Expectations of Marriage
Before & After Marriage
Among Maltese Catholic Couples

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores expectations of marriage before marriage, their origin, and their development in the first year of marriage among Maltese Catholic couples marrying in the Church.

Ten couples were purposely selected from a sample of marriage preparation course participants to attend two semi-structured interviews; one before marrying and another one approximately one year into marriage. The first interviews consisted of questions around the origin of expectations of marriage and on expectations of marriage before marriage. The second interviews focused on the development of expectations within the first year of marriage. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to analyse the data.

The various themes that emerged are highly indicative of the shifting constructions about the family and the transitory nature of gender roles in society with current couples finding themselves ensnared between traditional and post-traditional constructions. Expectations before marriage continue to persist into the first year of marriage as do various tensions between partners. While women generally expressed expectations concerning togetherness, connectedness, and increased emotional intimacy, men generally expressed expectations regarding independence and separateness. Women were also generally more inclined to voice expectations of romanticism than their male counterparts. Disappointment of unmet expectations, particularly of the romantic expectations, appeared to start immediately after the wedding as partners feel increasingly responsible.

All the emerging themes are embraced within an over-arching theme of an evolving relationship narrative, involving the co-construction of collaborative dance between individuality and relatedness.
I dedicate this work to my late father and my mother who thought me so much in life and about life.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY
1.1. Introduction

This study is a longitudinal investigation exploring Maltese Catholic couples’ expectations of marriage before marriage and their development in the first year of marriage. Very little research has been carried out in this area and no Maltese study ever explored expectations of marriage and their development. In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the couples’ expectations of marriage Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed. The uniqueness of this study further lies in its longitudinal approach. It analyses expectations of marriage before marriage and their development one year into marriage.

This chapter introduces the area of study and in various stages presents the rationale for its development into a research project.

1.2. Area of Study

Malta is being faced with an increasing number of marital separations (National Statistics Office [NSO], 2005). Concern about the future of the Maltese family is growing as marital relationship patterns and dynamics become increasingly complex and differentiated from the relatively simple traditional models (Abela, 2000). My view is that Maltese couples, whilst marrying with a prescribed, normative and often romanticized set of expectations are faced, to their disillusionment, with a completely different reality which requires “a dramatic change in their definitions of reality and themselves” (Berger & Kellner, 1970, p.58). As Euro-American literature has shown, the shift from the ideal to the real experience is often dramatic (Larson, 1988;
Expectations of marriage becomes, therefore, a tremendously important area to investigate. Partners bring into their marriage a constructed personal world view and history defining interpersonal roles which are not experienced as personal perspectives but as absolute truths. The construction of one’s expectations of marriage is the result of the interaction between the individual and a number of other factors including family of origin, media, society’s beliefs at the time, tradition, and so forth. As partners meet to form a relationship they, consciously or unconsciously, negotiate their expectations and ideals to construct a coherent and unified story. The significant transition from courtship to marriage marks the negotiation of norms for the marriage (Chadiha, Veroff, & Leber, 1998) and the co-creation of a new, often unexpected marital reality (Berger & Kellner, 1970; Wambolt, 1999).

1.3. Aims of the Study

Amidst the complexity of the topic, I have decided to focus on three fundamental questions: What do Maltese couples expect from marriage? How did these expectations originate? And how are they negotiated in the first year of marriage?

One popular view about expectations, held particularly by older generations, is that today’s young Maltese couples are too concerned about material expectations. They are perceived as investing more in their careers than in precious contact time together.
Some also add that couples have unrealistic expectations of marriage and are unprepared to face the *real* challenges of marriage and marital relationships.

Another popular belief is that the younger generations are naïve of the effect media and consumerism have on them. This makes them increasingly vulnerable to assimilate a plethora of unrealistic expectations. This research will hopefully help to provide alternative stories about what current Maltese couples expect of marriage.

In view of the above, the aims of this research are:

1. A better understanding of the expectations young unmarried couples have about marriage.
2. An understanding of how such expectations of marriage evolve during the first year of marriage.
3. Further knowledge about how these expectations originate and what sources inform the partners during their personal development, and become set prescriptions for the marital relationship.
4. An idea about gender differences in expectations of marriage and the way these are negotiated during the first year of marriage.
5. A clearer idea about which expectations are dealt with by the couples during the first year of marriage; that is which expectations are relevant to the first year of marriage.
6. A possibility of comparing the results of this research with foreign literature on related topics and highlight any differences or similarities.
1.4. Rationale for the Study

1.4.1. Introduction

Few decisions have higher stakes than the decision to marry, thus committing oneself to one partner for life. Murray and Holmes (1999) note that in no other context do adults voluntarily tie the satisfaction of their hopes and wishes to the goodwill of another. Expectations of marriage give individuals the sense that they can understand, predict, and control their future marital relationship (Baucom & Epstein, 1990). Various authors contend that couples enter marriage ‘blissfully blinded’ (Moody, 1990) as most expectations are never talked about between the partners and are unconscious (Ruszczyński, 1993; Dicks, 1967; Stark, 2001, Waller, 1938; Laner & Russel, 1995). The following themes indicate the reasons warranting a study of expectations of marriage in Malta at this point in history.

1.4.2 Marriage as a Transitional Challenge

It has been repeatedly acknowledged that the first year of marriage is a formative period for the relationship (Huston et al. 2001; Glenn, 1998; Goode, 1993; Gottman, 1994; Around & Pauker, 1987) in which couples face specific challenges (Carter & McGoldrick, 1980; Duvall & Miller, 1985) that are hypothesized to be crucial for their future marital success (Duvall, 1971; Fournier & Olson, 1986; Markman, Floyd, Stanley & Storaasli, 1988). Such challenges involve both individual and relational adjustment processes.
According to Berger and Kellner (1970) one central task of early marriage is to engage in a transformative narrative that redefines the realities of the partners’ individual histories through the co-creation of a new relational narrative. This multi-level process operates at the individual, couple, and contextual levels. Bruner (1990) contended that narratives represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of the world around them. The extent to which partners speak about their expectations, therefore, may be seen as a reflection of the couple’s narrative of their future together (Orbuch, Veroff & Holmberg, 1993). Expectations of marriage have also been described as the formation of a cognitive map, or schema, based on previous experiences and other sources of information (Laner & Russell, 1995).

1.4.3 Concern About Marital Stability and Increasing Separation and Annulment

That separation and divorce rates and expectations of marriage are linked has been shown by several researches. Larson (1988) as did others (Sabatelli, 1988; Glenn, 1991) linked the high divorce rates in the United States to marital dissatisfaction due to unrealistic expectations. On similar lines, Popenoe (1991) writes that as “… expectations for marriage grow ever higher, dashed expectations for personal fulfillment fuel our society’s high divorce rate” (p. 52). In the same vein, Baucom and Epstein (1990) contend that expectations are one of the five cognitive phenomena which, when distorted, can contribute to marital distress.

Marital separation in Malta, while still far from the Anglo-American reality, is on the increase. During the year 2003, 588 separation cases were agreed upon by the couples
consensually. Another 472 cases were still being settled by the civil courts (www.justice.gov.mt). Clear data for preceding years are not available and comparisons cannot be made (The Times, 2003c). Annulment requests made to the Church in the same year amounted to 141 with 41 cases being granted. Another 133 cases pending from previous years have also been granted, increasing the number of annulments dispensed during 2003 to 174. During 1990, only 52 requests for annulment were made of which 47 were sentenced in the same year. 17 were granted and 30 negated (L-Orizzont, 2004).

Concern about increasing marital breakdown in Malta has now spread among the scholarly (Abela, 1999), the religious (Archdiocese of Malta, 2000; Archdiocese of Malta, 2001; Bishops of Malta & Gozo, 2003), and in the media:

The astonishing rise in marriage separations, co-habitations, premarital sex and promiscuity, with an alarming rise in the number of teenage pregnancies, is nothing if not a reflection of the growing secularisation of the erstwhile Catholic Maltese amongst whom, for example, adultery is no longer considered a grievous sin, and cohabiting couples who have abandoned their legitimate spouses and children, are not only totally accepted nowadays, but even flaunt their newfound status (The Sunday Times, 2004a).
1.4.4. Increasing Family Configuration Variety

While the Maltese seem to retain the traditional family as their ideal, Maltese families are becoming increasingly differentiated from one another (Abela, 1999). About 3% of Maltese married men and women have a stable relationship with a partner other than their spouse. The rate of those having a stable relationship with a partner outside marriage increases to about 22% among the separated (Abela, 2000). 9% of adult men and 6% of adult women cohabit with a partner in spite of the unrecognised status (Abela, 2000). In the absence of official statistics, it seems reasonable to assume that the number of reconstituted families is rising. While in the mid 1980s the number of children born out of wedlock was minimal, during 2002, 14.6% of all recorded births were ‘illegitimate’ (NSO, 2003), a rate that is higher than some other European countries, for example Italy which stands at 10%. This corresponds with the increasing number of single parents, as well as with the increasing rate in teenage pregnancy.

The increasing complexity of family constellations and increased secularisation inevitably lead to variable expectations of long-term relationships in general. Making one’s marriage a Catholic sacrament becomes one of various options. Approximately one fourth of the 2140 marriages in Malta in 2002 were contracted civilly; that is 544 civil marriages against the 1596 couples who married in the Catholic Church (Archdiocese of Malta, 2003). In 2003 out of the 1860 marriages, 494 were contracted civilly (L-Orizzont, 2004). These changes tally with many Western European countries that are facing an unprecedented rise in unmarried cohabitation (Kiernan, 2001).
1.4.5. Declining Traditional View About Marriage and the Family

The idea of a lifelong marital bond is apparently fading, as less and less Maltese are ready to bear, ‘until death do us part’ with a partner who is violent, unfaithful, an alcoholic, or an unsatisfactory sexual partner, for example. In 1984, 34% of the Maltese conceived marriage as a lifelong endeavour ‘no matter what’. This percentage went down to almost 0% in 1999 (Abela, 2000).

In an ongoing comparative research on European values, Abela (2000) found Maltese respondents to attribute increasing importance to the interpersonal bond of marital relationships. Respondents found it important to spend time together (87%), to talk of their common interests (82%) and interpersonal problems (95%), to show understanding and tolerance (94%), respect and appreciation (98%), to enjoy happy sexual relations (81%) and to be faithful to each other (97%). Popenoe (1991) noted that the functions of marriage have changed from the traditional social obligation designed to provide for economic security and procreation, to being primarily a path to self-fulfillment.

One question arises on the extent to which today’s Maltese families balance out between the traditional functions of the family (procreation, care and education) and ‘modern’ functions (Sirovatka & Mares, 2002), including the career success of both partners, and the increasing material standard of living. My hypothesis is that the tension between traditional and modern functions is being resolved idiosyncratically
and privately between the partners. As Abela (2000) points out “people increasingly make up their own rules for living together” (p.57).

1.4.6. Changing Marital Role Expectations

Changing marital gender roles have been detected at various levels. Tabone (1995) noted a shift from the traditional belief that a woman’s place is in the home. This is supported by the increasing number of gainfully employed women (Abela, 1999; Camilleri, 1997). Women with higher levels of education are more likely to pursue a career even when their children are young (Abela, 1997). Tabone (1994) adds that if one had to add the official number of part-time employed women the number would increase considerably, let alone if one had to add up those unofficially employed.

These changing trends, while focusing predominantly on women’s role in society, are forcing a redefinition of gender-stereotyped roles. Research abroad has also predominantly focused on women’s changing role in particular (Botkin, et al. 2000). Maltese men still perceive themselves as the main breadwinners and women still consider themselves primarily responsible for home-making and childcare. However, the tendency towards shared home-making, childcare, and authority (power) in Malta is increasing (Tabone, 1987; Abela, 2000). This appears to be in line with other European countries like Italy (Andolfi, 2001) and Czeck Republic (Rasticova & Haskova, 2002) and the USA (Botkin, et al. 2000). Like in most European countries, in Malta more men than women tend to hold traditional views on gender (Abela, 2000). Unlike with women, education does not seem to affect men’s perception of gender values.
Among the changing roles are changing marriage role expectations, particularly in the areas of home-making, social participation, and employment (Abela, 2000; Botkin, et al., 2000). In view of the rapid changes the Maltese are undergoing, particularly with Malta’s entry into the European Union, this research will attempt to capture a snapshot of how the current situation is reflected in Maltese couples’ expectations of marriage.

1.4.7. Scant Research on the Subject

Clulow and Mattinson (1989) state that “the myths we entertain about marriage, personally and collectively, constitute the largest single explanation for the high incidence of marital stress and breakdown which have been evident in recent years” (pp. 11-12). This view is also shared by Segrin and Nabi (2002) who state that “one of the more powerful contributing factors to marital distress appears to be the unrealistic expectations that accompany, if not propel, people into marriage” (p. 247) (italics mine). However, while a consensus exists among various professionals about the role expectations of marriage play in marital success, empirical research on the subject is scant and such statements are often the fruit of clinical experience. The importance of studying expectations of marriage, therefore, is one involving their role in relationship formation, maintenance, and breakdown.

In view of the lacking empirical data, this research will attempt to offer a baseline for the understanding of expectations of marriage in Malta, their origin, and their evolution in the first year of marriage.
CHAPTER 2
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS AND
LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I will first attempt a definition of expectations of marriage. I will then review existing literature on the topic and present the conceptual frameworks for this research. Most of the literature on expectations of marriage comes from psychoanalytic writings, attachment theory, and systemic theory and is conceptual in nature.

2.2. Defining Expectations of Marriage

Various researches I referred to in doing this study abstained from defining expectations of marriage (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; Laner & Russell, 1995; Slosarz, 2002, Bonds-Raacke, et al., 2001; Jones & Nelson, 1996, Heim & Heim, 2000; Arond & Pauker, 1987). Several other terms were used interchangeably with expectations of marriage including marital expectations, ideal standards and marital ideals (Fletcher & Simpson, 2001; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Vangelisti & Alexander, 2002) thus expanding ‘expectations of marriage’ into an even more fluid notion.

My choice of the term expectations of marriage was based on the specific meaning it denotes. The term ‘ideals’ seems inappropriate as it denotes standards of unrealistic perfection to be reached. Therefore, ideals often refer to principles other than the general expectations which are the focus of this work.

The term ‘marital’ may also be subject to misunderstandings. The field of systemic family therapy has long attributed the term ‘marital’ with a specific aspect of meaning, namely the marital relationship as opposed to the parental relationship (Minuchin,
This term is therefore limited in its representation of only one level of relationship expectations.

Knobloch (2000), in her research entitled *Marital Ideals of Engaged Couples* made an attempt at defining a marital ideal as “a person’s conceptualization of the perfect marriage” (p.1). Her definition is deprived of the richness separate researchers attribute to expectations of marriage. Most authors seem to conceptualize expectations of marriage as cognitive, rational processes (Sharp & Ganong, 2000; Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; Solomon, 1988; Berger & Kellner, 1970).

Sharp’s and Ganong’s (2000) attempt captures a richer depth: “Unrealistic relationship beliefs are predispositions that bias a person toward interpreting intimate relationship events in an irrational manner” (p.71). This may be the first step towards acknowledging the unconscious and emotional processes influencing the formation and progression of expectations of marriage described by other authors (Dicks, 1967; Clulow, 1993; Arond & Pauker, 1987; Ruszczynski, 1995; Eichenbaum & Orbach, 1982).

My understanding is that expectations of marriage originate and develop within a developmental context of changing relational experiences starting in childhood through the observation of and relating with primary carers. Expectations of marriage may therefore be composed of both conscious and unconscious components, as well as both rational and emotional components.
For the purpose of this study it seems reasonable to define expectations of marriage as the conscious and unconscious sentiments, concepts, ideals, fantasies, desires, hopes and dreams one has about one’s future marriage, its structural and functional spheres, as well as one’s relationship with the outside world based on one’s experiences, contexts, and constitution.

### 2.3 Conceptual Frameworks

#### 2.3.1. Psychoanalytic Theory

The psychoanalytic relevance for this research lies in its two primary postulates: one, that interactive childhood experiences are formative of one’s beliefs about the self, others, and the world and two, that such experiences are stored in one’s unconscious and are protected by defence mechanisms (Brenner, 1974; Freud, 1966; Rusczcynski, 1995). Seen from an expectations of marriage perspective, these two postulates link the origin of expectations with their progression in courtship and marriage.

Psychoanalytically, the origins of expectations of marriage are seen as the unconscious internalization of one’s interactions within one’s primary intimate relationships (Clulow & Mattinson, 1989). Their origin is traceable in one’s ‘forgotten history’ of childhood experiences (Rusczcynski, 1992), which are unconsciously replayed in one’s current marital relationship (Dicks, 1967; Clulow, 2001). Orbach (1995) speaks of unconscious expectations of marriage as a reservoir of experiences resulting from what one has observed of the parental marriage and from one’s experienced intimacy in the first love relationship with mother.
Two other basic psychoanalytic concepts proposed by Freud, libido and mortido can also be useful in the study of marital relationships. Such polarization between idealization and denigration of the marital partner seems to be rooted in one’s very first experiences of intimacy with one’s parents (Ruszcynski, 1995). Ruszcynski (1995) considers the management of the love-hate tension as determinant to the success or failure of intimate relationships. He (Ruszcynski, 1992; 1995; Ruszczynski & Fisher, 1995) proposed that a marital dance is created between partners, patterned upon a mutual transferential dynamic and further elaborates on Klein’s (1946) concept of projective identification where partners unconsciously split off internal objects from the self and defensively project them into the partner who becomes equated with them.

While Freud hardly distinguished the psychology of women from that of men (Hall, 1979), later psychoanalytic developments emphasized gender-based distinctions. Infantile experiences were also shown by feminist psychoanalysts to be gender-based. Eichenbaum and Orbach (1982) have meticulously elaborated on women’s idiosyncratic childhood experiences of their relationship with their parents and how these differ from their male counterparts. As a result, fundamental gender-based differences in expectations of marriage may exist (Orbach, 1995).

Orbach (1995) suggests that gendered expectations include the culturally defined meanings surrounding the concept of dependency. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis becomes more systemic as it recognizes the importance of culture contextualizing relationships. Dicks’ (1967) view of relationships and expectations incorporates socio-
cultural factors among the three essential elements for the understanding of relationships:

1. Each partner as a separate individual.

2. Socio-cultural factors bearing on the couple both from their separate pasts and in their contemporary connections. (Dicks also speaks of culturally prescribed expectations and acknowledges their conscious and unconscious assimilation by individuals).

3. The identification of unconscious forces flowing between the partners, forming bonds of a positive and negative kind (love-hate involvement).

Psychoanalysis highlights the importance of fantasies in the psychosocial existence of individuals with Freud valuing such activity as the second *via regis* to the unconscious. Anna Freud (1966), continuing in her father’s footsteps, described fantasies as one of the methods adopted by the ego to avoid displeasure and hold on to one’s pleasurable resources. Freud also pointed out that whilst starting much earlier in life, during puberty fantasies have a crucial role in the achievement of independence (Segal, 1992). This in part justifies my inclusion of fantasies in this research, as fantasies are an important feature in the development of the desire to marry.

Taking the Oedipus complex into consideration, Bowen (1978) regarded the triad, rather than the dyad, as the building block of relationships. While his notion of triangulation refers to the re-routing of problems through third parties, more complex ideas about the triadic nature of relationships are emerging, addressing the various effects of relationships on relationships (Byng-Hall, 1999; Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). The ‘triangular dynamic’ (Clulow, 2001) becomes even more central with the arrival
of children as the number of possible relationships and the roles played by the partners increase (Clulow, 2001; Byng-Hall, 1999; Emde, 1991).

The psychoanalytic framework is therefore useful to this research in that it acknowledges the individual, the relationship and the ever changing contexts over time.

### 2.3.2. Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was originally developed to understand proximity-seeking behaviour in children (Bowlby, 1969). Bowlby (1969) himself admitted that attachment plays an essential role ‘from the cradle to the grave’. Attachment theory postulates that early attachment experiences form the prototype for later attachments via *internal working models* of self and others. Internal working models have been described as “cognitive/affective schemas, or representations, of the self in relation to close relationship patterns” (Bartholomew & Shaver, 1998. p.25) and “include expectations about the individual’s own worth vis-à-vis the attachment figures and about the availability and responsivity of that attachment figure” (Klonen & John, 1998. p.115).

Attachment theory lies on four central hypotheses (Rholes, Simpson, & Stevens, 1998). First, attachment orientations form during childhood largely in response to interactions with primary attachment figures. Second, attachment orientations remain relatively stable at least from late childhood and early adolescence into adulthood. Third, early attachment experiences affect relationships into adulthood, and fourth,
parents’ attachment orientations influence the nature of their children’s attachment to them.

While Bowlby’s pioneering work focused on attachment between children and caregivers, clinicians at the Tavistock Marital Studies Institute started formulating and exploring ideas about the relevance of attachment to adult relationships (Clulow, 2001). Simultaneously, others (Weiss, 1982, Hazan & Shaver, 1987, Ainsworth, 1989) were pointing to the intimate couple as a prime example of adult attachment. In spite of its limitations, Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) pioneering work attempted to explain adult romantic relationships from the perspective of attachment theory. They integrated earlier theories of love with the attachment perspective. A consensus now exists that the attachment styles portrayed in infant-carer literature are similarly manifested in romantic relationships (Feeney, 1998).

Various attachment theory notions appear relevant to my research. Generally, however, the focus is on the extent to which attachment styles are transmitted from parents to offspring (Cowan & Cowan, 2001), the extent to which expectations of marriage are expressed through the partners’ attachment needs and working models, and how these are expressed and negotiated within the developing relationship in the first year of marriage.

Another relevant concept is distance regulation (Byng-Hall, 1999; Clulow, 2001) which refers to the balance between being ‘too-close and too-far’ (Byng-Hall, 1999) partners have to establish to satisfy their respective attachment needs. Pre-marital
expectations in this regard and how the partners negotiate distance during their first year of marriage is a valuable developmental milestone to observe.

The relevance of attachment theory for this research lies in its focus on expectations related to relationship nurturance. While it’s deterministic nature accentuates the importance of focusing on the origins of expectations, attachment theory’s recent trend in associating childhood attachment styles with adult romantic relationships and clinical practice (Johnson, 2004) validates my focus on expectations development and re-negotiation in the newly formed marital relationships.

One major limitation of attachment theory to my research is its disregard for the contextual forces within which attachment takes place. Its focus being on the relationship between the partners’ dynamic patterns (Johnson, 2004) attachment theory undermines the power other contextual forces exert on relationships.

2.3.3. The Family Life Cycle Theory

The family life cycle has its origins in the work of Duvall and Miller (1985). Although several practitioners, including Haley, Milton Erickson, and Miinuchin, have referred to it much before that, it was the work of McGoldrick and Carter (1982) which officialised it within the systemic framework. They divided family development into six stages, starting with the unattached young adult and progressing into the final stage of the family in later life.

Their view is that the transition from one stage to another requires the successful negotiation of the expansion, contraction, and realignment of relationships “to support
entry, exit, and development of family members in a functional way” (Barker, 1998, p. 17). A further emphasis is put on the notion of time, whereby the family is seen as a system moving and unfolding through time.

While McGoldrick and Carter (1982) propose a universal model of family development, what makes this concept applicable to my research is that they allow for the many possible variations across and within cultures. Particularly relevant are the first three stages of the family life cycle, namely: unattached young adults, joining of families through marriage, and family with young children. Their usefulness lies in my interest around the transition from courtship to married life and the expectations with which the couples enter marriage. Also relevant to my research is Barnhill and Longo’s (1978) definition of the nine transition points, which have to be negotiated as the family moves from one stage into the next, in particular, the very first transition point dealing with the commitment of the couple to each other.

**2.3.4. Systemic Theory**

*Systemic theory* is a valuable conceptual framework for this research. In spite of the valid ample developments it underwent, the relevance of first order systems theory to my research lies in its capacity to focus on both the relationships and the individuals forming them and its consideration of circular causality. The importance of first order systems theory attributes to boundaries (Minuchin, 1974) and the related concept of stability/change (Bateson, 1979) makes it indispensable for this research whose focus is on developing marital relationships as they shift from singlehood to couplehood and from their family of origin into their family of procreation. At an individual level both
partners introduce their own expectations into the system (couple relationship) and get feedback from the partner that helps them negotiate their expectations to the new system. At a dyadic level, the couple interacts with the wider systems as it receives feedback that helps it adjust to the developing social context within which the relationship is embedded.

*Transgenerational theories* are also relevant to this research. Transgenerational theories highlight the historical context and locate the individual and family of procreation within a multi-generational context. This notion is particularly relevant in this research as it addresses questions about origins of expectations of marriage. Various are the other relevant concepts that can be borrowed from transgenerational theories. These include Bowen’s (1976) *undifferentiated ego mass* which describes family members’ inability to differentiate themselves from their families of origin. Such differentiation is paramount for the successful functioning of individuals as members of their newly-created families. My hypothesis is that differentiation from one’s family of origin ego mass is a process and will feature through the participating couples’ expectations around parents and in-laws, as well as through expectations around boundary making in general. Differentiation from family of origin is a cultural sensitive topic and it is interesting how the Maltese fare in this. In spite of the geographical closeness and the relatively traditional standards of the Maltese family life, previous local research failed to detect significant difficulties in this area of marital development and adjustment (Cachia, 1996). This can be due, however, to the invisibility of loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark’s, 1984). Bowen’s notion of differentiation has received strong criticism particularly by empiricists like Gottman (1999) who argues that unless empirically validated, concepts like differentiation
remain a myth. However, a recent review of research on differentiation exploring the
different research attempts at deconstructing and validating differentiation showed
mixed outcomes (Miller, Anderson & Keala, 2004)

John Byng-Hall’s notion of family scripts and family myths (Byng-Hall, 1985, 1988)
are particularly relevant here especially towards an understanding of how partners
negotiate their personal scripts, derived from their respective families of origin, into
one coherent script. The notions of corrective and replicative scripts (Byng-Hall,
1985) are similarly important notions that are expected to feature prominently in the
development of new marriages.

