# Savoring Mealtime Narratives:
# The Co-Constructed Experience of Family Mealtime across the Family Life Cycle in the Maltese Context

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## Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the work in this dissertation titled 'Savoring Mealtime Narratives: The Co-Constructed Experience of Family Mealtime across the Family Life Cycle in the Maltese Context' in partial fulfillment of the Masters in Systemic Family Psychotherapy, was carried out by myself. Appropriate citation has been included when referring to studies by other authors.

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**Abstract**

*The aim of this study is to explore the co-constructed experience of family mealtime across the family life cycle within the Maltese context. Family mealtime is a significant aspect of family life, as it serves as a central gathering point for family members to share food, engage in conversation, and reinforce familial bonds. The objective of this study is to understand how the co-constructed family mealtime experience evolves as individual family members progress through different stages of the family life cycle. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews to collect data from three families. Using thematic narrative analysis, this study found that families were able to adapt mealtime patterns and interactions according to new contexts. Furthermore, families' narratives explained the changes in the meaning of family mealtime that changed according to the different stages. Moreover, narratives delineated the negotiation of roles according to the family members' social constructs. These findings of this study provide valuable insights into the co-constructed experience of family mealtime in Malta, shedding light on the ways in which this evolves across the family life cycle.*

Key words: systemic; social constructionism; family mealtime; meaning making; family life-cycle; roles; family bond

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# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 Introduction

*"The table is really where family life happens"*

The above quote taken from Marshall and Davis (2018) encapsulates one of the main reasons as to why I am endeavoring in conducting research in relation to family mealtime. It is at the table that many families get together, interact with each other and also create lasting memories. It is also a place where traditions are passed down, values are transmitted and relationships can be nurtured (Kok, 2015). It was through my systemic learning that I became more curious about the day-to-day practices ingrained within family life. Furthermore, by approaching family mealtime from a systemic lens, I can explore the multifaceted dynamics and interplay of various factors, such as communication patterns, roles, and cultural influences, that contribute to the family mealtime experience.

## 1.2 Rationale of the Study

Research from various fields of study consistently demonstrates the significant importance of family mealtimes, which can greatly contribute to the overall well-being of family members, enhance school performance, and promote healthy dietary intake (Fulkerson et al., 2014). Most of the studies I found when researching family mealtimes were conducted with individuals or explored dyadic interactions. Some studies also mentioned that future research would be conducted with all individuals within the household (Loth et al., 2019).

In their book, Parrott et al. (2011) describe how family therapists' questioning about family mealtime had recently become obsolete. They describe how the idea of the family dinner gradually faded due to long working hours of both parents as well as children's after school activities. They continue to postulate that the social and economic changes that happened in the last quarter of the 19th century has significantly changed family mealtime patterns. Parrott et al. (2011), close their argument by stating that the importance of exploring family mealtime practices has emerged once again, given the myriad of research underscoring the significant value of this practice.

Little research could be found on family mealtimes within the Maltese context. Zammit's (2011) mixed methods research explored family mealtimes in the Maltese islands. Her research demonstrated that the majority of families in Malta eat together frequently, with 99% of respondents believing that family meals were important and 98% agreeing that family mealtimes are beneficial to themselves and their families (Zammit, 2011). However, 56.1% of the respondents ate together as a whole family every day and 25.8% reported eating together on several days during the week (Zammit, 2011).

### 1.3 A Personal Endeavour

Recognizing the profound impact that shared meals can have on familial relationships, I am motivated to delve into this topic and uncover further layers. Family mealtime can serve as a powerful medium for fostering communication, strengthening bonds, and creating lasting memories (Neely et al., 2014). Understanding its nuances can offer valuable insights into family life, influencing not only the well-being of individual family members but also society in general

(Fulkerson et al., 2014). By studying family mealtime, I aspire to contribute to the knowledge base that informs practices, enabling families to optimize this precious time. Through this research, I also aim to shed light on the significance of this seemingly ordinary yet extraordinary aspect of family life.

### 1.4 Research Aims

The objective of this research is to obtain an in-depth understanding of families' co-constructed experience of family mealtime throughout the Family Life Cycle. Influenced by systemic perspectives, the influence of the Maltese context on family mealtimes will also be taken into account. Furthermore, this study aims to shed light on domestic commensality within the specific context of Malta, with the aim of providing insights for both professionals and policymakers.In order for me to grasp an understanding of the co-constructed experience, a narrative approach was utilized.

### 1.5 Clinical Implications

In her paper, Fishel (2016) posits that family therapists can utilize family mealtimes in multiple ways in order to help them understand the family’s organization, in addition to support and instill change. So far, I have personally very rarely touched upon this subject. By conducting this research, I hope to instill further understanding as well as curiosity from professionals, especially locally, who are working with families to explore what is considered to be a very important aspect of family and individual lives. Moreover, understanding the contextual factors

influencing mealtime patterns and interactions can also lead to further family friendly measures which can further support family quality time.

## 1.6 Conceptual Framework

This study will apply a systemic theoretical framework to understand family mealtime. A systemic framework reflects the reality that persons affect each other in complex and reciprocal ways. (Becvar & Becvar, 2009). As such, the meaning of the individual's experience of mealtime cannot be understood without understanding the context of the family. Also, the meaning of the family's experience of mealtime cannot be understood without understanding the experience of the individual members (Smith, 2009). Systems theory also focuses on the interaction between processes within the family system and the wider context (Dallos & Draper, 2010).

### 1.6.1 Social constructionism

The epistemological stance of this research study is a social constructionist one. The narrative approach of this research, implores that the uniqueness and shared experiences of the families, embedded in the Maltese context, cannot be disregarded.

Rather than viewing family mealtime as an intrapersonal experience, a social constructionist approach emphasizes that meaning is derived from interactions and discourses with those around us (Puig et al., 2008). Social constructionism also views 'reality' as a subjective experience (Andrews, 2012, p.41). As a social constructionist approach acknowledges that reality

is constructed through social interactions and interpretations, this research recognizes that family mealtime can be viewed as a social construct that is shaped by the collective understandings, values, and practices of the individuals involved. By adopting a social constructionist perspective, the study seeks to explore how meanings, norms, and rituals surrounding family mealtime are constructed, negotiated, and transformed within specific historical, cultural and social contexts.

### 1.6.2 Family Life Cycle

The family life cycle theory posits that families go through predictable change influenced by various life events (McGoldrick & Carter, 1988). Furthermore, McGoldrick and Carter (1988) state that families must be able to adapt to the various changes occurring in their lives in order to remain functioning. In order to do this, tasks, roles and operations may have to be re-negotiated. McGoldrick (1989) divided the transitions in seven stages (See Appendix 1).

The family life cycle can be used as a framework to explain systematically, shifts in mealtime behaviour contextualized in family life. As families progress through various life stages, the experiences surrounding mealtime also undergo changes. Each life cycle stage is characterized by unique challenges that influence family dynamics and rituals, including mealtime practices. Understanding family mealtime within the context of the family life cycle provides insights into the evolving nature of mealtime practices and their role in family cohesion, communication, and adaptation to life transitions (Berger, 2013).

Of course, one must keep in mind that taking a family life cycle perspective does not imply that all families go through different phases at the same time. Rather, it recognizes that families may experience the various phases of the family life cycle at different times and in unique ways (McGoldrick, 1989)**.** The family life cycle approach acknowledges the individuality of family experiences, understanding that factors such as cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and personal circumstances can influence the timing and progression through different stages. It also acknowledges the different trajectories that diverse families can take.

Since research in general as well as research specifically related to mealtimes is rarely conducted longitudinally, and do not incorporate lengthy periods of more than a few years, "longitudinal connections can easily be lost" (Carter & McGoldrick 1988, p.8). Exploring family mealtimes with families, across different time periods can be a step towards understanding further such connections.

### 1.7 Self Reflexivity

As I embark on this endeavor, it is crucial for me to acknowledge the influence of my own experience of mealtime. Upon reflecting on my family's mealtime patterns and interactions throughout various life stages, I recognize a multitude of changes arising from different contextual influences during different periods. During my early childhood, I recall mealtime being a stressful experience due to my selective eating habits. However, as I began cooking for myself, all the family's experience shifted and interactions became less focused on the intake of food. Family

mealtimes, typically held during weekends due to school and work commitments, were characterized by lively discussions especially by my father and brother.

The family interactions underwent further transformations when my brother and I introduced our respective partners to the table. With the addition of new individuals, the nature of our conversations took a different shape. Special occasions, such as Birthdays and Christmas, were and are still marked by a typical Sunday meal. In my family, mealtime holds great importance as a valuable opportunity for interaction, and its significance seems to have grown since both my brother and I left home. By acknowledging these personal experiences and observations, I aim to approach this research with heightened awareness, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of family mealtime across the family life cycle.

### 1.8 Overview of Chapters

The next chapter outlines research and theories related to family mealtime that are relevant to this study. The methodology utilized for this research is detailed in chapter 3. This chapter illustrates the research design, recruitment of participants, data collection procedure and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the data gathered from the interviews and Chapter 5 evaluates the main findings of this study. The final chapter, Chapter 6, will discuss the limitations of the research and will also include recommendations for future research.

# Chapter 2 - Literature review

This section will focus on a selected review of literature surrounding family mealtime. The predominant themes presented will be related mostly to the significance and the impact of mealtime on parents, adolescents and children.

## 2.1 Food across Space and Time

Cross cultural research demonstrates that "ritual events are often marked and confirmed through the consumption of food" (Douglas, 1984; Fieldhouse, 1986, as cited in McKie et al., 1999). Furthermore, family meal times have been highlighted as "patterned interactions that can fulfill both an organizational purpose and a symbolic or cultural transmission" (Wolin & Bennet, 1984).

Visser (1991, p.29) describes families eating together as the oldest ritual that exists on earth. The custom goes back 2 million years, to the daily return of hunters and foragers with food provision to be divided with the rest of the group. This practice brought about other rituals and meanings within different communities as well as the differentiation between different groups. Like any other aspect, food is greatly embedded within political, religious and economic contexts. Different rituals within different cultures and religions are rooted in food related rituals (Pisha, 2019, p.16).

Taking the Maltese context and Christian Catholic religion as an example, the communion ritual finds its roots in the Last Supper that Jesus shared with his apostles before his crucifixion. Additionally, a lot of religious feasts are marked by food rituals most of which are held with extended family members, during for example, Christmas and Easter periods.

Furthermore, new inventions and interactions between different cultures also brought about changes within the sharing of food within the family. For example, the early 1800s and 1900s brought a significant change as the dining table was created. The dining room began in wealthier homes and eventually integrated into the middle class. This enabled the gathering of all family members together in one space and brought about the initiation of family dinners (Pisha, 2019, p.18). Given that food is embedded so much in our practices, we can learn a lot about families not only by understanding what food they eat but also how it is eaten.

