside world seems to act as a protective factor towards developing a unified couple identity. This seems to allow the couple the space to negotiate dyadic processes whilst forming itself, especially in the early years of marriage. An example of this is Jane and Mario, and Claire and John's narratives, which depicts their ability to position themselves as a couple vis-a-vis their in-laws' over-involvement. Once again this process of boundary setting requires a mutual active and conscious participation of partners.

Findings indicate that consistent boundaries set by the couple contribute to its ability to function at its best, whilst also allowing space for interaction with in-laws, friends, and family. Thus, boundary-making is not comprised of complete emotional cut-off (Bowen, 1976) from family of origin, but rather consists of re-writing individual scripts, through a process of feedback loops and connections, into a coherent couple narrative. Thus clear boundaries seem to support couples in influencing the movement of people in and out of their dyadic system. In this regard, the concept of inter-dependence play a significant role, given the mutual influence and dependency that exists between members of a system and sub-systems (Bertalanffy 1975; Whitchurch and Constantine 1993). What one partner does influence the other, as well

as members of the extended family and vice versa, as in, Bateson's (1979) view that "everything is connected to everything else."

This setting of clear boundaries with one's family of origin is a challenging within the Maltese context given the close proximity and emotional ties that exist between families in the local context. This in turn, creates a challenge for the couples, in which pressures are created, to follow on family rules and traditions. Furthermore, given the strong Catholic beliefs within the local context, the moral values come into play, conditioning partners' behaviour on an individual level as well as on a couple level. Mutual willingness, open dialogue and emotional connectedness are key factors which support couples to draw closer together and define their boundaries with their in-laws. Given the current cultural shifts, this might create tensions with and between in-laws due to differences in perspectives, in which, wherein in-laws may not view individuality as equal and as important as the relationship.

Contemporary advances in the use of social media seem to also influence dyadic interaction and formation. Two of the couples mentioned the use of social media, in which Mario expressed his strong dislike of the use of Facebook, which his wife Jane seems to often use. Similarly, Julia and Kevin emphasise the use of social media in conflict management and reconciliation. Thus this poses a new challenge for current couples, which calls for re-negotiation of boundaries.

## 5.7 Other important findings

One important observation is partner's use of language during the interview process. During the process of analysis I took note of the use of "we" and "me" language. It was noticed that couples (1, 3, 5) who seem to have a strong sense of "relational consciousness" were able to use "we" and "me" language interchangeably, as opposed to those couples (2, 4) who depicted an "individual consciousness". The latter, engaged more in "me" and "separateness" language using pronouns such as "I -Jien", "You-Inti", "S/He - Din/Dan". Also these couples made less attempts to address their spouse with their name as opposed to the other couples.

Couples' use of language seem to match with the themes that emerged, in which analysis of findings indicates that couples 1, 3, and 5 seem to have developed a "We-consciousness" as opposed to the "ME-consciousness" of couples 2 and 4. This is also reflected in the language used by such couples, in which "we" and "me" language were used respectively. As argued by Schwarz et al., (1998) this analysis of language and discourse allows for an unbiased measure of partners' shared accounts. For some of the participant the concept of "we-ness" was a new term which they had never heard before. Thus, participation in this study was a unique experience, which provided the opportunity to introduce a language of "we-ness", which may possibly instil some form of reflection between spouses.

Another significant observation is that the successful negotiation and co-construction of a unified couple identity does not seem to be related to the duration of marriage or

the relationship, but rather to the events and experiences which couples go through together. This is also highlighted by Azzopardi (2007). I may add that individual characteristics and attachment styles seem to also influence this mutual dance between partners. This was noted based on the information gathered on the couples' relationship history. Sharon and Claudio seem to have developed a "we" identity despite the fact that they have been in courtship for 3 years and married for 2 years and 10 months, as opposed to Roberta and James and Julia and Kevin who have been in courtship for 8 and 10 years, respectively and married for 4 years. This seem to signify that a "we-ness" is event-bound rather than time-bound.

### **5.8 Connecting Theme: A mutual dance of communicating distance and closeness**

Emotional closeness and attunement help couples to create a secure and safe relational space in which open dialogue communication becomes permissible, leading in turn to a stronger emotional connectedness and deeper levels of intimacy. This seems to support couples to engage in an active participation in negotiating a balance between their sense of individuality and togetherness, whilst also negotiating boundaries with the outside world. This seems to reflect a process of intimacy building, comprising of a mutual dance between *distance* (separateness) and *closeness* (togetherness), in the formation of a unified couple identity, in which they can feel secure to distance and retain their individual self but get close and become a couple as needed.

## 5.9 Reflexivity

Reflecting on the interview process, my view of the importance of active participation in dyadic formation might have been strongly emphasised. This seems apparent from the fact that I kept on probing in various ways on this regard, whenever couples uttered the word “naturali” (natural progression). However, such process of reflexivity was of low relevance to some of the couples who expressed more interest in sharing their narratives. My emphasis on the process of reflective thinking and active, conscious participation seem to be influenced by my internal dialogue which views marriage as dynamic and thus requires hard work and mutual dedication. However, I do acknowledge that whilst this is my narrative, this is not necessarily the experience of all participating couples.

I acknowledge that I am also going through a process of negotiating my individuality and couplehood with my husband, thus some of the participants’ accounts resonated with me. Therefore, interpretation of couples’ narration might be influenced by my internal dialogue and experience of dyadic formation. Furthermore, I am conscious of the fact that my life cycle stage is similar to that of the participating couples. I am 31 years old which falls in the age range of the participants. Therefore, this might pose certain limitations on eliciting certain aspects of the interview findings. On the other hand, given this similarity with the participating couples I could have influenced the interviewing process by my interest in focusing and probing on particular aspects and not others. It may be that if I would have been in a different life stage than that of the

participating couples, I would might possibly had interpreted findings differently or otherwise asked different questions during the interview process.

Additionally, it might be that the interviewing experience might have influenced the couples' responses. Even though, I tried to implement interviews in a place familiar to the participants so as to decrease possibilities of participants feeling uncomfortable, this does not eliminate the possibility that participants might have been careful on what to disclose and not. Therefore, whilst positive aspects in their relationship were strongly emphasised, it might be that other less positive aspects or otherwise relationship challenges were unspoken of.

All in all, this research study was a huge learning experience in that it challenged my views on certain aspects of the researched theme. This not only led to my learning on the theme but also helped me gain a more reflective understanding about myself in relation to the researched theme. This experience changed me both as an individual, as well as, on a couple level, as a wife. Thus, I acknowledge the co-authoring of "we-ness" in which the interview process might have changed couples' dyadic experience, and in turn couples' narratives and shared experiences changed me. My husband is also an active participant in this change, in which, through his interest and curiosities in such study, we engaged in dialogical conversations about the research, its findings, and "us" as a couple.

### **5.10 Therapeutic Implications**

Research studies in Malta seem to be limited in their interest in couple identity development. As a result, foreign research is generally the main source of information for clinical practitioners in Malta. This poses a huge limitation in clinical practice given the possibility of differences in sociocultural trends. Therefore, this research study might be a useful source of information. I think that this study can help practitioners to focus on certain aspects when working with couples, married, unmarried and cohabiting, who present to therapy with dyadic challenges.