From its modernist, structural and strategic origins, systemic theory evolved to
embrace various second and third order perspectives (Vetere & Dallos, 2003; Flaskas,
2002). The systemic model has been recently redefined in terms of its capacity to
include individual, relational, and contextual aspects and their relationship over time
(Vetere & Dallos, 2003).

One important landmark in the shift from first to second order was the inclusion of the
therapist in the ‘observing’ system (Tomm, 1988) which superseded the modernist
view about power difference between the observer and the observed. Since then,
systemic theory and therapy were increasingly influenced by social constructionism
and post-modernism, an influence characterized by a shift towards a focus on meaning
(Dallos & Urry, 1999). Social constructionism attacked the modernist frame that
focuses on objectivity and embraced the post-modern notions of multiple voices
(Hoffman, 1990) and the interactions between them. Thus realities became social
constructions through language (Anderson & Goolishan, 1988) rather than fixed and independent.

Particularly influential on systemic theory was the work of Kennith Gergen (1990, 1994) whose emphasis on language and relationships as the primary forces for the construction of self and social world gave him prominence in a field whose business is fundamentally selves in relationship. Gergen’s focus on the narrative as the basis of meaning generation gave way for the third order wave in systemic ideas.

The narrative ideas of storying and re-storying are particularly helpful for this research. First, because this work is embedded in language and relationships both in its content and its process, and second because of the enlargement of the contextual field allowed by the narrative ‘lens’ which permits me to consider myself as part of the system co-authoring stories about expectations of marriage, their origins, and their evolution in the first year of marriage.

White’s (1990) contention of the narrative, rooted as it is in Foucault’s work and his idea of the relationship between power and knowledge, is somewhat different from Gergen’s and Anderson’s and Gollishan’s position, whose idea of the narrative is rooted in social constructionism. The notion of dominant discourses becomes highly relevant to my research, in terms of both the methodology and personal style of conducting the interviews, and the narratives generated within them. A point needs mentioning here: this is a research work and as such will be mostly concerned with the understanding of narratives that participants bring along and generate during the
interviews. Major deconstruction work comes later as, I reflect back on the interviews and reconstruct new narratives about the narratives through my interpretation.

Campbell and Groenbaek’s (2006) recent work on *positioning theory* and *semantic polarities* is a valuable contribution to a more discourse-based systemic theory. Particularly useful is the idea of relationship as a construction whose meaning is the result of the interplay between opposing positions mediated through discursive relationships. Positions involve an ever-evolving systemic dance between *autopoiesis* and *alterpoiesis* which continuously renegotiate the clusters of rights, duties, and obligations associated with each position. The psychological reality of positions emerges as expectations, beliefs, and presuppositions.

Whether such diversity within the systemic framework is a sign of versatility or a sign of corrupting the traditional structural / strategic stance is debatable. In recent years practitioners have looked at integrative ways of working. Dallos proposed integrating personal construct therapy and systemic therapy (Dallos, 1997). John Byng-Hall suggested various links between systemic therapy and attachment theory (1999). Dare (1979, 1997) and Wachtel and Wachtel (1986) have looked at links between psychoanalysis and systemic psychotherapy. Social constructionism and post-modernism have stirred disagreements within the field, particularly regarding their location in the map of systemic theory and practice (Flaskas, 2002; Minuchin, 1991; Speed, 1991). The major critique involved the notion of reality and realness, and its existence irrespective of our consciousness of it. Vetere and Dallos (2003) seem to propose systems theory’s potential to act as a metatheory thus integrating the various theoretical frameworks it is linked with.
The post-modernist and social constructionist notions’ usefulness for this research lie in their power to respect the phenomenological nature of this research and therefore respecting the participants’ voices as unique and equally valid stories. In this sense, the flavour remains collaborative, empathic, reflective, and respectful towards the research participants (Anderson, 1997). Simultaneously, the social constructionist/post-modernist stance may be dangerous due to its negation of objective reality and realness, and the commonalities among the different emergent stories as themes which are the realities the participants live (Speed, 1991; Flaskas, 2002).

*Feminist theory* is another paradigm influencing systemic theory. The different facets of feminism are unified by the fundamental idea that men and women are equally valuable (Fox & Murry, 2000). Feminism is therefore a critical theory with gender as its basis, espousing equality against the male dictated modernism. Feminism generally fits systemic theory perfectly well, particularly second and third order theories promoting reflexivity and readiness towards self-criticism, co-authoring of ‘reality’ and the notion of voice multiplicity, and its focus on the process and patterns (Fox & Murry, 2000). Feminism favours social constructivism and views gender as a social and cultural construct (Ferree, 1990) and is critical of traditional positivist paradigms that promote ‘othering’ (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 1996). Feminism challenged first order systemic theory and called for a re-examination of the theories and practices informing systemic work (Burck & Speed, 1995).

Couple research beyond the feminist paradigm is simply underprivileged. Feminism has informed this research in many ways. My attempts at highlighting the participants’
experiences; being self-reflexive and considering myself as part of the meaning generation system; my focus on the local and personal experiences of the participating couples; my attempt at focusing on the social processes involved, as well as the effort at considering and respecting gender differences and similarities, all fall within the feminist approach to scholarship (Fox & Murry, 2000). The challenge remains that of interacting with the emerging couple stories in a way that acknowledges my contribution to the co-construction of the narratives.

2.3.5. Conclusion

Speaking about systemic theory and practice has now become an issue of mapping the multiplicity of voices that shapes its chorus. As I try to find my way around the map, I have to remind myself of my own vantage point, which is outside all the theorizing occurring in the UK, USA, and Australia. Simultaneously, I am constantly dipping myself in it, by my constant trips to the UK, which gives me the advantage of the inside/outside position.

The systemic conceptual framework is therefore integrative and embraces various theory and practice frameworks that modified its route along its passage from modernism to post-modernism and beyond (Flaskas, 2002). Its curiosity and flexibility welcomed the challenges, and itself challenged other models towards change by questioning linearity and modernism.
2.4. Research on Expectations of Marriage

2.4.1. Expectations of Marriage and Marital Success

Expectations of marriage play a role in the direction marital relationships take. Models linking premarital relationships to marriage quality and success are various. Three major proposals include the disillusionment model, the enduring dynamics model, and the emergent distress model.

2.4.1.1. Disillusionment Model

Waller’s (1938) early disillusionment model was based on the premise that courtship is a process along which partners construct idealistic stories about each other and their future marriage. “The only authentic thing in the picture is the emotion which one feels toward it” (Waller, 1938, p. 200). Disillusionment ensues as partners are confronted with the territory of marriage and are less concerned with impression management. (Huston, et al., 2001).

Waller’s model continues to persist through the 20th century. Brehm (1992) contends that “people fall in love with their own imagined constructions rather than with the concrete reality of another human being” (p.103). Popenoe (1991) argues that as expectations grow higher, unfulfilled expectations fuel the increasingly high divorce rates. Baucom and Epstein (1990) similarly assert that expectations are often based on faulty data gained from popular media portraying unrealistic expectations. Glenn (1991) also sees Americans’ high expectations of marriage as closely connected to the high marital failure rate. This view is also held by Sabatelli (1988):
The relatively high and idealistic relationship expectations held by individuals before marriage may contribute to the drop in marital satisfaction typically noted after the ‘honeymoon period’ is past, when relationship outcomes begin to fail to measure up to expectations (p.220).

Huston et al. (2001) found that “the likelihood of divorce depended significantly on how much the marriage changed away from the romantic ideal over its first 2 years” (p.248). Sabatelli (1984), a strong adherent to the disillusionment model, developed the *marital comparison level index* (MCLI) which claimed the capacity to measure “the degree to which spouses feel the outcomes derived from their relationship are measuring up to their expectations” (p.660). The comparison level (CL) (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986) is the standard, formed by the “backlog of experiences in and knowledge concerning other relationships based on the observation of appropriate people” (p.307). The CL represents the outcome that partners feel is deserved and realistically obtainable from a relationship. Marital satisfaction exists when the marital relationship experience falls above their CL. Buelhman, Gottman, and Katz (1992) also noted that high, unrealistic expectations can be detrimental to marital success.

While valid in its portrayal of the role of illusive expectations of marriage, the disillusionment model fails to consider the phenomenological complexity of marital relationships. Its linear cause-effect position may hinder the potential for a wider understanding of the role expectations of marriage play in relationship development.

### 2.4.1.2. Emergent Distress Model

A second model is the *emergent distress model*, which like the disillusionment model “presumes that newlyweds begin marriage as affectionate lovers. However, the
Emergent Distress Model suggests that people do not expect to maintain such extraordinary levels of love and affectional expression” (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 238). Decline of positive feelings and romantic attraction are normative and what corrodes relationships are rises in conflict and negativity, rather than the disillusionment proposed by the previous model.

### 2.4.1.3. Enduring Dynamics Model

A third model, the *enduring dynamics model* (Caughlin, Huston & Houts, 2000) presumes that relationship patterns and dynamics are established during courtship and carried over to the marital relationship where they are maintained throughout the course of marriage. Contrary to the disillusionment model, the enduring dynamic model believes that “partners enter relationships with their eyes open to their partner’s and their relationship’s shortcomings” (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 239). “There is evidence that at least some newly married spouses are far from blind to each other’s shortcomings and that many people marry in spite of the apparent weakness of their bond” (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 239).

### 2.4.2. Marital Satisfaction and Expectations

Marital satisfaction was found to be associated with the discrepancy between what people expect and what they actually receive from their marriages (Schaefer & Olson, 1981), with the difference between the ideal other and the perceived actual other (Sternberg & Barnes, 1985), and with the degree of discrepancy in expectations between husbands and wives (Kelly & Burgoon, 1991). However, Kelley and Burgoon
warned that this does not imply that incongruent expectations guarantee dissatisfaction.

Research findings about expectations of marriage are discordant. While some researchers found expectations to be a source of tension, frustration, and dissonance, others have shown how expectations of marriage can solidify spousal commitment and be a driving force in the fulfillment of a relationship’s potential (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; McNulty & Karney, 2004). In line with Insel and Jacobson’s (1975) self-fulfilling prophecy, expectations of marriage are seen as inspiring outcomes consistent to them. Several studies agree that the partners’ expectations of marriage influence their evaluations of the relationships (e.g. Baucom, Epstein, Rankin, & Burnett, 1996; Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Knee, 1998; McNulty & Karney, 2002; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996b; Stanley, Blumberg, & Markman, 1999). When functioning as ‘goal structures’, expectations of marriage appear to be beneficial as they stimulate behaviours and perceptions which confirm expectations (McNulty & Karney, 2004).

While unrealistic expectations may contribute to marital distress they cannot be considered as the cause. One major limitation of the above researches is the combination of a variety of conceptually distinct phenomena into a single explanation, i.e. expectations. Moreover, what constitutes high, low and unrealistic expectations is still unclear and is highly dependent on various contextual factors.
2.4.3. Types of Expectations

Various categories of expectations are presented here in clearly distinguishable categories. This was only done for the purpose of clarity. Phenomenologically, any expectation may belong to different categories simultaneously.

*Prescriptive* expectations refer to what couples believe should happen in a relationship while *predictive* expectations refer to what the partners believe will most likely happen (Kelley & Burgoon, 1991).

*Normative* or prescribed expectations refer to societal norms for marriage. They comprise socially constructed discourses which involve formally and informally expressed expectations about gender roles, love making, communication patterns, power, control and authority, extended family relations, and so forth. *Ascribed* expectations refer to those common expectations resulting from the partners’ negotiations over time. Such expectations may in part account for marital adjustment and stability.

Expectations of marriage can be *conscious* and *unconscious*. As Clulow and Mattinson (1989) illustrate, “often we do not know about our expectations until they are disappointed and realise that something we had hoped for is missing” (p.23). This is further clarified by Orbach (1995) when she writes that:

> we go mad in marriage because our expectations and hopes conflict deeply with our experience. We imagine, dream of, and anticipate a relationship with one set of parameters; we discover that we are enmeshed on one whose parameters are foreign (p.108).
Many expectations people have about their future marriage often remain unarticulated. Unconscious expectations often fail to emerge clearly even in one’s own awareness (Arond & Pauker, 1987).

Sabatelli and Pearce (1986), indirectly acknowledge the role of the unconscious in expectations of marriage. While focusing primarily on the cognitive aspect of expectations, they distinguish realistic expectations from unrealistic expectations with the latter consisting of ideals, dreams and hopes. Cognitive expectations underline individual expectations based on previous life experience (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986). Sabatelli and Pearce refer to the baggage each individual brings along into a new relationship containing “experience and knowledge concerning other relationships based on observation of appropriate people” (p. 307).

The authors above focus on different aspects of expectations of marriage. A deeper analysis of expectations of marriage would possibly reveal a far more complex reality. It seems more likely that expectations of marriage are a combination of conscious and unconscious, prescriptive, predictive and normative, as well as ascribed components. I believe that the degree of awareness of such complexity is in some way related to one’s personal and relational development.

2.4.4. The Origins of Expectations of Marriage

Partners bring into marriage a personal history and a personal view of how things ought to be in their marriage. Such views are not experienced as personal values, beliefs and perspectives, but as the truth and reality (Solomon, 1988). It is widely
acknowledged that these truths, in the form of expectations of marriage, are the result of the person’s interaction with a multitude of contexts. For the purpose of this research, I will focus on the three most relevant contexts influencing the origin and formation of expectations of marriage, namely, the family context, media, and the religion / tradition context. This tallies with Huston’s (2000), and Spreacher and Felmlee’s (1992) plea for researchers to move away from focusing on partners’ personal attributes into considering the ecological context influencing couples’ relationships.

2.4.4.1. Research on the family context and its influence on
expectations of marriage

Undoubtedly, people’s own family life experience is a major influence on their multi-dimensional development. This section is aimed at offering an overview of the existent research highlighting the importance of the family of origin influences on one’s expectations of marriage.

Toben and Joanne Heim (2000) think “that where you come from and your family history lies beneath just about every issue you’ll face in your entire marriage – not just in the first year” (p.17). Adjustment in marital relationships has been associated with the quality of one’s parents’ marital relationship and the quality of attachment to one’s parents and siblings (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Segrin & Nabi, 2002). Learning about marriage starts from one’s home, as parents teach their children what a partnership is like by modeling their martial relationship.
A number of researchers have examined the effect of parental discord and divorce on children’s attitudes toward marriage. Some studies have shown that children of divorced parents have a negative view of marriage (Kelly, 1981; Long, 1987), do worse than those in intact families in several aspects of their development (Dowling & Gorell Barnes, 1999; 2000), and are fearful and anxious about their own future marriage (Schwartberg, 1981; Sorosky, 1977). Children from broken homes, particularly daughters, are less interested in marriage (Booth, Brinkerhoff, & White, 1984) and have low expectations and evaluations of marriage (Long, 1987).

Some research has indicated that it is not parental separation and divorce per se that influence expectations of marriage but family integration (Coleman & Ganong, 1984). Kalter (1987), Grych and Fincham (1990), and Markland and Nelson (1993), carried out research with college students and found that inter-parental hostility and conflict is a prime factor influencing young adults’ expectations of marriage. Children who are exposed to such conflicts seem to form negative impressions of marriage. Paradoxically, Coleman and Ganong (1984), and Jones and Nelson (1996) did not find significantly different attitudes towards marriage between high conflict background and low conflict background people. Muench and Landrum’s (1994) research yielded similar results and suggests that family dynamics play a superior role in expectations of marriage formation. “Therefore, even though some people’s expectations of happiness and success in marriage may have been tainted by prior experience (divorced parents), they still strongly desire having a positive marital and family relationship” (Jones & Nelson, 1996, p.173). These different results are indicative of the necessity for further research clarifying which children are being effected and how vis-à-vis their expectations of marriage.
2.4.4.2. Media and Marriage Education

The media have also been attributed with the power to influence people’s expectations of marriage. However, “no empirical evidence exists to support that claim” (Segrin & Nabi, 2002, p.247). In their seminal research specifically on the topic Segrin and Nabi (2002) examined the relationship between television viewing and expectations about marriage. They found that while overall television viewing is not a good predictor of unrealistic expectations of marriages, “those whose television viewing patterns included a large quantity of romantically themed programming were more likely to hold idealistic views of marriage” (p.260). However, reaching conclusions from one research is bound to be misleading. It is possible that those with idealized and unrealistic expectations of marriage are selectively exposing themselves to romantic genres media content. If this had to be the case, the question around the origin of expectations remains. Segrin and Nabi (2002) agree that although we cannot assume causality, we are confident that the media do play a role in developing and reinforcing beliefs about marriage” (p.261).

Marriage education is widely practiced within the Catholic communities. In Malta the marriage preparation course is a compulsory step for those choosing to marry in the Church. One of the course’s aims is the teaching of a realistic framework of marriage with the hope of reducing unrealistic expectations in various areas of married life. However, the multi-vocal bombardment of ideals from tradition, culture, and media might impede the courses from having the desired effect.
In Canada, Laner and Russel (1995) devised a pre-test – post-test comparative study involving unmarried university students. Contrary to their prediction, the course did not reduce the students’ high expectations about marriage. Sharp and Ganong (2000) used the same methodological approach without using a control group to explore the effects of a courtship and marriage integrative course on unrealistic expectations of marriage in the USA. They claimed that the intervention significantly lowered the students’ unrealistic romantic beliefs, but left other unrealistic relationship beliefs untouched.

Both the above researches, however, used student samples who were interested in taking the course which may reflect a possible self-selection bias. Sharp’s and Gangong’s (2000) sample was also gender imbalanced with only 33 males against 131 female respondents. The type and construction of the course may have also influenced the participants’ responses. While the researchers claimed integrative teaching to be their main approach, students were only exposed to integrative teaching for one week out of a whole semester. The university setting, within which the course was delivered, may not be the ideal one for these types of interventions, as the large classes used may have reduced the effects of integrative teaching.

On a much larger scale, Stanley et al. (2006) carried out a representative survey across four American states and found participation in premarital courses to be associated with higher satisfaction and commitment in marriage, lower levels of conflict, and reduced the chance of divorce. It is suggested that participation in premarital education generally benefits couple relationships over time.
2.4.4.3. Religious and Traditional Influences

Religion sets behavioral parameters within which marital relationships are conducted. While the Maltese no longer conduct their lives on the basis of singular moral discourses, religion still plays a major role in the establishment of ideals (Tabone, 1994). The 1999 European Values Survey (Abela, 2000) reveals that in spite of the reported secularization (Tabone, 1987) the order of value priorities shows that 80% of the Maltese give religion third priority, following the family (first) and work (second). Women generally value religion over work, “whereas men give second importance to work, women give priority to religion” (Abela, 2000. p.45).

Tabone (1994) argues that “notwithstanding traditionalism and institutionalism, the Church still succeeds in instilling a religious imprint in the individual” (p.295). In fact, almost all Maltese are baptized, and attend catechism for about 7 years, they receive their first Holy Communion, receive Confirmation, and generally marry in the Church. Tabone continues that this is “irrespective of whether the person is a believer or not” (p.295). About 75% of all marriages are sacramentalised in church (Archdiocese of Malta, 2003; L-Orizzont, 2004). The fact that tradition, culture, and social life were for centuries imbued with religious activity may at least indicate that hardly any Maltese escapes religious experience.

Nonetheless, aspects of religiosity seem to be increasingly trailing behind other values among the Maltese. One recent study, focusing on religious attitudes and practices among Maltese university students (Tabone, et al. 2003), found that 71% of students approve of premarital sex and 99% see nothing wrong with premarital cohabitation.
Only 24.8% of students claimed that they would never claim for divorce no matter what. Another witness of declining religiosity is the 2006 Sunday Mass Attendance Census (Inguanez, 2006) which revealed an 11% fall in church attendance among the Maltese since 1995.

The Church organizes the marriage preparation course with the hope of intensifying Catholic values among Maltese families. Courting couples preparing for marriage attend the compulsory marriage preparation course as indicated by the Church. The course aims to help couples, in their preparation for the sacrament of marriage, arrive at a better evaluation of their relationship and their commitment to each other, and to a Christian marriage. It consists of eight group sessions addressing eight different topics from a Christian perspective. The courses are organized through one of its voluntary organizations, Cana Movement, which was set up to promote Catholic family life among the Maltese.

2.4.5. Malta’s Current Situation: What do people expect from their marriage?

Malta’s situation is in flux and marital stability, so unquestioned in the past, is now becoming a preoccupation (Archdiocese of Malta, 2000; Archdiocese of Malta, 2001). The Archbishop of Malta takes every opportunity to point out the worrying situation (The Times, 2003b). Cultural discourses are changing and multiplying, and while traditional discourses are still echoing, a multitude of new discourses are gaining ground. This move towards post-traditionalism (Abela, 2000) might be confusing. Divorce in Malta is illegal and separation is still seen as morally wrong.
Simultaneously, separation proved itself to be a solution for many desperate individuals.

My view is that the Maltese are in the *either – or* phase between the traditional and the post-traditional, moving slowly towards a *both* traditional and post-traditional position. The existing tension is between the moral and the practical; the Church’s advice not to abandon the ‘good’ traditional values, and economic developmental demands which force the Maltese to embrace post-traditional values.

Public opinion, another dominant discourse, about marriage is being re-shaped and this can be inferred from Abela’s (2000) findings. Most Maltese consider marriage to be a relevant institution with women having a more favourable view of marriage than men. However, the separated, men in particular, tend to find marriage an outdated institution. Moreover, “in less than a decade, … the number of Maltese respondents who find no reason for the termination of marriage union has dropped from thirty-four percent in 1984 to twenty-two percent in 1991” (Abela, 2000, p.65).

The analysis of marriage values can reflect at least a glimpse of what people expect from marriage and the marital relationship. The European Values Study (Abela, 2000) conducted in thirty European countries, organizes marriage values in three major categories that respondents view as essential for a successful marriage. These categories are:
1. *Interpersonal bond between partners:* characterized by time together, sharing and discussing mutual problems, talking, expression of respect and appreciation, understanding and tolerance.

2. *Cultural homogeneity:* refers to the commonalities between the partners and includes common social and ethnic background, concordance on political adherence and religious beliefs.

3. *Situational conditions:* involve good housing, adequate income, equal sharing of household chores and child-rearing.

In this survey Maltese respondents seemed to prioritize *interpersonal bond* factors in marriage. The order of responses were as follows: “to spend time together (87%), to talk on their common interests (82%) and interpersonal problems (95%), to show understanding and tolerance (87% in 1994, 94% in 1999), respect and appreciation (90% in 1984, 98% in 1999), to enjoy happy sexual relations (74% in 1984, 81% in 1999), and to be faithful to each other (93% in 1984, 97% in 1999)” (Abela, 2000). The difference between 1984 and 1999 can be related to increasing individualism. Increasing separation may also be changing the Maltese’ perception about marriage. How this is influencing the unmarried young generations and their expectations of marriage is yet to be seen.

The Maltese seem to attribute importance to the sharing of a common social background between partners. In particular 47% of the respondents in Abela’s (2000) research, as compared to the 25% of the 1984 study, see agreement on politics as important. 57% agreed that common interests and tastes are important for relationship success. There has been a rise in this value which only 38% agreed with in 1984. One considerable drop was the belief that common religious beliefs are essential for marital survival. In 1999, only 57% agreed with this item compared to the 70% in
1984. This tallies with Tabone’s (1987) comments on secularization and with the increasing rate of couples marrying by the registry. Does this also reflect an increasing importance attributed to romanticism?

The third category, situational conditions, registered a decline since the 1984 studies. 36% of respondents, as compared to 58% in 1984, see good housing as important. An adequate income (40% in 1999, 47% in 1984) and having children (69% in 1999, 79% in 1984) are being given less importance. The latter is reflected in the decline of children and teenagers. In 1980, 31% of the population was in this age-group. During 2002 the proportion dropped to 24.6%. The number of births in 2002 was 3,805 as compared to the 5,602 births in 1980 (The Times, 2003). In terms of good housing, one wonders whether the declining importance on housing reflects the helplessness young courting couples feel in front of rocketing housing prices. While in the late 70s and 80s couples opted for terraced houses, today’s couples are only affording to buy flats and marionettes with longer repayment terms and higher rates. The implications of this may involve a longer courtship and a smaller family. In a report published in the Times (2003a), the Minister of Social Policy was reported saying that the cost of residence in Malta has now become a major contributor towards older-age marriage. It seems that the longer repayment schemes and ever smaller homes are contributing to the shrinking size of family with one-child families on the increase.

The above results may be indicative of a shift towards romantic love as a most valid reason for marrying. This also reflects the current generations’ departure from religious and traditional dicta that prioritize commitment and sacrifice over romantic
love. This has been revealed by the university students’ study (Tabone, et al., 2003) and the Sunday Mass attendance survey (Inguanez, 2006).

With regards to issues like marriage, cohabitation and divorce, birth control and abortion, extramarital sex, and premarital cohabitation, the students’ responses further evidence the individualized Catholicism trend. Today’s youth seem to be more on the *both – and* position as they feel no inconsistency between believing in God while simultaneously disregarding important moral values as dictated by the Catholic Church.