### 2.2 Family Mealtime as a Routine or Ritual

Family routines and rituals provide a form of stability for the whole family (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007; Fiese, 2006). There are a few distinctive features which differentiate family routines from rituals. Family rituals can be described as significant and symbolic events such as celebrations and traditions. Meanwhile, family routines are daily patterns integrated within the family (Denham, 2003)**.** Family mealtime can be viewed both as a routine ingrained in family's daily practices and as a ritual since it is also attributed to different occasions and specific events which are differentiated from the mundane routines. In fact, I will be focusing on family mealtime experience both as a routine and ritual as this depends on the family's unique intentions and meanings they ascribe to this shared experience. According to Fiese, (2006, as cited in Denham, 2003, p. 306) studying and understanding family routines and rituals is essential because they provide an opportunity to look into family processes, as well as the cultural context. Furthermore, they are also an intersection between individual and family dynamics (Fiese, 2006, as cited in Denham, 2003). Lawrence and Plisco (2017), postulate that life satisfaction is higher for families who give importance to routines and rituals.

Systemic family therapists have also understood the importance of routines and rituals and have also explored and prescribed rituals as a form of intervention (Pio & Evarist, 2016). The Milan Team (1977, p.6) state that a family ritual can be a powerful way to unite all family members in a "collective experience". Furthermore, Pleck (2000, as cited in Pio & Evarist, 2016) also stipulates that family rituals can also "stir up strong emotions and are frequently reminisced about and discussed within the family." Structural therapy has also been utilized to work on family routines and has been found to positively support the latter (Pio & Evarist, 2016, p.14).

### 2.3 Content and Meaning Making

Although, as mentioned earlier, a large array of research demonstrates that a prioritization of family mealtimes can result in higher levels of general life satisfaction, it is also important to look at what happens during family mealtimes.

In fact, Lawrence and Plisco (2017, p.8) postulate that research should also look into communication and interactional patterns to better understand how one can further enhance this domestic commensality. When looking into argumentative discussions during family mealtimes, Bova and Arcidiacono (2015) found that mealtimes provide all family members the opportunity to intentionally or unintentionally express their expectations and feelings, both in relation to the mealtime context as well as outside the family's context.

Mealtimes can provide families with the opportunity to interact with one another. During this time, patterns of interactions can also be observed, in fact a good number of studies integrate videos and observations as part of their data gathering. Minuchin, Rosman and Baker (1978, as cited in Dallos, 2003, p. 526) stipulate that although family interactions and dynamics are complex, they can still be observable. Observations can also lead to an understanding of patterns of

discussions, avoidance of arguments or expression of feelings, which is also consistent with attachment patterns (Dallos, 2003, p. 521).

Cannon (1998, p.86) also sheds light on the spiritual aspect of family mealtimes. The majority of the interviewees in Cannon's study, utilized words such as 'connection' and 'bonding'. For Cannon, this signified a sense of togetherness that individuals seem to yearn for. Furthermore, some participants in Cannon's study (1998) also expressed a sense of mourning when reflecting upon the loss of such a significant ritual.

Moreover, another meaning delineated from participants' interviews was the meaning of mealtime prayers (Cannon, 1998, p.85). Interviewees mentioned how parents view mealtimes as a parental assigned responsibility by the divine and also utilize mealtime as an opportunity to pray. In fact, a brisk search on the internet shows various mealtime prayers, with one site listing twenty-five different versions of mealtime prayers with different subtopics ranging from blessings to requests (McDonald, 2022).

Mealtime practices are embedded with symbolism through blessings, food served, as well as assigned seating and so on. Fiese et al (2006) stipulate that the symbolic practices can be either inclusive or exclusionary to different family members. Mealtimes therefore provide an opportunity for family members to understand where they belong within their family.

### 2.4 Culture, Gender differences and Family Loyalties

As Beardsworth et al. (2002, p.73) postulates, similar to other practices within society, mealtimes are influenced by cultural practices similar to other areas and practices within society. That is why family and mealtimes cannot be explored in isolation (Beardsworth et al., 2002, p.73).

Ciurea & DeVault (1991, p.3), discuss for example how mealtime practices differentiate between different socio-economic groups. Furthermore, Beardsworth et al. (2002, p.85) also posit that "women's food-related roles in effect express and reflect their subordination" and, "the idea that the food-related obligations and duties imposed upon women actually serve to enforce their subordination."

One of the reasons why I decided to conduct research with all family members was to also include the male figures since as Adamson et al. (2014, p.118) stipulated, there is very limited research on mealtime patterns and the role of the father. Furthermore, the numerous studies I came across had females as research participants.

This is why family mealtime can also be a window towards understanding cultural implications such as gender roles. For example, in a study conducted by Schafer and Schafer (1989) showed that women across the younger life cycle stages expressed their wish that their husbands should be more involved in meal preparation, however husbands in older life cycle stages were by then more involved in food-related tasks.

Other research studies have also shown that mothers tend to be the dominant contributors in the initiation of mealtimes and surrounding conversations (Bohanek et al, 2009, p. 508). Ciurea & De Vault, (1991) also states that research on fathers' experiences of family meals is still limited. This could be a result of lack of response from men to participate in research related to this subject. Ciurea & De Vault (1991) sees that this lacuna could also be a result of women being the main person responsible for food and mealtime.

Although minimal research has been conducted locally, results obtained indicate that the mother remained the person responsible for meal provision (Zammit, 2011; Piscopo, 2004). The

findings on this aspect of mealtime were an interesting reflection for myself as a woman researcher, influenced by my own culture. Although personally I consider my father to be the person responsible for mealtime, my mother was still the person who prepared food throughout the whole week, with my father cooking on Sundays - when all the family ate together.

Influenced by Boszormenyi-Nagy's concept of invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984), this reflection also brought about a further exploration on loyalties. From my experience, I consider cooking food for my family members, friends and boyfriend an act of showing that I care and not being able to do so sometimes instigates a sense of guilt. This could be stemming either from my father's and grandfather's influence of cooking food as an expression of love, or possibly by my own culture unconsciously ingrained that as a woman, I should be the person who 'provides for the family'.

As Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, (1984, p. 38) describes, "failure to comply with obligations leads to feelings of guilt". Reflecting on my personal positioning makes me further aware how this might also influence my interview questions and analysis in my research.

### 2.5 Mealtime Frequency and Perceptions

Apart from a number of researches that demonstrate how family satisfaction and mealtime can be interrelated, a number of studies have also investigated mealtime frequency to understand whether families are managing to find time to eat together. In a research conducted in 2001 in the US, with 1371 adolescents and their families, 60% of parents reported that they manage to have six or more family mealtimes per week (Boutelle et al., 2001).

It is interesting to note that another research held in the same region in the United States in 2015, with one hundred and sixty participants, 42% stated that they manage to eat six or more meals together per week. 29% of participants however reported that they managed to have three or less family mealtimes per week (Fulkerson et al., 2016, p. 138).

A number of barriers impinging on family mealtime frequency have also been extrapolated via research. Difficulties in scheduling were mentioned by research participants with reasons for this being mainly due to inconsistent work schedules (Quick et al., 2011). Other barriers that emerged were adolescents' preference to be more independent as well as discontent with family relations. (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000). Within the Maltese context, work commitments, in particular those of the father, are a barrier for not eating together as a family with mothers stipulating that they preferred to give food to their children once they arrived from school (Zammit, 2011, p. 192).

### 2.6 Parents' Perspectives of Family Mealtime

Findings from research with caregivers often show that parents give value to family mealtimes and recognize the benefits that mealtimes can provide. (Jarret et al., 2014, Quick et al., 2011, Lawrence & Plisco, 2017). Parents also tend to view mealtime as an opportunity to teach and pass on certain values to their children, (Quick et al., 2011, p.660). Moreover, parents also consider mealtimes as an opportunity to interact and connect with their children (Quick et al., 2011, p.660). Whilst a lot of research has been conducted on parents' views in relation to family mealtimes, I could not find a lot of literature on the effects of family mealtime on parents' and couple's wellbeing.

Findings from a survey conducted in the United States indicated a slight association between frequent family meals and lower body mass index among parents (Sobal and Hanson, 2011, as cited in Utter et al., 2018). However, as Utter et al. (2018) posit, little research has been conducted to explore whether there are any emotional benefits of family mealtimes for parents. However, in their research Utter et al. (2018) found that "parents who have frequent family meals are better off in terms of social and emotional wellbeing".

In a thematic analysis conducted by Campbell et al. (2022), the father's emotional experience of mealtimes was explored. A good number of male participants stated that mealtime was a 'positive' experience', recognizing family mealtimes as "a source of enjoyment as they were one of few opportunities for valued family interaction". While keeping in mind their contributions to mealtimes, the emotion of frustration also emerged for parents, especially in response to their children's eating behaviours; such as refusing to eat the food provided. (Campbell et al., 2022).

In our work as family therapists, we often come across couples and parents who complain about the lack of time they have for each other and their children. Devine et al. (2019, as cited in Kok, 2015, p.23) state that time, as well as parents' employment status, play a large contribution on family mealtime activities. Both mothers and fathers reported dissatisfaction with the fact that they could not dedicate a lot of time towards both the preparation of mealtimes as well as their ability to be present for this activity. Parents also reported feeling "too tired to eat" and "too rushed and too hurried to eat" (Devine et al, 2009, as cited in Kok, 2015, p.23).

### 2.7 Children's Perspectives of Family Mealtime

Research surrounding family indicates that family routines and rituals are considered to be an important factor in children's development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). Regardless of the

substantial research on the benefits of mealtimes on children, less studies focus specifically on the children's views, experiences and meaning of mealtime. Boutelle et al (2001) demonstrate that parents' and adolescents' perceptions differ from each other, with adolescents seeing themselves as being more involved in family mealtimes than their parents do.

One of the themes researched in Prior and Limbert's (2013) study conducted with 76 adolescents, was barriers related to family mealtimes according to adolescents. The study conducted showed that 88% of females and 68% of males stated that they see themselves continuing to have mealtimes with their families. Interestingly, one of the tests also showed that males reported finding family mealtimes more stressful than females. Apart from busy schedules, teenagers might also sometimes avoid family mealtimes due to dissatisfaction with their family relationships (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2000).

When interviewing older children who told stories about their family of origin's mealtimes, one of Cannon's participants spoke affectionately about her mother's cooking, - giving meaning to her mum's efforts to give them elaborate meals, presented in a visually appealing manner, as a way of showing love (Cannon, 1998). Another participant described how mealtimes provided an opportunity to strengthen the family's relationships, reminiscing how he and his brothers and sisters took the opportunity to open up and "get things off their chest" whilst they helped out with cleaning the dishes after mealtimes (Cannon, 1998).