### **5.11 Research Limitations**

One main limitation of this study lies in its lack of generalisation of findings. Given that the sample was relatively small, research findings cannot be generalised. As a result they cannot be said to be representative of the whole population. Whilst a qualitative methodology allows for space to elicit the meaning, uniqueness and experience of participants' shared accounts; it is limited in providing the quantity aspect that a quantitative research can provide. Furthermore, given that this study was carried out among Maltese couples, findings are based on the experiences of this sample population. Therefore such results might not be relevant to other populations or otherwise need to be applied with caution. Age is also another factor which might be of a limitation in this regard, in that findings might be influenced by couples' age

and life cycle transitions and so they might not necessarily represent the same views of other couples which fall under a different age group.

Another limitation is the absence of a pre-test of the research instrument. This could have helped with the identification of ambiguity in the interview questions guide. Additionally, given that joint interviews were used, this might pose a limitation on the information that couples had shared. This might have limited partners from sharing certain aspects or views in the presence of the other partner. Therefore, this might have limited the provision of information given by participants.

### **5.12 Directions for Future Research**

I highlighted suggestions for future research in the text above. Therefore I will be brief in this section. I think that future studies using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies can better indicate whether such findings are representative of the whole population or not. I suggest future studies to focus on the meaning Maltese couples attribute to love in relation to commitment and marriage. I think the process of negotiating a unified couple identity requires further study, with a main focus on partners' attachment styles. Future research may also focus on exploring the concept of emotions and emotional connection as experienced and viewed by males, depicting a male narrative within the Maltese context. Finally, I think that the view of a natural progression of dyadic relations is a major source of conflict and difficulties in romantic relationship. Thus this deserves further attention.

## 6. Conclusion

---

The main aim of this study was to explore how young Maltese couples, in a heterosexual marriage, co-construct their unified couple identity, whilst negotiating the interplay between *togetherness* and *separateness*, throughout the first five years of their married life. This study shows that this process requires couples to engage in a mutual dance of communicating *closeness* and *distance*. Whilst couples with a “we-consciousness” take an active role in negotiating dyadic processes and patterns of interaction, couples with an “individual consciousness” allow for a natural progression of the development of their couplehood, indicating less active, conscious choices and more individual oriented decisions.

Emotional connectedness is a fundamental factor which supports a sense of *togetherness* between the couple, creating in turn a sense of security and safety for partners to experience *closeness* and we-ness. This is marked by an empathic understanding of each other’s feelings, moods and thoughts, which seem to provide partners with a sense of connectedness and oneness. As a result, partners learned to rely on each other and therefore a sense of mutual emotional inter-dependence is created between the couple, thus a unique sense of significance for each other is developed. Achieving a sense of “we-ness” is not an easy journey. It requires constant dedication and attention from both partners to make this a beautiful and remarkable journey.

## References

---

- Acitelli, L. K. (1993). You, me, and us: Perspectives on relationship awareness. In S. W. Duck (Ed.), *Understanding relationship processes I: Individuals and relationships* (pp. 144–74). London: Sage.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., (1989). Attachments beyond Infancy. *American Psychologist*, 44, 709-716.
- Ainsworth, M. D. S., & Bowlby, J. (1991), An ethological approach to personality development. *American Psychologist*, 46, 331-34
- Alea, N., Singer, J.A., & Labunko, B. (2013). “We-ness” in relationship-defining memories and marital satisf
- Andersen, S.M., & Chen, S. (2002). The relational self: An interpersonal social-cognitive theory. *Psychological Review*, 109, 619-645.
- Anderson, H., & Goolishian, H., (1988). Human systems as linguistic systems. Preliminary and evolving ideas about the implications for clinical theory. *Family Process*, 27 (4), 371-393.
- Aron, A., & Aron, E. N. (1997). Self-expansion motivation and including others in the self. In S. Duck (Ed.), *Handbook of Personal Relationships* (2nd ed., Vol. 2, pp. 251-270). London: Wiley.
- Aron, A., Aron, N. A., & Norman, C. (2001). Self-expansion model of motivation and cognition in close relationships and beyond. In M. S. Clark & G. J. O. Fletcher (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook in social psychology: Vol. 2. Interpersonal processes*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.
- Aron, A., Aron, E. N., Tudor, M., & Nelson, G. (1991). Close relationships as including other in the self. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 60, 241-253.
- Aron, A., & Aron, E. N. (1996). Self- and self-expansion in relationships. In G. J. O. Fletcher & J. Fitness (Eds.), *Knowledge Structures in Close Relationships: A Social Psychological Approach* (pp. 325-344). Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
- Azzopardi, C. (2007). *Expectations of Marriage Before & After Marriage Among Maltese Catholic Couples*. Masters’ dissertation. University of East London.
- Azzopardi, F., (2009). *The influence of in-laws in marriage breakdown*. Unpublished degree thesis, university of Malta, Malta.
- Barnhill, L.R., & Longo, D. (1978). Fixation and regression in the family life cycle. *Family Process*, 17 (4), 469-478.

- Bateson, G. (1972). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Mind and nature*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Bateson, G.,(1979). *Mind and Nature: A Necessary Unity*. New York: E. P Dutton.
- Bateson, G. (1980). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity* . New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Bemhardt, B.C. & Singer, T. (2012). The neural basis of empathy. *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 35: 1-23.
- Berger, P., & Kellner, H., (1964). Marriage and the construction of reality: An exercise in the micro-sociology of knowledge. *Diogenes*, 46, 1-24.
- Berg, D., N., & Smith, K., K., (1988). *The self in social inquiry: Researching methods*. London: Sage.
- Berscheid, E., & Ammazalorso, H. (2001). Emotional experience in close relationships. In G. J. O. Fletcher & M. S. Clark (Eds.), *Blackwell handbook of social psychology: Interpersonal processes* (pp. 308–330). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Bertrando, P. (2015). *Emotions and the Therapist: A Systemic-Dialogical Approach*. London: Karnac.
- Bishop, K. (2014). Want a Happy Marriage? *Times of Malta*  
<http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20140302/life-features/Want-a-happy-marriage-.509093>.
- Bodenmann, G., Plancherel, B., Beach, S. R. H., Widmer, K., Gabriel, B., Meuwly, N., Charvoz, L., Hautzinger, M., & Schramm, E. (2008). Effects of coping-oriented couples therapy on depression: A randomized clinical trial. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(6), 944-954.
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I. & Spark, G. (1984). *Invisible loyalties*. New York: Bruner/Mazel.
- Bowen, M. (1971). Family therapy and family group therapy. In H. Kaplan, & B. Sadock (Eds.), *Comprehensive group psychotherapy*. Baltimore: Williams and Wilkins.
- Bowen, M., (1976). Theory in the practice of psychotherapy. In P. J. Guerin. (Ed.). *Family therapy*. New York: Gardner.
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 1. Attachment*. New York: Basic Books.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and Loss: Vol. 2. Separation, Anxiety and Anger*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1980). *Attachment and Loss. Vol. 3: Loss, Sadness and Depression*. New York: Basic Books.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Basic Books.

Bradbury, T.N., Campbell, S.M., & Fincham, F.D. (1995). Longitudinal and behavioral analysis of sex role identity in marriage. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 68, 328-341.

Bretherton, I., & Munholland, K.A. (1999). "Internal Working Models in Attachment Relationships: A Construct Revisited". In Cassidy J, Shaver PR. *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research and Clinical Applications*. New York: Guilford Press. pp. 89–114.