### 2.4.6. General Criticism of the Research Reviewed

The research on expectations of marriage cited above is limited in several ways. First of all, the primary focus of the researcher was generally marital success or failure and marital satisfaction. Expectations emerged therefore as a by-product in relation to marital success or failure and marital satisfaction, and were not elaborated upon (Popenoe, 1991; Glenn, 1991; Buehlman, Gottman, & Katz, 1992; Schaefer & Olson, 1981; Sternberg & Barnes, 1985; Bons-Raacke, et al., 2001). Some research, while focusing on expectations of marriage (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; Sabatelli, 1984; 1988), was aimed at the development of an instrument measuring the degree to which spouses feel the outcomes derived from their relationship are measuring up to their expectations. While attempting to standardize instruments able to measure one’s disappointment or satisfaction with one’s marriage, this group of research does not answer, however, what couples, or partners, actually expect from a marriage. This may enforce the idea that expectations of marriage, while having a degree of cultural
universality, may also be very personal and idiosyncratic. The instrument may therefore be flawed by its self-created paradox of attempting to be a universal measure of idiosyncratic and personal expectations. As seen in the literature review above, some expectations about marriage are unconscious. Therefore, how one can measure them remains an important question.

Second, studies in the area tend to be retrospective and engage married participants (Huston, et al., 2001; Sabatelli, 1984; Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986) with some having been married for more than ten years (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986). The implications of time can be various. By the time that subjects are exposed to the interviews or questionnaires they would have gone through a lot of different experiences in their marriage thus contaminating one’s experience of the past. In a narrative sense, the story one holds about the past is not necessarily the same story one held in the past. How reliable retrospections can be is therefore questionable. By studying expectations of marriage at two different points in time, this study will attempt to capture expectations in real time, as they occur, thus giving a more realistic and idiosyncratic phenomenology of what couples expect out of their future marital relationship and how these expectations change over the first year of marriage.

Third, studies often engage individuals rather than couples as their participants (Fletcher, et al., 2000; Sabatelli, 1984; Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986). While this may be useful in tapping individual expectations, it is simultaneously difficult to extrapolate joint, systemic couple processes. Joint narratives about expectations acknowledge and have the potential of tapping the couple’s expectations of marriage (Wambolt, 1999). This research used joint interviews with the aim of extrapolating systemic processes.
particularly in the renegotiation process of expectations during the first year of marriage.

Moreover, most samples consisted of dating and single university students. While these have proved useful in exploring, for example, the effects of parental behaviours on their offspring’s attitudes about marriage (Kelly, 1981; Long, 1987; Schwartberg, 1981; Sorosky, 1977; Booth, et al., 1984; Coleman & Ganong, 1984; Grych & Fincham, 1990; Markland & Nelson, 1993; Jones & Nelson, 1996; Muench & Landrum, 1994; Spreacher & Felmlee, 1992; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003; Jacquet & Surra, 2001), they may prove inadequate when it comes to expectations of marriage. Sabatelli and Pearce (1986) had found increased age to be associated with higher expectations in men and lower expectations in women. This research benefited from the collaboration with a sample of engaged couples and aimed at understanding committed couples’ expectations of marriage just before marrying.

Fourth, all studies I looked into were quantitative studies and used standardized measures. As has been discussed repeatedly, quantitative studies, while good at giving a general view of the specific subject under study, fall short of representing human realities as they occur in day-to-day living. Subjects in such researches are bound to answer specific questions leaving the elaborate human experience untapped. While some studies did use narrative means, for example free-writing essays (e.g. Knobloch, 2000), these were coded and measured quantitatively with the aim of generalizing. The local studies quoted (e.g. Tabone, 1987; 1994; 2006; Abela, 2000; Tabone, et al. 2003; Inguanez, 2006) were also quantitative surveys. Extrapolating data in some way related to expectations of marriage has been laborious, as most of it was implicit in the data.
2.4.7. Summary of Literature Review and the Emerging Research Questions

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlighted several learning points. One major point is the absence of an operational definition of expectations of marriage making it difficult to clarify their constitution. Further understanding of expectations of marriage and their composition will clarify the synergistic aspect of the cognitive, emotional, conscious, unconscious, and contextual aspects of expectations of marriage.

The other main learning point is that the Maltese are rapidly shifting from traditional values towards more westernized values. The visible difference between the Maltese and the rest of European is rapidly disappearing in many aspects of life, posing, perhaps, the toughest challenge to the Maltese in years.

Along the progression from Waller’s theoretical based hypotheses established back in the late 30s, to the later developments by psychoanalysts drawn from clinical experiences, to the empirical research that has slowly and fragmentally developed since the 1980s, there was an agreement that expectations of marriage are implied in marital distress. A typology of expectations drawn from the literature was attempted in an effort to appreciate the diverse opinions and their inter-relations.

Other available research looked at factors influencing the origin of expectations of marriage with the family context being considered as the main source of influence. Some research addressed media influences on expectations of marriage but results are inconclusive. Inferences were drawn from local research on values and religiosity. All
seem to agree about the Maltese’s shift from traditional to post-traditional values, implying that expectations of marriage are increasingly becoming secular.

This research hopefully provides another step towards an increased understanding on a yet indefinite topic by asking three fundamental questions: What do Maltese Catholic engaged couples expect from their future marital relationship? How did these expectations originate? How are they negotiated in the first year of marriage?

One general hypothesis is that Maltese couples, while retaining some idiosyncratic characteristics differentiating them from their European and American counterparts, are increasingly assimilating Western values. Some comparison with existing European and American literature will be made. The focus of this study remains that of gaining a clearer understanding of Maltese Catholic engaged couples’ expectations of marriage.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
3.1. Introduction

Methodology refers to how an inquirer goes about finding out whatever one is interested in. Several considerations are taken into account when deciding which research methods best suit the subject under investigation, namely the research questions, the adopted paradigm, and the researched. In this study the research questions required a longitudinal approach and direct conversations with a sample of engaged couples who have committed themselves to marrying. For this purpose, I opted for the interview method as my main research tool. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was selected for interpreting the data.

3.2. Data Analysis Using IPA

Having reviewed the existing literature on expectations of marriage it became apparent that a more detailed understanding of expectations of marriage would be a useful addition to current inconclusive research available. Furthermore, at this premature point in the history of research on expectations of marriage, it is proposed that such an approach has some advantages over quantitative designs. In particular, a qualitative approach would meander through the basic fabric of expectations of marriage, thus exploring their nature and constitution. Later on, quantitative research can build upon this general understanding,
3.3. Rationale for choice of IPA

Various qualitative methods have been described in the literature (Becker, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998a; 1998b; 1998c; Richardson, 1996; Flick, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Holloway, 2000; Jefferson, 2000; Breakwell, 2004) with many sharing important underlying characteristics. However, the important features distinguishing them cannot be undermined. For the purpose of this research some well established qualitative methods were considered because of their relevance.

IPA’s aim ‘to explore the participant’s view of the world’ (Smith, 1996) is consistent with the idiographic position taken in this research to explore expectations of marriage. IPA is concerned with both the individual’s unique stories and the common experiences and patterns across participants. It recognizes and legitimizes the interactive and dynamic nature of participant-researcher relationship and acknowledges the researcher’s involvement in the generation of meaning and co-construction of the emergent research story (Chapman & Smith, 2002).

IPA’s thorough methodological procedure fits the recursive and reflective stance taken in a systemic research like this one. Because of its appreciation of the context within which the research takes place, IPA appreciates both the differences and similarities between participating couples, as it works through the lower level themes to higher order categories (Smith, 2004).

Grounded Theory (GT) emphasizes theory building (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and is committed to constant comparison and theoretical sampling (Pidgeon, 1996). This
method was not selected for various reasons. Firstly, this study focused on couples’ expectations and their construction over a specified period of time. So rather than the cumulative and simultaneous sampling and analysis of data so characteristic of GT, I had thought that my research would benefit from a two-time data collection method, which is not characteristic of GT. Secondly, the aim of this research was not to generate theory but rather to contribute to the expansion of the current picture of expectations of marriage.

Simultaneously, I found some aspects of GT and other methods helpful. For example the idea of directed conversations made by Pidgeon and Henwood (1996) about interviewing helped keep a smooth flow of information exchange. The idea of constant comparison of data was also helpful during the data analysis phase, by gradually analyzing transcripts to build upon themes that emerged during the previous transcript analysis, thus expanding themes till saturation.

Some notions of discourse analysis have also been helpful to this research project, in particular Potter and Wetherell’s idea, which considers verbal reports as behaviours in their own right and contextually driven (Potter & Wetherell, 1995). By its focus on elucidating the interactive tasks and actions performed and expressed in the type of statements people make, discourse analysis goes beyond the primary focus of this research which remains that of gaining a deeper understanding of expectations of marriage, their origin, and their development in the first year of marriage. IPA was therefore chosen for this study.
3.4. The Selected Participants for this Research

The selection of the participants was based on three pragmatic principles. One was to gain as rich an understanding about expectations of marriage as possible within the limitations of this study. The second one was to achieve a degree of internal coherence, and the third, to have a sample size large enough to permit the above two points and simultaneously small enough for the study to be achievable within the time-frame available for the doctorate programme.

A purposive sample of eligible couples included Maltese Catholic couples who were to be married by February/March 2004 and who had completed the eight-week marriage preparation course prescribed by the local Catholic Church as a requisite for marrying in the Church (Table 3.1). As this research involved joint interviews, both partners had to accept to participate. Eleven engaged couples offered to participate in this research. Five were refused because the marriage date was much later than that established in the inclusion criteria.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Couple</th>
<th>Joe &amp; Linda</th>
<th>Jason &amp; Amanda</th>
<th>Adrian &amp; Claire</th>
<th>Michael &amp; Grace</th>
<th>Noel &amp; Josienne</th>
<th>Massimo &amp; Shirley</th>
<th>Patrick &amp; Sharon</th>
<th>Emanuel &amp; Maria</th>
<th>Tarcisio &amp; Magdala</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>31 years</td>
<td>32 years</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>23 years</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>43 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31 years</td>
<td>25 years</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>27 years</td>
<td>29 years</td>
<td>28 years</td>
<td>28 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Length of Courtship</strong></td>
<td>5 ½ years</td>
<td>5 ½ years</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>2 ½ years</td>
<td>3 ½ years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practicing Religion</strong></td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Neither</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Only</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.5. Recruitment of Participants

Most of the participating couples were recruited from different parishes around Malta through the parish priest. An advert inviting couples to participate was also placed on the website weddingsmalta.com.mt. Collectively, these efforts yielded eleven interested couples who were sent a copy of the information sheet and consent form (see Appendix 1) and were invited to contact me directly if they wished to take part. Only nine met the necessary inclusion criteria and returned their signed consent form. The first interviews were carried out between December 2003 and March 2004 to fit exactly with my projected schedule.

3.6 The Researcher

I am a male, Maltese, Catholic family therapist. My interest in the topic has a long history and is the product of personal and clinical experience. Having been married for 20 years has convinced me that a lasting marriage is dependent on the partners’ flexibility to review their personal and relational expectations vis-à-vis the ever-changing dynamics. My 20 years of marriage have taught me that marital expectations are inevitably and naturally different from the real experience of marriage and that expectations can potentially set the marital destination in any direction. Their potential for disappointment lies in the fact that they are meant to be actualised within a different temporal, social, relational, and psychological context from the one within which they were originally formed.
My work with disappointed couples has further intrigued me into indulging in expectations of marriage. The suffering associated with disappointment often reflects the intensity with which expectations of marriage are unconsciously or subconsciously constructed and defended. At times I could retrospectively identify with the distressed couples and their disappointment. Living in a context where relationship problems of this sort can only increase, I hope this research contributes to a wider perspective and mindset about expectations of marriage and the dynamic change they go through.

3.7. The Interview as a Research Tool

In view of the present lacunae about the nature of expectations people hold for their future marriage, and of the fact that the little existing research on expectations and related areas is predominantly quantitative (e.g. The Relationship Belief Inventory, Epstein & Eidelson, 1981; The Romantic Beliefs Scales, Sprecher & Metts, 1989: The Expectation Level Index, Lewis & Spanier, 1979; The Marital Comparison Level Index, Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; and others which were unpublished e.g. The Marriage Expectation Scale used by Jones & Nelson, 1996), and because no research on expectations of marriage has been carried out in Malta, a phenomenological understanding of expectations of marriage as a necessary preliminary for the further development of standardized instruments seemed more appropriate (Bradbury Thomas, personal communication, December, 2003). In line with this, a qualitative research based on semi-structured interviews appeared more suitable to extrapolate the
experiential underpinnings of expectations of marriage, their origin, and their development in the first year of marriage.

Another feature of this study is its longitudinal nature. It involved two interviews with the same participants at two different points in time; the first interview just before the couple got married and the second around a year into the couples’ marriage. This design is ideal to elicit real-time data at different points in time and is uncommon in an area which mainly researched retrospective participants’ accounts. Contamination of retrospections has been an accepted fact since Freud’s discovery of defence mechanisms.

The interview questions were originally developed in the English language and were then translated to Maltese. They were structured in a way that progressed from the less intimate to the more intimate questions, keeping in mind the progression of expectations of marriage from childhood to marriage. Because of the level of transparency of my agenda, adhering to the collaborative nature of my research paradigm, I had to find the right balance within the structured-unstructured dimension for my interviews (Gillham, 2000).

All interviews were recorded to facilitate transcription. All recording was digital for specific reasons: digital recording permits data storage as files on the computer, making them easily accessible for transcription. Unlike tape recording, digital files provide the possibility of further securing data by passwords and by electronically hiding the files from being visible. In this way, confidentiality and anonymity were secured. Digital recording also lends itself better to organizing files.
I carried out the interviews myself and was therefore the only constant presence across the interviews, apart from technological equipment. I should perhaps have written relatively constant due to inevitable changes in mood, energy levels, growth process and so forth. A copy of the guiding questions of the two interviews has been included in Appendix 2.

3.7.1. First Interview - Content

The First interview tackled two of the research questions namely; What do couples expect out of their future marriage? and how do expectations of marriage originate? These interviews were conducted prior to marriage and the time frame between the interviews and the wedding date varied from one week to two months. The interview aimed at stimulating a conversation between the partners and myself about their expectations of marriage. While the questions are presented here in a defined and sequential way, in the ‘real world’ they were moulded into an almost informal social conversation.

While I made every effort to keep the wording of the questions standard throughout all interviews, this was not at all possible. Every couple had its own language that needed to be respected. Educational background, age of partners, socio-economic background and other factors all played a significant role in the wording and rewording of each question. On some occasions, some questions had to be adapted twice, first for one partner and then for the other.
For the purpose of creating a set of questions to operationalise the research questions, a focus group was conducted. It consisted of colleagues in the field of couple work. Their participation involved a discussion about expectations of marriage. The main themes that emerged are reflected particularly in the expectation areas of the interview. The focus group helped me also to clarify my position as a researcher, as well as in some ethical dilemmas. A further elaboration of the last two points will be provided further on. Retrospectively, I admit that I could have made the focus group more heterogeneous by involving for example a priest and a social worker, as it could have generated more diverse ideas and recommendations (Flick, 2000).

First interviews consisted of four main parts:

Questions in Part 1 aimed at breaking the ice and help participants to connect with the topic of the interviews, thus creating an atmosphere for the more intimate parts of the interview. It further aimed at eliciting narratives about the origins of expectations of marriage.

The in-depth discussion on what couples expect from their future marriage was tackled in part 2. This part was intended to progress from open-ended questions (What expectations would you say you have as you look ahead to marriage?) to more closed-ended questions (What expectations do you have about recreation? How do you expect to spend your free time? Your holidays?) (Bradbury Thomas, personal communication, December 2003). One advantage of moving from open-ended to closed-ended questions involves the adjustment process couples will go through while they are being interviewed. It is only respectful that the level of intimacy between the
couple and myself during the interviews will reach its high gradually. Sudden and specific intimate questions may be perceived as violating intimate relationship boundaries and perhaps secrets.

1Questions in part 3 facilitated a discussion about the marriage preparation course the couples attended. These questions were intended to give an indication about how the compulsory marriage preparation courses were perceived by the participants and how relevant they were to their own expectations of marriage.

One final part of the interview, part 4, asked about the interview process, content, context, the interviewer, and the interview’s effect on the couple individually and jointly.

### 3.7.2. Second Interview - Content

The second interviews aimed primarily at understanding the development of expectations of marriage during the first year of marriage. For this purpose, interviews were conducted approximately one year from the wedding. They were divided mainly into two parts.

**Part-one** of the interview was intended to answer one main research question: What happens to the expectations of marriage the couples expressed in the first interview during their first year of marriage? Interviews would often start off by the question “How would you describe your first year of marriage?” I chose to leave the second interview unstructured with the intention of yielding richer narratives of the couples’
experience of their first year of marriage and a greater diversity of experiences. While the questions that emerged after the analysis of the first interviews may have provided a rich bundle of data, I was concerned that using those questions would restrict the second interview by my concerns. Further questions followed the direction of the co-created narratives making each interview a different ‘territory’, even though many emerging themes were common.

*Part two* - At the closure of every interview, I also asked questions about the couples’ expectations for the future and if they were envisioning any challenges ahead. The typical questions asked included: “Now that the wedding is over and you have already been married over a year, what is it you are envisioning for the future?”; and “Do you expect any other challenges ahead?”.

### 3.8. Pilot Interviews and Subsequent Amendments

Three pilot interviews were carried out with three volunteering couples introduced by colleagues and who adhered with the inclusion criteria set for participants. The feedback gathered from participants after the pilot interviews, one of which was video recorded, served to modify the interviews content and procedure.

To guide me through the observations I availed myself of the experience I accumulated during my M.Sc. dissertation and used the *patient response style scale* (Besharat, 1997). This scale assesses the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication involved in the patient’s attitudes and behaviours that are expected to

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facilitate or impede progress in psychotherapy (Besharat, 1997). An attempt to widen its application to couple interviews has indicated that while the partner’s presence may influence the participant’s level of verbal participation, the influence is more on the quantity of verbal participation rather than its quality (Azzopardi, 1998).

The following are amendments made to the original research idea.

**3.8.1. Amendment 1**

The original idea of video recording all time-one interviews was abandoned. This idea was originally based on the premise that time-two interviews would be based on the couple’s review of themselves during time-one interview. While in terms of design this approach would have been appropriate and fruitful, it would have generated an unmanageable amount of data beyond that needed for the purpose of this study. The time needed for the second interview would have also doubled, making it very difficult for me to schedule all the interviews within the time-frame allotted.

**3.8.2. Amendment 2**

During the pilot interviews, no participant automatically talked about the meaning of their choice to marry in the Church. Moreover, this appeared to me to be an important question to ask vis-à-vis the context of this research. The meaning people attribute to marrying in the Church is important data if a deeper understanding of expectations of marriage among Maltese Catholic couples is to be achieved. For this purpose, I added
question number three (Why have you chosen to marry in Church?) among the
guiding questions.

3.8.3. Amendment 3

The pilot interviews proved rather difficult to transcribe. The couples’ enthusiasm to
help me in the research led to an overwhelmingly high amount of interruptions, at
times making conversations unclear. For this reason, I decided to invite couples before
the interview to take turns in talking so as to facilitate the transcribing process. I was
conscious that such a choice could have an impact on the direction of the interviews
and the conversational and relational dynamics. Nevertheless, considering that I was
interested more in perspectives than in couple dynamics I favoured this decision.

3.9. Deciding about the Language

Most Maltese speak both English and Maltese as their primary languages. Some speak
predominantly English, while the majority speak predominantly Maltese. A bilingual
information sheet and a consent form were prepared. Initially, I had thought of hiring a
translator and conducting the interviews all in English to avoid complications in
translating from Maltese to English. This idea generated a lot of questions. How
would Maltese speaking participants feel with a Maltese researcher on Maltese
couples who speaks English? How would a third party (translator) influence the
research process? I decided to leave this choice of language to the participants
themselves.
Eight couples opted to go for the English language as they thought this would facilitate matters for me. They all felt confident about their English and some of them actually preferred the English language. Only one couple preferred to speak in Maltese.

3.10. Data Analysis Process

The process of analysis using IPA is an iterative one. The procedural guidelines used were those suggested by Smith, Jarman and Osborn (1999) and Smith and Osborn (2004). Preliminarily analysis involved the reading and re-reading of the transcripts to develop familiarity with the transcripts. Notes of particularly relevant and interesting statements were made in the margins and on a separate notebook. Relevant themes pertinent for the particular couple were also noted down in the opposite margin.

Further reading of the transcripts identified lower-order themes. These emerging themes were constantly checked with the transcripts for their groundedness and robustness. Once a transcript was felt to have been exhausted as to any further codes and themes, another one was analysed using the same procedure. All transcripts were analysed and coded in the same manner. Two of the transcripts were reviewed independently by my two supervisors and both yielded very similar themes to the ones I had generated. Parts of other transcripts were also reviewed by peers during presentations. Like the supervisors, they also identified similar themes to the ones I had extracted.
When all the transcripts had been analyzed, themes were cross-referenced for similarities and/or differences and a greater understanding of the interconnections between the transcripts and the themes was developed. Where strong connections were identified, sub-themes were clustered together under higher-order themes. Checking the themes and higher-order themes for groundedness in the text was part of the process throughout. There was a constant re-checking of the transcripts to ensure that no matter how higher a theme was it still reflected the raw data.

Finally, the interpretative process continued into the development of an overarching theme connecting all the themes identified. The overarching theme helped for the development of a coherent interconnectedness between all the themes and was identified as an *exploratory narrative* (Raval & Smith, 2003) which best described the identified themes. There was a continued iterative process with the transcripts throughout the whole process so as to ensure that themes, categories, and the overarching theme were grounded in the raw data.

The use of N-Vivo computer software simplified the coding process of the transcripts by replacing the traditional cut/paste method of the manual process. Transcriptions were transferred to N-Vivo and coding was all done electronically.

Numerous excerpts from the transcripts have been included so that the complexity of narratives may be conveyed coherently. On some occasions the excerpts presented may appear long. However, for the sake of clarity and understanding, and to contextualise the conversation, I decided to present a whole statement or conversation even though some parts of it may be unrelated to the heading under which it appears.
3.11. After the Interview

At the end of each interview, couples were asked about their experience of being interviewed. The interview atmosphere was reportedly positive and comfortable. Most couples felt that revisiting their story suited them and felt refreshing. This fits with Bradbury’s (1994) encouraging findings that the effects of research on couple relationship are generally positive.

One couple had asked me about their relationship. I was surprised as this question shifted me from being a researcher and one who wants to learn, know, and discover, to being a clinician, and therefore one who is perceived as having knowledge to dispense. I felt divided between feeling it was inappropriate in this context to provide feedback, and simultaneously feeling it was inappropriate to leave the couple blind, considering that this was the one couple I thought was facing serious dilemmas. I had decided to offer a very brief account of both what I felt were my concerns about the couple and what I felt were the couple’s resources, which they could draw upon to resolve their dilemmas.

3.12. Validity

Qualitative research ventures its questions from a different (post-positivist and co-constructionist) world-view than that of quantitative (positivist) research. Therefore, its evaluation should be in terms of different canons than those applied for quantitative research and should be critiqued against criteria valid for the qualitative approach (Smith, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b). Multiple validity checks have
been developed over the last years and are still being developed as criteria to ground qualitative research (Flick, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998c) and assess its robustness. Those most relevant to my research are summarized and discussed below.

*Internal coherence* asks a fundamental question about the groundedness of the researcher’s interpretations in the data. This concept is closely linked to what Smith (1996) calls the *presentation of evidence* in which enough raw data is presented to allow for the interrogation of the interpretation being made. Data, in the form of excerpts from the transcribed interviews, were presented to support interpretations.

*Member validation* (Smith, 1996), or as Flick (2002) calls it, *communicative validation* refers to the process of taking interpretations after an initial analysis back to the participants as a check to ensure that interpretations of data tally with the participants’ meaning of the information they had provided during the interviews. Initially, there was the intention to validate findings in this way in order to ensure that interpretations accurately reflect the participants’ intended meaning. However, I opted to clarify information and meaning at the time of the research interviews (Smith, 1996).

*Triangulation* refers to the use of number of different independent sources of information or methods as a way of validating and grounding one’s research findings (Smith, 1996). In this research, I continuously attempted to link findings and interpretations to other researches carried out independently. Other links I made referred to established related theories with which my data and interpretations seemed to fit.
Independent audit is a way of validating one’s findings by filing all data in a way that anyone else could follow the chain of evidence that led to the final report presented (Yin, 1989). This study made part use of this technique. Some transcripts were handed to the research supervisors so that they could analyze them and extract themes independently. The same was done with fellow students and tutors present for the presentations who were handed excerpts from transcripts and invited to analyze them independently and extract and generate themes. This helped a lot in confirming that the themes I extracted were generally the same themes the others had generated. It thus was helpful in validating my interpretations.

Ecological validity, the extent to which the research was carried out in the location and natural setting of the participants in relation to the research questions, was minimally relevant to this study. This concept, however, can apply at two levels; one referring to the fact that the research was carried out in the same context to which the questions referred, that is the research asked about Maltese Catholic couples and was carried out in Malta. One relevant drawback could have possibly been that the feedback and assessment for this research were carried out primarily in a different cultural context, that is the UK. However, another supervisor in Malta was regularly consulted as well.

Another useful level was contextual validity (Tindall, 1994) which refers to the appropriateness of the location within which the interviews have been carried out. This is more difficult to determine for this study and in this respect the location in which to carry out the interviews was not considered as highly relevant to the research questions. In fact, participants were given different options where to carry out the
interview and they all chose my office for the first interviews. For the second interview some couples chose to have the interview at their own home, a request which was respected and adhered to.

It is also hoped that the rhetorical power, coupled with other validity claims can present the reader with a clear and coherent story about expectations of marriage, their origin, and their development in the first year of marriage. For this purpose, an example of the method of analysis is presented in the Appendix 3, showing the coding process involved in the clustering of themes to arrive at supra themes and dominant themes.

The qualitative nature of this study has enabled an in-depth analysis to be carried out on expectations of marriage and has ultimately yielded rich descriptions of the participants’ experiences. Apart from generating new insights about expectations of marriage, their origin, and their development in the first year of marriage, this research has also prompted new questions in thinking about expectations of marriage and highlighted several important features in this area including parental influences on expectations, the developmental nature of expectations, gender role expectations, and so on.