### 2.8 Wellbeing and Attachment

Whilst the exploration of eating disorders is beyond the scope of this research, studies related to mealtimes, and the aforementioned disorders, continue to prove how this domestic commensality is likely to influence children and adolescent's wellbeing. White and Meyer (2014,

p.173) postulate that not only frequency of mealtimes, but also having a positive mealtime atmosphere is associated with lower chances of the development of eating disorders. Godfrey et al. (2013) also mention that a number of studies demonstrate that there is a relationship between family mealtime interactions and eating disorders.

The impact that family mealtimes have on its respective members depend on a number of factors including interactions and relationships between the different family members, as well as activities surrounding mealtimes (Masters et al., 2014). As Berge, (2009) stipulates, family meals can also be stressful for the family if there are issues and strained relationships. Several factors can impinge on the latter, such as disagreements on food preparation and picky eaters, which could lead to further conflict within the family during that particular time (Fulkerson et al., 2008). Stress and anger in the mealtime context is also correlated with significant use of food to regulate emotions (White et al., 2022).

# Chapter 3 - Methodology

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter details the research method and methodology applied in this study. Furthermore, the recruitment process, sample of participants as well as the tools utilized for data collection and data analysis will be discussed. Additionally, measures related to ethics, reliability, validity as well as the process of reflexivity will be presented in this section.

## 3.2 A Qualitative Approach

Creswell (1998, p. 15) describes qualitative research as "an inquiry process of understanding that explores a social or human phenomenon". I particularly appreciated the words selected for this definition since the author conveys a meaning of an incessant exercise to explore and understand a personal experience without presuppositions or a search for a common truth. In fact, this is very much in line with the social constructionist approach which is a prominent stance in my research and as explained earlier, moves away from notions of one truth.

As Roller, (2015) states, qualitative research and social constructionism is a "natural wedding". This is different from a positivist approach which holds the belief that the purpose of research is to get the closest estimation of reality as possible (Tuli, 2010, p. 100). Hence, in attempting to explore the family's narratives in relation to family mealtime, it makes sense to adopt an approach which is a qualitative one.

Utilizing a qualitative approach is an excellent way to explore family relational processes as well as obtain family members' meanings about the latter (Ganong & Coleman, 2014). Given that the narrative is co-constructed between various family members, I also had to pay attention to the way the story and relationship between members was expressed (Riessman, 1993).

Moreover, considering the systemic framework of this research, an approach rooted in second-order cybernetics is adopted. Within this perspective, reality is understood as being shaped by language and communication, particularly through the interactions between myself, the researcher, and the participating family members (Griffith et al., 1990). This approach has facilitated a heightened awareness of my own role and influence as a researcher, allowing for a better understanding of the dynamics inherent in the experiences and interactions.

### 3.3 Why use Narrative?

Family life and family practices do not happen in a vacuum, rather, they exist within a specific context of time and space that requires exploration (Česnuitytė, 2020). In this study, keeping in mind for example the transition of adults moving out of their parents' homes need to be analyzed within the context of social, historical and geographical contexts of that particular time. Thinking narratively about a phenomenon will support me in capturing the detailed narratives of families.

As Burck (2005, p.252) describes, Narrative Analysis provides the opportunity for the researcher to focus on the way the individuals present their "self-narrations" both as a construction as well as identity making. Furthermore, for this particular research, narrative inquiry is also suitable to research families since their stories are created through the linguistic interactions between them as they go through different transitions throughout the Family life cycle. As stated earlier, families' stories are also situated within the context, in this case for example, the Maltese culture, economics, parents' jobs and geographical factors also play a contribution in the families' stories.

Furthermore, utilizing a narrative approach would also permit me to extrapolate why the interviewees are narrating in this specific way and at that particular point in the conversation as well as how an excerpt of the interview fits in with other parts of the interviewee's story as narrated throughout the whole interview (Gilbert, 2008).

Additionally, narratives are the universal way in which people make sense of their experiences. The experience of family mealtime can be connected to narrative and language in various ways. Foucault's concept of power relations and discourses highlights how language operates as a mechanism of power and control within social institutions (Mambrol, 2016). Family mealtime, as a social setting, is not exempt from these dynamics. Language use during mealtimes can reflect and reinforce power dynamics within the family, shaping interactions as well as relationships.

Chomsky's linguistic theory, on the other hand, emphasizes the innate human capacity for language and the role of language in shaping our thoughts and perceptions (Cowie, 2008). In the context of mealtimes, language becomes a tool for expressing and negotiating individual and collective identities, as well as establishing social hierarchies. It allows family members to communicate their needs and emotions, and also facilitates the transmission of cultural values, norms, and traditions.

The focus of this research was to understand the narratives of these families and how together the family members managed to co-construct a reality of this practice. During the interviews and subsequent analysis, I was interested in understanding the participants' language and meaning making narrative and how their stories constructed their perception of this reality.

### 3.4 Sample Selection and Recruitment

Narrative enquiry requires a sample of participants which permit me to "unpack" stories (Riessman, 1993). In order to obtain this, participants for this research were purposively selected. This sampling method was utilized since it supported me to identify families that met the required criteria thus enabling further insight into my research question.

In order to recruit participants, an advert on social media was shared and four participants contacted me expressing their and their family's interest to participate in this research. One family dropped out due to time constraints which left me with a total of three families. The minimum

number of participants set in my ethics application was met since Narrative Inquiry allows researchers to select one or more individuals to explore their stories (Creswell, 2007, p.55).

Furthermore, I decided not to recruit more participants after conducting the three interviews because this approach allowed a more detailed analysis of the few texts (Creswell, 2007, p.126). Therefore, also keeping in mind the institution's stipulated word count and timeframe, it was more important for me as a researcher to obtain an in-depth understanding of the subjective stories that also reveal interesting information.

### 3.5 Research Participants

This study focused on Families, thus, participants' sample consisted of three Maltese families (refer to table 3.1). Since I wanted to explore mealtimes across the different life cycle stages, I decided to find families who have adult children so that the different realities within different time contexts can be explored. The ages of parents who participated in this study range from 56 to 73 and children's ages range between 26 and 37 years of age. Families' characteristics are included in table 3.1 below. Also, participants vary in their educational background and work status, as noted in table 3.1. It was interesting to notice how all the parents in this sample happen to be working or used to work in the same setting as their husbands/wives. This happened to be by coincidence, and was not planned for.

Table. 3.1 - Families' Characteristics

| Table 3.1 Family Characteristics | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family | Family 1;<br>Georgia<br>Paul<br>Lisa<br>Daniel | Family 2;<br>Michael<br>Rosette<br>Diane<br>Anthony | Family 3;<br>Elaine<br>Darren<br>Rodianne<br>Justine |
| Age | G: 63<br>P: 73<br>L: 28<br>D: 37 | M: 61<br>R: 56<br>D: 26<br>A: 29 | E: 56<br>D: 59<br>R: 32<br>J: 26 |
| Current Work Status (by Sector) | G: Housewife<br>P: Financial Sector<br>L: Social Sector<br>D: Financial Sector | M: Education Sector<br>R: Education Sector<br>D: Social Sector<br>A: Education Sector | E: Health Sector<br>D: Health Sector<br>R: Gaming<br>J: Gaming |
| Education | G: Secondary<br>P: Secondary<br>L: Tertiary<br>D:Tertiary | M: Tertiary<br>R: Tertiary<br>D: Tertiary<br>A: Tertiary | E: Post Secondary<br>D: Post Secondary<br>R: Tertiary<br>J: Tertiary |
| Number of Children who left household | 1 | 1 | 1 |

### 3.6 Conducting Interviews with multiple Family Members

Influenced by systemic thinking, I decided to conduct interviews with all family members given that all members respective' lives and subjective experience are intertwined and the interactions between them create the mealtime experience. Furthermore, meaning is created through the family members' interactions and interpretations (Van Parys et al., 2017). Interviewing all family members also enables the cocreation of a joint account.

As Reczek (2014, p.1) stipulates, taking into account and obtaining information from all members of the family, can provide the research with a more tough and "broader understanding of family dynamics". Eggenberger and Nelms (2006, p.283) further stipulate that although conducting family interviews can present diverse challenges, it provides more insight into families and is an important element in the evolution of family theory. Of course, I had to be attentive to who was predominately leading the conversation, who was more enthusiastic or silent, as well as my own biases and interpretations.

### 3.7 Ethical Considerations

To ensure no ethics were breached when conducting this study, ethical approval had to be obtained from the Institute of Family Therapy - Malta board. Interviews were held at a convenient place chosen by the families which allowed a confidential setting. Upon expression of interest, all the participants were provided with a written description and purpose of the study. They were also handed a consent form and were informed that they could decide to stop their participation at any point in the study should they feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, data protection procedures were also shared with the participants.

To ensure data protection, fictitious names were utilized and omission of any identifiable data were completely removed. Furthermore, participants were provided with a copy of the research results once completed. In addition, participants were recorded during interviews. These recordings were destroyed after the completion of this project. Although it was ensured that no

distress is caused through questioning, participants were still made aware that I was able to refer them to therapeutic support if any topics will instigate any form of distress (Steffen, 2016).

### 3.8 Interview Structure

Using my personal experience and knowledge gained through my studies, I utilized a semi-structured interview with guiding questions to illuminate the stories of families. This is because semi structured interviews allow a dialogue through open ended questions that could support me to explore the not yet known (Adams, 2015, as cited in Wiley et al., 2015, p.493). One interview was conducted with each family. This was done in order to allow me to observe the dynamics of the family and observe any non-verbal information which might occur during this experience. This would help enrich the story itself.

During the initial part of the interview, demographic information was gathered. Demographic questions included; age of each individual within the family, socio-economic status and education. All families except for one preferred to hold the interviews at their homes. One family requested to meet online. Although I was concerned that this might cause a few challenges, I accepted to proceed with interviewing them, firstly to accommodate their request and secondly, this in itself proved to be a useful insight of the family and their mealtime expereince as will be discussed in the subsequent chapters.

I utilized an online meeting platform to conduct such an interview. Although I had no challenges in understanding the participants, I understand that certain interactions and non-verbal

gestures might have been missed. Furthermore, I paid particular attention to ensuring confidentiality to participants, given that the internet can present further risks in relation to this (Busher, as cited in Silverman, 2016, p.14).

### 3.9 Pilot Study

Prior to embarking on interviewing families, the interview questions were discussed with my supervisor to ensure appropriateness and relevance to the methodology I determined. I also conducted a mock interview with a few colleagues to test out the questions. Following this, a pilot study with one family was conducted. This allowed me to test my method and interview questions and see whether they would elicit the necessary information to answer my research question. Should the pilot study have revealed any areas for improvement, then the necessary amendments would have been included before the actual research is done (Denscombe, 2017). However, the findings from the pilot interview were included in the analysis of the data, since no necessary amendments were made.