Brewer, M. B., & Gardner, W. (1996). Who is this “we”? Levels of collective identity and self-representations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(1), 83-91.

Buehlman, K. T., Gottman, J. M., & Katz, L. F. (1992). How a couple views their past predicts their future: Predicting divorce from an oral history interview. *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 5 No. 3 & 4.

Burke, P.J. & Cast, A.D. (1997). Stability and change in the gender identities of newly married couples. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 60 (4), 277-290.

Burke, P.J. & Tully, J. (1977). The measurement of role/identity. *Social Forces*, 55, 250-58.

Butler, E.A. (2011). Temporal interpersonal emotion systems: the “TIES” that form relationships. *Pers.Soc.Psychol.Rev.* 15, 367–393.

Butler E. A., Randall A. K. (2013). Emotional coregulation in close relationships. *Emotion Review*, 5, 202–210.

Byng-Hall, J. (1980). “Symptom Bearer as Marital Distance Regulator: Clinical Implications.” *Family Process*, 19: pp. 355-365.

Byng-Hall, J. (1985). The family script: a useful bridge between theory and practice. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 7: 301-305

Byng-Hall, J. (1995). *Rewriting family scripts : improvisation and systems change*. New York :Guilford Press.

Byng-Hall, J. (1995a). Creating a Secure Family Base: Some Implications of Attachment Theory for Family Therapy. *Family Process*, 34:45-58.

Carrere, S., Buehlman, K. T., Gottman, J. M., Coan, J. A., & Ruckstuhl, L. (2000). Predicting marital stability and divorce in newlywed couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 42-58.

Cassidy, J., & Shaver, P.R., (1999). *Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*. New York: Guilford.

Cate, R. M. & Lloyd, S.A. (1992). *Courtship*. California: Sage.

Cere, 2000

Chapman, E., & Smith, J., A., (2002). Interpretative phenomenological analysis and the new genetics. *Journal of Health Psychology*, 7, (2), 125-130.

Cherlin, A. (1981). *Marriage, divorce, remarriage*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Clulow, C. (2001). The sense of connection. In a.Clulow (Ed.), *Adult Attachment and couple psychotherapy: The secure base in practice and research*. East Sussex: Routledge.

Conger, R. D., Rueter, M. A., & Elder, G. H. (1999). Couple resilience to economic pressure. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 54-71.

Coontz, S. (1988). *The social origins of private life: A history of American families 1600-1900*. New York: Verso.

Dallos, R., & Draper, R., (2005). *An introduction to family therapy: Systemic theory and practice*. (2nd Ed). UK: Open University Press.

Dallos, R. (1997). *Interacting stories: Narratives, family beliefs, and therapy*. London:Karnac.

De Angelis, B (2013). *Are you the one for me?: Knowing who's right and avoiding who's wrong*. (2nd Ed.). Harper Element.

Decety, J. (2011). The neuroevolution of empathy. *Ann. N.Y. Acad. Sci*, 1231:35-45.

De Waal, F.B.M. (2008). Putting the altruism back into altruism: the evolution of empathy. *Annual Review of Psychology* 59: 279-300.

Denzin, N., K., & Lincoln, Y., S., (Eds.) (1998). *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials*. London: Sage.

Dew, J. (2008). Debt and marital satisfaction change in recently married couples. *Family Relations*, 57, 60-71.

Dew, J. (2009). The gendered meaning of assets for divorce. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 30, 20-31.

DeYoung, P.A.(2003).*Relational Psychotherapy: A Primer*. Brunner-Routledge: New York.

Dumouchel, P. (1995). *Emotions: essai sur le corps et le social*. Paris: Institut.

- Eckstein, D., Eckstein, S., & Eckstein, D. (2014). Creating respect in couples: The Couple's Respect Questionnaire (CRQ). *The Family Journal*, 22(1), 98-104.
- Edwards, D., & Potter, J., (1992). *Discursive psychology*. London: Sage.
- Erickson, R. J. (1993). Reconceptualizing family work: The effect of emotion work on perceptions of marital quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 55, 888–900.
- Eurostat, 2017. Marriage and Divorce Statistics. Retrieved from [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage\\_and\\_divorce\\_statistics#Further\\_Eurostat\\_information](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics#Further_Eurostat_information)
- Feeney, B. C. (2007). The dependency paradox in close relationships: Accepting dependence promotes independence. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 268–285.
- Fergus, K.D. (2001). The couple's mutual identity and reflexivity: a systemic-constructivist approach to the integration of persons and systems. *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, Volume 11, Issue 3, pp 385–410.
- Fergus, K. D. (2011). The rupture and repair of the couple's communal body with prostate cancer. *Families, Systems, & Health*, 29(2), 95-113.
- Ferree, M., M., (1990). Beyond separate spheres: Feminism and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 52, 866-884.
- Fisher, J., & Crandell, L. (2001). Patterns of Relating in the Couple. In C. Clulow (Ed.), *Adult Attachment and Couple Psychotherapy. The 'secure Base' in Practice and Research*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Fitness, J., & Strongman, K. (1991). Affect in close relationships. In G.J.O.Fletcher & F. D.Fincham (Eds.), *Cognition in close relationships* (pp. 175–202).
- Fonagy, P. (2001). *Attachment Theory and Psychoanalysis*. New York: Other Press.
- Fox, G., L., & Murray, V., M., (2000). Gender and families: Feminist perspectives and family research. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1160-1172.
- Freedman, J., & Combs, G., (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York: Norton.
- Freedman, J.,(2001). *Concepts in the Social Sciences Feminism*. USA: Open University Press.
- Frei, J. R. & Shaver, P. R. (2002). Respect in close relationships: Prototype definition, self-report assessment, and initial correlates. *Personal Relationships*, 9, 121-139. Gergen, 1985.
- Gergen, K.J.,(2001). *Social Construction in Context*. London: Sage.

Gildersleeve, S. (2015). Capturing the “we-ness” of happy couples through narrative analysis. Psychology Honours Dissertation. Connecticut College, New London.

Godwin, K. M., Swank, P. R., Vaeth, P., & Ostwald, S. K. (2013). The longitudinal and dyadic effects of mutuality on perceived stress for stroke survivors and their spousal caregivers. *Aging and Mental Health*, 17(4), 423-431.

Gottman, J. M. (1994). *Why Marriages Succeed or Fail: And How You Can Make Yours Last*. New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks.

Gottman, J. (1999). *The marriage clinic*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Gottman, J. M. (2011). *The science of trust: Emotional attunement for couples*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co.

Gottman, J. M. (2014). *What Predicts Divorce?: The Relationship Between Marital Processes and Marital Outcomes*. Psychology Press: New York.

Grafova, I. B. (2007). Your money or your life: Managing health, managing money. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 28, 285-303.

Grote, N. K., Frieze, I. H., & Stone, C. A. (1996). Children, traditionalism in the division of family work, and marital satisfaction: “What’s love got to do with it?” *Personal Relationships*, 3, 211–228.

Gudmunson, C. G., Beutler, I. F., Israelsen, C. L., McCoy, J. K., & Hill, E. J. (2007). Linking financial strain to marital instability: Examining the roles of emotional stress and marital interaction. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 28, 357- 376.

Haley, Jay (1963). *Strategies of Psychotherapy*. New York: Grune & Straton, Inc.