One difficulty I struggled with in terms of validity has been the apparent duality between the general and the idiosyncratic. While wanting to respect each and every couple’s idiosyncrasies, I was also interested in generating some kind of coherent and representative story that says something about all the couples. My attempt was to constantly remind myself of Lyotard’s (1984) idea of paralogic / neo-pragmatic
validity which states that the aim of scientific knowledge is not to correspond with reality, but to discover differences and leave contradictions in their tension.

### 3.13. Reflexivity

Central to the definition of qualitative research is the process of *self-scrutiny* which refers to the intellectual and emotional factors that inevitably influence the researcher’s involvement in the research process (Berg & Smith, 1988). It is an opportunity for the researcher to observe the difficult and complex dynamics occurring between the researcher and the researched. This can be said to be systemic research whereby the observer becomes also the observed and where self-scrutiny becomes an essential feature of the research process.

This seems isomorphic with the theme ‘togetherness and separateness’ that emerged from the data in this study. The participants dilemma was also my dilemma in relation to the research process. I can identify my struggle in maintaining the right balance between where the ‘I’ starts and where the research starts, and between being separate and simultaneously part of the research process. It can be that some themes that emerged, including ‘togetherness and separateness’ are a symbolic projection of my internal dynamics. It can also be that participants projected their dilemmas into me and I, through self-reflexivity, identified them. This infinite dance between my stories and those narrated by participants, in an evolving spiral of understanding, is isomorphic with the couples’ evolving relationship narrative.
My primary concerns therefore revolve around how far my constructions as a researcher were grounded in the constructions of those whom I studied, and how much of those constructions were mine and how much the participants’. In short, to “understand the phenomenon or event under study from the interior” (Flick, 2002, p. 25). Going through the process of analysing the transcripts permitted me to engage with the transcribed material at a very intimate level, which was necessary to get a good sense of the participant’s perspective. On the other hand, the necessary ‘enmeshment’ with the data made it simultaneously difficult to take a meta-perspective and develop an idea about the broader connections of the material, and the ideas and themes I was generating. This study helped me to seriously reflect upon the connectedness and separateness balance necessary to maintain a healthy relationship between the objective and the subjective during research.

Retrospectively, I now realise that my interest in expectations of marriage may have risen from some conscious or unconscious desire to review and renew my own expectations of marriage at a stage where my eldest son had commenced his ‘leaving home’ process. I recall discussing repeatedly with my wife how quickly our children have grown and that soon it’s going to be me and her alone again. In this way expectations of marriage must have become an ‘obvious’ subject of choice.

The way I carried out the interviews, and understood and interpreted the data, has therefore been influenced by my *a-priori*, unconscious constructions about the topic, as well as by the ongoing and evolving narratives between myself as a researcher, and the participating couples. There were times at which I was shocked by certain statements made by participants. One example was when participants spoke about expectations in an ‘idealistic’ way triggering in me a bout of realism. At times I felt
the urge to utter “you wait and see”, or to challenge them to review their position, which for obvious reasons I refrained from doing. It would have been very interesting had I video-taped the interviews with the possibility of retrospectively analysing how such thoughts might have leaked into the interviewing system, and the effects they might have had on the interview process.

While carrying out the interviews, I found it difficult to disengage myself from being a family therapist. I was used to meeting couples for an altogether different purpose than that of sitting down and ‘merely’ listening to what they have to say about the topic. I found it difficult to stick to the research questions and not engage myself in a therapeutic discourse.

Being a Maltese Catholic myself has had its consequences, one of which could have prevented couples from engaging in particular discourses, for example about sex and sexuality. However, metaphorically speaking, being familiar with the sea helped me to be able to dive deep or float as necessary and not be unwittingly driven by unknown currents in an uncontrolled way. Yet my belief is that there is no value-free position.

Having carried the study in Malta, with Maltese people, and presenting the work within an English institution made me reflect on the use of language. The languages used during the interviews were English and Maltese, with English being the most used. There are several questions in this regard. One is that the English spoken by the Maltese may be different from the English spoken by the English. Nevertheless I found out that there is no one single English within the increasingly multicultural Tavistock community. I found these differences to be enriching, providing data with
multiple contexts through which they could be analysed. Such culturally and linguistically diverse contexts provided a pluralistic critique of my research.

This study facilitated reflections about my clinical practice, and the important role expectations of marriage and their disappointment play in marital satisfaction and distress. Most predominantly, I have learned that expectations of marriage are developmental in nature. They evolve over time in synchrony with other contextual factors. One couple in particular gave me the opportunity to experience the impact of an unexpected first child on the pre-established dynamics and expectations of marriage as well as on the various mechanisms employed by the couple to safeguard themselves and their nucleus.

The learning experienced throughout the research process falls into three main types; learning about myself; learning about the subject selected; and learning about the research process. Once again, distinguishing between them is not easy as they all blend in one systemic choreography.
CHAPTER 4

ORIGIN OF EXPECTATIONS: ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION
4.1. Introduction

To facilitate coherence, the different categories of themes that emerged from the two interviews have been clustered into three different chapters according to the research questions. This chapter will look at categories and themes that fall under the first research question: How do expectations of marriage originate? Chapter 5 will present themes related to adolescent fantasies about marriage and chapter 6 presents themes related to the second research question about expectations of marriage. Chapter 7 will look into categories and themes related to the third research question about the evolution of expectations in the first year of marriage.

This section consists of supra-themes and dominant themes. Supra-themes are those themes featuring in at least eight from the nine couples interviewed. Dominant themes are those shared by three to seven couples. Super-ordinate or dominant themes may contain sub-themes.

An attempt has been made to remain as loyal as possible to the participants’ stories. Excerpts from transcripts have been presented as supporting evidence of the link. IPA acknowledges that the process of understanding participants is an interpretative one, where meaning is co-created or inferred from the many different levels of information that are contained in the communication taking place between the interviewer and the participants (Bruner, 1978; Steiner, 1998). Various interpretations have been attempted in the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ stories.
Generally, the identified sources of expectations of marriage among participating couples included the establishment of a constructed narrative about their parents’ marital relationship, media, culture, and religion.

4.2.1 Supra-Theme 1: Parents as Role Models

All the nine couples in the sample referred to their parents’ marital relationship as the main source of influence in their construction of expectations around marital relationships. Few, like Claire feel their parents’ marital relationship was to emulate.

Claire: I think the first idea I got about marriage was from my parents ... eh... I always had a good impression of marriage from my parents because ... ehm, I’ve rarely seen them fight openly in front of me, obviously let’s put it this way I don’t know what they did behind closed doors but in front of me .. they did argue, but, my mother starts to give in so an argument would fizzle out within minutes ... ehm ... my father always worked hard and did a lot of sacrifices to give us everything. And my mother did a lot of sacrifices in bringing us up. So in my mind marriage was something, an environment in which children grew up in a healthy, protected ... way.

Many seem to have constructed a negative idea about their parents’ marital relationship. Expectations about an alternative type of marital relationship was re-constructed.

Maria: Yes from a very young age actually. I mean they’re still together and they love each other, perhaps in the wrong way. But I had said I want something different for myself. I mean more understanding and communication. I wanted more companionship in my relationship, in the real sense. That you move together, tighter together.
On finding their parents’ marital relationship disappointing some participants preferred to look at other relatives to construct a good-enough role model to aspire to.

Amanda: *I have an aunt and an uncle that I really admire. And I try to imitate them a lot. For example the way they make up after a quarrel … They are not young anymore, sort of, and they were always very close …*

### 4.2.2. Dominant Theme 1: Media Influences

Media emerged as a predominant source of influence used particularly by participants whose construction of their parents marital relationships was an undesirable one. TV was reported to be a primary source of influence in their construction of alternative expectations of marriage.

Maria: *I used to see a lot of cartoons (laughs) any type of cartoons all the time. You start from Remi and end with Gorgi, all of them. And there were a lot of incidents where people marry, they used to represent the romantic aspect of it. And I always wished it for myself. On the other side my parents used to argue a lot. They used to argue between themselves and with everyone. Even I used to argue with them. So I did not always have a good idea of marriage, as a model. But I always believed that I would be able to have something different for myself. And when I was younger, and used to read a lot of fairy tales, and they lived happily ever after kind of stuff, I used to tell myself ‘that’s how I want to be’. That is why I decided to be different.*

Only Claire resorted to books and the internet in search of an alternative even though her construction of her parents’ marital relationship was positive.

Claire: *With my parents no. But I am an avid reader and I read a lot about it (marriage). Even at a very young age. So although I didn’t ask my parents, I read books and I searched the internet,*
so. I was always thirsty for knowledge and I always satisfied that thirst …

4.2.3. Dominant Theme 3: Expectations Development During Courtship

The importance of courtship influences on expectations of marriage lies in the courtship’s capacity to renegotiate the partners’ original constructions of expectations of marriage. Participants expressed how courtship interaction between partners influenced the construction of expectations and how their narratives about expectations of marriage were modified to accommodate each other’s. Sharon’s excerpt highlights how expectations are co-constructed through mutual interaction, communication, and the temporal context within which the process takes place.

Excerpt 1:

Sharon: Certain things are born with you. And then you develop them by time. Then they have to be the two of them (partners), so that they can see what to do. Both characters … that together they decide … Perhaps until four years ago I used to say that I wanted four children. It’s an example because I always wanted two. But then it’s together that you decide and you have to see the times as well.

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: I think it’s our characters together. The way I understand it is that had Patrick been different, … things would have gone differently, we would be a different couple …

4.2.4. Interpretation

Partners bring into their relationship conscious and unconscious stories constructed from their interactions within primary intimate relationships (Clulow & Mattinson,
1989; Orbach, 1995; Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986; Sabatelli & Bartle-Haring, 2003). Such constructions can be desirable or undesirable and while some participants expect to follow on their parents’ footsteps, some others reconstructed their own expectations about marital relationships. Only one participant seemed able to select desirable qualities of their parents’ marital relationship and isolating them from undesirable ones. Generally both men and women’s narrative refuted or accepted their parents marital relationship en-bloc.

Shulman, Rosenheum, and Knafo, (1999) from Israel investigated the extent to which adolescents’ expectations of marriage are in some way related to their parents’ expectations of marriage. Their results indicated that parents’ expectations of marriage accounted for the expectations of marriage of their adolescent offspring. In principle, “expectations also prescribe the basic features of marital interactions” (p.214). The parents behave in accordance with what they expect from one another. And it is this that their offspring seem to observe and assimilate along the years (Sabatelli & Pearce, 1986).

Sroufe and Fleeson (1986) connect the intergenerational transmission of expectations to attachment theory according to which children internalize basic expectations and attitudes concerning marital behaviour through their observation of and participation in their family relationships. The model of relationships observed eventually acts as a template to new social contexts (Hartup, et al., 1989) including their own developing romantic relationships.

Mueller and Pope’s (1977) transmission hypothesis notes that inter-parental hostility impacts young adults’ attitudes toward marriage. Kalter (1987) postulates that
substantial conflict within the parental relationship forms negative impressions of the institution of marriage among children who are exposed to it. Wallerstein (1987) points out that while these children’s expectations of their future marriage may have been tainted by their parents’ conflict, they still strongly desire and expect to have a positive marital relationship.

This desire might actually be the result of the tension local adolescents experience: on the one side the traditional discourses pushing them to marry and on the other side, their negative construction of the parents’ marriage and the current Maltese scenario. The result of this tension can be the construction of a blinding over-optimistic narrative about their expectations of their future marriage. As will be seen later, such construction is often based on alternative role models. It is interesting how participants whose construction of their parents’ marital relationship was conflict-ridden talked about how this actually motivated them to construct an alternative marital script (Byng-Hall, 1999). It is as if people’s need for connectedness helps in the construction of an alternative ‘idealised’ story to anaesthetize them against perceived marital dangers. Such mechanism featured also in the theme of comparison and fits the disillusionment model’s notion of sentiment override (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002).

The fact that early childhood attachments influence later intimate relationships has been documented (Clulow, 2001; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). Moreover, the parents’ marital relationship influences the type of attachment developed between adult and infant (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999). Participants whose construction of the parents’ marital relationship was undesirable might be considered to have had a somewhat less
secure attachment experience of their parents’ marital relationship. This can be visible from their yearning to repair their family of origin script into a more successful one (Byng-Hall, 1985). This success was often described in terms of increased connectedness and togetherness. On the other hand, the minority whose construction was one of a desirable relationship might be said to have had more secure attachment experience which motivated them towards replicating the script (Byng-Hall, 1985). For example, in the case of Josienne, her mother’s nursing role towards a sick father possibly provided her the possibility of constructing a secure internal working model with an image of marriage as a caring secure base in which care is provided no matter what, thus encouraging her to replicate the family of origin script within her own marriage.

It seems that where the original script is desirable, the person might find it easier to transfer the constructed desirable patterns into the new marital relationship. Those who resort to alternative models of relating might need to re-construct novel internal working models involving themselves, their partners, and their relationship. The former are expected to experience a more harmonious marital relationship than the latter (Berlin & Cassidy, 1999) However, reparative scripts are both desirable and possible. Subsequent attachment relationships challenge original scripts and act as key experiences and sources of personal and relational re-authoring (Anderson, 1997; Byng-Hall, 1999).

Generally TV can be considered to be the second strongest source of influence in the construction of expectations of marriage when the participants’ construction of their
parents’ marital relationship failed to offer them a desirable source of influence. This fits Jones and Nelson’s (1996) suggestion that in the absence of significant role models, people, especially young ones, become more vulnerable to assimilate romanticized views of marriage proposed through media.

Some evidence of the link between TV viewing and expectations of marriage can be found in the literature. Signorelli (1991) argued that “television may be the single most common and pervasive source of conceptions and action related to marriage and intimate personal relationships for large segments of the population” (p.121). In a series of case studies Illouz (1998) noted that her research participants often claimed that media portrayals were responsible for their romantic views of marriage.

TV series emphasizing the romantic aspects of relationships were the most popular among participants in this research. The Maltese can be particularly vulnerable to TV influence. As a recent NSO lifestyle report shows “mass media (TV viewing in particular) occupies an important share of their free time, with males and females spending almost 45 per cent of their free time on this activity” with young adolescents spending an average of 190.6 minutes a day during weekdays watching television (NSO, 2002. p. ix).

Segrin and Nabi’s (2002) findings that “those whose television viewing patterns included a large quantity of romantically themed programmes were more likely to hold idealistic views of marriage” (p.260) might also hold for the participants of this research. However, the term idealistic remains undefined. For example, all
participants expect their marriage to last “until death do us part”, which is considered by Sabatelli and Pearce (1986) and others as unrealistic.

However, when considering the Maltese context and understanding the importance the Maltese attribute to a lifelong marriage, it becomes understandable why the expectation of a lifetime union is not ideal at all. All participants in this research expect their marriage to last a lifetime, no matter what meaning they attribute to marrying in the Church. Moreover, legal separation is still perceived negatively with separated people considered at best ‘pitiable’ and unable to stick to it.

The tension arising from such an expectation surfaces through the couples’ dilemma between expecting a life-time union while simultaneously remaining aware of a possible eventual dissolution. Such concern appears to be realistic and in line the enduring dynamics model (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 239) which postulates that partners enter marriage with a degree of awareness of possible marital pitfalls. Because of the increasing legal separation and because “in less than a decade, however, the number of Maltese respondents who find no reason for the termination of a marriage union has dropped from 34% in 1984 to 22% in 1991” (Abela, 2000, p.65) partners have to find a way to embrace both possibilities (Dallos, 1997). One possible way partners resolve this dilemma is through fusing the two apparently diverse beliefs by constructing and narrating the possible pitfalls as a source of motivation “to work harder for the relationship”, thus making it last forever. One question might arise here: With marriage being a ‘closed box’, do partners really know what the marital territory actually involves and what working harder really means? Here is where hope becomes a valuable sentiment often expressed through religious beliefs.
There seems to be a process whereby couples in courtship review and renegotiate some of their original constructions of expectations in an attempt to co-create a common narrative about expectations of marriage (Dallos, 1997; Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). There is a strong indication towards mutual influence and a desired homogeneity that may be indicative of the partners’ difficulty about accepting and managing differences, at least at this stage in the relationship. This transpired from the interviews during which most couples prided themselves with their sameness and commonalities. Not all expectations seem to be influenced by courtship interactions and it has not emerged which are more and less vulnerable to be reviewed and reconstructed.

Women in particular expressed an incomparable need for sameness perhaps because women may harbour the feeling that they have to give up more than men in the relationship. Women in Malta seem to prioritize the value of the relationship more than men do (Abela, 2000). Men still seem to “give more importance to children and an adequate income” (p.63). As Abela (2000) reported, women prioritize the interpersonal bond and give importance to faithfulness, communication, understanding, and tolerance. My experience during the interviews in fact was that women were more likely to adapt their constructions about expectations of marriage to their partner’s. Women were also more likely to adopt romanticized views of marriage than participating men. This could have worked in favour of men’s less flexible traditionalist view about marriage and gender roles (Abela, 2000).

This striving towards similarity can make sense when viewed from the similarity model proposed by Cate and Lloyd (1992). This model proposes that similarity plays an important role in mate selection and relationship outcome. The more alike the
partners are in terms of personality, attitudes, values, and several demographic characteristics, the more likely the partners are to feel compatible and comfortable in their relationship. The *interpersonal process model* of courtship interaction also assumes that similarity between partners in the above factors is an important feature of successful relationships.

### 4.2.5. Summary of Findings about the Origin of Expectations of Marriage

The participants’ expectations of marriage were primarily a constructed narrative about their parents’ marital relationship. Where the constructed narrative was based on desirable parental behaviour participants chose to emulate that behaviour. An alternative source was used when the parents’ marital relationship construction was undesired and refused. Participants tended to be categorical in their construction about their parent’s marital relationship.

Media emerged as a predominant source of influence used particularly by participants whose constructed story about their parents’ marital relationship was negative. TV in particular was reported to be a primary source in the construction of alternative expectations of marriage. Media influences emerged more visibly in women participants than in men.

Partners’ personal constructions of expectations of marriage are modified through courtship experience to accommodate each other’s. The development of a unified coherent narrative about expectations becomes also visibly important for the
developing couple. It seems that difference is difficult to accept at this stage of the relationship and that women generally appear to be more flexible when it comes to reviewing their narratives about expectations of marriage than men are.
CHAPTER 5

RECALLED ADOLESCENT FANTASIES OF MARRIAGE: ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION
5.1. Introduction

Adolescence is an important milestone in individual development during which adolescents expand their views about relationships in general and intimacy in particular (Erickson, 1980). Generally, women in this sample recalled more concrete fantasies about marriage than men. Generally, women tended to recall romanticized fantasies whereas men tended to express more practicality.

In this category no supra-themes featured. It may be due to the difference in the participants’ capacity to retrospectively recall specific fantasies about marriage. Four dominant themes feature in this category namely the romantic marriage, traditional family, vague fantasies, and timing of marriage. Following the presentation of themes, various interpretations have been attempted in the effort to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ stories about adolescent fantasies and how these compare to actual expectations of marriage.

5.2. Dominant Theme 1: Romantic View of Marriage

Grace and Shirley, among others, retrospectively recollect their romantic expectations and how as adolescents they fantasised about a union with a partner, with an emphasis on togetherness ‘all of the time’. Only women expressed romantic recollections.

Excerpt 1:

Grace: \( I \text{ think that you are happy and that you have support, and... he helps you and cooperates with you ... I mean ... that ... ehm ... What will happen is that we will be in two. And no one else. I mean, always us two together and sort of ... we are two persons, and will be living under the same roof. And no one} \)
else, on our own, we will have to make our own decisions and be independent as much as possible, sort of ... no one else intruding.

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: Yes, I mean to be sincere for me it was more of a fantasy. I mean for example I used to dream a lot of nice things, for example like, how to do I put it? ... I mean I did not use to care about the reality that many of the marriages don’t succeed. When still in my teens, I used to imagine the blue prince, perfection, and that nothing is missing, sort of, and everyday is a happy day etc etc ...

5.3. Dominant Theme 2: Traditional Image of Family and Family Life

The expectation of a traditional family emerged in the retrospective recollections of women’s adolescent fantasies. Again women recollected more fantasies than men and in some cases the fantasy did not feature a husband and women only fantasized about their motherhood.

Excerpt 1:

Linda: ... When I used to think of my adult life ... I definitely imagined myself as married. More than that, I remember specifically thinking that in ten years time I will be married with children. That means that by 26 years, for me, I would have been married with 2 children already.

Linda’s traditional features are extended to gender roles:

Linda: Ehm ... ehm ... In an orderly looking house, nothing out of the ordinary, in fact. Ehm ... I think in those days I used to imagine myself a house wife. I mean not a working mother, ehm ... I think I imagined myself with two children, ehm ...
Excerpt 2:

Grace: … Oh yes, that we’d be home, and how life would be. I used to imagine certain things, like then you’d have children, and the like, you know one dreams!

5.4. Dominant Theme 3: Timing of Marriage

The age when one marries seems to have been in some of the participants’ adolescent fantasized expectations of marriage.

Joe: I always said though… this (marriage) is what I want. I always thought, this is very ironic, even before I entered to become a priest … that I will marry at 30 years.

Linda: I remember specifically thinking that in ten years time I will be married with children. That means that by 26 years, for me, I would have been married with 2 children already.

Other participants recollected fantasies of marrying after specific events and life-experiences rather than age. While Jason expected to marry after “seeing everything” Emanuel’s expectation was that of marrying after finishing university studies.

Excerpt 1:

Jason: I come from a very united family … I always wished to marry, but I never wanted to marry young. To be honest I wished to see what life offers first, sort of, and never wanted to marry at 22 and later say “See what I’ve lost in my youth”. Do you know what I mean? I wished to see everything and experience different partners. But I always wished to have a family, sort of.

Excerpt 2:

Emanuel: I think that marriage, even from a young age perhaps, was a natural step that I imagined I would do when I grow older. Because I wanted to be like my parents. For me the norm was that my parents were quite OK together and the family is
something nice. So I used to say that one day I will do it. But this is when I was young I used to say that now I will go to college, then I go into engineering, and then get married. So marriage was intended to be after university.

5.5. Interpretation

In general, women participants reported more fantasies that men. The majority of men recollected no or vague fantasies. Female participants recollected romanticized fantasies featuring togetherness and relational fusion, as well as family union. These fantasies highlight women’s traditional gender role expectations of care provision reflected in “staying home with the kids” and “care for the home”. The disappointing struggle between traditionalism and emerging gender role equality surfaced during the interviews as women find themselves torn between the moral/traditional discourse about women’s place being at home (Archdiocese of Malta, 2005; 2006) and the political/social discourse about gender equality, encouraging women towards paid work to meet the expected European Union targets.

The three men who remembered adolescent fantasies recalled fantasies about the house and the timing of marriage, thus reflecting traditional masculine role of provision of security (financial or structural). The gender difference in adolescent fantasies about their future marriage has not to my knowledge been research before and this is one unique contribution of this research. However, research has consistently found that men’s sexual fantasies were generally more sexually explicit and dominance oriented while women’s more emotional-romantic and submissive (Zurbrigg en & Yost, 2004; Dubois, 1997).
Perhaps because of the joint-interviews context men were reluctant to admit the sexual nature of their adolescent fantasies in front of their future spouse. Such gross absence of fantasies could also have been due to the macho attitude men construct and portray. Myself being a man would not have helped in their divulging their sensitive sides either.

Another emergence of adolescent fantasies was that adolescent fantasies seemed to serve various purposes. One particular purpose was a sense of detachment from one’s conflicting parents. There seems to be a link between one’s construction of one’s parents’ marital relationship and the fantasies experienced during adolescence. In this sample, more women than men constructed their parents’ marital relationship as undesirable and expected their future marital relationship to be reparative. This difference may be accounted for by the different rearing approaches boys and girls receive as children with women being reared to be more sensitive to relationships than men (Gilligan, 1982; Orbach, 1995; Hendrick & Hendrick, 1995).

Two women did not recall any adolescent fantasies about their future marriage, namely Josienne and Magdala. I hypothesized that their lack of fantasies, or their inability to recollect them, may be linked to their experience in some peculiar way. For example Josienne has lived within a particular household. Just one year after marrying, Josienne’s father fell ill and her mother catered for his chronic illness throughout their marriage, along with having to work and provide for the family as the father could not. Within such a context, one would expect that reparative fantasies are experienced during adolescence. As if she wanted to stick to her reality, Josienne referred to marriage as an unpredictable ‘closed box’, thus highlighting her
construction of the risk involved in marriage. Her explanation for not having fantasies was that she started dating Noel, her future husband, at the age of 15. According to her this did not leave any space for fantasies.

Magdala did not respond to the question related to fantasies. When she spoke about her family, she told me that her mother died when she was six and her father just a couple of years later. She was reared by her eldest sister. I hypothesise that since Magdala lost her parents at a very young age, she lacked the opportunity to observe and learn from her parents’ marital relationship. There still remains the question of why Magdala did not revert to media or other role models present in her life, like elder sisters and brothers or aunts and uncles. It may reflect the unique role the parents play in the child’s life along the lifespan (Bowlby, 1969). Having missed her parents as a baseline to compare with, Magdala did not construct fantasies, neither one way nor the other. This hypothesis may be complemented by the traditional and functional nature of the marriage between her and Tarcisio. The feeling I got from the interview and through reading the transcript about this couple was one of an emphasis on children, rather than on romantic longing.

This situation raises interesting questions about social learning and the parents’ role in modeling behaviour and attachment formation that shape children’s future behaviour. While both Josienne and Magdala experienced losses in their families of origin, the fact that Josienne’s parents were alive, even though quite absent and engrossed in the fathers’ chronic condition, she could at least construct some kind of attachment with her parents. Magdala could not construct an attachment with her missing parents.
Josienne could at least repair her family of origin script, while Magdala had to completely reconstruct it in her new family of procreation (Byng-Hall, 1985).