### 3.10 Data Analysis

I was faced with a dilemma when determining how to best go about analyzing the data collected, given the multiple influences in the interview context - including the various interactions between the family members as well as the embedded socio and geographical context. Additionally, analysis of data for multi-family member interviews remains underrepresented in literature (Van Parys et al., 2017). Apart from conducting further research and reflections about

the various types of narrative analysis, I also revisited what I wanted to extract from the information and how it will be utilized to support my research questions.

That is why, after carefully evaluating the above, I decided to combine two frameworks and phase my analysis in two parts, first conducting a thematic narrative analysis for each respective family, to extrapolate *what* the family chose to speak about to define the changes in practices and meaning that I am interested in researching. Utilizing thematic narrative analysis still supported me to maintain the sequencing, keeping the story intact while interpreting it (Riessman, 2008, p.74).

I also utilized the three-dimensional space approach described by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). This framework enabled me to look into how the personal experience of each family member was being integrated within one narrative via their interactions with the rest of the family members. Given that interviews were conducted with all family members any non-verbal information during the interview such as, pauses, eye contact or visual exchanges, and other gestures whichmight enrich the stories told, were noted.

Having all the family members interviewed together, listening to each other and building on each other's ideas, enriched their narrative as a family. Furthermore, given my interest in researching changes and practices across the Family Life Cycle, the three-dimensional space structure enabled me to look at the themes in terms of past, present and future. The three-dimensional space approach also required me to look into the participants' physical locations and how the different activities occurring in that place affected their experience.

In order to analyze the data, I also borrowed from Lyons and Coyle's (2007) suggested model, starting with reading through the transcripts a few times to familiarize myself with the material and start extracting significant themes that emerge. Lyons and Coyle (2007) also posit that the narrative's tone as well as identifying the imagery and particular themes before weaving this in a coherent story. Each theme will be viewed in line with the family life cycle stages to extrapolate the changes that occurred across the stages.

By examining the sequence of stories in the interview, together with the thematic connections within it, allowed me to see how the family members tied together significant events and important relationships in their lives (Bell, 1988, as cited in Riessman, 1993) As a researcher, I also had to be attentive of my own positioning when conducting narrative analysis in order to be able to differentiate between what I perceived from the stories of the families' lived experience and my participants' intents (Mello, 2002).

### 3.11 Validity and Reliability

Polkinghorne (2007, p.480) mentions a number of validity issues in relation to narrative research, these being; Language limitations; the limits of reflection, especially to areas which are out of my awareness; the resistance of people to reveal certain information, as well as the complexities of the co-creation between myself as a researcher and the participants. To mitigate these limitations, interviews were personally transcribed the day after, so that I could clearly revisit any personal comments, thoughts or feelings which I might have missed during the interview itself.

Furthermore, the intonation, non-verbal interactions, pauses or hesitancy to respond to questions were also noted. These measures then enriched the creation of the narratives themselves.

Moreover, in order to enhance the validity of the data and ensure that the study accurately represents the participants' perspectives and experiences, several strategies were employed. These involved engagement with the data and participants as well as employing reflexivity to address my biases. Additionally, I ensured that there was clear and transparent documentation of the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Furthermore, taking a collaborative approach as well as ensuring that my professionalism and empathy could enable participants to feel more at ease were crucial aspects in this research. There were also a number of instances where I summarized the person's answers or asked further questions to clarify statements to make sure that I understood correctly and to also reassure them that I was actively listening to what they had to say (Dilley, 2000, p.133).

### 3.12 Reflexivity

As a researcher, I had to be very conscious of my own experiences, biases and knowledge throughout this research and I also had to understand how I was also influencing the creation of knowledge with my participants (Berger, 2013). Furthermore, Separating the role of a trainee family therapist and researcher was not an easy feat.

My role as a trainee family therapist is to support family members to express thoughts and emotions safely, and to understand each other's experiences and subjective truth. Whereas as a researcher, I had to listen to my participants' experiences without interfering as much as possible. Moreover, I had to be aware that having experienced mealtimes within my family as well as being a daughter and having moved out recently, could have influenced the questions I planned as well as my probing questions during the interviews.

I knew that I had to monitor and bracket these experiences in order to remain curious. The roles and experiences mentioned, together with knowledge about our culture could have potentially stopped me from asking more questions to understand the subjective experience of the family I was interviewing. Being reflexive was kept at the forefront throughout all the phases of my research including, both the collection of data as well as its analysis.

As Valentine (2007, as cited in Berger, 2013) describes, being reflexive helps to be more attentive to 'unconscious editing' because of our own experiences. In turn, this enabled "fuller engagement with the data and more in-depth comprehensive analysis of it".

# Chapter 4 - Results

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the main research findings. Meeting these families proved to be an enriching experience for me. It was enjoyable to notice that all participants in all families were enthusiastic to contribute to the discussions, and the three families interviewed stated that the interview itself helped them to spend some time together and to also think about and discuss something which they have never discussed or thought much about before. The interviews with the families also generated resonant reflections about my own family mealtime experience. Participants' accounts are relayed in the form of excerpts, aiming to shed light at what was being co-constructed between the participants and myself as the researcher.

## 4.2 Overview of the Main Themes

Participants in the study discussed diverse transformations in the family mealtime experience throughout the family life cycle. It became evident that individual members were consistently required to adjust to changes in their surroundings and adhere to normative shifts at different stages of the family life cycle.

Moreover, the influence of culture and transgenerational beliefs and values was observed in shaping roles, patterns, and implicit or explicit decisions related to family mealtime, as further elucidated in the subsequent discussion. Families narrating their own family's rituals and traditions

in relation to mealtime seemed to connect the respective family members and demonstrated how family mealtime can support the family's identity as a unit.

Overview of the main themes is demonstrated in Figure 1:

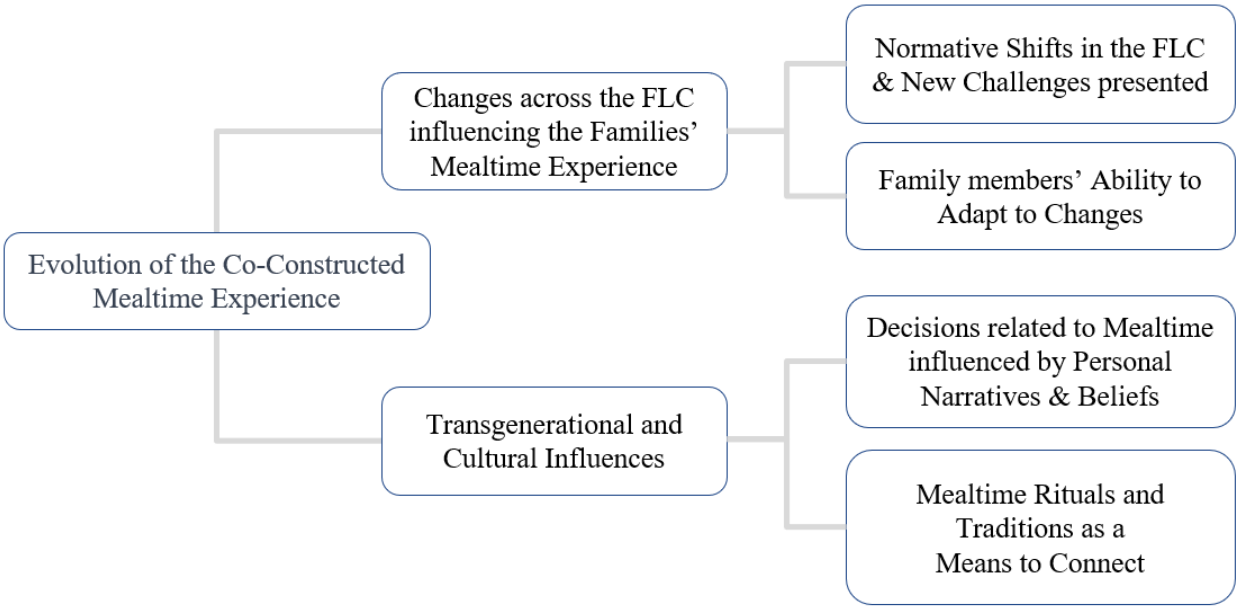



*Figure 1*: Thematic Map of Findings

Apart from presenting the overall themes, presenting data in a family-by-family manner, is important because it allows for a better understanding of the complexity and subjectivity of the family mealtime experiences. Each family's unique context, background, and individual dynamics influence the co-construction of mealtime experience differently. By analyzing the data at a family level, I could also gain insight into the specific challenges and adaptations that each family faced in relation to mealtime throughout their life cycle as well as the meaning making of this experience.

This approach helped to identify variations that might be missed when solely focusing on general themes. Understanding these individual variations ultimately contributes to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the families' co-constructed mealtime experiences. The main themes, depicted in Figures 2, 3, and 4, provide an illustrative representation of these findings.