Halling, S., (2008). *Intimacy, transcendence, and psychology: Closeness and openness in everyday life*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hart, J., (2014). *We-ness: couple identity as shared by male partners of breast cancer patients*. Dissertation: Trinity Western University.

Hazan, C.,& Shaver, P.R., (1987). Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52, 511-524.

Healy, M., & Perry, C., (2000). Comprehensive criteria to judge validity and reliability of qualitative research within the realism paradigm. *Qualitative Market Research*, 3(3), 118-126.

Hendrix, H. (1988). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples*. New York: Perennial Library.

Hendrix, H. (2008). *Getting the love you want: A guide for couples*. New York: Perennial Library.

- Higgins Kesler, M. R., Werner-Wilson, R.J., COOK, A. S. & Berger, P.(2000). emotion management of marriage and family therapists: How is it different for women and men?. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 28:243–253.
- Hinneken, C., Lemmens, G., Vanhee, G., and Verhofstadt, L. (2016). A pronoun analysis of couples' support transactions. *Front Psychol.* 2016; 7: 77.
- Hoffman, L. (1993). *Exchanging voices: A collaborative approach to family therapy*. London: H. Karnac.
- Holloway, I., (1997). *Basic Concepts for Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Blackwell Science.
- Holm, K. E., Werner-Wilson, R.J., COOK, A. S. & Berger, P.(2001).The association between emotion work balance and relationship satisfaction of couples seeking therapy.*The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 29:193–205.
- Horrocks, A. M. (2010). *Financial management practices and conflict management styles of couples in great marriages*. Dissertation: Utah State University.
- Houben, M., Van Den Noortgate, W., and Kuppens, P. (2015).The relation between short-term emotion dynamics and psychological well-being: a meta-analysis. *Psychol. Bull.* 141, 901–930.
- Husserl, E. (1999). Ideas I. In *The essential Husserl: Basic writings in transcendental phenomenology*. (D. Welton Ed.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Huston, T. L. (2009).What's love got to do with it? Why some marriages succeed and others fail. *Personal Relationships*, 16 (2009), 301–327.
- James, K. (2007). Differentiation in couple therapy: Revisiting the Schnarch-Hendrix debate. In E. Shaw, and J. Crawley (Eds.), *Couple therapy in Australia: Issues emerging from practice*. Melbourne: Psychoz Publications.
- Johnson, S. (2009). Attachment Theory and Emotionally Focused Therapy for Individuals and Couples Perfect Partners. In J.H. Obegi and E.Berant (Ed), *Attachment Theory and Research in Clinical Work with Adults*. The Guilford Press.
- Karney, B. R., & Bradbury, T. N. (1995). The longitudinal course of marital quality and stability: A review of theory, method, and research. *Psychological Bulletin*, 118, 3–34.
- Kerr, M., and Bowen, M. (1988). *Family Evaluation: An Approach Based on Bowen Theory*. NY: Norton.

- Knudson-Martin, C., & Huenergardt, D. (2010). A socio-emotional approach to couple therapy: Linking social context and couple interaction. *Family Process*, Vol. 49, No. 3.
- Kupperbusch, C., Levenson, R. W., & Ebling, R. (2003). Predicting husbands' and wives' retirement satisfaction from the emotional qualities of marital interaction. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, Vol. 20(3): 335–354.
- Kuppens et al., 2007;
- Kwang, T.N. (2010). Exploring the mutual influence of self and relationship: A theory of couple identity negotiation. Dissertation: University of Texas at Austin.
- Leary, M. R. (2008). Functions of the self in interpersonal relationships: What does the self actually do? In J. V. Wood, A. Tesser, & J. G. Holmes (Eds.), *The Self and Social Relationships* (pp. 95-115). New York: Psychology Press.
- Lewis, L. D., (2010). *The Eight Levels of Intimacy*. LA: Couples Company, Inc.
- Lieberman, S., (1979). A transgenerational theory. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 1: 347-360.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative Researching*. 2nd Ed. Sage Publications: London.
- Mathison, S. (1988). Why triangulate? *Educational Researcher*, 17(2), 13-17.
- McAdams, D. P. (2013). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by* (Rev. & exp. ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- McGoldrick, M. (1989). The joining of families through marriage: The new couple. In B. Carter & M. McGoldrick (Eds.), *The changing family life cycle: A framework for family therapy* (2nd ed.) (pp. 209-233). Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- McGoldrick, M & Gerson, R (1988). "Genograms and the Family Life Cycle". *Family Life Cycle*. Ch. 8. 164-189.
- Merriam, S., (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, J. B., & Stiver, I. P. (1998). *The healing connection: How women form relationships in therapy and in life*. Boston, MA: Beacon Hill Press.
- Minuchin, S., (1974). *Families & family therapy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, K. A., McCabe, M. P., & Brink, R. B. (2001). Are married couples happier in their relationships than cohabiting couples? Intimacy and relationship factors. *Sexual and Relationship Therapy*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 2001.

- Morgan, A., (2000b). *What is Narrative Therapy?: An Easy to Read Introduction*. Dulwich Centre Publications
- Morris , M., L. & Carter, S., A (1999). Transition to marriage: A literature review. *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences Education*, Vol. 17, No. 1.
- Muro, L., Holliman, & Luquet, W. (2015). Imago relationship therapy and accurate empathy development. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy*, 00:1–17.
- Olson, D. H., & Olson, A. K. (2000). National survey of marital strengths. Retrieved from <http://www.prepare-enrich.com/research>
- Olson, M., Seikkula, J., & Ziedonis, D. (2014). The key elements of dialogic practice in open dialogue: fidelity criteria. <http://umassmed.edu/psychiatry/globalinitiatives/opendialogue/>
- Pare, D. A. (1995). Of families and other cultures: the shifting paradigm of family therapy. *Family Process*, 33:217-31.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Polit, D., F., & Hungler, B., P., (1995). *Nursing research: Principles and methods*. (5th edition). Philadelphia: Lippincott.
- Potter, J. (1996) Discourse analysis and constructionist approaches: theoretical background. In J.T.E. Richardson (Ed.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods for Psychology and the Social Sciences*. Leicester: B.P.S. Books.
- Potter , J. & Wetherell, M. (1995). Discourse analysis. In J.A. Smith, R. Harre, & L. Van Langenhove (eds.), *Rethinking methods in psychology*. London: Sage.
- Reid, D. W., Dalton, E. J., Laderoute, K., Doell, F. K., & Nguyen, T. (2006). Therapeutically induced changes in couple identity: The role of we-ness and interpersonal processing in relationship satisfaction. *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs*, 2006, 132(3), 241–284.
- Rohrbaugh, M. J., Mehl, M. R., Shoham, V., Reilly, E. S., & Ewy, G. A. (2008). Prognostic significance of spouse we talk in couples coping with heart failure. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 76(5), 781–789.
- Rohrbaugh M. J., Shoham V., Skoyen J. A., Jensen M., Mehl M. R. (2012). We-talk, communal coping, and cessation success in a couple-focused intervention for health-compromised smokers. *Family Process*, 51 107–121.
- Rusbult, C.E., and Van Lange, P.A. (2003). Interdependence, interaction, and relationships. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 54, 351–375.
- Ruszczynski, S. (1995). My Partner, My Self ? In C. Clulow (Ed.), *Women, men, and*

marriage, (pp. 45-54). London: Sheldon.