One other participant, Linda, recalled elaborate adolescent fantasies albeit deprived of a male figure, involving only the house and children. Throughout the interview Linda never mentioned her father. I had reflected this back to her and her reply was “poor dad”. She referred to him as “silent” and “emotionally distant” even though caring, and that her mother was the “boss” in the family. My hypothesis is that having constructed a “good” marital relationship between her parents meant having a detached father who was in the background and an over-involved mother in the foreground. This scenario might have instilled a great need for connectedness, which she expressed very intensely during the interview. Furthermore, having observed her parents might not have equipped her with the necessary skills to attach in the way she desired. This distance-closeness dilemma might have been resolved unconsciously through her choice of Joe, with whom she could both replicate her family of origin script while simultaneously hope to repair it (Byng-Hall, 1985).

One final point is that recalling adolescent fantasies can be very complex as it involves the creation of a narrative about a past narrative. Constructing a memory involves the blending together of a series of memories which are unconsciously selected and constructed through interaction (Dallos, 1997). This may have hindered or facilitated the re- and co-construction of narratives about participants’ adolescent fantasies during the interviews, or orchestrated constructions in a particular way.
Recalled fantasies in general concord with expectations of marriage expressed later.

Grace’s story is an example. She recalled fantasizing:

Grace: \textit{I think that you are happy and that you have support, and… he helps you and cooperates with you … I mean … that … ehm … What will happen is that we will be in two. And no one else. I mean, always us two together and sort of … we are two persons, and will be living under the same roof. And no one else, on our own, we will have to make our own decisions and be independent as much as possible, sort of … no one else intruding.}

In her romantic fantasy she envisioned herself and her partner completely absorbed in each other, detached from the outside world and completely independent. Grace’s expectations of marriage are almost identical and replicate her romantic construction of marriage.

Grace: \textit{You have to live together and … how do you say it … and that you, sort of … ehm … that everything is done together … everything now … the most important is that we’re together … it is something that we’d been waiting for so long. Our aim was this, now, that we live happily. I think that’s it. To do everything together.}

The fact that women fantasised more than men during adolescence, and that men constructed a more positive picture of their parents’ marital relationship than women, can be explained by the defensive function of fantasies. Through fantasy, women reconstructed an alternative desirable story of their future marriage as they needed a reparative script. Men did not need to fantasize an alternative story of their future marriage as their construction of their parents’ marital situation was a desirable one and so they expected to replicate their family of origin script (Byng-Hall, 1985).
Freud’s emphasis on the defensive nature of fantasies is also useful. He asserted that fantasies do not necessarily occur as a reaction to external situations but also to internal constructions about external events (Brenner, 1973). The gender difference in the construction of parents’ marital relationship can be partly attributed to differences in the disposition towards intimate relationships (Gilligan, 1982) with women being more relationship oriented than men (Orbach, 1995). This factor may have had a conditional effect on what men and women in this sample observed and constructed as children.

It can also be argued that such difference can explain women’s orientation towards dependence and men’s orientation towards independence. Women, having culturally been ‘trained’ within a phallocentric culture (Chodorow, 2004), are more tuned to perceive relationship dynamics. Consequently, their potential to develop relationship skills and be tuned into others’ needs increases, which in return make them feel much more secure than men in intimate relationships, thus unafraid of dependence, like men often are (Chodorow, 1995). Men on the other hand, being less able to perceive relationship dynamics, feel insecure about dependence. They defend themselves by denying their capacity to depend, projecting it onto their female partner (Ruszcynski, 1995), and adopting an independent image of themselves. This aspect is linked with the following discussion on togetherness / separateness and the ensuing discussion about polarization and the function of projective identification.
CHAPTER 6

EXPECTATIONS OF MARRIAGE:
ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION
6.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the expectations partners expressed of their future marriage. Generally, the expectations that emerged cover multi-systemic features incorporating extended families, work, and friends and their interaction with marriage. Because multiple themes emerged in this section they were clustered into five representative categories.

6.2. Category 1: Expected Lifestyle Changes

While expecting some desired and undesired relationship dynamics, developed during courtship, to continue into marriage, couples simultaneously expect lifestyle changes to take place after the wedding. Expected lifestyle changes emerged in five different supra-themes which generally reflect particular concerns couples have about their future relationship. The sub-themes are marriage as a continuation of courtship; Juggling between career and family life; Concerns about time; Housework, and Recreation.

In general, referring to the sample, men and women’s concerns about lifestyle changes appear to be different. While men seem to focus more on time and presence concerns, women are more focused on their eventual and predicted loss of career improvement/development possibilities.
6.2.1. Supra-Theme 1: Marriage as a Continuation of Courtship

All participating couples expect courtship behaviour to continue into married life. Such expectation primarily involves desired behaviour. Undesired behaviour, like conflict, was also expected to continue by some of the participating couples.

Excerpt 1:

Joe: Let me, and then Linda will speak for herself, let me ...ehm. Say what I expect ... or how I’m looking at things. First of all I don’t see getting married as the starting point of something. For me it’s a continuation of a relationship that has already started. I, for me, ... I ... once I, in my mind, I decide that I want to spend my life with a person, I’m not ... mentally I wouldn’t wait for the day I get married to start living with the person. I mean ... if there is something which is good ... sort of good between us ... like we communicate, we talk, you know like, we fight, anyway. To be honest, at that level I expect more of the same, in a sense, I mean we still have to communicate, we still have to fight and argue.

Excerpt 2:

Amanda: What I expect is that he remains the same with me. That he respects me and that he does not take me for granted. That he loves me and not look for someone else.

6.2.2. Supra-Theme 2: Juggling Between Work and Family Life

Because the majority of the couples interviewed for this research expect to pursue a career they also expect to find juggling between career development and family life to be tough. Participating men and women add a part-time job to their primary work in
order to repay the house loan sooner, leaving little time for the relationship. Related tensions were expressed, for example the dilemma between investing in the family through studying, working to repay the house loan quicker, and simultaneously delaying childbearing. Women in particular felt torn by this dilemma.

Sharon:  
*Because I study as well, I mean, he works until 7.30 pm and I started a part-time and I study as well, at home I will be doing everything myself, I mean the cooking and the washing, everything. And so there's little time left. At times we just phone each other. That bugs me a bit. Because if we are together even if we are tired, we sit by each other and talk, ask each other how we are, about the day. But at least you can talk face to face and not over the phone.*

Later on Sharon expands the argument further:

Sharon:  
*I would like to have only one child (laughs) but … (incomprehensible). But in today's life I don't want to have a baby and don't dedicate time for her. And I, if I have two, we're both with a career, and I don't want to put my career before them neither. But you cannot not work. And they don't offer much opportunities, they tell you ‘you can work with reduced hours up to eight years’, for example. And then rules and regulations and you have to go in at a certain time. You don't have flexibility and so it’s obvious. So it’s very difficult to have two children.*

Work-life balance issues for a man may look different but the tension remains.

Joe:  
*… I mean for all intents and purposes, although I live at home with my mother and father, but … sort of times to be with Linda are times which are planned. I mean when you are married its not planned time but all time … ehm … so you would have to … in my case … in my case ! … with a job that’s very, very taxing, with a lot of pressures, I still need to figure out how I am going to juggle all the commitments together, not for the relationship only, but how to fit those commitments within a new relationship which … ehm … will be constant … Not that its not constant now … ehm … but living together is different.*
6.2.3. Supra-Theme 3: Concerns About Time

Work overload is also reflected in time availability. Participating men and women equally expressed a concern around time and how busy they are and expect themselves and each other to be after the wedding.

Emanuel:  
*This is a problem. The problem is simple and it translates in time. A day has only 24 hours, and a lot of it we work or we sleep. In a way the day has only three hours. Well, our day together will be like that. In which we have to cook, eat, shower, ... So in these three hours one would need to encompass all the work, and housework etc. It troubles me, this time issue because I would like to have time to relax. And till now, in my life, I didn’t relax as much as I should have. And I’m not seeing that things are going to improve a lot, in the sense that ... I mean I hope and I do believe that the things we will be doing as a married couple and which are new, I mean housework and the like, ehm ... we become more practical about them so as to reduce their time as much as possible. I’m the type who is fixated on efficiency and these sort of things.*

6.2.4. Supra-Theme 4: Concerns About Housework

Aware about limited time available most participating couples expect housework to be a challenge after the wedding.

Linda:  
*Yes it is a challenge ... ehm ... the fact that now I go home and find everything ready ... practically I don’t do anything at home. Ehm ... and I know that because I work shorter hours than Joe ... Not because I believe that women have to do all the housework ... but because I work shorter hours than Joe ... I know there will be certain work to do at home when we are married ... work which I don’t do now. Quite frankly it’s work I don’t like. And if I don’t do it, sort of, I don’t expect Joe to do it, since I will be having more time at home. To a very big extent I feel it is my ... it is going to be my role. Ehm ... At the same time it doesn’t scare me ... It is more a question of ...*
ehm… I have to find a new way how to organize my time, you know.

This theme has gender implications attached particularly because participating women expect their future husbands to share the workload while they are working full-time. Simultaneously, women generally expect that they will have to do the housework on their own, as their partner is expected to work longer hours.

Shirley:  
For example, I do expect, because we both work, to work together at home, right. So that we’d be the same. Not for example we both work outside the home and then at home I do all the work on my own. Or vice versa.

Magdala and Tarcisio were the couple presenting traditional expectations of marriage. Possibly due to Tarcisio’s age, being some 15 years older than his partner, with a house paid and a stable job ahead, the partners agreed that Magdala stops working completely after the wedding to dedicate herself to housework and eventual childrearing. Magdala states this in two separate accounts.

Excerpt 1:

Magdala:  
That’s why I’m stopping from work, then I will have housework to do. If I’ll have twins like my sister that would involve a lot of work. My sisters are twins …

Excerpt 2:

Magdala:  
I will stop from work when I marry, I want to care for my children.
6.2.5. Supra-Theme 5: Concerns About Recreation

As is expected of people who expect their marriage to be poor of time, the couples interviewed expect recreation to feature minimally in their future marital relationship. Nevertheless, all couples acknowledge the value of recreation in their future marital relationship.

Excerpt:

Joe: *In what sense recreation?*

Linda: *Having fun for example?*

Joe: *It’s a very strange word for me … (laughs jokingly)*

Interviewer: *How do you expect to have time together and recreate yourselves?*

Joe: *I have no idea quite honestly … … but anyway ...(laughs) this word … recreation … is not very much in my books, work is …*

Excerpt 2:

Maria: *… Because I would like us to go and cycle together, that we watch some films both at home and at cinema. Every now and then going out for a meal together. It would be good if we go for a holiday together once a year. I expect us to make an effort to stop doing whatever we’re doing at 8.30 p.m. and watch some television, and try to relax, because I think that’s healthy. I also expect to say a prayer together before we sleep.*

6.3. Category 2: Boundary Making

Boundary making consists of two suprathemes; inter-relational boundary making activities which partners perform both separately and together in relation to others,
and intra-relational boundary making activities which occur within the relationship between the partners. Both are implicated with the couple’s developing narrative.

**6.3.1. Supra-Theme 1: Inter-Relationship Boundaries**

Generally there seems to have been a progression of intensification of inter-relationship boundary making activities amongst the couples interviewed which featured as follows:

1. Boundaries with friends
2. House buying as a way of establishing physical boundaries
3. Boundaries with relatives
4. Establishing common goals and interests
5. The establishment of a sense of prediction

Couples generally expect to establish and keep clear boundaries in respect to friends.

**Claire:** I’m very wary of friends. In my my my … I don’t have many friends at the moment. I never had a lot of friends because (I’m) a bit of a reserved person. In the marital home it’s not their place. ‘Il hbieb sal-bieb’ goes the Maltese (friends until the front door). I don’t think it’s appropriate for my husband to come home and find my friend on the sofa, for example. So I don’t intend to give parties at home and open the door like it’s a … you know? My home is mine and my husband’s.

Boundaries with the respective families of origin are expected at different degrees between detachment and enmeshment. On one extreme Massimo and Shirley, because of their troubled experience with their respective parents, prefer the least contact possible.
Shirley: *Oh with our parents … The least contact possible and the less we meet the better.*

Massimo: *And we will speak about general things and not what happens between us.*

On the other end of the continuum, Maria expects that a clearer couple identity and an increased understanding of their respective parents will draw them closer to their relatives.

Maria: *I expect us to relate with his parents and my parents as a couple. I expect us to become closer, I think. Because we would be married like they are. It’s like changing your mentality. Ehm … I also expect to unite with them more … and to seek them more than when we were before. Before it was like time for friends and now it’s like more time for the family. For example we would invite our relatives more at home.*

In between the two extremes, some participants expect their partner to intensify the boundary with the parents. Amanda used the interview to make her expectations clearer to Jason.

Amanda: *I wish that there will be no intrusions. Sort of … ehm … With his family he is the spoilt child … that sort … and I, in a way, am afraid at times. That’s one of the things that scares me … that they may intrude … not that I don’t want them to visit, but I don’t want them there all the time … sort of … that scares me.*

Patrick and Sharon’s boundary making is expected to be a tough challenge involving an ‘intrusive’ pastor. Patrick in particular appeared to be very angry and concerned as he struggles to establish protective boundaries around the couple. Issues of power inequality are also reflected in his attempt at affirming himself within the relationship. The couple’s struggle to define the relationship is visible in the following excerpt.
Sharon: *Ehm ... because a lot of problems cropped up. My pastor did not accept. Well, I agree with him. He did not accept. I mean this is like when someone is a Muslim. He's not going to marry in Church, would he? I had a lot of trouble in fact. A real lot. But at the end me and him (Patrick) agreed to make a biblical service and holy communion ...*

Patrick: *(Angrily) ... And that the pastor doesn't show himself up in there ...*

Sharon: *(Gallows laugh) No of course.*

Interviewer: *So when you say you're marrying in Church it's within the Catholic Church that you're marrying aren't you?*

Patrick & Sharon: *Yes, yes.*

Sharon: *I had to discuss it with the pastor. He had told me that it is unacceptable for me to marry in Church. I don't blame him. But he almost fired me from the denomination. The thing is that he told me that I will be betraying whatever I learned. He's right and I agree with him. It's true. But in the end ... for example it's different abroad. There are bigger denominations and so forth. It's more difficult in Malta. It's like you're saying you have another Church apart from the Catholic Church. So now I clashed with him.*

Patrick: *And according to me, the persons to decide are me and Sharon and not someone who is foreign to us.*

The buying of the couple’s future residential home and its location can also be seen as another attempt at boundary making, a statement of couple-hood, and the advancement of couple identity formation. While the theme of couple identity development will be considered later in another section, suffice it to say at this point that like relatively all Maltese couples, the couples in this sample have bought their future matrimonial home.
6.3.2. Supra-Theme 2: Intra-relationship Boundaries - Finding a Balance Between Togetherness and Separateness

Courtship has reportedly been marked by intense feelings of togetherness and fusion frequently intensified by the partners’ sensation of boundarylessness. Several couples reported having developed the capacity to understand their partner’s mood and the content of the partner’s thinking. This empathic capacity may be a necessary component for the creation of safety and predictability, making marriage a manageable leap.

Massimo:  Oh yes I can visualize it. And I mean, it’s amazing because it never happened to me in my life before, but we know each other so well, in this relatively short time together, that I know even her temperament, how she would react to certain situations. I can almost anticipate.

For example in the back of her mind she would also be thinking in what I am thinking. I mean we became so used to each other that when she sees me a bit distracted, she would know immediately what it is that I have or not.

Boundary making activities are also expected between partners within the relationship. This is visible in the form of a balance between togetherness and separateness denoting the interplay between the personal and the relational. Participating women seem to expect increased togetherness and closeness. Men, on the other hand, seem to expect to have their own space respected within the relationship.

Grace:  ... you have to live together and ... how do you say it ... and that you, sort of ... ehm ... that everything is done together ...
everything now … the most important is that we’re together … it is something that we’d been waiting for so long. Our aim was this, that we live happily. I think that’s it. To do everything together.

Michael: (long silence). Maybe … maybe that everyone will have his own time as well. So while we do things together each of us will have some time for himself as well. That if I go somewhere, let me put it this way, ehm … sort of she knows what my hobby is … I go jogging, that’s my only hobby and it truly helps me to detach myself from everything. So that time is mine … and she knows that if I don’t go at least once a week, she knows how I will end up. I end up like a vegetable. And I would also like to give her her own time, sort of. But I, I don’t know, she wants to stay with me almost all the time …


Earlier themes point towards the developmental nature of expectations of marriage. Another process emerged whereby couples fine-tune their expectations by a series of comparisons they make to check their relational status and values. Comparison seems necessary for the constant re-construction of relational patterns and to create a sense of predictability. Three types of comparison emerged namely:

Dominant Theme 1: Between the couple and other known couples.

Dominant Theme 2: Between the couple and the general local situation.

Dominant Theme 3: Between the couple in the present and in the past.
6.4.1. Dominant Theme 1: Comparison Between the Couple and Other Known Couples

The security other known couples, particularly siblings, provide as a point of reference for the participating couples emerges as an important feature of comparison. Looking at others seems to provide a sense of reliable predictability.

Excerpt 1:

Tarcisio: Look, we are seven in our family, four of us are married. Two of my brothers and myself are still unmarried, one of them has married twice, but until today, I mean my brothers have been married for long, and all of them sort of have their family and their home. I mean they don’t complain about being married, they seem to feel happy about it.

Magdala: … and they are all united with their families.

Tarcisio: You can see it, that they live for the children, sort of, The children are all reared up well. One has two children, 25 years married …

Magdala: My siblings are all married, one of my brothers had died of cancer, and they all have children, one has three and the other has three.

Interviewer: So you both have families that when you look at them they give you hope about your marriage.

Tarcisio: Yes we have the view that marriage unites, and is enjoyable, especially with children, you know what I mean.

Excerpt 2:

Massimo: … I had an older sister, she had to face the same situation we are facing now. Because they (parents) did not want her husband. And they started projecting, in spite of the fact that they married anyway. They are projecting what happened with my sister onto me. They are saying that she (Shirley) will not respect me. But I think she could have been anyone. This happened with any girlfriend I had. They always found
something wrong with them. They used to tell me ‘you deserve better’ and ‘she’s not the right one for you’.

6.4.2. Dominant Theme 2: Comparison Between the Couple Itself and the General Local Situation

In the process of constructing their expectations of marriage some couples compared their relationship with the local general situation. Impressed by the increasing separation rate and marital breakdown, these couples looked at others’ failure to construct their ideal of a healthy relationship. This provides them with an internal sense of reassurance and predictability.

Excerpt 1:

Michael: I think a lot … I think that many of the marriages that are ending it’s because many think only about themselves. We are living in a society in which everyone considers only himself, and sort of …

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: Look, let me tell you. We are both aware, our feet are both on the ground and we know, some of our own friends broke down … separated … ehm … at work, I’m not shy to say … there are teachers who fling with other teachers for example, God forbid. Something which for us is shocking as well. Sort of they are people we know. And then … I mean it’s people you don’t expect such things from. Massimo had told me this a few days ago. At the same time, I say to myself, this is what I say to myself and I always say it, I say if me and him are making all our efforts to build a solid ground in courtship, we have these values, we know that we are trusting each other, because at the same time we both trust in God.
Excerpt 3:

Massimo: *It* (the increasing marital breakdown in Malta) *keeps us alert, but we are capable, between us, we take more care of each other, sort of, than most other couples around us do. I’m not saying we don’t care, but the first thing we look at is our relationship. We say ‘it’s true these are things that happen, but, her, Shirley, I know her enough, and I can visualize how the future can be.*

6.4.3. Dominant Theme 3: Comparison Between the Couple in the Present and in the Past.

Some participating couples compared themselves with their own past performance.

Surviving the difficult times of early courtship emerges as an important feature in the construction of their narrative about their future marriage.

Excerpt 1:

Grace: *We’ve been through good and not so good situations together …* and once you go through them, then you go through other things in the future as well.

Interviewer: *It’s very interesting, it’s like you’ve made a test to check your strengths.*

Grace: *Yes, that’s how it is …*

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: *But I say ‘We moved beyond so many difficult moments, why can’t we continue working hand in hand’? …*
6.5. Category 4: Becoming a Family

The couples interviewed generally concord on the narrative of family and family life. Their constructions of family constitution, family life and development express a general view of a families as constituted of two partners, married for life in the Church, with two children planned to be born around three years after marriage.

6.5.1. Supra-Theme 1: Marriage is for Life

Marrying in the Church generally represents the ultimate sign of commitment to the relationship and reflects one’s intention of a lifetime union. All the interviewed couples, irrespective of the meaning they attribute to marrying in the Church, expect their marriage to last ‘until death do us part’. Simultaneously, a couple of participants’ commitment was unrelated to marrying in the Church. The local increasing marital instability seems to be having its bearing, as some couples also expressed a sense of unpredictable possibilities which may terminate marriage. I asked Adrian and Claire “How long do you expect your marriage to last?”:

Excerpt 1:

Adrian: *How long? Forever no?*

Claire: *Forever.*

Adrian: *I think that’s obvious. Otherwise I wouldn’t have married. We’re taking it seriously you know.*

Claire: *Is there anyone who marries without wanting the relationship to last forever?*
Excerpt 2:

Tarcisio: *How sweet he is! (to Magdala referring to me) Forever!*

Magdala: *Forever, until one of us dies anyway.*

While expecting their marriage to last a lifetime, some couples also harbour a concern about the possibility of future separation.

Excerpt 1:

Amanda: *A commitment for life is not a joke.*

Interviewer: *You are mentioning for life. So you do expect that once you’re married it’s forever. You expect it will last forever.*

Amanda & Jason: *Yes*

Jason: *I hope that it will be ... a normal marriage, sort of, not marrying and then separating with the first problem.*

Amanda: *We hear of so many marriages that break up! That you’d be scared ...*

Excerpt 2:

Michael: *Until we last, until death ...*

Grace: *Supposedly ...*

6.5.2. Supra-Theme 2: Marrying in the Church

Invariably, marrying in the Church emerges as the only acceptable way of ‘proper’ marriage. Yet, the meaning attributed to the ritual varies between couples and between partners. Marrying in the Church is therefore an automatic and undecided expectation
and many couples admitted there was no choice involved. Cultural and extended family forces were highly visible throughout the interviews.

Excerpt 1:

Interviewer:  Why have you chosen to marry in Church? Why haven’t you chosen to cohabit or not marry at all for example?

Josienne:  Because of our religion, it’s better if we do it in God’s house and the sort.

Noel:  Because we were brought up in religion and therefore sort of … marriage is its pinnacle … even for us we feel it’s a good thing.

Interviewer:  What makes you feel it’s a good thing?

Noel:  First of all because what is united by God no one can divide. And then it’s a sacrament … and we always believed in sacraments.

Excerpt 2:

Shirley:  I never even imagined that we’d marry civilly only, for example. It doesn’t even cross my mind. The question is very easy to answer, as we are saying there is no way anyone can change my mind. Not even if my parents tried to convince me. For me the sacrament is everything. For me there is no marriage without a sacrament. For me God comes first, the very very first. And whatever happens, even with you (Massimo) during courtship, we always recurred to God. We always prayed together and for me there is no marriage without a sacrament.

Excerpt 3:

Claire:  My parents would have thrown me out. I don’t know about yours but …. For them it’s a disgrace, they’d feel dishonoured … and all that sort of thing. I don’t know what I will think about it when I will have my own children. But for me it wasn’t even an option. I never considered it. I don’t know if it’s good or not to cohabit before marriage. I don’t know so I am not going to risk.
Adrian: *It’s fashionable* (cohabitation before marriage). I talk to a lot of people and they want to live together before, so... because of finances and some stuff like that... they’re inventing things...

Claire: *So that wasn’t even an option. For neither of us I think...*

Adrian: *... for neither of us even from my parents’ side...*

Claire: *... especially his mother*

Adrian: *... My parents are so Catholic and traditional that they wouldn’t have permitted me marrying someone who is not Catholic... you see...*

6.5.3. Supra-Theme 3: Family and Children

Becoming a family also means having children. Generally, having children emerges as an expected natural consequence after marrying. While couples may have different opinions about when to have children and how many, there seems to be a consensus among all couples that, as one participant put it, ‘A childless family is no family at all’.

**Excerpt 1:**

Grace: *You expect to have a happy life. To be happy. To have all the support obviously. To have children no!? It’s obvious to have a family ... heq ..*

**Excerpt 2:**

Noel: *What’s marriage without children. It’s what makes the family.*

...
6.5.4. Supra-Theme 4: Timing of Childbearing

Generally, participating couples expect to have children approximately between one and two years after the wedding. The reasons given for this preference vary but frequently revolve around the couple expecting to enjoy each other for a while and around financial restraints.

Earlier on in the interview, women expressed the dilemma between wanting to have children immediately after the wedding because of their increasing age. Only one couple expects to conceive children immediately after the wedding. Almost all couples expect to have two children.

Excerpt 1:

Amanda: Yes, maximum two. Not more. We never discussed this as such though … I would like to leave some time before that though, for the simple reason that we have a house to repay … sort of we have a commitment … we don’t enjoy ourselves much … I would like us to enjoy each other first.

Jason: The same here. I would like us to spend some time on our own to enjoy each other. Lately, since we bought the house, sort of, we locked ourselves inside, we didn’t enjoy ourselves much. You know … I mean we will have children … we never talked about it really, when we decide we decide. We would like to have something in the house.

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: Because these things are in the hands of the Lord, aren’t they? And we don’t prolong it more because I am not young anymore.

Massimo: Exactly, we also took that into consideration.

Shirley: So we couldn’t actually leave five years to repay the loan and then have the children …
Some women expect to finish their studies before bearing children.

Sharon:  
First I want to finish the studies I'm doing, supposedly by June 2005 I'd be finished. So that I'd be more relaxed and we'd be one year married.