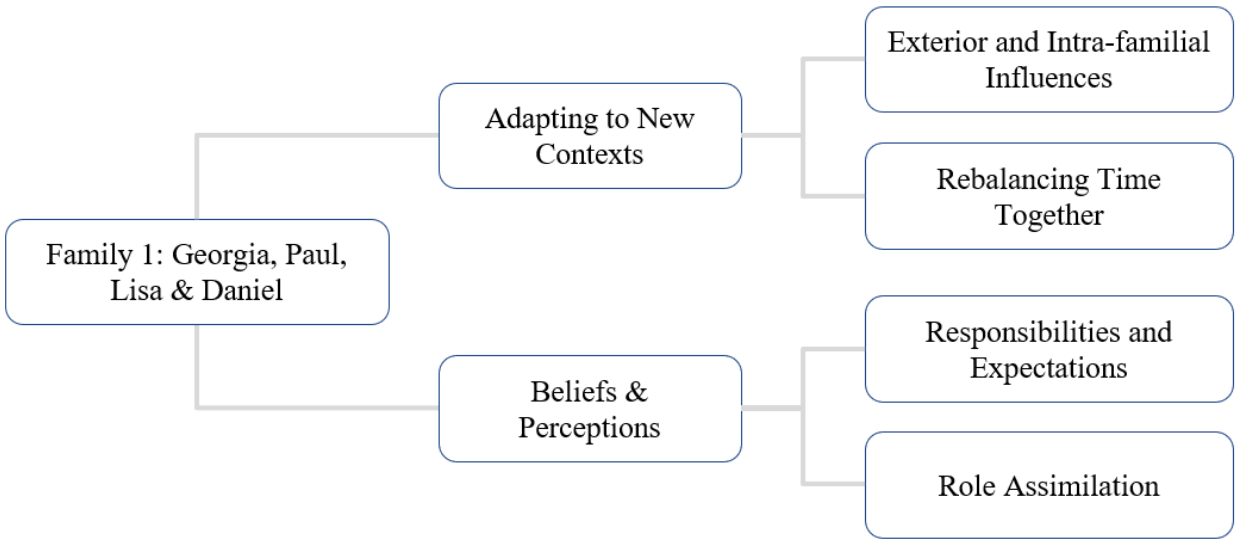



*Figure 2:* Thematic Map Family 1

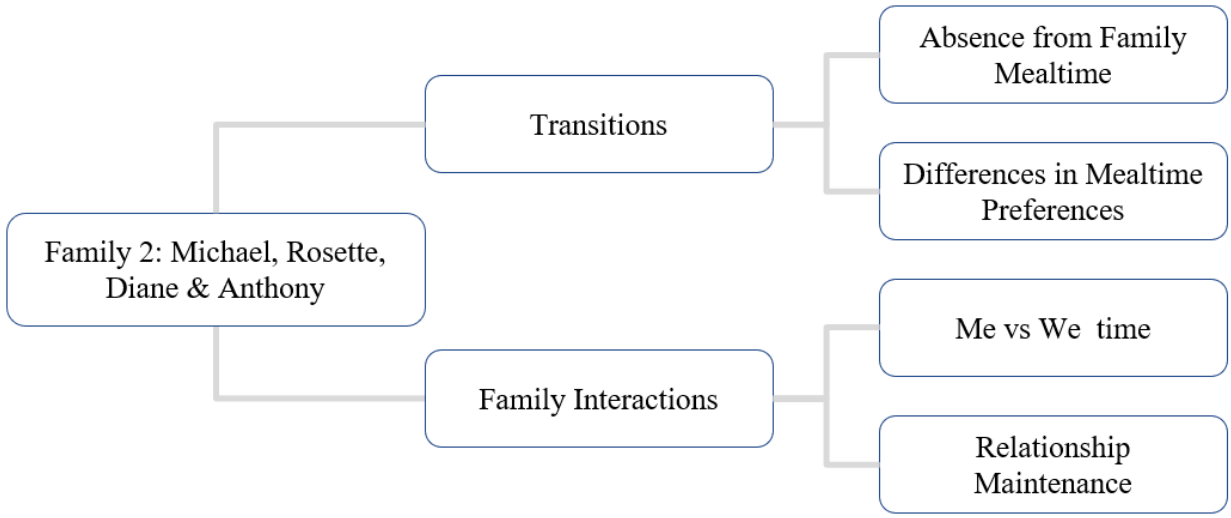



*Figure 3:* Thematic Map Family 2

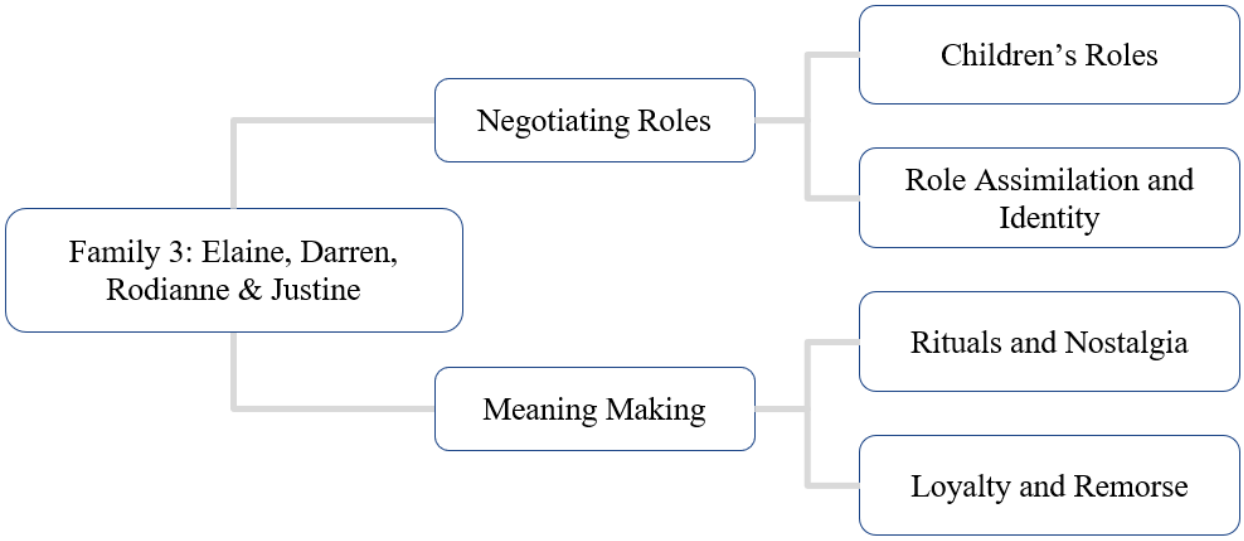



*Figure 4:* Thematic Map Family 3

### 4.3 Family 1: Georgia, Paul, Lisa, Daniel

The interview with this family of four was conducted virtually. Georgia, Paul and Lisa were all sitting at the kitchen's table whilst Daniel connected from his own home at a later stage during the interview. Daniel had moved out 3 years ago and is living with his wife and young daughter. Georgia and Paul are now pensioners whilst Lisa is working in the social field and is still

living with her parents. The conversation was initiated by the mother who was and still is responsible for cooking meals for all the family. However, all family members were eager to participate and contributed in co-constructing their own narrative on their family's mealtime experiences.

### 4.3.1 Adapting to New Contexts

Over the years, the frequency of family mealtime remained relatively consistent for this family. Nevertheless, family members shared their experiences of evolving interactions due to internal and external changes that have taken place over time. The participants' narrative demonstrated a sense of family resilience that managed to adapt to different influences that impacted their time together. Family resilience refers to "the capacity of the family, as a functional system, to withstand and rebound from adversity" (Walsh, 2021).

#### 4.3.1.1 Exterior and Intra-familial Influences

One of the biggest changes occurred with the birth of their children. Georgia's narrative centered on these changes as she described how although when they were still a couple, she and her husband used to eat together, this changed completely when they had children.

> Georgia: ikollok baby jekk jibki jew imissu l-bottle trid tieqaf biex ittijulu so ehhh meta jkunu babies inpoggu fuq il-mejda flimkien imma interruptions ikun hemm ovvjament. Gieli per ezempju jien gieli kesahli l-ikel ghax il-baby qed jibki.

*Georgia: You have your baby and you have to stop because it was time for his feed so (sigh) when they're babies, we sit down together but we have a lot of interruptions obviously. Sometimes my food used to get cold because the baby was crying.*

This was also reiterated by Daniel who also has a three-year-old daughter and is also experiencing a new stage in his life.

The family's interactions also varied according to what was happening to them outside family mealtimes. The family seems to have adapted according to what was happening within their context without setting explicit rules or concrete decision making.

Paul: Tista' tipprova taghmel ir-regoli tieghek ghal-certu hinijiet tal-gurnata imma mbaghad ir-realta, il-hajja tibaghtlek affarijiet differenti.
*Paul: You can try to create your own rules for some times of the day but then reality, life beings about different things.*

At some points during the interview, there was also evoked in the family's narrative, a hint of indignation towards exterior exigencies such as work that were seen as being an impediment to spend time with the other family members during mealtimes. Both father and daughter described that as they grew older, work-related phone calls started to interrupt family mealtimes.

Paul: I used to interrupt anything that is going on. Ghaliex ovvjament dak-iz zmien ma kellniex headphones sofistikati emmm gifieri laqqas internament ma kien hemm mowbajl. Gifieri jekk kien ikolli telefonata, f'daqqa wahda kulhadd irid jieqaf ma nistghux inkomplu nargumentaw.

*Paul: I used to interrupt anything that is going on. Because obviously, at that time we did not have any sophisticated headphones so not even internally, we did not even have mobile phones. So if I had a phone call, everyone had to stop and we could not continue our arguments.*

The daughter also described how taking work related phone calls used to distract her from mealtimes.

Lisa: Anke gieli hdimt day shift il-hadd mid-dar u x'hin ifettillu kien idoqq dan limbierak t-telefon, kont nirrispondi.. Fi x'hin idoqq kont irrid nieqaf niekol u nirrispondi it-mobile. Gieli rrispondetju hawn

*Lisa: Even sometimes I used to work day shift from home on a Sunday and whenever the blessed phone rang, I answered. Whenever the phone rang, I had to stop eating and answer it. Sometimes I answered it here.*

#### 4.3.1.2 Rebalancing Time Together

All family members mentioned that they are now appreciating spending time together more and doing their utmost to be present for family mealtimes. The husband and children's work and

other commitments seem to have affected whether they managed to do this. As they were talking about this retrospectively, family members did not seem to be very pleased when family mealtime was somehow interrupted or whenever they were not present for meals with the rest of the family. Paul mentioned specifically that he did not like the fact that he had to skip meals *"because that is our time".*

Technology has proved to be useful for Daniel, who has moved out of the house recently and still manages to be present during family mealtimes by connecting with the other family members virtually.

> Lisa: Le, le ma jigix jiekol hawn imma virtually emmm dejjem ikun qieghed hawn on a video call kwazi
>
> *Lisa: No, no he does not eat here although virtually he is always present via a video call almost.*

and

> Daniel: Din ta' nofsinhar ezempju ilbiereh hdimt mid-dar. X'hin kont qed niekol f'nofsinhar cempilt l-ommi hekk kellimt l-ommi.Minuta kollox ta'
>
> *Daniel: This afternoon thing for example, Yesterday I worked from home. While I was eating, I called my mum. I spoke with her. Just for one minute.*

Furthermore, all family members expressed how the Covid period further changed their interactions and time spent together during mealtimes since the daughter had to leave her parents' home during that period and was also not present during family mealtimes. Furthermore, they were

not able to visit each other. However, the daughter stated that technology then supported them to remain in contact with each other and as Lisa described, "*it was the only way we could keep in touch".*

> Lisa: Imma ezempju kuljum irrid incempel il mummy fuq video call. U waqt l-ikel e! Waqt l-ikel irrdi incempel il-mummy.
> *Lisa: But for example I wanted to video call my mother every day. And during mealtime! I wanted to call her during mealtime.*

### 4.3.2 Beliefs and Perceptions

Perceptions regarding the family mealtime experience exhibited variations among family members at different stages of the family life cycle. However, the family's narrative indicates a continuous adherence to transgenerational beliefs concerning responsibility for mealtime chores as well as the enduring influence of the family of origin. Through their discourse, it became evident that responsibility and patterns of interaction were transmitted across generational boundaries. (Bartle-Haring & Sabatelli, 1998, p.903).

.