Sbarra, D.A., and Hazan, C. (2009). Coregulation, dysregulation, self-regulation: an integrative analysis and empirical agenda for understanding adult attachment, separation, loss, and recovery. *Pers.Soc.Psychol.Rev.* 12, 141–167

Scabini, E. (2000). Parent-child relationships in Italian families: connectedness and autonomy in the transition to adulthood. *Psicologia: Teoria e Pesquisa*, Vol. 16 n. 1, pp. 023-030

Scabini, E., & Iafrate, R. (2003). *Psicologia dei legami familiari*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Schaefer, M. T. & Olson, D. H. (1981) Assessing intimacy: The PAIR Inventory, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 1, 47-60.

Schaffer, R. (2007). *Introducing Child Psychology*. Oxford: Blackwell. p.83–121.

Schoebi, D., Wang, Z., Ababkov, V., and Perrez, M. (2010). Affective interdependence in married couples' daily lives: are there cultural differences in partner effects of anger? *Fam.Sci.* 1, 83–92.

Schwarz N., Groves R. M., Schuman H. (1998). *Survey Methods*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Seider B. H., Hirschberger G., Nelson K. L., Levenson R. W. (2009). We can work it out: age differences in relational pronouns, physiology, and behavior in marital conflict. *Psychology of Aging* 24 604–613.

Sels, L., Ceulemans, E., Bulteel, K. and Kuppens, P. (2016). Emotional interdependence and well-being in close relationships. *Front. Psychol.* 7:283.

Shinebourne, P. (2011). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In N. Frost (ed). *Qualitative Research Methods in Psychology: Combining core approaches*. Open University. p.44- 65.;

Shotter, J. 1993 *Conversational Realities: Constructing Life through Language*. London: Sage.

Shotter, J. (2004). On the edge of social constructionism. “Witness-thinking” versus “aboutnesstinking.” London: KCC Foundation Publications.

Siegel, D.J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of wellbeing*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Siegel, D. J. (2007). *The mindful brain: Reflection and attunement in the cultivation of wellbeing*. New York: W. W. Norton

Singer, J. A., & Skerrett, K. (2014). *Positive Couple Therapy: Using We-Stories to Enhance Resilience*. New York: Routledge.

- Skerrett, K. (2003). Couple dialogues with illness: Expanding the “We”. *Families, Systems and Health*, 21, 69–80.
- Skerrett, K. (2004). Moving toward We: Promise & peril. In W. Rosen & M. Walker (Eds.), *How connections heal* (pp. 128–149). New York: Guilford Press.
- Skerrett, K. (2013). Resilient relationships: Cultivating the healing potential of couple stories. In J. Jordan & J. Carlson (Eds.), *Creating connection: A relational cultural approach with couples* (pp. 45–60). New York: Routledge.
- Skerret, K. (2016). We-ness and the cultivation of wisdom in couple therapy. *Family Process*, 55:48–61.
- Skerrett, K. & Fergus, K. D. (2015). *Couple resilience: Emerging perspectives*. Springer.
- Smith, J.A. (2007). *Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods*. Sage Pub
- Smith, J.A. (1996). Evolving issues for qualitative psychology. In John, T.E. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences*, (pp. 189-101). Leicester: BPS.
- Smith, J.A., (2004) Reflecting on the development of interpretative phenomenological analysis and its contribution to qualitative research in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 1, 39 - 54.
- Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., Larkin, M., (2010). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research*. London: Sage Publications.
- Smith, J.A., Harré, R., & Van Langenhove, L., (1995). Idiography and the case study. In J. A. Smith, R. Harre & L. Van Langenhove (Eds.) *Rethinking Psychology*. London: Sage.
- Smith, J.A., Jarman, M., & Osborn, M., (1999). Doing interpretative phenomenological analysis. In M. Murray & K. Chamberlain (Eds.), *Qualitative health psychology: Theories and methods*. London: Sage.
- Smith, J., A., & Osborn, M., (2007). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*. London: Blackwell.
- Sprey, J., (2009). Institutionalization of the family and marriage: Questioning their cognitive and relational realities. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*: 4–19
- Sternberg, R.J., 1986. A triangular theory of love. *Psychological Review*, 93, 119-135.

Strong, T., Rogers-de Jong, M., Merritt, S., (2014). Co-authoring we-ness and stories of intimacy. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 36:398-408.

Swick & Freeman, 2004

Tingey, H. (1993). Managing stress: Emotional labor and multiple-role obligations in dual-earner households. Unpublished master's thesis. Utah State University, Logan, UT.

Walliman, N. (2011). *Research Methods: The Basics*. Routledge: USA.

Watzlawick, P., Weakland, J. H., & Fisch, R. (1974). *Change: Principles of problem formation and problem resolution*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Watzlawick, P. P.; Beavin, J.; and Jackson, D. (1967). *Pragmatics of Human Communication*. New York: Norton.

Whitchurch, G., and Constantine, L. (1993). "Systems Theory." In *Sourcebook of Family Theories and Methods: A Contextual Approach*, ed. P. Boss, W. Doherty, R. LaRossa, W. Schumm, and S. Steinmetz. New York: Plenum Press.

White, M. & Epston, D., (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York: Norton.

Wilkinson, M. (1992). How do we understand empathy systemically? *Journal of Family Therapy* , Vol 14, Issue 2: 193-205.

Yerby, J. (1995). Family systems theory reconsidered: Integrating social construction theory and dialectical process. *Communication Theory*, 5, 339-365.

Yin, R. K., (2011). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish*. New York: Guilford Press.

## **APPENDIX**

## **Information Sheet**

I would like to start by thanking you for having shown an interest to participate in this research study.

The title of this study is: **“From Me to We: A Journey of Young Couples’ Experience towards Co-constructing their Couplehood”**.

Your participation will be of high significance in this field of study and research findings. This study will explore how young Maltese couples, in a heterosexual marriage of a period between 2 and 5 years of marriage, develop and maintain a unified couple identity in their married life.

### **Researcher:**

This study is being conducted by Ms. Yanica Richards Chircop, in partial fulfilment of the Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy within the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT) Malta under the supervision of Dr. Charles Azzopardi.

### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to explore how young couples develop their couple identity whilst at the same time maintaining their sense of individuality. This means that this study will mainly focus on experiences which highlight the interplay between a sense of “me-ness” and “we-ness”. This allows for an understanding of how such process influences couples’ relational intimacy and vice versa.

### **Procedures**

You are kindly asked to participate in a semi-structured interview as a couple. Duration of interview is expected to be around 60 minutes. The interviewing session

will be held only once unless the need for another interview may arise. Interview session will be audio-taped. You have the right to ask for a copy of your transcript and to also be given a copy of the research report.

### **Risks and Benefits of Research Study**

Whilst participation in this study may not lead to any potential risks or harm, should it be the case that during the interview stage any of you, either on an individual level or as a couple, would start showing signs of distress, you will be given the opportunity to opt out of the study without any consequences for doing so. Furthermore, if therapeutic interventions or follow-up would deem to be essential, a family therapist will be appointed as a means of reference. No monetary benefits as a means of reward are intended to be given out for your participation in this study.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Confidentiality is given high priority. Interview recordings will be stored securely and kept private. These will be only accessible to me and will be destroyed upon achieving a successful completion of results. Your name will be altered to prevent you from being identified. Should it be the case that this research study would become published your anonymity would also be protected and ensured.