6.5.5. Supra-Theme 5: Parenting of Children

All participating couples expect to give their future children the best parenting. While the couples’ construction of what is ‘best’ remains idiosyncratic, two specific expectations emerged. First, they expect to rear their children without resorting to their parents’ help. The second is that child-rearing is expected to be the women’s responsibility with men’s role being peripheral.

Excerpt 1:

Maria:  
I’m expecting to stop working when we have children, just for some time. Obviously because of the love towards the children. Obviously, the career will take a step back. Maybe until that time I will be running my own Gestalt clinic and would therefore be able to work at my own pace. Ehmm … I don’t know but I guess it’s me who will have to stop working. I think it’s better for the children and for the family. And his wage is much higher than mine. Second not because I don’t think he’ll be good with the children, on the contrary, I think he will be very good actually. But in the first and second year of the children it’s more important that the mother be present, than the father. Well that’s what I think. I don’t know. I’m sure I won’t be bored at home but I do say to myself ‘who knows what will happen’ and how will I be spending time when … but I’m sure I will find a lot to do.

Excerpt 2:

Amanda:  
But I don’t want that my children will be kept by their grandparents. Even if I had to change to part-time work or reduced hours. Because at the same time I don’t like the idea of locking myself at home and be a housewife. Do you
understand? But I imagine that once you have a baby you have to stop working obviously, so that you can rear the children.

Jason: I wish that she rears the boy until he goes to school. And when he goes to school she can go back to work while he’s at school. I prefer her not to work before the child goes to school. I don’t want to leave the baby with someone else so that they rear him. I would like us to rear him.

6. 6. Category 5: Challenges Related to Differences

Participating couples expect to encounter three main types of challenges as a result of the differences between them. The first are challenges related to personal qualities of partners, and the second challenges related to expression of affect. The third challenge involves gender roles and its various peculiarities.

6.6.1. Supra-Theme 1: Challenges Related to Personal Qualities

The challenges included in this section relate particularly to the participants’ own or their partner’s personal characteristics. Mood swings, rationality-emotionality, expression of affect, and assertiveness were brought up by participants.

Excerpt 1:

Joe: A challenge that I need to overcome is … ehm … I have to manage, not manage, her mood swings. Linda suffers a little with mood swings … ehm …

Linda: That’s what I was thinking.

Joe: … ehm … and I have to manage it. To be honest I’m already, I mean, I’m not the type … I don’t think that … At times it’s not because I don’t realize because when I realize I can cope with it. But sometimes I don’t realize … ehm … I forget … so it’s a challenge at the same time I have some experience because my mother suffers from the same thing (laughs lightly). So I
already have experience of coping with a person with mood swings. I mean, it’s still challenging, it’s not something I enjoy doing, to be honest, at all. It is a challenge. You wouldn’t know.

Excerpt 2:

Linda: I was thinking about, ehm, sometimes, Joe’s rationality. Joe is the head and I am the heart. Ehm, at times it works well and compliments each other beautifully. Its downside is that I feel he does not understand me, at times, you know. A case in point now is that I am currently going through two days of panic, you know, at times I go through moods … ehm even because of the wedding, you know like …

Excerpt 3:

Amanda: Yes … I think what bothers me most in him is that he is too good. That he serves everyone without being able to say no. I mean … OK he did change a bit …

Expression of affect in particular expresses a gender difference with women expecting more expression of affect from their male counterparts. Men seem to dislike expression of affect. Among all the participating men, only Joe was aware that this ‘lack’ may require some effort to change in his future marriage.

Excerpt 1:

Joe: I’m certain … to tell you the truth I know I have to work on that, you know? She’s, you know? Affectionate. … She likes cuddling … and it runs shiver up my spine. Do you understand?

Linda: Even if I do this (touches his leg)

Joe: Even if someone touches my legs I tickle. Do you understand? That is going to be a challenge. A challenge for her …

Linda: It has been a challenge …

Interviewer: It’s therefore a challenge for both of you in different ways.

Linda and Joe: Yes, yes, yes
Joe: It is to both of us because one would always feel ... ehm ... lacking. Lacking as in not being given. And the other one would always feel lacking in not being able to give.

Excerpt 2:

Noel: Nothing out of this world. Not a lot of buttering up and the sort.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that?

Noel: I mean not that sweetness and comedies, that buttering up is not of my taste.

Interviewer: So you don’t like caresses?

Noel: No no no, I don’t like it. I want us to be real and not a lot of abundant sweetness.

Interviewer: What is abundant sweetness in your view?

Noel: I feel it is something which she uses to cheat me. I mean a lot of caresses.

6.6.2. Supra-Theme 2: Division of Roles

Generally, both men and women expected gender roles distribution along the traditional narrative with women expecting and expected to provide care and men to provide financial security and protection.

Expected care from women involves housework, childcare, and provision of affect.

Excerpt 1:

Shirley: ... at home I will be doing everything myself, I mean the cooking and the washing, everything.

Excerpt 2:

Josienne: If I am off work and we have children and he comes home from work, tired, I cannot expect him to stay with them for me either. And if they cry at night I wake up and take them away. Because
if he has a hard day the following day ... you know what I mean. But then he can help as well, and not take it personally and be offended if I ask him ...

Excerpt 3:

Sharon: Perhaps the plates as well, but I cannot imagine him washing the floors. If there is a great need he’d know, but I’m not going to ask him. I can imagine him dusting around but not the floor. He himself had told me that he would not wash the floors. And I don’t see it as his role neither. And I don’t think he’s ever done it. For me it’s enough if he helps with the dishes or dusting.

Men were expected and expect to work longer hours, especially while women are raising the future children, do less housework, and provide a secure home environment through provision and management of finance and maintenance work.

Joe: I think it’s me that’s gonna be taking care of that (finances)... I don’t trust her to take care of money ...

Linda: I am hopeless … I’m not a money manager

Joe: But … what we had talked was, what we had talked was, at least, that her wage, that her wage goes for the daily running of the daily living of us as a couple as a family. And my salary would go either to savings, because she wouldn’t save … ehm … or in investments and capital assets (jokingly) or other big investments, you know sort of buying a kitchen … you know like.

The protective role men expect and are expected to perform has been expressed in various forms. One interesting protective feature expressed by Patrick who feels it is also his duty to provide a safe operational environment in the kitchen for his future wife.

Excerpt 1:

Patrick: It (cooker) wasn’t good anyway. It had no brand name on it, nor any serial number. I think about safety then. Perhaps it was an imitation. In the end she accepted that the cooker of her dreams does not really exist. And the one we chose is still nice.
Excerpt 2:

Emanuel: So the first sacred thing ... ha... I want to be certain, not be certain, But I’m always striving, and thinking all the time, how on the day we have children Maria would be able to stop working. Right? ... I mean she would have a choice that if she could she would stop working and I in some way I have to cope. In this way our family would be right.

Gender role dichotomy emerged as a taken for granted feature and couples don’t even question it.

Excerpt 1:

Interviewer: That’s interesting, for example why she and not you? Why this choice.

Noel: In the sense ...

Josienne: ... He has to go to work ...

Noel: ... I cannot stay at home. I cannot stop working, No?

Excerpt 2:

Shirley: Sort of men, how would I say it, should be doing things which are different from those the woman does. I’m not saying always. But certain problems he solves them, I don’t. Not because I don’t know how to, but he would know better. For example he pays the bills, if something happens in the car it’s him, for example if it has to go to the mechanic ... regarding computer both of us, but he is more capable. When it comes to writing, for example writing a letter, he’s the one. Ehm ...

Rather than an equal share of responsibilities, the couples interviewed generally expect that marriage is a business of polarized responsibilities within which males and females have distinct roles.
Excerpt 1:

Shirley: No, not equal. Although I do like it when he tells me ‘let me cook something’ or when he does his dishes. But on the other side I also understand, this is something I never told him ... at times I feel that even if the man ends up doing housework he loses his masculinity. Sort of men, how would I say it, should be doing things which are different from those the woman does. I’m not saying always. But certain problems he solves them, I don’t. Not because I don’t know how to, but he would know better.

Excerpt 2:

Claire: My career, being a woman, is never on the same footing as that of a man, in my opinion. In spite of all this talk on gender equality I don’t believe we’re on the same level. I doubt that we will ever be. ...  

6.7. Interpretation

This section discusses the broad categories that were identified in the analysis. Such discussion involves an interpretative attempt at connecting the themes that emerged, thus portraying a coherent story about the findings. In this endeavor, I will try to remain as loyal as possible to the participants’ perspective and in doing so, I will refer back to the transcripts and present excerpts as supporting evidence for my interpretations.

6.7.1. Marriage as a Continuation of Courtship

Referring particularly to desired behaviour, e.g. closeness, intimacy, communication, and the sharing of house chores, participants generally expect courtship behaviour to extend into their marriage. The one undesired behaviour that was expected to continue
into marriage was conflict. Unpredictable circumstances were also mentioned. Most participants, like Shirley, also felt their relationship to be at its best, and foresaw minor space for improvement after the wedding. As she herself declared: “What do I expect from him? Eh... he already does all the things I expect from him”.

This theme raised several questions which I struggled with for quite some time. What factors influence such construction of readiness? What implications are there on the couples’ construction of their future marriage? Is this a romantic illusion or sentiment override? Or is it realistic?

My general hypothesis is that marriage is constructed by the participants as an end in itself rather than as a beginning. This is not surprising, especially when considering the length of courtship of the couples interviewed and the tasks they manage to complete within it. Five out of the nine had a courtship length between five and a half years and ten years. The extended courtship period in Malta has already been documented (Cachia, 1996; Abela, 1998) and suggests a diversification from Anglo-American cultures. During courtship Maltese couples often achieve tasks which in Anglo-American literature are reportedly achieved during the first years of marriage (Cachia, 1996). This may add the heightened sense of marriage as a destination rather than a start.

One general courtship task that emerged in this study, perhaps linked with the length of courtship, is the construction of a relationship narrative, which I will explore later. Three particular courtship tasks also emerged suggesting that courting couples in Malta, as Cachia (1996) and Abela (1998) had argued, achieve several psychological
and material tasks before marrying. The three tasks are: balance between togetherness and separateness; boundary making; and house buying. I will only tackle these tasks very briefly here and elaborate on them as separate themes later on.

The first task involves three inter-linked processes apparently necessary for the relationship’s consolidation. These processes are the capacity to empathize with each other, the possibility to predict about the stability of the relationship by comparing their relationship with that of others around them. Empathy seems to provide partners with a sense of connectedness, understanding, and oneness. Predictability seems to provide a sense of security and reassurance partners intuit from each other, and serves as a kind of ‘guarantee’ against violations in the relationship, for example infidelity.

The balance between togetherness and separateness lies at the basis of the construction of a relationship narrative which involves “constant and inevitable tensions between the individuality and autonomy necessary for the emotional health of each of the partners” (Ruszczynski, 1995, p.45-46). These tasks have been visible throughout the transcripts through the partners’ creation of common hobbies, not going out with friends to be able to be together, and buying things together, or at least consulting with each other before they buy things for themselves, are just few examples.

The second courtship task, boundary making, involves the construction of a protective psychological and physical distance occurring at individual and the relational levels simultaneously. At an individual level, each partner distances themself from their friends and family of origin to get closer to their partner and establish the “capacity to tolerate being both part of something and not part of something” (Ruszczynski, 1995,
This is described as the balance constituting psychological health. At a relationship level, partners perform activities to socially transmit their constructed union and make it public. Such a public statement is one of the most important aspects of commitment, particularly within a small community like Malta where extended family ties are still strong and where what neighbors think still matters a lot. Through boundary making, participants construct greater, or unrealistic, expectations on the marital union as the sole source of fulfillment of one’s individual needs, at the exclusion of other sources.

One major material task achieved during courtship is the buying of a house, in spite of the relatively high costs of residential property in Malta (Seychell, 2005; The Times, 2003a). Official statistics published by the NSO (2004) show a 241.9% increase in personal loans between 1994 and 2002 with the Maltese borrowing up to 34% of their earnings to buy their property. Apart from being considered a necessity, house buying is also one of the ultimate steps towards a lifelong commitment as well as another public statement of the commitment highlighting the seriousness of the relationship. It also establishes a physical boundary between the couple and the outside world.

The above tasks expose partners to a wider spectrum of relationship activities and experiences normally associated to a later stage of the family life cycle in Anglo-American literature. In the Maltese context, the construction of the shared reality Richards (1993) and others (Duvall & Miller, 1985; Carter & McGoldrick, 1980) attribute to marriage, starts well before marriage. One might think however, that such construction can involve an illusive sense of closeness, which leaves the couple feeling so emotionally close that the only remaining significant change will happen
through the ‘final step’ of the transition, i.e. living together, which local tradition and culture strongly associate with marriage.

These themes may be seen as fitting the enduring dynamics model (Caughlin, Huston, & Houts, 2000) which presumes that relationship patterns are established during courtship and carried over to the marital relationship. The relatively long courtship permits partners to “enter the relationship with their eyes open to their partner’s and their relationship’s shortcomings” (Huston, et al., 2001, p. 239). However, still concerned about the extent of the awareness with which Maltese couples enter marriage, I agree with Abela (1998) that “the various stages of a long betrothal also need to be explored” (p. 325).

6.7.2. Expected Life-Style Changes

While expecting to carry desired behaviour patterns into their future marriage, couples also expect their future marriage to offer challenges to their lifestyle. All the themes that emerged under this category concur with the balance between time together and time away from each other. While couples expect marriage to continue providing a sense of connectedness, they seem to expect that marriage will bring changes to the way they perform, or rather execute, that connectedness, through living together.

Lifestyle changes can be described as changes in one’s way of living one’s time. Four major concerns emerged as themes under this category. These are: juggling between work and family life balance; concerns around time; concerns around housework; and concerns about recreation.
One striking general difference emerged between career-oriented couples and couples who expressed a disinterest in pursuing a career. The former expressed more concern around lifestyle changes, while the latter seemed more inclined to engage in traditional gender roles. Career-oriented couples expected marriage to be more challenging in terms of time, as they shift from a “part-time” courtship relationship into a “full-time” marital relationship. Such concern might be because career-oriented couples already experienced longer working hours and less time together during courtship than non-career-oriented couples do. While career-oriented couples generally hoped to manage their marital relationship better after the wedding non-career-oriented couples looked forward to marrying, expecting to relieve pre-marital tension created by wedding preparation.

How does this relate to the fact that both types of couples generally perceive their marriage as an end in itself rather than a beginning? One argument is that couples vary in their construction of marriage as a final destination. For example, of major concern to career-oriented men are the long hours they normally spend at work. They expected that the actual living together after the wedding would increase the tension between being more present at home with their partners and providing for the family.

At the root of this tension lies the dilemma between a traditional construction of marriage and the growing post-traditional demands. It is common in fact that “males tend to have part-time employment together with a full-time occupation” (Central Office of Statistics, 1999, p.48; National Statistics Office, 2006c). Men generally

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2 By career-oriented is meant those who have in mind continuous and life-long development and advancement in their career. Most of these persons have at least a tertiary education level. By
assume the role of provision of finances well before marriage (Abela, 2000) even though women in courtship, and in marriage, generally work as much as men do (in my sample there were three women who had a part-time job alongside their primary occupation). Adding to the tension is the fact that participating women also expected their future husbands to adopt the provision role generally, but especially when children arrive. Grace could not bear the idea that her husband stops working to stay home with the children while she pursues her career, “How can he stop working?” In my view, this double-binds men between being expected to assume the traditional role of the primary breadwinner and simultaneously assuming the post-traditional role of sharing this primary role with his partner. Such tension will inevitably cause both personal and relational distress.

Non-career-oriented women expected that they and their partner would dedicate more time to the relationship and the family after the wedding. Career-oriented women on the other hand expected that they and their partner would have limited time to spend together. Perhaps consequently, whereas career-oriented women expected to have difficulties around housework, non-career-oriented women expected housework to be part of their future role. All women, career-oriented or not, however, equally expressed that they expect their partner to help them around with housework when they marry, as they do now during the final days of courtship while preparing for their new home.

Recreation has been described as an increasing value among the Maltese (Abela, 2000) occurring mainly during weekend days (NSO, 2004). In this sample, women
disinterested in career I mean those who only envision having a job in which they only invest the daily eight hours’ work.
expected recreation to feature in their married life more than men. One strong gender difference is that while generally women’s construction of recreation is time together with their partner, men’s is time on their own. Career-oriented men expected to have less time for recreation than non-career-oriented men. All participants, however, expected to have at least Sunday off, with women emphasizing and demanding that it has to be spent with the family and men generally struggling to retain some time for their own activities and hobbies. This has strong implications on gender difference and attachment in romantic relationships, a theme I will be exploring later.

Another important implication is the role work-family-life balance plays in people’s psychological well being. While being a recent re-discovery, the importance of work-family-life balance has featured much earlier in psychology with Freud commenting that to be healthy, people must be able to love and work. Yet it appears that the demands of love and work often clash, partly because of gender differences and partly because of the tension between personal needs, relational needs, and job demands as participants in this research themselves are saying.

6.7.3. Balance Between Togetherness and Separateness

Several were the excerpts in the transcripts pointing towards the developmental task of finding a balance between togetherness and separateness. Relationships offer the challenge of the construction of a unique shared narrative (Dallos, 1997) distinguishing the couple from other couples in the context. The resulting unique relational identity involves a reconsideration of the personal narratives of the self, as well as a reconsideration of the narratives constructed about the partner. The
following discussion on boundaries is highly related and while boundary making here refers to boundaries between the couple and the outside world, togetherness and separateness reflects boundaries within the relationship, between one’s identity as an individual and one’s identity as a partner.

The general picture presented in the excerpts is that women, more than men, constructed romanticized expectations about togetherness like “doing everything together” and “being together all the time”. Women were also more detailed in their narratives about their future closeness and included explanations about the difference in being together watching a film and being together talking, implying that talking is the expected way of being together. Claire’s narrative, for example, involves dedicating her “extra free time” to herself if she will have it because she expects herself and her partner to dedicate their free time to each other.

Generally, men constructed expectations around separateness and seemed to expect their partner to appreciate their need to have time on their own. One clear example was that of Michael and Grace whereby Grace continuously speaks about doing everything together while Michael interjects to express his ‘need’ to be on his own.

The general picture is therefore one in which men’s and women’s construction of space is different, with men appreciating distance and women appreciating closeness. This is another balance partners will have to create through the ‘patterning’ (Dallos, 1997) of their relational health, at both the psychological and the relational levels (Ruszczynski, 1995). The interplay between togetherness and separateness is implicated in the couple’s unique identity achievement as they move from shared
memories to shared narratives and eventually a shared belief system (Dallos, 1997). Retrospectively, I can recall the different couples I interviewed and how I felt with them. For example, with some couples I felt relaxed as they took turns in answering the questions. With others I felt anxious and overwhelmed by their diffused boundaries. I would ask one question to one person and the other answers instead. I recall having to struggle with the sense of suffocation and with politely indicating the need to have clear and uninterrupted answers that will eventually facilitate transcription.

The degree of balance achieved in togetherness and separateness is therefore an indicator of stability in the relationship. This balance resonates with what Rusczcynski (1995) called “the capacity to tolerate being both part of something and not part of something” (p. 46) simultaneously and which constitutes psychological health. It is a fundamental feature of one’s internal ‘capacity for marriage’ (Colman, 1993) and is therefore another developmental milestone for the couples to achieve. Each partner’s need for closeness and distance, as I see it, reflects one’s construction of connectedness, possibly based on one’s infantile relationship with one’s carers. But why the gender difference in my sample?

To answer this question I need to refer to the notions of projective identification (Rusczcynski, 1995) and mutual identification (Colman, 1993). From these perspectives both partners unconsciously invest in each other parts of themselves. The type of investment depends on individual psychological needs and other contextual factors, e.g. cultural and traditional narratives within which the partners live. My hypothesis is that in Malta, where traditional gender roles are still very present, even
though in transition (Abela, 1998), men invest (or rather project) in their partners their own dependence (socially considered to be a female trait), while women project on their men their independence (considered to be a masculine trait). In this way partners become polarized with men taking the independent and women the dependent polarity. This process has been highlighted by Joe and Linda’s expressions “You know how these women are … They feel insecure when they’re alone …” and “Joe is the head and I am the heart”. Various other excerpts reinforce this idea.

Gender differences in relationship investment have been detected and documented (Gilligan, 1982). Fletcher (2002) argues that “women tend to approach and communicate about relationship problems while men are more likely to avoid or withdraw from such interactions” (p.145). Women, generally seem more expert about and motivated towards relationship monitoring, maintenance, and success (Fletcher, 2002). As Hook et al. (2003) put it, women “like being connected, doing things together with others, and they place great emphasis on talking and emotional sharing” (p.464). On the other hand other research findings indicate that gender differences are culturally constructed (Sprecher & Toro-Morn, 2002). In relationships, narratives about gender are co-constructed over time and do not simply belong to either one of the partners (Dallos, 1997).

Another aspect of togetherness that featured was the expectation to empathize with one’s partner, which was generally interpreted by partners as a measure of closeness. Women particularly expressed pride in their ability to empathize. This is not surprising if one takes into consideration the notion of gender role polarization and the mechanisms by which it is achieved, namely projective identification and mutual
identification. What partners may be able to empathize is perhaps that which they themselves project onto their partner. Empathy can be seen as one partner’s story about the other’s story about the world and is one’s vital attempt at making sense of the constructions of the other. Such narratives between the partners evolve as an attempt at predicting and influencing each other (Dallos, 1997). The sense of security created by such narrative is especially needed when one of the biggest leaps in life is imminently attempted. Such empathy emerged regularly during the interviews through for example partners speaking for each other. Gender differences are implicated as the participating women’s heightened sense of empathy might have driven them to interject and to speak for their partner more than men did. One wonders whether this is one seed in the construction of the demand-withdraw pattern later on in marriage (Vogel & Karney, 2002).

Empathy can be said to be the ruler with which partners, particularly women, measure their degree of intimacy and connectedness (togetherness–separateness or closeness-distance). Many theorists agree that intimacy, or rather the degree of perceived closeness, is multi-dimensional, consisting of several components including love and affection, personal validation, trust, and self-disclosure, and whose meaning is idiosyncratic (Hook, et al., 2003). The degree of the partners’ perceived closeness can be evident through language (Tannen, 2003). As I journeyed through the transcripts, I started realizing how participants interchanged between the ‘we’ and the ‘I’. At this point I only consider the use of such terms interesting as an in-depth text analysis is needed to highlight the value of such terms. Simultaneously, several questions remain as to whether the use of such terms reflect one’s perceived degree of closeness, or a couple’s standing on the continuum between togetherness and separateness as
represented by the jointly co-constructed narrative (Berger & Kellner, 1970). Do those who predominantly use the ‘we’ or ‘us’ feel more connected? Do those who predominantly use the ‘I’ feel more independent? Does an interchangeable use between ‘I’ and ‘we’ denote a healthy balance? Or does it reflect one’s transitory impasse between individuality and shared identity? How is the use of such terms linked with the tasks achieved in the couple identity development process? It would be interesting to carry a discourse analysis to clarify some of these questions. Hypothesizing on the gendered themes that emerged in this study one would probably find that women use more the term ‘we’ and men more the ‘I’, reflecting their different locations in the connectedness narrative.

Empathy and intimacy are also implicated in the couples’ expectations about the balance between their relationship with one another and their loyalty obligations towards each partners’ family of origin (Boszormeyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984). This notion can have particular relevance to the Maltese not only because of the inevitable physical proximity but also because of the traditional and psychological forces binding offspring to their parents. In spite of the expected romanticism and desires of connectedness with their future partner, the hidden forces of the family of origin may possibly tie partners into a frustrating spiral of failed attempts at living up to their expectations of marriage. The delicacy of such a matter lies in the fact that such forces are often unconsciously or pre-consciously enacted.

Excerpts highlighting the relationship between expectations and the transgenerational forces working against them are various. One example is Linda who since adolescence fantasized about a romantic marriage. Consequently, her expectations are also romantic, depicting a high degree of passion and expectations of deep connectedness.
Why would she choose an a-romantic and unemotional partner then? Possibly because her “poor dad” whom she doesn’t mention during the interview, was emotionally absent from her life. The obligations involved here can consist of an injunction (Berne, 1988) not to let down her “bossy mother” by investing too much in a relationship and be happier than mum ever was. Linda’s complaint “if it weren’t for you” (Berne, 1987), allows her to rationalize her failure by projecting it onto her fiancé’s inability to connect thus safeguarding her unconscious obligation towards her mother by not fulfilling her dreams.

Togetherness - separateness remains therefore a challenging and evolving narrative participating couples expect to develop in their future marriage. Gender differences emerged in the construction of such narrative with women ‘punctuating’ (Bateson & Jackson, 1964) their need for closeness and men their need for distance. While expressed through demands and concerns about doing things together, this theme represents the deeper implications of attachment styles including the tensions between personal aspirations, and external factors like tradition, contemporary culture, family of origin obligations, career demands, and so on.

**6.7.4. Boundary Making**

Boundary making represents the couples’ boundaries between themselves as a couple and the outside world. This type of boundary coexists with the relationship’s internal boundary (togetherness-separateness) explored above. The process of establishing boundaries seems to be a gradual one involving various stages. It further serves various purposes including the gradual definition of the couples’ evolving relationship
narrative and the strengthening of the couples’ private and public commitment to each other.

The participants’ narrative about their future marriage is one that excludes friends, except a couple or two, with whom they can meet occasionally as couples. Some participants expressed this to be a necessary distance that facilitates mutual knowledge, while others in terms of their need to bond with their partner. The general impression was that discourses about friends bedevil their presence in the marital union. In Malta there is a cultural inclination towards considering marriage and the marital home as a sacred space inscribed in proverbs such as ‘Il-hbieb sal bieb’ which literally translates to ‘friends until the front door’ denoting that friends are not to be allowed in the marital home.