#### 4.3.2.1 Responsibilities and Expectations

Whilst mealtime interactions between family members changed along the years, the mother's responsibility to prepare meals seems to have remained constant through the years. There was no concrete discussion or decisions on who was to be responsible for preparing meals and

when asked about this, both Georgia and Paul looking at each other in a questioning manner as they never actually spoke about this matter.

> Georgia: Nahseb qas kien hemm decizjoni. Giet automatically.
> *Georgia: I don't think that there was any decision. It happened automatically.*

Paul further mentioned however that this was an important factor for him that Giorgia knew how to cook.

> Paul: mhux taghmilha kundizzjoni imma nasheb li kieku Gergia ma rnexxiliex timmasterja li ssajjar u l-kwalita, nahseb kien ikollna problemi kbar (laughing)
> *Paul: it's not that you make it a condition but if Georgia did not master her cooking skills and the quality, I think we would have had a lot of problems (laughing)*

#### 4.3.2.2 Role Assimilation

The rest of the family also concurred that Georgia was ultimately the sole person responsible for mealtime preparation with Lisa referring to the kitchen as her mother's territory and with the father taking over responsibility on very rare occasions whenever Georgia was not able to cook such as when she was attending to her mother when the latter was at hospital. Furthermore, no major changes occur on special occasions, such as Christmas and Easter or someone's Birthday, with the family opting to eat at their home with the exception that there is

usually more food. Georgia still prepares food for the family and finds it strange whenever there is no one to cook for.

Georgia: u meta johorgu u nispicca wahdi niekol, ma nikolx. Niekol vera ftit.

*Georgia: and when they go out and I end up eating alone, I don't eat. I eat just a little.*

Katia: Thossok stramba jigifieri?

*Katia: You mean you feel strange?*

Georgia: Ehe ma nikolx. Ikolli seba mitt sena biex nitlaq minn fuq il-mejda u ma nikolx.

*Gerogia: Yes, I don't eat. I would want to leave the table as soon as possible and I don't eat.*

### 4.4 Family 2: Michael, Rosette, Diane & Anthony

Inspired by the insights drawn out from my first interview, I was looking forward to meeting and interviewing the second family. The interview was conducted in person and was held at the family's kitchen table within their house. All family members participated in the interview and each family member added on to the others' discussions, highlighting their individual experiences within the same context.

#### 4.4.1 Transitions

This family's narrative shared a few similarities with the aforementioned one. New situations brought about by different factors required the family to adapt to new changes related to

family mealtime. The biggest change that impacted family mealtime seems to have occurred when the mother started working again when the son was five years old.

> Rosette: Jien l-ewwel hames snin meta kelli t-tifel sakemm kellu five waqaft nahdem allura kelli iktar hin biex insajjar fhimt. Hin ghat-tisjir, hin ghalihom u kollox kien f'idejja. Kollox. Meta mbaghad bdejt nahdem is-sitwazzjoni inbiddlet kompletament.
>
> *Rosette: For the first five years, when I had my son, until he was five years old, I stopped working, therefore I had more time to prepare food. Time for cooking, time for them, and everything was in my hands. Everything. The situation changed completely when I started working.*

#### 4.4.1.1 Absence from Family Mealtime

Another change that seemed to have affected family mealtime for the children was when the mother then started working longer hours and was not present for lunch during the week. Anthony mentioned that the situation changed drastically when this occurred and Diane described that period as being traumatic. Anthony continued to say that this had impacted him a lot;

> Anthony: mbaghad innutajna qisu forsi iktar kemm kienet importanti dak il-hin li ha nqattghu flimkien fit-tlieta. Jiena nnutajtha hafna dik.
>
> *Anthony: I noticed then how important it was for me to spend time together at 3:00pm. I noticed that a lot.*
>
> Katia: qisek hassejt in-nuqqas tieghu

*Katia: Its like you felt its absence*

Anthony: mija fil-mija

*Anthony: one hundred percent*

Even though the father was present during mealtimes, the children still expressed that they felt that there was someone missing and that it completely changed the mealtime experience for them. Furthermore, even though the mother was not present, her responsibility to prepare the food remained the same along the different stages of the family life cycle.

Another change transpired when the children started growing older, since they started eating in their rooms. This was not questioned by the parents, since both children started having more study commitments which they had to attend to.

#### 4.4.1.2 Differences in Mealtime Preferences

Different food preferences amongst family members required the family to adapt to certain changes or new requests presented by the respective family members. This sometimes caused some tension within the family, especially when the children were younger. The latter mostly occurred whenever the daughter did not like the food that was prepared for her;

Michael: Nahseb dik punt important li kellhom tastes differenti u specific.

*Michael: I think that's an important point, that they had different and specific tastes.*

Diane: Meta kont picky imma kienet tikkrea l-istress

*Diane: Whenever I was picky though, it used to cause some stress*

And

Rosette: Kienet tqajjem naqa tenzjoni. Niggieldu maghha. Kul kul kul.

*Rosette: It used to cause some tension. We used to fight with her. Eat, eat, eat*

The family's narrative was embedded with tension which seemed to stem from the parents' concern for their daughter's health and as their daughter was in her early adolescence, she became pickier on her food. This sometimes caused arguments between the parents and daughter even when they went out to eat in a restaurant on certain occasions.

### 4.4.2 Family Interactions

Throughout different stages, interactions between family members during mealtimes displayed variations. Initially, the parents sought other opportunities outside mealtime to engage in discussions. In contrast, the children perceived mealtimes as an opportunity to eat and pursue individual interests. Nowadays, mealtime interactions seem to have shifted, with the daughter describing the experience as being *"very nice, and it's a way we bond"*.

#### 4.4.2.1 Me vs We time

Variations arose between eating alone and eating with the rest of the family, and these preferences shifted according to the family life cycle stages. For instance, Anthony mentioned that

he has always preferred eating alone, often accompanied by a book since childhood. Diane also expressed a preference for watching television while eating. However, both children emphasized that the significance of family mealtime has evolved over time. Nowadays, they value the time spent together and view family mealtimes as an opportunity to interact with the rest of the family.

#### 4.4.2.2 Relationship Maintenance

After the son moved out, family mealtime occurred once a fortnight on a Sunday, mostly due to every member's work commitments. It seems that the less frequent mealtime occurs, the further it is seen as an opportunity to get together for the family;

> Diane: Ghax ma tantx konna naraw il-xulxin imma issa l-unika mod kif niltaqghu kollha
>
> *Diane: Because we didn't see each other a lot, but now, it's the only time when we meet each other.*

And

> Anthony: Bazikament mod kif insibu hin biex inqattghu mal-familja. Issa iktar importanti. Imortanti hafna. Hafna hafna importanti.
>
> *Anthony: Basically, it's one way how we manage to spend time together as a family. Nowadays it's more important. Very important. Very very important.*

And

> Rosette: Allura issa issa vera l-ikel sar hin li nitkellmu
>
> *Rosette: Nowadays, mealtime has really become the time where we can talk.*

### 4.5 Family 3: Elaine Darren Rodianne Justine

I also interviewed this family at their home. When I entered, I was enthusiastically greeted and prompted to sit at the family's dinner table. All members of the family were already there and they immediately told me that this interview was a good opportunity for them to meet up. Justine is still living at her parents' house whilst Rodianne, the eldest daughter, had left her family of origin's house around four years ago.

#### 4.5.1 Negotiating Roles

Changes occurring at different life cycle stages required different family members to take on new roles and responsibilities related to mealtime. Elaine recounted how initially, she took responsibility for preparing food when they started living together, however there was then a change in roles when they had their first child. Elaine admitted that it became difficult for her to take care of the children while cooking. At one point, she felt that she could no longer handle this and in response to that, Darren took up this chore and up till Today, Darren remained the person responsible for preparing food for the family.

##### 4.5.1.1 Children's Roles

With differences to the other families interviewed, the family members described how both daughters were given different chores and responsibilities related to mealtime as they were growing up.

Darren: min jarma l-mejda u jahsel il platti wara. Dawk it-tfal kienu jiehdu hsieb

*Darren: who prepared the dining table and who washed the plates afterwards. The children took care of these.*

Justine: U min jahsel u min jixxutta kienet glieda ta' kull filghaxija. It-tnejn li ahna rridu nahslu u hadd ma jrid jixxutta

*Justine: And whoever washed and whoever dried was every evening's fight. We both wanted to wash and no one wanted to dry.*

Justine: Gieli konna nqaxxrulek il-haxix perezempju

*Justine: Sometimes we used peel the vegetables for example*

#### 4.5.1.2 Role Assimilation and Identity

Whilst the mother and daughters spoke mostly about their interactions and presence during mealtimes, the father's narrative centralized mostly on food preparation and cooking, given that he remained the main person responsible for this. I could notice Darren's passion as he described how he learnt to cook and how much satisfaction this gives him. Rodianne also mentioned that even when she had invited them over for dinner and was cooking for her family, her father was not able to sit down at the table but kept going near her and tried to help her out. This was further reiterated by Darren himself;

Darren: Mhux ha noqghod bilqieghda hekk (makes sign with his hands showing the table) Jien l-istess dawn joqghodu bilqieghda jpacpcu. Jien noqghod insajjar il-hin kollu.

*Darren: I'm not going to sit down like this (makes a sign with his hands showing the table) I'm the same. They sit down talking. I keep cooking at all times.*

### 4.5.2 Meaning Making

This family's narrative highlights emotional connectedness in their experience of family mealtime. This was portrayed by two themes which came out strongly. In particular, all family members recounted specific memories pertaining to family mealtime and different emotions were expressed while recounting these experiences. Overall, the family's narrative also had an overarching sense of contentedness whilst recounting their interactions with each other during family mealtime which according to Lawrence and Plisco (2017, p.8) could have also promoted high levels of family satisfaction.

#### 4.5.2.1 Rituals and Nostalgia

When the mother mentioned a particular tradition related to mealtime, all family members joined in and started narrating stories and remembering particular moments that happened during these outings. A sense of nostalgia prevailed throughout their dialogue and all family members were laughing and joking between them whilst revisiting these memories.

Elaine: U kien ukoll ma kienx ikun hemm televixin so it was a lovely time together

*Elaine: and there was no television so it was a lovely time together*

And

Rodianne: Jien nahseb dak iz-zmien nahseb ma tirrealizzax kemm kienet importanti imma llum il-gurnata

*Rodianne: I think at that time you wouldn't realize how important it is, but nowadays*

And

Justine: Imma issa li semmetjha nghid ara istra qas ghadna naghmluha

*Justine: But now that you're mentioning it I'm saying it's a pity that we no longer do this*

#### 4.5.2.2 Loyalty and Remorse

The dialogue on traditions and meeting together for mealtime shifted towards the present situation and the fact that Rodianne is eating with the rest of the family on a much less frequent basis. Her moving out of her family of origin's house and especially since the time that Covid hit the island, decreased the frequency of which Rodianne was meeting her family. The mother mentioned how much she missed having all the family together for mealtimes. As they were talking about this, Rodianne seemed to be saddened and maybe somewhat guilty about not being able to be present for mealtimes as much as she would like.