### **Voluntary Participation and Freedom to Withdraw**

Your participation is voluntary. If at any time you may wish to withdraw your consent for participation you are encouraged to do so without having to give any explanations. There will be no repercussions for withdrawal of participation.

### **Contacts and Questions**

If you may have any questions, even after the interview has been held, you are encouraged to contact me personally on [yanica\\_chircop@yahoo.com](mailto:yanica_chircop@yahoo.com) and/or on mobile number 79707893.

**Thank you for your time in reading this information and for your participation in this study.**

### Statement of Consent

Please tick the following boxes if you agree with the statements below:

- I declare that I have fully read and understood the information provided in this sheet.
- The purpose of this study, procedures to be followed, risks and benefits, if any, all have been clearly explained to me.
- I had the opportunity to ask any questions and I am satisfied with the responses to any of my queries and/or misunderstandings which were clarified.
- I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and I can withdraw my consent to participate at any time without having to give any reason.
- I understand that confidentiality and anonymity, including any future publications, will be treated with strict confidence.
- I am aware and trust that audio-recordings will be destroyed upon successful completion of results.

**Our signature hereunder implies that we have discussed about our participation in this study as a couple and therefore we both agree to participate in the interview as part of the research study procedure.**

**Note: You will be given a signed copy of this consent form to keep for your records.**

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Interview Guide**

### **Relationship History**

1. How long have you been married?
2. How long have you been knowing each other before you got married?
3. Did you have a civil or religious marriage?
4. How did you make your decision to marry and what helped you conclude on this decision?
5. Who came up with the idea to marry and why?
6. Do you have children? If yes, was this a choice you made? If not, why?

**The below questions are probes which can be used to gather information about the below aspects of the couples' relationship.**

### **Married Life / Security**

7. How would you describe your married life?
8. How do you manage your relationship?
9. What define/distinguish you as a married couple as opposed to when you were still courting each other?
10. What understanding have you gained about yourselves as individuals throughout the past years as a married couple?
11. What understanding have you gained about yourselves as a couple throughout the past years as a married couple?
12. How did you form such an understanding?
13. Do you feel that you are a couple? How? - (mention particular moments that mark your sense of couplehood).
14. How do you present yourself to others? (as a couple or as an individual?, when does this happen).

### **Empathy, Respect and Acceptance**

15. How do you communicate your love and feelings towards each other?

16. How do you take care of each others' feelings and emotions?
17. Who expresses emotions most / least?
18. What do you do when you hurt each other?

### **Pleasure and Shared Intimacy**

19. What does intimacy mean to you?
20. How do you share your intimacy?
21. Who is most / least intimate?
22. When are you most /least intimate?
23. How satisfied are you of your current level of intimacy?

### **Happy moments**

24. Tell me a bit about your happy moments together as a couple

### **Shared Meaning and Future Visions of their Married Life**

25. How do you negotiate your work-life balance?
26. How do you spend your free time?
27. How do you feel when you are together?
28. How do you feel when you are on your own?
29. How do you envision your married life to be like in the near future?

### **Conflict Management and Decision Making**

30. How do you make decisions? (Who takes which decisions?)
31. How do you handle challenges / stressful moments?
32. How do you argue / handle conflict?

### **Financial Management**

33. How do you take financial decisions? Who takes such decisions?
34. Do you have a joint account?
35. How do you manage financial struggles?
  
36. What do you understand by the term “we-ness”?
  
37. Is there anything else that you would like to share which you think can be significant to this study?

## Transcripts in Maltese

### Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)

*Jane: ifhimni, jekk, jin naf, jiena rajtu down jew jarani down ha jistaqsi, isma x'garalek, jew jin naf jekk qed jarani down ha jfissidni per ezempju. Dak it-tip.*

### Couple 5: (Claire and John)

*John: Ifhem, we know each other very well.. taghlimna ngharfu meta huma dawk il-mumentu li nkunu tajbin u meta le.. ezempju Claire meta jkollha burdata hazina tkun b'kocch nervi, ninduna ghax lanqas messagg ma tibghatli (laughs) nibaghtilha jien mbaghad, ifhem I show her I realised and that I'm here.. imbaghad nhalliha tikkalma..*

### Couple 2: (Roberta and James)

*Roberta: Jiena b'xi mod nisplodi jew ninfaqa nibki jew nohroghom. b'xi mod nohroghom. Robert izomm iktar ghalih. U il-fatt li ma tantx, kif qed nghid, qabel mil-ewwel kont ninduna u anke issa ninduna imma issa irid jghaddi zmien. Jew jaghmel xi tlett ijiem kwiet u nghid gara xi haga!*

### Couple 5: Claire and John

*Claire: once li zzewwigna ghamilt dawk ix-xahrejn anzjuza. Imma ma kien nbidel xejn. Kont nkun mdejqa u lanqas lil John ma ridt nara. Qisu kelli wedding blues, bhal baby blues, imma wedding blues. I spent three months feeling anxious and sad. U lanqas kont naf ghala. John was very sensitive and patient towards me. Imnalla kien hu ghax vera supportjani. (To him) You really supported me, if not for your support I don't know what would have happened to me.*

*John: Yes. You did the same when I had my rough patch. You know, we support each other in moments of hardship.*

### Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)

*Julia: jiena nuri iktar nahseb. Jien naf li jzomm iktar fih. Imma jekk ikollu stress jew xi haga ninduna. U nsaqsi jien*

*Kevin: mhm ezatt.*

*Julia: inti ma tantx tigi saqsini jekk ghandix xi haga jew hekk... ifhem jiena nipprova, I handle my own emotions, ghax jiena jekk nibki dan jogghod jidhak bija.*

*Kevin: skond fuq xhix*

*Julia: ezempju meta in-nanna kienet l-isptar jien kont noqghod nibki. Dan kien jghidli imma Julia xi trid taghmel jekk inhi xiha, mhux hekk tistenna. Imma jien ghalija hija xi haga kbira fhimt.*

### Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)

*Sharon: Intimacy ghalina ma tfissirx biss ir-relazzjoni sesswali ta bejnietna, imma anke sense of friendship, companionship and mutual affection we share in our relationship. ... We share our intimacy in so many different ways. Eem ezempju meta nkunu vulnerabli u nesponu ruhna ma xulxin, hija mod wiehed ta intimita. Ahna intimi anke f'affarijiet zghar, imma li ghalina jfissru hafna. Per ezempju, Claudio dejjem jiftahli l-bieb nkunu fejn inkunu, kemm jekk qed naghmlu xirja jew simply opening the car door for me. These for me are special, and make me feel loved. Jien min naha l-ohra naf li Claudio jkun irid kiss qabel ma nohorgu mid-dar filghodu. Nkun tard jew le, meta ninsa nerga nidhol d-dar ntih bewsa.*

*Claudio: vera!! (Laughs)*

*Sharon: ifhem, affarijiet zghar li ahna nhossuhom li jghinuna biex niftakru u napprezzaw dak li ghandna u jghinuna biex nibqghu ntejjbu relazzjoni taghna u ssir iktar b'sahhitha.*