Participants expressions like “in the marital home, it’s not their place” and “the least friends the better” also denote a certain sense of isolation. It is true that the Maltese in general prioritize the family over everything else (Abela, 2000). In fact little seems to have changed since O’Reilly Mizzi’s (1997) review of her precedent study about the women of Senglea. She had found that 41% of the women in this small city had no friends outside of family members. Friendship, as a value, ranks fifth among the Maltese with middle-aged men attaching a slightly higher value to friends than women (Abela, 2000). Middle class populations might present a different picture from that of O’Reilly Mizzi. My hypothesis is that at this stage in their development, partners are absorbed by other challenges and developmental tasks related to their relationship,
particularly the construction of a coherent relationship narrative, and so they attach less importance to friendships (Abela, 2000).

Buying a house together is a private statement of the achievement of a satisfactory level of intimacy thus another way of saying ‘I expect to commit myself to a future with you’. It is also a public statement indicating the personal commitment, another way of saying ‘We openly expect to commit ourselves to a future together’ (Clulow, 1993; Lewis, 1972). Buying a house together involves getting a bank loan together, which in itself is expected to be a very long commitment. It also involves expectations about joining financial forces and the signing of contracts together as a unit and sole proprietors.

The buying of the future marital home is an important premarital milestone among Maltese couples, marking the transition from single-hood to couplehood. With the current unfavorable house rent laws (Seychell, 2005) house buying in Malta is the standard route to marriage with “the majority of the population live[ing] in owner-occupied dwellings” (Central Office of Statistics, 1999).

The chosen locality of the future matrimonial home is also related to boundaries. Most of the couples interviewed declared a neo-local residence as opposed to a patri-local or a matri-local one. This might be a reflection of the new trends detected elsewhere in Europe (Abela, 2000). However, because of the small size of the island, my hypothesis is that whilst in other European countries neo-locality may be associated with work related migration, in Malta it might reflect the couples’ expectation to
define the boundary with their families of origin. The following excerpt from one of the interviews is an example:

Claire: *I firmly believe that extended families should never get in the way between the couple. Here in Malta where everyone is knocking on peoples’ doors and going into each others’ houses, I’ve heard … and I’ve seen that extended families sometimes can create problems between the partners.*

Boundary making ensues with the partners realigning their relationship with their respective parents and in-laws. Generally couples don’t expect that their parents and in-laws will interfere with their relationship in the future. Only one couple expect interference from parents and in-laws. Such were based on the participants’ own retrospective experience with their respective parents and in-laws, as well as on the experiences of their siblings. Massimo’s serious concern is based on his recollection of how his parents reacted to his sister’s boyfriend:

Massimo: *I had an older sister, she had to face the same situation we are facing now. Because they did not want her husband.*

Massimo and Shirley in particular were highly concerned as they described their intrusive parents as their worst experience. Their troubled courtship experience was flooded with moments when their parents invaded their relationship and both expect further interference in the future. Their expectations involve drastic boundary making measures like reducing contact, keeping distance, and withdrawing of information. Here are a couple of examples.
Shirley: Oh with our parents … The least contact possible and the less we meet the better.

Massimo: And we’ll speak about general things and not what happens between us.

In a qualitative study involving newlyweds, Cachia (1996) has found that the couples in his research did not find transgenerational boundary making difficult to deal with. This finding replicated Tabone’s (1995) earlier study which has indicated that the Maltese modified extended family is actually an asset, providing readily available help and support. It seems that the traditional discourse around in-law intrusion is dissipating and giving way to newly favorable constructed discourses. All participants expressed clear expectations as well as ideas about how to mitigate any possible over-involvement. The typical expectations couples have about their future interaction with their parents and in-law necessitates the establishment of a newly constructed clearly defined balance. Here is what Amanda said:

Amanda: Not that they don’t visit, you know, but not that they are always at our place … I want my privacy. Do you understand? And I don’t want that they expect too much from us … because sometimes they do expect a lot from us. What’s ours I want it to be ours and not to be taken away by them.

To ‘protect’ their future marital relationship some couples expect to resort to strengthening their relationship’s internal dynamics. Developing common interests and investing in hobbies they expect to pursue together after marriage, are some of the protective features of the couples’ stories about their future marriage.
Boundary making expectations emerge as a particularly relevant construction at this stage in the couples’ family life cycle. Surprisingly though, boundary making does not feature directly among the tasks achieved during courtship described by Duvall and Miller (1985). The only indirect reference is the first developmental task of the married couple whereby young married couples are expected to spend time “finding, furnishing, and settling into their first home as a married pair” (p.134), a task which the Maltese generally achieve well before marrying. A developmental spectrum of boundary making stages during courtship namely boundary making with friends, house-buying, and boundary making with parents/in-laws, which do not feature in Duvall and Miller’s proposed tasks.

Duvall and Miller’s (1985) marital task of “interacting with relatives on both sides of the family” (p.134) is essentially tackled well ahead of marriage among the participants of this research. Most of the couples I interviewed expected to decide about their relationship with their respective families well before they get married. From a structural conceptual framework it can be said that the “rules defining who participates [in the relationship] and how” (Minuchin, 1974. p.53) have their origin during courtship. This supports the idea that the construction of the relationship narrative develops well before marriage.

Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark (1984) locate the newly formed nuclear family within a historical transgenerational context thus claiming the transmission of relational patterns from one generation to the next. From this conceptual framework, boundary making appears as a difficult task to achieve particularly because the invisible loyalties (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1984) involved in the formation of a new
family claim specific bonds across generations, which in Malta are often very visible (Cachia, 1996; Tabone, 1995). Some participants were very much aware of the specific pitfalls that may be involved. Speaking about her boyfriend, Amanda expressed her concern for the future:

Amanda:  *I wish that there will be no intrusions. Sort of ... ehm ... With his family he is the spoilt child ... that sort ... and I, in a way, am afraid at times. That's one of the things that scares me ... that they may intrude ... or ... not that I don't want them to visit but that they are there all the time ... sort of ... that scares me.*

However, some other participants, like Michael and Grace seem to engage in a dance whose steps are defined by Grace’s concern around Michael’s over-involvement with his parents. Unlike Amanda and Jason, Michael and Grace seem less willing to speak about it overtly. Bowen would have seen both Jason and Michael as undifferentiated from their family of origin ‘ego-mass’. It would be very interesting to see how this ‘undifferentiation’ and the involved dynamics will emerge during the first year of marriage. Will the fact that one couple speaks about it overtly and one covertly make a difference in how the ego mass of the newly formed nuclear family evolves?

Lewis’s (1972) developmental model of courtship marginally considers boundary making as one of the tasks among others to be achieved during the final stage of his six stage model, namely *dyadic crystallization*. This tallies with the stage the couples I interviewed were in, namely in the final stage of courtship and just before marrying. However, the participants in my research had long been engaged in boundary making activities with the majority starting isolating themselves from friends almost immediately after meeting. All couples bought the house around 2 or 3 years before
the wedding date. Moreover, Lewis (1972) does not consider boundary making as necessarily leading to marriage. The participants in this research however have shown that dyadic crystallization, particularly boundary making activities, tend to intensify as a consequence of the decision to marry and that it is part of a progressive construction of a relationship narrative, marked with both relational and social milestones.

Participating couples experienced and expected a progression of tasks along their courtship and in marriage. During the initial phase of the relationship the partners were uncommitted to the relationship. As the relationship intensified, one of the partners proposed a serious commitment which often lead participants to a sense of commitment uncertainty. The time taken to undergo the decision to commit depended on many factors which will not be delved into in this study. When the decision to spend life together was taken, the couple moved to the committed phase. Here was when boundary making narrative took shape, initially through the letting go of friends, and culminating in house-buying as one of the ultimate signs of commitment. After the couple bought the house, they took some time to set the wedding date after which the phase of wedding preparation commenced.

Systemically speaking, it is through boundaries that the construction of the matrimonial narrative evolves beyond the private sphere of the relationship into the public domain. My general view is that couples facing marriage go through establishing a balance between constructing a new identifying narrative differentiating them from the rest, especially their families of origin, and simultaneously acknowledge their loyalties towards their parents and cultural norms. Most of the couples, for example, did not provide a coherent story about their choice to marry in the Church. Most admitted that it wasn’t even a choice, with some further admitting
that such a decision was based on not wanting to shame their parents or for fear of being rejected by them, or other social structures.

Such conformity to parental and cultural-traditional norms may be a reflection of the strong ties existing between parents and their children. The parents stand out as the representatives of cultural-traditional norms and the children (participants) express a great desire to please them. Establishing boundaries between the couple and the outside world becomes a dilemma of ‘normality’ whereby couples may fear that if they reject what is ‘normal’ they will be rejected in return. Psychoanalytically speaking, one can see this as reflecting the strong sense of community, whereby the self is forsaken for the benefit of the collective, and whereby the family is more important than the individual. One wonders about how the collective identity vs individual identity will eventually be resolved in the marriage to allow for the emergence of a couple unique identity. The couple’s home may be the only place at this phase in the couples’ relationship where they can actually explore this identity. The emerging question is: Where does the couple start and where does it finish? Couples seemingly expect to have a clear answer that helps them distinguish their story as unique.

6.7.5. Comparing the Relationship

Comparison refers to a process whereby couples fine tune their relationship narrative by comparing their relational behaviour with that of others and themselves in the past. Comparison seems to be a necessary activity for the couple to construct expectations about relational patterns and practices, thus creating a sense of predictability for their future. Three types of comparison emerged during this research namely: comparison
between couple and other known couples, between the couple and parents’ marital relationship, between the couple in the past and in the present. Generally couples engage in more than one type of comparison. Comparison can be said to hold various functions for the relationship. By implication comparison denotes a lacking assertiveness which might be indicative of the multiple, perhaps conflicting, stories available at this point in history.

One primary function of comparison seems to be to justify the partners’ commitment towards each other. Many participants recalled various obstacles to such commitment during courtship. Some, like Massimo and Shirley, and Joe and Linda, mentioned family of origin related situations, others, like Patrick and Sharon, talked about third party intrusions, while others, for example Michael and Grace, talked about life circumstances. By comparing their current relationship with their own relationship in the past, some couples could pride themselves on their achievements and reassuringly predict their relationship in the future. Couples who compared themselves in this way all felt stronger in their commitment to the relationship. As Grace clearly put it:

Grace: We’ve been through good and not so good situations together … and once you go through them, then you go through other things in the future as well.

Some participants could use this protective technique to the extent of denying realistic threats to their relationship. For example, in spite of the great difficulties the couple had faced, and is likely to face, Sharon continues to ignore the pastor’s intrusions and the impact they may eventually have on her future relationship with Patrick.
Comparing one’s relationship with others helps the couple position themselves within the larger context (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). This has the reassuring effect of the construction of a relationship narrative that defines and positions their relationship in contrast to other relationships. By comparing their relationship with their constructed idea of other couples’ relationships, Michael and Grace feel reassured because unlike ‘other’ couples, they are not individualistic and “don’t think only about themselves”. This quality, in their view, is reliable enough to justify the lifelong commitment they are about to make through marrying.

Comparing one’s relationship with that of other couples, and perceiving it as superior is not a rare occurrence. Research in the area (Buunk, 2001) has consistently demonstrated that individuals perceive their own relationship as better than those of most others (Buunk & Van den Eijnden, 1997). In another research, participants also reported having more positive beliefs about their own relationship than about other close relationships (Van Lange & Rusbult, 1995). Buunk (1998) and Weinstein (1980) also found that generally people estimate their own vulnerability to marriage breakdown as much lower than that of other couples.

Focusing on the negative aspects of other relationships, therefore, makes it possible to focus on one’s relationship’s positive aspects and fine tune expectations accordingly. Today’s increased possibility of marital separation has intensified the sense of unpredictability and uncertainty. This was highlighted in this research, particularly when couples spoke about the challenges they expect to face during their future marriage, as well as during our conversations about origins of expectations.
The process of comparison might also involve collective projection by which partners collectively project onto other couples those aspects of their relationship they dislike, thus denying their existence and the potential danger they might pose on their relationship in the future. Examples of this possibility can be found in the transcripts. Various couples including Claire and Adrian, Tarcisio and Magdala, Michael and Grace, and Noel and Josienne engaged in such comparative conversations with some, like Shirley and Massimo feeling scrupulous about the behaviour of other couples.

Shirley: *That is why I told you, you may say how optimistic we are, but this is something which shocked us, almost scrupulous. I used to tell myself ‘is it possible that the other couples never discussed certain issues’? At times they were common topics for example how many children would you like to have. We used to be shocked and perplexed.*

A second function of comparison involves the partners’ construction of expectations about each other thus reassuring oneself about one’s choice of partner. As the partners in the relationship get closer and learn more about each other’s good and not so good aspects, they feel an increasing need to reassure themselves about their choice of partner and what to expect from them, particularly as the binding moment of the wedding approaches. Claire’s excerpt is a good example. She looked back to compare Adrian with the students she hanged around with during university time.

Claire: *To tell you the truth I wasn’t at all encouraged when I looked at today’s youngsters. Especially the young men, because in my mind, maybe I’ve got the wrong impression, but what I saw was that they were just interested in sex, that they were interested in using a girl and then finding another one, that they just wanted to go for the pleasure of the moment, that they were immature, and they did a lot of things which weren’t for me if I had to be their girlfriend.*
With the wedding just days away, justifying one’s choice to marry can be an essential feature at a time when, and a context where, the risk of marriage breakdown is increasing. Finding a way to reassure oneself that the partner chosen for a lifetime is the right one becomes even more prominent for the fulfillment of expectations one holds for one’s future marital relationship. Comparing one’s relationship and as emerged earlier, the use of empathy, are both ways of managing uncertainty.

### 6.7.6. Becoming a Family

The couples’ construction of their future family addresses developmental and structural aspects of family life. Developmentally, participants expect a series of clear stages through which they expect themselves to progress. While retaining a somewhat traditional developmental route, the themes reveal some interesting variations concerning children, and a slightly varied structure, with an emphasis on gender equality particularly expressed by female participants. The main discourse involves a lifelong marriage in the Church. All couples, except one, expect to wait about two years before having their first child followed by another within a couple of years. All participants expect to rear their own children themselves, without the interference of their parents.

#### 6.7.6.1. Marriage is for Life

Invariably, participants expect their future marital commitment to last a lifetime. Meanwhile, the increasing demand for legal separation in Malta seems to be having its toll on young unmarried couples. Most participating couples expressed concern about
their future marriage, as they hoped nothing would eventually instigate them to separate. The increasing possibility of marriage breakdown appears to be a realistic concern as less and less Maltese are ready to stay married unconditionally and at all costs (Abela, 2000).

“As success in life is closely related to self-realization in the family” (Abela, 2000. p.65) and as secularization increases, expectations of marriage gain prominence in the evaluation of one’s marriage. Secularization has been described as consisting of a shift from the collective to the individual sphere, with increased disengagement from religion and increased reliance on rationality (Shiner, 1967). This means that what people expect from their marriage will now become the baseline against which the success of their marriage and fulfillment within it is measured. In this way separation also becomes an idiosyncratic affair, even though collectively the Maltese have set a rational standard prescribing allowances for separation to take place (Abela, 2000). This trend towards secular practice is similar to what Abela (2000) calls *individualized Catholic identity* and to the findings of the recent research by Tabone et al. (2003) on religious beliefs and attitudes of Maltese university students.

The couples I interviewed seem to experience the dilemma between the safety of traditionalism and the anxiety of secularization and post-traditionalism. While binding themselves in a marriage for life, they concurrently harbour a concern about a possible undesired separation. The use of comparison and empathy in the construction of the future relationship narrative re-emerge as possible attempts at making marriage a manageable leap.
6.7.6.2. Marrying in the Church

Invariably, marrying in the Church was expected to be the only way into ‘proper’ marriage. None of the couples considered other possible options, for example cohabitation or civil marriage. However, the meaning attributed to the Church marriage appears to have different connotations for different participants, reflecting their expression of the secularized diversity (Tabone, 1987) and individualized Catholic identity (Abela, 2000).

All the couples interviewed expressed that marrying in the Church was not a question of choice with most admitting that they did not even think of, nor ever discussed, alternative possibilities. Generally their comments, except in the case of Joe, were often devoid of significant religious meaning and included statements like “marriage is a sacrament” or “because of our religion”. Any attempt to elaborate on these comments was countered by generic statements reflecting one’s position vis-à-vis one’s expectations. Statements like “God will help us if we involve Him”, or “my parents would have thrown me out”, and “it’s more because of tradition” reveal how marrying in the Church is an automatic and unquestionable construction, rather than a reflected-upon commitment based on understanding of a Catholic marriage and its idiosyncratic requirements.

My hypothesis is that because I contacted most of them through parish priests, they might have thought I was involved with the Church. Some couples, however, did respond differently to my attempts to elaboration. Answers like “It doesn’t mean anything as such” and “I’m doing it to make him happy” reveal that some couples
were not being influenced, at least, by their belief about my involvement with the Church. Joe’s deeper response that marriage is “a statement of our faith” appeared obvious as prior to meeting Linda, Joe was in a convent preparing for priesthood. Another couple, Massimo and Shirley also attributed a deeper meaning to marrying in the Church. Like Joe and Linda, this couple has a long history of religious involvement.

The construction of marrying in the Church emerged as another tension between traditionalism and secularism. For the majority of the participating couples, marrying in the Church emerges as a public statement of their commitment rather than as a sacramentalized union. Narratives about the aesthetic aspects of the wedding and its preparation support this idea, as does the lavishness of Maltese weddings. During the year 2002 Lm11.5 million Maltese Liri (approx. Stg. 17.5 million) was spent amongst 2240 weddings, bringing the average wedding expenditure to Lm5100 (approx. Stg.7900) (L-Orizzont, 2003). Many couples admitted during the interview that had it been for themselves, they would have done nothing of the sort.

6.7.6.3. Family and Children

All participants expect to “form a family”. Their construction of a family emerged very clearly with children featuring predominantly. Participants generally agreed that there is no family without children “What’s a marriage without children? It’s what makes the family” is Noel’s representative statement. Some participants’ construction of a family goes even further. Having only one child does not constitute a family. Couples expect two children and the reasons provided for this were that being an only
child is unhealthy for the child and having more than two children is seen by couples as very expensive.

The importance which Maltese couples attribute to children emerges also in Abela’s et al. (2005) research and is in line with Abela’s (2000) values study whereby “the average family consists of two adult parents with dependent children” (p.61). This traditional view of the family is held by all the participants in my study. Family size in Malta is moderating in line with other European countries and Western societies (Abela, 2000). While in the past large families were common, today's married couples are happy with having one or two children at the very most. The 2005 Census preliminary report describes that

The period between the 1995 Census and the 16th Census held in 2005 saw a marked decline in the average annual growth, the population increasing by an average of 0.7 per cent per year between the two Census years. This is attributed mainly to a decline in the birth rate, resulting in an ageing population (NSO, 2006).

Abela had also reported a less pronounced need for highly-educated women to have children as well as a dissociation of parenthood from marriage. However, neither of these featured in my study. On the contrary, the image portrayed here is one in which couples are eager to have children and are expecting, as well as planning them, regardless of their educational background. This is perhaps due to the differences in the sample used.

It is in terms of timing of childbearing that one can find a difference between the career-oriented and non-career-oriented women. From the only two non-career
oriented women in my sample, Magdala expressed a desire to have children as soon as possible after marriage. The other, Sharon, expects to wait some time before becoming a mother. Those pursuing a career expect to wait for a year or two before having their first baby. The reason women gave included time to settle down in the new marital relationship and to achieve better knowledge about each other. Men’s reasons involved financial recovery and time to finish the house. Women generally also expected to have the second child immediately after the first, with the primary reason provided being that this would keep them off work only for about 5 years until the children reach school age, after which they expect to return back to work.

Men participated less in discourse on childbearing and parenthood and seemed to leave such decisions to their female partner, engaging themselves only where financial and security matters were concerned. This further reinforces the idea of the traditional gender roles polarization and their onset during courtship, whereby men are expected to provide financial and structural security and women to provide care. Whereas until recently the Maltese were open to childbearing at any point after the wedding, today’s couples seem to go on a calculated endeavour of having to juggle between the many facets of marriage.

All couples expect to rear their future children themselves rather than ‘baby park’ them with their parents’. The main reasons provided revolve around a concern about the children’s well being. Many agreed that exposure to multiple parental figures can be detrimental to a child. Participants also expressed a sense of responsibility towards the children. Specifically, irrespective of gender and career orientation, participants expect the mother to stop working and rear any future children, and the father to provide financially, at least until the children get to school-age and the mother can
return to work. The newer generations of married couples still hang on to traditional gender roles when it comes to child rearing, and hold stronger views on this issue than their European counterparts (Abela, 2000). The Maltese believe that pre-schoolers in particular, and children in general, are still likely to suffer if their mother goes out to work (Abela, 2000). This finding contrasts with other European countries, whereby women’s value for independence comes out more strongly.

A survey on women and men in Malta (Central Office of Statistics, 1999) revealed that childbearing contributed to the drop in female employment. Working women are reported to be predominantly from the 18 to 29 year age-bracket with a sharp drop in the childbearing and child-rearing years of women aged 30 and more.

The resulting tension emerges more strongly in women who are thorn between expecting an equally shared relationship with their future spouses and rearing the children themselves as traditional gender roles dictate. In her research analyzing factors influencing Maltese women’s choice between quitting and continuing working while rearing the children, Borg (1999) found women’s choice to be influenced by various factors. Amongst them is a social pressure to return to work after the birth, the nature of the job, the husbands’ influence, the women’s sex role orientation, the parents, and available childcare possibilities. This has been particularly visible in women who pursued an education and had a professional occupation (Borg, 1999).

Women’s internal dilemma between career and child-rearing is an internalized representation of a much wider multi-systemic agenda between two most powerful discourses. On the one hand is the government whose agenda is expressed through
various women’s advancement and gender equality organizations. Such entities were set up to promote women’s role in society and aim to increase women’s employment to reach European standards. On the other hand, the local Church is persistently re-proposing traditional gender roles, encouraging women to prioritise the family, particularly their children, over their careers (Archdiocese of Malta, 2001). The end result is a double bind, whereby no matter what women choose to do they are bound to lose out anyway. Men, in their confusion of not knowing what is expected of them, appear to be only silent passive observers in this dilemma. Of course, one can also see this passivity as a deliberate attempt to maintain the status quo.

The couples interviewed expect and accept polarized responsibilities within marriage. The sense of *role protection* usually associated with men’s struggle to maintain power, can be considered a systemic homeostatic phenomenon involving both the private and public aspect of marriage. One also wonders what sort of feelings men go through during the child-rearing phase. On the one side they say “we want to rear our children ourselves” and on the other side expect themselves and are expected by their partner and major social discourses, to work longer hours to provide financially for the family and to somehow compensate for the loss of the wife’s income while she rears the children.

**6.7.7. Living Together Challenges**

Participants construction of their future marriage includes challenges they expect to be facing once married. These challenges are mostly ones which they have already
experienced during courtship thus reinforcing their idea that marriage is a continuation of courtship.

Affection emerges as a tough challenge. The picture consists of men who don’t express, or are unable to express their affection towards their female partners, and women who are both in need and in demand of affect and able to express it. Extreme examples are those of Joe who says that Linda’s affectionate behaviour “runs shivers” down his spine and makes him “stiff”, and Noel who considers Josienne’s affectionate behaviour as “buttering him up” and “a comedy”. Only two participating men are not as restrictive in their expression of affect. For example, Tarcisio feels comfortable being affectionate to Magdala. Other men like Emanuel can be conditionally affectionate as long as he is not “tired”.

The fact that men and women are different in the way they perceive and express affection has been well documented (Tannen & Aries, 1997; Clulow, 1995; Snell, 1989; Cancian, 1988; Gilligan, 1982). Tannen has consistently studied differences in styles of men’s and women’s communication and has repeatedly found disparity particularly in language and speaking styles. But Tannen has along the years polarized gender differences to the point of failing to pay attention to the considerable overlap that exists. What is positive in her approach is that she addresses these differences without maintaining the superiority of any one style over the other (Tannen & Aries, 1997). On the other hand, gender differences in general have been undermined by various authors (Aries, 2002; Deaux & Major, 1987) who see masculine and feminine behaviour as predominantly the result of the situational context, and social factors such as stereotyped expectations, status differences, and social roles. These are
described as causing an individual to display masculine or feminine behavior in a particular interaction.

Taking contextual forces into consideration, Maltese men and women, like those described by Orbach (1995) and Brody (2000) have been reared in a stereotyped context. Survey findings show that men tend to be generally much more traditional than their women counterparts, as are the social expectations of them, and are more inclined to restrict expression of affect (Abela, 2000). One other relevant finding in Abela’s survey is that “the majority of Maltese women share the sexist stereotype that men are less able to handle emotions in relationships” (p.67), indicating that both men and women have similar perspectives of the masculine role. This finding is similar to findings in other European countries and while one may think of this as part of the Mediterranean/Latin machismo, research in the United States has shown similar trends for men (Zamarripa, Wampold, & Gregory, 2003). O’Neil’s (1981) concept of the masculine mystique describes how men are prohibited from appearing weak by expressing their affect.

The systemic picture that emerges around expression of affect is a perceived relational challenge, one in which men are seen as retentive and women as expressive, or rather, men withdraw and women demand affect. The fact that in my sample a few of the men have adopted behaviour characteristics normally associated with the female stereotype may be indicative of the shift being attempted in gender stereotypes. Some men among the participants acknowledged relationship involvement styles normally associated with females, such as contributing to housework, being affectionate, doing things together including hobbies, resulting in what Abela (2000) calls the negotiating
family as opposed to the authority oriented family. This same shift in the role of men has also been noted in Italy (Andolfi, 2001) with particular emphasis on the changing role of the father.