Rodianne: Ifhem meta niltaqghu ghal ikel ghalija tkun l-iktar haga li nkun looking forward ghaliha anke jekk perezempju l-ikla tal-Milied oqtolni! Tigi tghidli ma nistax immur ghax honestly vera hekk qisni looking forward ghaliha. So anke l-fatt illi is-sena l-ohra kelli l-Covid, dis-sena immisjajtha habba li konna msefrin(pause) Jien ghlaija dik il-hin mal-familja hekk qisha dak iz-zmien inkun looking forard ghalih, so in a way qisni nimmisja e (slightly emotional) allavolja nifhem illi huwa nuqqas tieghi ukoll li ma nfittixx forsi illi nghidilhom perezempju isma ha nigi niekol ghandkom.

*Rodianne: When we meet to eat together, for me it's one of the things I look forward to the most,even for example for Christmas. I hate the fact that I wouldn't be able to go because honestly it's like I look forward to it. So even that I had Covid last year and this year we were abroad (pause) For me, that is time with the family and its like I look forward to that time with the family, so in a way I miss it (slightly emotional) even though I understand that it's also my fault that I don't ask them for example to come to eat with them.*

Being in her position of having moved recently from home, /I resonated a lot with this sense of sadness and guilt and I stopped myself from asking further so as not to make her feel more uncomfortable.

# Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter will analyze and discuss the findings gathered through this study. A number of variables were taken into account, such as context, gender and family life cycle stages. Data was analyzed from a post-modern systemic perspective and discussed in light of literature reviewed.

## 5.1 Family Mealtime within a Rapidly Changing Maltese Context

Findings from this study suggest that the families consider family mealtimes as an opportunity to get together and spend time with their loved ones. It was also evident how much family mealtime for these families is influenced by external factors. Parental and children's employment seems to be one of the biggest factors restricting these families from managing to be present for family mealtimes.

This concurs with literature which stipulates that "employment and working practices have an enormous impact on family life" (Abela et al., 2012). The latter needs to be taken in light of other fast-paced changes that are taking place in Maltese society. Employment and working practices in Malta have rapidly changed with most recent studies showing that more women are participating in the labour market (Borg, 2011).

Furthermore, local research showed an increase in working hours and the main reason for this was financial pressure Borg (2011). The high inflation rate is a possible attribution to such

pressure as families are spending more than they did in previous years in groceries (Calleja, 2022). Moreover, another recent study depicted the rocketing prices in property in Malta, stipulating that households with median income earners could only afford a loan which covered 76% of the median asking price of apartments (Borg, 2022).

These statistics demonstrate a changing representation of Maltese family life which could be partly caused by the changing economic situation in Malta. Given the findings, it is important to note these factors that were presented by the families. One would also be curious to see how, given its value, family mealtime could be sustained and how families can continue to adapt to the new challenges that are presented nowadays that hinder the time spent during mealtimes as a family.

### 5.2 Social Construction of Gender Roles and Invisible Loyalties

Exploring socially constructed gender roles, two out of the three interviewed families seem to operate within stereotypical gender roles with the mother being the main person responsible for food preparation and the father being the breadwinner of the family. One of course has to take into consideration that parents interviewed are parents of adult children and have experienced a different context to parents who have young children nowadays. The "cohort to which people belong historically influences their worldview as well as their beliefs about life cycle transition", (Elder & Rockwell, 2006). This is because culture evolves through time due to social and economic influences and changes.

The Gender Equlaity Index in 2022 showed that women in the EU are "more than twice as likely as men to provide the bulk of childcare for young children aged till 12", and women continue to shoulder the bulk of housework (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2022). One of the mothers interviewed also expressed how tiring it was or still is sometimes to take care of all the chores related to mealtimes including the preparation, cooking as well as the cleaning. She stated "Nispicca ezawrita" *"I end up exhasuted"*. The responsibility of house chores and responsibility for the preparation of food seems to be a dominant narrative within the Maltese context.

Linking this aspect systemically, the family of origin plays an important role on how ideas are inherited from one's own parents (DeCore & Focht, 2019), influencing the co-construction of meaning around responsibilities and expectations between the family members. In fact, when asking interviewed parents how they made decisions related to responsibilities surrounding mealtimes; four out of the six replied that this was a 'natural transition' and there were no concrete discussions on how roles and chores were to be divided.

Furthermore, my interpretation of findings also demonstrated invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984) where for example one of the mothers confirmed that she always prioritized food and stated that responsibility to provide for meals was very much emphasized by her mother who used to tell her that food preparation came before any other house chores.

### 5.3 Family Mealtime and Transitions in the Family Life Cycle

Transitions across the family life cycle stages require changes within the family system as the family needs to adapt itself to new situations and circumstances. These transitions require families to commit to a new system, accept new members, increase flexibility as well as accept the shifting of generational roles across the various family life cycle stages (McGoldrick, 1989, p.15).

### 5.3.1 Parents' Negotiation on Rituals

Apart from the negotiation of roles that the parents as a couple had to determine and adapt across the family life cycle stages, another task presented to them was the creation of rituals surrounding family mealtime. Coming from different families of origin, the couple encounters differences in familiar rituals such as meals as well as keeping family traditions such as birthdays or anniversaries (Mc Goldrick, 1989).

This negotiation of keeping the Family of origin's traditions was addressed in the interviews when families were describing mealtimes on special occasions especially in relation to particular religious feasts such as Christmas and Easter. The parents explained how they spend their time with their Family of origin by bringing their own parents to their home or attending meals with them both on special occasions as well as during the weekend. This negotiation also had to be adapted according to their children as well as when their own parents started growing older.

### 5.3.2 Mealtime Experience with Young Children

All interviewees mentioned that having children brought about an adjustment of couple system and relational patterns during family mealtime, with the focus shifting completely on children. All parents interviewed mentioned that they used to share the responsibility for their children's food intake. When asked about their experience as parents for example, Darren stated that there was not much going on during this time except for giving instructions to their children;

> Darren: Xejn, kul ghax se jiksahlek, inti qum min hemm ghax rqadt.
> *Darren: Nothing, eat because it is going to get cold, you wake up because you're going to sleep.*

### 5.3.3 Replicative and Corrective Scripts

As Byng-Hall (1995, p.223) stipulates, exchanges of patterns emerging from the parents' own experience, transgenerational influence and meaning making, produce a new family script. My interpretation is that the children's observation of what was occurring within these patterns of interaction, established their own views on mealtime practices and they then determined what they would want to keep the same scripts or correct them.

These views were expressed in various forms across all families interviewed. Specifically in instances where both children and parents explicitly stated whether they wanted to keep a certain aspect related to mealtimes or do the complete opposite of what was or is being done in their Family of Origin; such as the frequency of eating as a family, using their phones during mealtime or asking their own children to help out in the preparation of food. Transitions across the family

life cycle brought about new situations for family members where they had to re-evaluate their own beliefs and values in order to adjust to new challenges and scenarios.

### 5.3.4 The Co-construction of Interactions and Conflict

Children are not passive recipients to their social environment (Grieshaber, 2015). Family interactions during family mealtime demonstrate how conflict and resistance between parents and children is interrelated, each influencing how family interactions are regulated.

One of the prominent challenges that led to arguments in all families interviewed was when children refused to eat food prepared. This might also be due to the parents' beliefs and concerns related to mealtime and their children's health. Furthermore, when asked about discussions on different topics during mealtimes, all families mentioned that they discuss various subjects and no particular topic is excluded or prohibited from being addressed during these times. However, all families stated that these discussions sometimes create arguments or conflicts. Brumark (2008, as cited in Bova & Arcidiacono, 2015, p.3) observed that arguments with children aged twelve and above tend to last longer and require more exchanges in order for these to be resolved.

Moreover, my interpretation of the results is that whereas there were times when stories surrounding family mealtime were depicted with a sense of closeness, laughter and good memories, others were described with a sense of distance and bad memories. The interpretation of these stories is also a confirmation of the 'both/ and' position that family interactions "can be both playful and serious" (Goodwin, 2007).

### 5.3.5 The Continuum between Togetherness and Separateness

Having interviewed families with adult children, The most significant aspect in their current life cycle stage is the exit and entries of members within the family. This also characterizes the family mealtime experience. Whilst all families interviewed made it a point to eat together on a regular basis, as the children grew older, things started to shift and it was more difficult for the family to meet and eat together. This is where once again the family had to adapt and new traditions and rituals were created to adapt to this change.

Families also mentioned how nowadays, family mealtime also includes the children's partners. Having partners being present during mealtimes changed both the interactions as well as preparation for mealtimes. For example, Michael and Anthony explained how mealtime has now become more formal and Diane stated that if there is something that instigates an argument, they avoid discussing it during mealtime. Furthermore, as McGoldrick (1989, p.19) mentions, parents must not only deal with the changes occurring with their children but also take a different role with their own parents who become more dependent on them. This was also indicated in the interviewee's responses when describing both changes in traditions as well as the impact of external influences on family mealtime.

## 5.4 Changing Meaning of Mealtime

From the interviews I held with the families, I learned that the families views and meaning making of mealtime changed over the years. When the children where younger, meals were viewed as a more practical event that occurred and which sometimes also created some tension. As the children grew older and as the tension between other commitments and time spent with family during meals grew, the more parents and children seem to have valued this time and perceived it as contributing to both individual and family wellbeing.

The family members who were responsible for the preparation of food expressed in various ways how this chore was viewed as a way of taking care of their families with Rosette specifically describing the preparation of food as an act of love towards her family “qisu l-imhabba tieghi lejhom ux”. All Adult family members nowadays look upon family mealtime as a bonding opportunity, one which they miss when this does not occur.

### 5.5 Co-constructing Family Memories

While describing their co-constructed experiences in relation to family mealtime, all families interviewed recounted a few stories and reminisced memories of when they ate together as a family.

What strongly emerged in my research is the family’s sharing of their intertwined experiences and a sense of connection that prevailed as they were recounting specific memories related to family mealtimes. (Jones & Ackerman, 2018) stipulate that sharing family stories is a fundamental aspect of how families build a sense of connection. They continue to mention that

identities and one's sense of belonging as well as the ways one relates to others are influenced by their memories of their lived experience. Furthermore, family stories carry the collective narratives of family memories contributing to the creation of a shared identity and connection across multiple generations (Jones & Ackerman, 2018).