*Claudio: ehe, hekk hu!! l-intimita sesswali hija mportanti imma mhiex kollox.*

*Couple 2: Roberta and James*

*Roberta: l-ewwel nett gieli nigi ghajjena mejta li nidhol fis-sodda u nistownja ruhi jigifieri. Hafna drabi hekk qed nispiccaw. Speċjalment jekk tkun ghamlet xi lejl twerzaq uuu, iva hafna taffettwa l-intimita.... Gieli anke rقادna fi kmamar separati ghax jew hu jkun ma jiflahx biex ma jmarradx it-tifla jew vici versa, jigifieri. Jew ghax ikun irid iqum kmieni filghodu bl-alarm biex ma jqajjimlix it-tifla hux.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: il-fatt li tnejn li ahna nafu nesprimu l-emozzjonijiet taghna lejn xulxin emm b'mod genwin din tghina nkunu iktar intimi.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ehe qisha nahseb anke l-fatt li hemm iktar din il-connection li qisna iktar close. Qisha bla ma trid (l-intimita') nibtet iktar ha. Il-fatt li l-kommunikazzjoni hija ahjar l-intimita nibdet iktar.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Claudio: ahna nirrispettaw hafna lil xulxin kontinwament, anke meta nkunu miggildin jew f'argument.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Claudio: ... Jien illum il-gurnata nhossni iktar secure u komdu mieghi nnifsi.. Mhux bhal qabel, eeem avolja llum il-gurnata ghandi iktar responsabilitajiet, heq, ghandi iktar affarijiet fuq mohhi u iktar responsabilita. Eem iva nhossni iktar secure anke fir-relazzjoni minn mindu zzewwigna.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Kevin: ghax dan mhux ser toqod tghid le ghax jien mizzewweg jew haga u ohra. Qed tifhem. Jigifieri din ghax int married u hekk, ghax int mizzewweg, bullshit.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ...issa drani hu. Li ma kinitx tghin illi kien jigi, inkun inervjata u jigi jipprova zzieghel bija u jiena hallini nikalma wahdi. Jigifieri qabel iktar kont ninnervja. Issa drani. Jhallini nikkalma imbaghad meta nikkalma nitkemlu.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Mario: ghax qabel ma kienet tikkontrolla kwazi xejn. ghamlet kwazi sena ma kinitx thallas il-loan ghax dejjem tispicca bla flus. Imbghad ghidtila jien mhux ser nhallas iktar. Imbghad tghalmet twarrab*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: ehe vera hekk jaghmel jitlaq il-barra mil-kamra imbghad meta jikkalma jigi jghidli biex nitkellmu. Ahna ghandna komunikazzjoni tajba bejnietna. Anke meta nwegghu lil xulxin dejjem nfittxu l-hin li nispegaw lil xulxin x'wegghana, and obviously we try our best to avoid repeating that thing which hurts. We also make it up to each other after a big argument in different ways depending on the situation.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Kevin: ehe jien naf li teqred u. Imbghad ezempju jekk naf li tiddejaq noqod fuq is-sodda bis suftal kelba u staqsitni nghidilha le biex nevita hames minuti grid.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*James: jiena hadt id-decizzjoni li mhux ha noqghod naghmel hajti niggieled fuq ic-cucati u. Jigifjieri kemm jista jkun tibqa ghaddej.*

*Int: titkellmuhom l-affarijiet, tmut hemm kif taghmlu?*

*Husband: u le qisu mbaghad wahedhom jaqaw in place l-affarijiet. Bhalma ghidtlek qabel, inutli taghmel, toqghod bin-nervi go fik. Inutli toqghod tiggieled. Qisni jiena kont qtajt linja mhux ha noqghod naghmel hajti niggieled u. Tibqa ghaddej.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: ma tigix mill-ewwel. Imma maz zmien taghlimna li, fis-sens.. jien ezempju ghaddew l-ewwel tliet xhur, kont nghid ara drajt. Imbghad ghaddew sitt xhur u thossok hafna ahjar, tghid mela jien kont ghadni lanqas jin sew. Wara sena kont nghid issa vera drajt.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: nahseb domna sena u nofs biex is-setiljajna sew.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: l-ewwel sena zwieg konna boxing.*

*James: ijja ijja*

*Roberta: Sakemm drajna lil xulxin.*

*James: l-ewwel sena kienet l-iktar difficili*

*Roberta: (with a strong emphasis) l-ewwel sena iva. sakemm drajna lil xulxin. Kont naf affarijiet fuqu, imma mbaghad jkun hemm affarijiet semplici, bhal per ezempju ma jalaqx it-toilet seat jiena dik kienet itini f'ghajni u ghada ttini f'ghajni (She*

laughs). Imma issa qed jghalqu jigifieri. Imma konna niggieldu fuq affarijiet li meta tghidhom man-nies jghidulek cucati immaaa...

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: Jiena nhobb il-hin tieghi iva. Filfatt jien gili nippuxjah u nighidlu isma ohrog xi darba ma shabek. It's healthy. Jien naraha healthy. .... qabel konna niggieldu iktar fuq hekk, pero illum il-gurnata iva it-tnejn li ahna nghatu l-ispazju taghna.*

*Mario: problema ghax jien niddejaq nohrog ma shabi jekk hi tkun qeda dar. Din bil-kontra fihmt. Qabel kienet taqbad u tohrog. Jien niccekja maghha. Per ezempju sibt filghodu din tkun xoghol mela nghid orrajt ha mur, imma fil hin li tigi lura niprova nigi dar biex ma tkunx wahidha. Ghax qabel la kienet tghidli (kienet) taqbad u tohrog. Issa mhux naghmlu li rridu imma nitkellmu isma per ezempju hi ghandha limit biex tohrog ma shabha u jien ghandi limit biex nohrog ma shabi. Ghax qabel kollox bl addocc.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: fuq din ma naqblux, ghax jien ghandi bzonn il-hin tieghi wahdi. Inhobb ikolli hin tieghi wahdi emm heq xorta jien individuwu fl-ahhar mill-ahhar, u nahseb importanti li ma nitlifix l-individwalita tieghi. U fl-istess hin din tghid biex napprezzaw iktar u nkunu iktar kuntento meta nkunu flimkien. Biss pero Claudio ghandu idea differenti minni.*

*Claudio: ara jien m'ghandiex hin fuq idejja daqs kemm ghandha hi, u l-ftit hin li jkolli nippreferi nqattghu maghha. Jien nhossni iktar kuntent meta nkun maghha milli meta nkun wahdi. Sakemm ma nkunx wahdi u nintefa niehu nasa (both laugh).*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ...sakemm..tidhra tkun daqshekk indipendenti, ifhimni filli tiddependi fuq tad-dar jaghmlulek kollox f'daqqa wahdha trid taghmel kollox int. Orrajt ghandek il-partner jghinek imma still diffici.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: (she laughs) Hekk gili nghidlu. Qed nigu listess f'ceru affarijiet. Ghax tant tkun ilek flimkien li tibda tiehu minn xulxin vera.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

*Julia: ezatt ux, ezatt. Ezempju xi haga li rajt differenza jiena hija il bahar. Dan ma jhobbu xejn il bahar u jiena nhobbu hafna. Imma tant ma tantx immorru bahar li jiena sirt ma mmurx hafna bahar.*