### 5.6 Therapeutic Implications

Kumpfer, (2013) postulates that disruptive family environments that are frequently characterized by family conflict, disorganization, or disrupted family rituals including inconsistent meals together and bedtime rituals, can proliferate a sense of anxiety and stress in children. Furthermore, As mentioned earlier, because of economic pressures, parents are working more and spending less time parenting. All families interviewed yearned for more time to be spent with their family and wished to be more present for family mealtime. Research has shown that families that maintain certain rituals such as mealtimes can help mediate the stress and chaos other factors can bring about (Kumpfer, 2013).

Given this evidence, the need for family strengthening interventions that encourage parents to be more involved with their children are required. The impact of time spent together as a family is a key issue for policymakers since this has a great impact on families and society in general.

Furthermore, stories that families create about their mealtime practices can provide an opportunity to view how the family works and interacts together. Being interviewed as a family,

the construction of a joint account enabled a view on family dynamics and how individual members interacted and responded to one another.

In one particular study, structural family therapy was found to help assist the functionality of family rituals (Pio & Ankwasiize, 2016). Working on family interactions and focusing on the family's success, helped families to further participate in family routines and rituals.

# Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The main aim of this study was to explore the co-constructed experience of family mealtime across the family life cycle. This study shows that family mealtime is an important contributor to the respective family members' identity formation and connection and that the families need to adapt to external influences in order to continue to find time to eat together even by adopting new rituals. Challenges related to mealtime occur at different stages of the family life cycle ranging from ensuring that children eat their food to trying to find time to eat together. A sense of resilience and eagerness to sustain family mealtime prevailed the families' narratives.

## 6.1 Research Limitations

The main factor that needs to be underscored is that due to the small sample and the fact that the study was conducted with Maltese families only, the intention is not to generalize data, however this study might lead towards an interest in quantitative research. Furthermore, this study does not include various forms of families that exist within society nowadays, including families with one parent, families with both female or male parents and other types of families.

Since the interviews were conducted with the whole family, there was the risk that the respective family members were more attentive to describe their personal reality as a way of protecting the other family members. To mitigate risks, I reassured participants of confidentiality and also did my best to ensure that each participant was given enough time to explain their own experience so that every participant would have the opportunity to narrate their story.

Another limitation of conducting interviews for occurrences that happened in the past is that stories told of the past are influenced by the family's current context, beliefs etc. Speaking about family mealtimes retrospectively does not necessarily determine the individual's exact experience at that time but only portrays their current ideas of what happened.

The importance of self-reflexivity in this process was crucial to ensure that my personal biases do not interfere with the researcher's re-narration of the family's story since I am affected by my own culture and personal experiences of mealtime. Given that I have lived through family mealtimes and am the same stage of the children who are no longer living at their parents' house, I had to allow myself to be completely guided through each interview by the participants. Relating a lot to the stories told could have sometimes stopped me from asking certain questions or probing further. Furthermore, my own beliefs and assumptions have also influenced my interpretation of the findings.

### 6.2 Directions for Future Research

As mentioned earlier, future local studies using both quantitative and mixed methods methodologies can provide more insights on family mealtime in the local context. I suggest future studies to also focus more on the meaning of mealtime for Maltese families. Future research may also focus on exploring the experiences of mealtimes in different types of families. Furthermore, for this research I did not include participants with one or both parents who are foreigners. Given the unique qualities that race and ethnicity give to the population as a result of their histories and

experiences (Becvar, 2013), it would be interesting if research is conducted with one of the parents who is a foreigner within the Maltese context.

Moreover, given the literature available that illustrates the importance of family routines and rituals, local research on how family rituals are being integrated within family therapy and how they can be further integrated can also enhance practices and interventions that can in turn support families.

### 6.3 Clinical Implications

In light of the above, findings from this research can also support systemic psychotherapists in their work with families. Asking about mealtime interactions can provide an opportunity for enactment which can in turn provide valuable insights into the family dynamics, communication patterns, and role distribution within the family. Therapists can use mealtime discussions to better understand family relationships and identify potential areas of conflict or dysfunction. Findings show that mealtime provides an opportunity for families to get together. Family mealtime can serve as a natural setting for promoting open communication among family members.

Therapists can encourage the facilitation of discussions about feelings, concerns, and perspectives to strengthen family bonds. Furthermore, as observed during the interviews held, encouraging the preservation of meaningful family rituals can foster a sense of identity and belonging within the family. Lastly, I think that the findings of this research are a clear demonstration of the families' ability to adapt to the challenges that are presented. This served as

a reminder for myself as a budding therapist that focusing on the families' resources and ability to be resilient can also help instill a sense of hope in families.

### 6.4 A Professional and Personal Endeavour.

The findings of this research seem to highlight the numerous changes and challenges that families face during various transitions in the family life cycle and how these in turn influence the family members' co-constructed experience of family mealtime. My appreciation of the families' resilience might also reflect my personal hopes and wish for families to find time together and connect. This might also reflect my personal journey with my own family and my personal wish of finding more time to be with my loved ones especially given the current lifestyle of juggling time to balance working, studying, being a girlfriend as well as a daughter and sister.

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# APPENDIX

## Appendix 1 - Table 1: The Family Life Cycle: An Overview

| **Family Life Cycle Phase** | **Emotional Process of Transition: Key Prerequisite Attitudes** | **2nd Order Tasks/Changes of the system to Proceed Developmentally** |
|---|---|---|
| **Emerging Young Adults** | Accepting emotional and financial responsibility for self | a. Differentiation of self in relation to family of origin<br>b. Development of intimate peer relationships<br>c. Establishment of self in respect to work and financial independence<br>d. Establishment of self in community and larger society<br>e. Establishment of one's worldview, spirituality, religion and relationship to nature<br>f. Parents shifting to consultative role in young adult's relationships |
| **Couple Formation: The Joining of Families** | Commitment to new expanded system | a. Formation of couple system<br>b. Expansion of family boundaries to include new partner and extended family<br>c. Realignment of relationships among couple, parents & siblings, extended family, friends, and larger community |
| **Families with Young Children** | Accepting new members into the system | a. Adjustment of couple system to make space for children<br>b. Collaboration in child-rearing, financial and housekeeping tasks<br>c. Realignment of relationships with extended family to include parenting and grand-parenting roles<br>d. Realignment of relationships with community and larger social system to include new family structure and relationships |
| **Families with Adolescents** | Increasing flexibility of family boundaries to permit children's independence and grandparents' frailties | a. Shift of parent–child relationships to permit adolescent to have more independent activities and relationships and to move more flexibly into and out of system<br>b. Families helping emerging adolescents negotiate relationships with community<br>c.Refocus on midlife couple and career issues<br>d. Begin shift toward caring for older generation |
| **Launching Children and Moving On at** | Accepting a multitude of exits from and entries into the system | a. Renegotiation of couple system as a dyad<br>b. Development of adult-to-adult relationships between parents and grown children |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Midlife** | | c. Realignment of relationships to include in-laws and grandchildren<br>d. Realignment of relationships with community to include new constellation of family relationships<br>e. Exploration of new interests/career, given the freedom from child care responsibilities<br>f. Dealing with health needs, disabilities, and death of parents (grandparents) |
| **Families in Late Middle Age** | Accepting the shifting generational | a. Maintenance of own and/or couple and social functioning and interests in face of physiological decline: exploration of new familial and social role options<br>b. Supporting more central role of middle generations<br>c. Making room in the system for the wisdom and experience of the elders<br>e. Supporting older generation without over-functioning for them |
| **Families Nearing the End of Life** | Accepting the realities of family member limitations and death and the completion of one cycle of life | a. Dealing with loss of spouse, siblings, and other peers<br>b. Making preparations for death and legacy<br>c. Managing reversed roles in caretaking between middle and older generations<br>d. Realignment of relationships with larger community and social system to acknowledge changing life cycle relationship |

*Source: Adapted from* Carter and McGoldrick (1988).

**Appendix 2 - Letter of Invitation**

**Dear Sir/Madam**

I, Katia Cortis, a student at the Institute of Family Therapy - Malta, will be conducting a research study in part fulfillment of the Masters in Systemic Psychotherapy within the Institute of Family Therapy (IFT) Malta under the supervision of Dr. Charles Azzopardi.

The aim of this study is to obtain families' narratives on the co-constructed mealtime experience across the Family Life Cycle. The data needed for this study shall be collected through an interview, which will last for approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Interview sessions will be audio visual-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**

Your participation in this study will support the research objectives to understand further this day to day routine, providing more knowledge to both professionals and society in general.

Participation in this study is not intended to lead to any potential risks or harm. Having said this, should it be the case that during the interview stage any of you, either on an individual level, as a couple, or family 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, a family therapist will be appointed as a means of reference in case where further support will be required following research interviews.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**

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. You will be given false names in the research to prevent you from being identified. Your anonymity will be protected and ensured throughout the whole research.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. If you take part in the study, you have the right to:

• Refuse to answer any particular question, and to withdraw from the study at any time

• Ask any further questions about the study that occur to you during or after your participation

Your participation will be of high significance in this field of study and research findings.

**Contacts and Questions**

If you may have any questions, you contact me personally on cortiskat@gmail.com and/or on mobile number 99901705.

**Appendix 3 - Statement of Consent**

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 from the study at any time without having to give any reason. Furthermore, I can decline to answer any particular questions.

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 our participation in this study as a family and therefore we all agree to participate in the interview as part of the research study procedure.

**Name of Participant:** **Name of Participant:**

_____ _____

**Signature:** **Signature:**

_____ _____

**Name of Participant:** **Name of Participant:**

_____ _____

**Signature:** **Signature:**

_____ _____

**Name of Participant:**

**_____**

**Signature:**

**_____**

**Name of Participant:**

**_____**

**Signature:**

**_____**

**Researcher: _____**

**Signature: _____**

**Date: _____**

**Appendix 4 - Interview Guide**

The main question I want to answer is: what **is the family's co-constructed experience of mealtime across the Family Life Cycle**

**Secondary questions to elicit the family's narrative**

- What were the different patterns and interactions across the different family life cycle stages:
- How did the meaning of family mealtime change across the different family life cycle stages:

Establishment (couple)

Family with Pre-school children

Family with school age children

Family with adolescents

Family with young adult

Family as launching - adult leaving household

**Further probing questions:**

*Decisions and contextual factors*

- Tell me more about how you went about deciding who prepares food for mealtimes?
- How did you go about deciding how frequently your family eats together?
- What factors influenced such decisions?

*Rules related to mealtime*

- Were there any rules related to mealtime?
- Did this change in any way during the different stages? What happened when someone did not abide by such rules?

*Patterns and Interactions*

- How did you relate to other family members?

- What topics were discussed mostly?
- Who sat/ sits next to whom?
- Who talked/talks to whom?
- Who left/leaves the table first?
- Who used to do/does the cleaning after?

*Meaning*

- How important did you consider family mealtime? / How did these change across the FLC?
- How did the meaning of mealtime change across the family's life cycle