*Kevin: imma mhux ghax ingelek jien ma tmurx ghax inti*

*Julia: lee ghax tinfluwenzani. Rari morna bahar flimkin. ... ifhem mhux daqshekk gravi, imma ehe titlef ftit int minn int ta. Ma nahsibx.. em, imma hekk noqghod nghid, ara jien kif sirt, kont inhobb tant il-bahar.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: ehe nohrog wahdi ehe. Ma jifhmux ili isma xorta ghad ghandi hajja. Jigifieri jkun hemm minn, emm, (shifted in english) some people see us as a couple imma mbaghad there will be one offs illi if I go out alone they say isma how come you are going out alone per ezempju. ... ehe din hija, din wahda mill problemi li kellna imbaghad tkellimnija.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: li jekk jiena qabel kont, jien ehe kelli vizzju li anke wara xoghol, per ezempju jekk naf li xi hadd minn shabi qieghed free tlaqt magghom. Kont naf li dan xoghol sal- hamsa, nghid mort id-dar xi sitta. Il-llum ilgurnata naf li isma jiena spiccajt mix xoghol preparajtlu l-ikel, ha nistennih gej per ezempju. U nahseb iktar anke f'sens li timmatura*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: jien ghand omni kont imdorrija li rrid ninza z-zarbun qabel ma nidhol id-dar, huma ma kienux imdorrijin hekk. Allura kif kont narah jidholi biz-zarbun id-dar, daqshekk kienet ittini rasi.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: ezatt. Nippreferi li jkun mieghi. Anke meta nohrog u hekk, nippreferi li jkun mieghi. Imma fl-istess hin dak il-hin wahdi per ezempju d-darba f'xahar nohrog mal-best friend tieghi. Dik inkun qed nistenniha dik il-gurnata.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*James: u il-hin wahdek, kulhadd ghandu dak differenti. Per ezempju jiena jekk immur l-ghalqa u noqghod hemm bil-klieb bizzzejjed.*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Interviewer: u kif in-negozzajtu flimkien dawn ir-rutini differenti?*

*James: ghax imbaghad timmatura bhala koppja.*

*Roberta: giet wahidha*

*James: tigi naturali iva. Tigi naturali mbaghad hux.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Sharon: m'hemm l-ebda ktieb li tista tuza biex jkollok a happy and loving marriage. Irid ikun hemm rieda miz-zewg nahad indaqs sabiex relazzjoni tahdem, emm u l i zwiieg ikun ibazat fuq imhabba, rispettu u dinjita lejn xulxin.*

*Claudio: u nahseb importanti hafna wkoll x'metodi jahdmu l-iktar ghalina u muhx noqoghodu fuq li jghidulna nies ta madwarnaa, jew naghmlu li jkunu qed jistennew minna.*

*Couple 5: Claire and John*

*Claire: il-hin taghna ghalina huwa mportanti, emm u infittxuh. Bit-tifla mhijix daqshekk facli, ghax apparti li nahdmu tnejn, irridu niehdu hsieb lilha, em (laughs) apparti xoghol tad dar u hekk ux.. imma dejjem jirnexxilna nipjanaw hin ghalina flimkien.*

*John: it-tifla normalment naghmlu mezz li sa tminja jew disgha tkun raqdet biex bhekk jkollna hin flimkien, nitkellmu u hekk.*

*Claire: yes hekk hu.. tifla nhobbuha mmens, biss pero ghalina relazzjoni taghna tigi l-ewwel. Heq, ifhem minghajr ir-relazzjoni taghna m'hemmx hi, jigifiri inutili ninvestu fit-tifla u ahna nkunu mkissrin bejnitna.*

*John: hekk hu. That's right!!*

*Couple 2: (Roberta and James)*

*Roberta: u qisu meta jkollna hin wahidna hekk, qisu lanqas inkunu nafu x'ha naqbdu naghmlu (laughs)*

*James: eee hekk, hekk tispicca mbaghad ghax qisek tant tkun inqtajt minn affarijiet li meta tispicca ghandek il-hin f'idejk ma tkunx taf x'ser taqbad taghmel imbaghad.*

*Couple 1: (Sharon and Claudio)*

*Claudio: ahna nqattghu l-bicca l-kbira tal free time taghna flimkien ux halli npattu ta nuqqas ta hin li jkollna fost il-gimgha.*

*Sharon: ehe, meta nkunu flimkien nhossuna at peace u kuntenti, ghax nafu li naghmlu x'naghmlu ha jkun zgur ghal ahjar ta relazzjoni. Biex insahhuha.*

*Couple 5: (Claire and John)*

*Claire: ara John fil bidu ma kien jghamel xejn xoghol tad-dar, cooking u hekk iva imma tindifxejn.*

*John: I'm not good at it.*

*Claire: true (laughs) imma that's how you were raised up ux.. but with time I supported him to get used to some chores. Ifhem still he struggles and I can see that in him. So we discussed it and agreed that I will do most of the housechores, imma mbaghad hu jghin f'affarijiet ohra bhax-xirja u tisjir. This way it works for us and we are both happy.*

*Couple 5: Claire and John*

*Claire: konna ha naghmlu religious ceremony, ghamilna l-kors ta kana u ghaddejna. We felt ridiculous the whole entire time ghax ahna vera m'ahniex religjuzi, just konna ha naghmluha to keep with the tradition u biex inzommu l-familja kuntenta. Imbaghad ghidna isma, it-tieg taghna and we will be hypocrite jekk naghmluh b'tal knisja, u at the eleventh hour imbaghad fl-ahhar minuta decidejna li ma naghmluhx tal- knisja u zzewigna bic civil. Like this it felt that it was our day.*

*Int: kif wasaltu biex tkellimthua mal-familjari taghkom?*

*John: we basically told them that's our day*

*Claire: ghidnilhom ahna hekk ha naghmlu*

*John: if you don't like, don't come*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: .... mal genituri tieghu, jiena l-ewwel tkellimt mieghu imbaghad hu tkellem magghom. Jigifieri mbaghad we settled them down. Imma kellna nitkellmuhom ghax meta konna naqbdu niggieldu fuqha kien jinqala iktar glied. Imbaghad meta poggejna bilqeda u tkellimna hekk, hekk u hekk imbaghad qishom l-affarijiet ikkalmaw.*

*Couple 3: (Jane and Mario)*

*Jane: Jien ghandi best friend tieghi li huwa ragel, u nohorgu hafna flimkien, Mario jafu wkoll. Il-familja ta Mario ma daqqitilhomx. For them he's a guy u jien qed nohrog ma guvni. Kienu jargumentaw hafna mieghi biex naqta l-kuntatt imma jien ma ridtx. Ghax qishom ma fhemux li dik hija hbiberija u li jien ir-relazzjoni tieghi*

*hija ma Mario. Allura dik al mument ghamlet zmien holqot polemika imma llum il-gurnata qisha kalmat. Qishom fhemu issa.*

*Couple 4: (Julia and Kevin)*

Kevin: din hawn Malta ghadna lura fiha. Barra minn Malta, kuljum precett, kull filghaxija johorgu. tarahom filghaxija wara xoghol, ejja mmoru niehdu zewgt iflixken birra. Ma tax xoghol imma jew ma shabek. ..le hawn Malta ma nghamluwix. Hawn Malta ahna wara xoghol immorru nsajru ghax gej ir ragel, jew gejja l mara. Dil mentalita. Gejja mil familja, fejn l-omm dejjem id dar issajar u ahna nippruvaw nimmimikjawhom.