In my view, however, this shifting trend is locally creating a lot of uncertainty in men, leading them to resort back to traditional measures of control, which they had been acculturated to as children (Orbach, 1985), only to find these strategies unwelcomed by their female partners, who in return make increasing demands about equality. This may lead couples into a downward spiral of disillusionment and conflict (Abela, 1998). The negative extremity of this pattern, women demand / men withdraw, is what Abela (1998) has found to be the predominant communication pattern among the moderate to low bracket of marital satisfaction whereby women discuss and men avoid. Christensen and Heavy (1990) interpreted men’s withdrawal and silence as a way by which men keep control over their partners. While this may be the case for some of the participating men, their withdrawal could also be the result of fear of being overwhelmed by their woman’s emotions, in front of which some men, for example Joe, feel “helpless”. The systemic nature of the interplay has been succinctly described by Joe in the following statement:

Interviewer: It’s therefore a challenge for both of you in different ways.

Linda and Joe: Yes, yes, yes

Joe: It is to both of us because one would always feel ... ehm ... lacking. Lacking as in not being given. And the other one would always feel lacking in not being able to give.
While thinking about those men in the sample who were able to express and accept some kind of affective behaviour from their partner, I wonder whether this is some sort of temporary measure until they get married. It will be very interesting to see if any changes occur in this area one year into marriage when the second part of this research takes place. It is also possible that literature on gender equality has been stretched too far by shifting from equality in political, legal, and opportunity terms into equality in gender characteristics like for example affection and love, thus failing to appreciate the richness that gender differences may promote. But, being a man myself, I may perhaps be biased in stating this.

### 6.7.8 Expectations of Gender Equality

Expectations about gender equality combine the various relationship levels involved in the future marital relationship, including the marital and the parental relationships, as well as the individual partners. The theme gender equality refers to the absence of gender stereotyped roles and tasks generally associated with male and female behaviour and emerged primarily as women’s plea for equally shared future domestic responsibilities.

Generally, couples expect a predictable trajectory involving an initial phase of equal sharing of responsibilities between the wedding and the arrival of children. Statements like “doing things together”, “choosing things together for their home”, and “making decisions together”, all denote this expectation. The second phase is marked by the birth of a child by which a forced shift into traditional polarized gender role distribution is expected. At a later phase, as the children reach school age and the
wife returns to work, couples expect to return back to equal sharing of responsibilities. Some couples did express some concern due to having to return to work after the paid 3 months maternity leave is consumed. Some others expect to take a year of additional unpaid leave to stay with the baby before returning to work. At this stage another shift back into equal sharing of responsibilities is expected. The various stages are summarized in Noel’s excerpt when he said:

Noel: She will be taking care of house cleaning when she stops working. Until she works we will share it.

While couples seem to expect a smooth transition from one phase to the next some apparent dilemmas emerge as confusing. On the one side is the expressed desire to rear one’s own children. Child-rearing is expected to be done by the woman while the man is expected to increase workload to compensate. On the other side, there are various pressures to take women back to work immediately after the three months maternity leave period, including the necessary income so much needed to repay the loans. The ensuing tensions cannot be fully appreciated by the engaged couples at this premarital phase.

Another implication involves men who are generally expected by their wives and themselves to increase workload to somehow compensate for their wives’ lost income. As a consequence, they are expected to contribute minimally to housework and childcare while their spouse is at home taking care of the child. Men are expected by their partners to arrive home late and tired without any strength left to contribute to housework. The extent to which such shifting patterns impact the relationship is not
known even though some speculate it is the number one reason for increased separations in Malta (Archdiocese of Malta, 2005).

The expected progression of gender roles’ adjustment during the first years of marriage is also visible in Borg’s (1999) work. She states that “it seems that upon the birth of the child, roles tend to become traditional, with women having primary responsibility for childcare and household tasks, and the men becoming more work-centred” (p.13). Foreign literature suggests that such shift to traditional roles occurs even when gender roles before the child is born were egalitarian (Crawford & Huston, 1993). Other local and foreign research has indicated that reverting back to traditional distribution of gender roles occurs even if the mother remains gainfully employed (Gambin, 1998; Hochschild & Machung, 1999; Lennon, Wasserman & Allen, 1991).

The gender equality narrative emerges as quite unclear. While social forces are pushing the ideas of gender equality with increasing force, both men and women seem to be finding the required leap difficult. For example women’s demands for help still reflect their expectation to be primarily responsible for housework and childcare. The following excerpts reveal how men were asked to merely “help” out rather than to equally share.

And I don't see it as his role neither. And I don't think he's ever done it. For me it’s enough if he helps with the dishes or dusting.

I imagine that he will help me. Because even now he helps around like sweeping.

But then he can help as well, and not take it personally and be offended if I ask him.
At home I want to help my wife of course. I want to do house chores as well.

This replicates what Borg (1999) found in her sample. Other findings, while acknowledging a slight move away from traditional gender role stereotypes (Tabone, 1995; Abela, 2000) still confirm that in Malta women expect to assume primary responsibility for childcare and housework (Borg & Spiteri, 1994). Men also expect women to take on primary responsibility of these tasks, while they take on financial provision responsibilities. Male participants in my research meant exactly this when they agreed they would “help”. Rather than take responsibility of housework and childcare in Malta “usually men devote more time to gainful work or study than to domestic work” (NSO, 2002, p. ix).

From a systemic perspective, gender equality becomes an issue whereby both men and women, in different ways, contribute to its maintenance and change. For different reasons, men and women have vested interest in the traditional narrative and while caught up in the fervor of gender equality they are simultaneously confronted with contradictory inner feelings (in-principle versus in-practice dilemma). Most women in the sample admitted that they would like to return to work for their self-fulfillment. Simultaneously, most women will eventually feel split between this desire to work and the guilt expressed in having to leave their babies behind them while they go to work (Borg, 1999). On the other hand, Maltese men have been reportedly slower than women in adjusting to the gender equality narrative (Abela, 2000). Some might interpret this as men’s attempt at holding on to their privileged social position and so they have more at stake than women in such shift. Systemically speaking, women have also much at stake, particularly concerning childrearing. Meanwhile, shifts in
gender roles stereotypes are now inevitable, emerging more as a result of socio-economic and political forces than because men or women expect it. In fact, if not forced by the dire financial situations, women tend to want to work anyway because of their personal fulfillment rather than because they want to be equal to their men.

6.8. Conclusion

The participants’ constructed expectations of their future marriage included desired and undesired relationship dynamics developed during courtship, along with couples lifestyle changes expected to take place once they marry. Generally, men and women’s concerns about lifestyle changes appear to be different. While men focus on time and presence women focus on their desired balance between career development and child-rearing.

As the majority of couples interviewed expect to pursue a career, they expect juggling between career and family life to be difficult. Many of the participating men and women expect to be time-poor for each other, as they work long hours to repay the house loan. A related expectation is a difficulty with distributing housework, with women generally expected by both males and females to do most of it. Recreation time featured minimally in the couple’s construction of their future marriage and is expected to be a tough challenge ahead, even though all couples acknowledge its value.
Boundary making activities featured highly among participants. They spoke about various levels of intra- and inter-personal boundaries making activities to safeguard their developing relationship narrative. Interpersonally, the balance between togetherness and separateness emerged as an important feature of the couples’ developing relationship narrative and attachment process. Men tended to be more inclined towards safeguarding their separateness, while women towards increased togetherness.

Several partners, particularly women, reported having developed the capacity to deeply empathize with their partner. This may be a necessary component for the creation of safety and predictability, making marriage a manageable leap. Comparing the relationship also intensifies the couples’ sense of predictability. A concern about possible future separation has been detected, which possibly fuelled the couples’ need to resort to both empathy and comparison as ways of alleviating their concern.

The participants’ narrative of family structure and family life involves a traditional picture consisting of two partners, married for life in the Church, with two children planned to be born around two to three years after marriage. Children were expected to be reared by the couples themselves. Marrying in the Church, while being the only acceptable form of marriage, generally represents the ultimate sign of a lifetime commitment. Simultaneously, a tension exists as the meaning attributed to marrying in the Church was not coherent with sacramental nature of marriage.

Challenges expected in the marital union are generally related to expression of affect, and gender roles. Men generally present a marked difficulty in expressing and
accepting affect and women demanding such an expression. Generally, both men and
women’s narrative about gender role expectations fit traditional values. Rather than
shared responsibilities, marriage is expected to be a business of unequal polarized
roles within which males and females have distinct tasks to perform.
CHAPTER 7

EXPECTATIONS DEVELOPMENT IN

THE FIRST YEAR OF MARRIAGE:

ANALYSIS & INTERPRETATION
7.1. **Introduction**

This chapter starts with presenting the analysis of the data gathered during the second interviews. The two categories that featured predominantly are adjusting to marriage and ongoing challenges. A case study follows. This features Michael and Grace who were the only couple to give birth to a baby during the first year of marriage. The uniqueness of their story warrants attention as it highlights various differences between them and other couples.

The data gathered could have been analyzed at different levels involving different aspects of the relationship. To keep in line with the aims of this research, I had to be selective and limit myself to an expectations-of-marriage perspective, while simultaneously being aware of the great loss of useful information that inevitably occurs in the process. An attempt is constantly made to connect second interview data with the first interview data.

7.2. **Category 1: Adjustment**

This category presents the three-levels of adjustment constructed in this study. The first level involves *personal adjustment* and reflects the effect of the transition from courtship to marriage as constructed by individual partners. The second level, *relational adjustment*, involves themes reflecting the type of adjustment which the couples underwent in the process of accommodating each other’s narratives. The third level of adjustment is *contextual/social adjustment* which highlights adjustment
activities couples experienced in their attempt to co-construct their unique relationship narrative.

7.2.1. Level 1: Personal Adjustment

The three emergent supra-themes under this level include shock, pleasant novelties, and realizations. They reflect the intensity with which participants experienced the unexpected, during their first year of marriage.

7.2.1.1. Supra-Theme 1: Shocking Experience

Generally shock refers to unexpected ‘discoveries’ about marrying, which participants often constructed as disappointing. It is not necessarily the case that such disillusionment is related to voiced expectations of marriage before marriage. Contrarily, the expectations participants refer to are often unconscious or subconscious expectations, which were not voiced in the first interview.

Linda, representing various participants, expresses how she became increasingly worried about the discrepancy she experienced between how she had expected to feel and how she actually felt after the wedding. This discrepancy partly confirms her romanticized expectations on the one hand (the ‘should have felt’), which originate through cultural influence, media and so on, and the ‘real’ thing (actually felt) she was experiencing on the other.

Linda: In the beginning it was very worrying for me. Ehm, in the beginning, in the first three months, I wasn’t happy at all.
That’s what I can say. There were a lot of things contributing to this. I was disillusioned, yes. That used to worry me a lot. There were the things that were annoying me, and there was the fear, I mean the feeling that I shouldn’t be feeling this way. Ehm ... sort of, I was worried because these were the first few months of marriage, and supposedly, according to books, I should be feeling bliss. I was feeling I lost it. And I used to feel very very very bad about that.

Joe: I used to go home and find her crying …
Linda: … and it took me a while to get used to it …
Joe: I think probably it took her months …

7.2.1.2. Supra-Theme 2: Novelties

Novelties include those aspects which the participating couples found new in their married life. These novelties refer to behaviours, situations, and circumstances which the partners reported never experiencing before during courtship. Grace’s excerpt provides a general view about the novelties experienced. For her, as for other participants, the first few months emerge as the most difficult.

Grace: The first few months were difficult. You’d feel the change. We had never lived together before marrying. You create a certain distance from the family and everything is so new.

For Massimo novelty is an ongoing story in his one-year-old marriage with Shirley, particularly the discovery of different aspects of Shirley’s personality.

Massimo: Well, what I experienced, and am still experiencing, is that I’m always finding something new in my wife. Always discovering new aspects in her character. Even the things she doesn’t like. It’s all new to me.
To Maria, learning to do the necessary house chores, from cooking to using the washing machine was all new. She admitted needing time to adjust psychologically by tuning herself to be able to manage such activities and include them in her life.

Maria: The first thing is that there were a lot of things I was learning. I mean how to wash the clothes, how to wash the floors. I mean I had done it before but not to this extent. I had to learn how to cook as well. I may have known how to cook a plate of pasta. So there was a lot of learning to be done, and that was OK for me. But the problem was to manage them. You know doing things after a day’s work. So it was like doing things right in the shortest time possible. Initially things slipped through my mind. I would focus on the cooking and forget about clearing things up. But it was a time when I couldn’t get hold of the situation. I was shattered.

7.2.1.3. Supra-Theme 3: Realizations - ‘Nothing is what it seems’

Most of the changes participating couples experienced after the wedding seem to have been unexpected. During the first interviews couples were eagerly looking forward to the living together, which was considered as the ‘only’ remaining move to accomplish after years of courtship. Apart from this, they had expected marriage to be a continuation of courtship. They now seem to reposition themselves as they learn that no matter how long courtship is, the actual living together is a resource for new opportunities. Josienne and Noel’s excerpt below sums all this up.

Josienne: And we had been together for ten years before marrying. But still in those ten years you never really realize certain things about the person. When you then live with the person, sleep and wake up with the person, then you start knowing the person. And my mum used to tell me this.

Noel: I agree with her. I think that you need to live with the person to know her. You then experience the difference.
In spite of her conviction of her deep empathy towards Emanuel, Maria talks about several realizations she experienced after the wedding. Her marital experience made her realise that in one year of marriage she came to know Emanuel much more than in all the courtship years.

Maria: ... I feel that I have come to know Emanuel more in this year than during our courtship period ... I knew he was more on the doing side rather than on the being. But living with him kind of helped me realize how he expresses it in everyday life. Kind of I lived it with him, not only heard him say it. At times it was a shock ...

7.2.2. Level 2: Relational Adjustment

Relational adjustment emerges powerfully evidencing different aspects of interpersonal tensions the couples experienced during their first year of marriage. These include differences between partners, relationship dynamics, traditional and post-traditional roles, and togetherness and separateness.

7.2.2.1. Supra-Theme 1: Adjusting to Differences Between the Partners

Partners’ differences experienced include the partners’ verbal involvement among others. Shirley’s first year of marriage acquainted her with Massimo’s silence. Being an expressive type herself, she feels she has to learn to empathize with him, rather than help him learn to become more expressive of his needs.
Shirley: More and more I understand our differences. He is an introvert and I say everything that comes to my mind. No matter how annoying or pleasant a thing is he would say nothing. And when he speaks he is very cautious for the appropriate words. I’m the opposite. I just speak my mind out. Even though many a time I have to say sorry afterwards. But on the other side I am finding myself understanding him more. Because he has a silent character, it’s not easy. Because I have to discover what’s on his mind. Even if he is sick. He wouldn’t say he is feeling sick. And sometimes I discover a couple of days later. So I had to learn to read his mind.

One other difference couples seem to have been struggling with during their first year of marriage is the distinction between the way they do things at home. Emanuel’s frustration about Maria’s perfectionism emerges visibly in the text. More than her perfectionism, it is the impact this perfectionism leaves on Maria’s speed in doing things that frustrates Emanuel.

Emanuel: Maria is a super perfectionist, so when she does something it has to be good. So if she cooks something she’s going to invest herself in it … In the beginning I used to notice that when she did something she was very slow in doing it. Even chopping an onion took her ages … It’s true she takes a lot of time, but the product would be good. I’m not a perfectionist. I am more practical and take less time.

Management of finances emerges as a significant difference between partners. One may remember how Joe took over because Linda, admittedly, cannot control herself from spending money. Josienne and Noel had also expressed the same difference between them during the first interview. The following excerpt from the second interview with Noel and Josienne reveals how one year into marriage the couple has managed this difference by sticking to their original expectation.
Noel:  
As for the money management, we kept it the way it was. I am the one taking care of the finances.

Josienne:  
Thank God it’s like that, that he manages the finances.

Interviewer:  
What makes you say this?

Josienne:  
(Laughs)

Noel:  
(Laughs) … because amount does not make a difference to her. She spends everything. Everything up in smoke.

Josienne:  
Yes it’s true, whatever I see I just buy, on the spur of the moment.

Some participants also admitted to be struggling with what they constructed as gender based differences. Joe expressed that having had only brothers and having lived all his life in a male environment (convent) makes him feel unprepared to live with a woman.

Joe:  
Let me tell you why. Ehm … as you know I lived in a community and I think that experience teaches you a lot about how to live with people, with different characters, you know. To be patient and tolerant and the like. But there was one big missing element. They were all males. And something I realized during this year is that with all my knowledge and experience which I accumulated there I never sort of realized what it takes to live with a woman.

Another difference tackled in the first year of marriage involves the partners’ psychological positioning on the time-scale between past and future. This difference may be particularly relevant to the understanding of couples’ developing relationship narrative. In the following excerpt, Emanuel describes how he experiences this difference.

Emanuel:  
It’s interesting, I never thought about these things. But now that I am talking … I am a person, … in fact it was interesting that we got married. Because Maria lives the present in the shadow
of the past. The past is always on her mind. She goes through it and she analyzes it. Even if she lives the present for a while she’s always doing it by analyzing the past. On the contrary to me the past is gone and finished. I live in the present with the future in mind. And so I think she helped me control my dreaming about the future and I hope I have helped her, I don’t know if it’s the case, to get a bit closer to the present. To at least meet along the way.

7.1.2.2. Supra-Theme 2: Developing Relationship Dynamics

Relationship dynamics and patterns are an important feature to take into account in the development of marital relationships. The first year of marriage in particular can be said to set new standards of relating.

Time-poverty and over-work lead Maria and Emanuel to develop a pattern whereby they do not discuss differences between them. This ‘feels bad’ on two counts. First because the partners are aware of the dangers, and secondly because it is disappointing vis-à-vis their original expectations.

Maria: Another disappointment was that we had expected that we would talk everything out before going to bed and possibly resolved every issue, and that we pray together. We haven’t done all this for most of the time. Sometimes we’re too tired to pray or to talk. I would wake up very sad the following morning if we had an unresolved argument. I would remind myself of the promises we had made.

Patrick and Sharon experienced interesting dynamics that developed around financial management. The excerpt below highlights the way this dynamic developed out of necessity within the relationship.
Patrick: We haven’t done a joint account. It doesn’t make a difference. And it is often the case that the savings are in her account. My wage goes for daily living, and bills. And she saves. And I trust her of course. I trust her blindly. But as for cash I usually have quite little available. But I don’t even ask her about the savings.

Interviewer: How did you arrive at such an arrangement?

Sharon: In the beginning we weren’t like that. We used to share fifty-fifty.

Patrick: But it all started after your [Sharon] car accident. We had to change the car as it was total loss. We had a lot of trouble with the car. So we decided she starts saving for the car and I pay for the daily living expenses. She had asked her father to lend her some money and she repaid him back. Until then I took the entire expense load on myself. And so we remained.

7.2.2.3. Supra-Theme 3: Traditional vs Non Traditional Role

Assimilation

Couple adjustment also entails who does what within the dyad. Role assimilation, in the case of the sample interviewed, varies along the traditional / non-traditional continuum. Adrian and Claire portray a representative example of traditional role assimilation during the first year of marriage. Adrian’s view of his wife is summed up in the “good woman” and “good wife”. Adrian, like any “good” husband does overtime and stays a little bit longer at work.

Adrian: ... She makes me happy. She takes care of me and she’s a good woman. She’s also doing her best to be a good wife as well. She cleans and she cooks. I stay a little bit longer at work. I do overtime.
Adrian admits how throughout the first year of marriage his participation in house chores gradually subsided. Claire, as if she is happy doing “women’s work” in the house, justifies Adrian’s gradual distance from house chores.

Adrian: At the beginning, to be honest, the chores at home … I used to participate more. But since she is a perfectionist and she likes things in a perfect manner, 100%. So I thought I don’t clean as good as her and so I gave up a little bit. Even for example the cooker I don’t clean it the way she likes it to be clean. She also directs me into using it and so slowly I moved bit by bit out of the picture.

Claire: There’s something else too. He suffers from back ache. And I found out that when we share the work equally he complains of back ache in the end of the day. And I worry. So what point is there in saying that I do half the work and then in the evening I have to worry about his back? I am not happy when he is in pain. And then he does other things for me which are not physically demanding. Like going to the butcher. It saves me a lot of time.

Another sense of traditionalism is manifested through Adrian’s sense of manhood. To him it means working more to support one’s family, so that the wife reduces working hours outside the home in order to be able to take care of the family.

Adrian: About the expectations, and I don’t know if I can succeed in this, is a professional plan, a small business. I look forward for my wife not to work. I’m trying to get her out of her job that is why I am trying to start this business. She disheartens me and tells me that I won’t manage. But I want her to work at least a little bit less, to be able to give more attention towards the house, to herself and to the children. I would be more satisfied if I would be able to support my family more in the financial sense. At the moment she works as much as I do. We both have full-time jobs and part-times. But I have this goal for the future.

Grace and Michael, who had a baby boy during the first year of marriage went through a similar experience. In line with their premarital narrative, the couple assumed
traditional roles with Grace being the primary care giver for baby Daniel and Michael investing in his career and taking a peripheral role in parenting. Grace voices her newly assumed mothering narrative and how she herself feels she is primarily responsible for the baby.

Grace: But its because I feel I’m more responsible for the child. Not that he doesn’t contribute … but I feel I am primarily responsible for the child. Even the fact that for example in the first three months the baby was on breast feeding he was completely dependent on me. Not that he did not do anything but he could not do much.

Some of the couples are also struggling with assimilating a post-traditional gender roles narrative. Josienne and Noel, apparently the couple closest to the post-traditional equity based relationship, speak about how functional they are finding their way of being. Josienne’s internal struggle emerges through her ‘supposed’ idea of praxis.

Josienne: … we both work. But he has more free time than I do, especially in the morning.

Noel: I work as a store keeper in a discothèque, so I mostly work during weekends and mostly during the evening. So during the week I’m off work most of the time.

Josienne: So I find almost everything ready when I’m back home.

Noel: I have time to clean the house and cook.

Josienne: Its been good up to now. Because we share everything. Even the things which are supposed to be done by the women. We share them. I mean the cooking, the cleaning, and we are having more time for each other.
7.2.2.4. Supra-Theme 4: Togetherness and Separateness - Being Together in a different Way from Courtship

The following are different excerpts portraying the participants’ emerging narrative about experience of togetherness in the first year of marriage. Adrian admits that his marriage provided a sense of belonging which he lacked before. He speaks about feeling part of a family, a well-defined system with clearer boundaries.

Adrian: … Before marriage I used to feel lonely, …Even though I had some friends and my cousin … Now, since I got married, I feel I have a family, you see. I have my own family now …Definitely we are closer to each other. We live together now, and we are a family. We have our own place and we share everything together. Definitely we know each other better and we communicate easier than before. We are very close to each other. We decide things together. Even when we go out, we go out together.

Shirley elaborates on her developing relationship narrative which is based on togetherness. Marriage has admittedly provided more space and time for the relationship to develop.

Shirley: I don’t know about other couples, but the fact that we decide everything together helps us a lot. We don’t hide things from each other. I believe that it can be dangerous …The second thing is that we have all the time for ourselves. When we were courting we did not have this much time together. And even the little time together was often interrupted by our parents.

Living together gave Grace a sense of increased connectedness. Michael, her husband talks about his increased sense of loneliness as Grace indulges in the baby. The differences in their individual narratives about togetherness eventually emerge as a tension point to be resolved.
Grace: But you are drawn closer [after the wedding]. The fact that you live together 24hrs compared to the couple of hours daily we used to meet does make a difference.

Michael: ... that’s it ... And we forget our problems so that we can keep the relationship as it is. Its good as it is. Even though I had told you she is giving a lot of attention to child. I need to try to accept it. I do understand it. I think that the …

Joe and Linda’s conversation reveals how they are struggling with understanding their different constructions of time together. Whilst for Joe, physical proximity means time together, for Linda time together is an altogether different story.

Joe: And I tell her this. Before we got married she used to tell me ‘I really look forward to live in our own house so that we can cook together, and do things together’. We got married, and there are moments in which we cook together, not a lot, but we do cook together and do other things together, not much I admit. But all of a sudden that is not time together according to her. To her, its not good enough …It is possible that for a man, the fact that he goes out to buy the most stupid things, like bulbs, water taps, and does other errands at home, at times with a lot of sacrifice. For me it’s a way of, homemaking is a way of being together. Its part of the relationship. I feel that for her they are not. These things don’t fall in her definition of time together. For her they are not a commitment of love, for example. To me they are because I would have sacrificed something else to do them, and I spent time doing them. It’s a choice, and I choose to do it, rather then get someone else to do it and pay.

Linda: Ehm …It’s also possible, like you said, that for me its so much part of the daily routine that I don’t see it as time together. For you it’s a break, because you’d be doing something different.

7.2.3. Level 3: Contextual Adjustment

During the first year of marriage, couples have constructed a relatively isolated picture of themselves, withdrawn from the wider social context of which they previously
made part of. Such gradual withdrawal was expected during the first interviews. Changes in their relationships with their extended families and friends were reported.

### 7.2.3.1. Supra-Theme 1- Changing Relationship with Parents and In-laws

Several participants have reported an improved relationship with their parents and in-laws after the wedding. Linda, for example felt that her relationship with her mum changed for the better after the wedding.

Linda: *My relationship with my mum changed as well, for example …. Ehm .. it got much better … it changed for the better.*

Interviewer: *In what sense? I am very curious.*

Linda: *I think I started to miss her. So I started looking forward to meeting her. You know? And so the time I spent with her started to get more intense. More valuable sort of.*

Josienne noticed that her mother in law is treating her ‘better’ after the wedding, to the point of her feeling like her daughter.

Josienne: *I feel she (mother-in-law) is better with me. Perhaps she treats me better because now I’m the wife of her son. But she is definitely treating me better then she used to during our courtship. Its better now. If I don’t go there she would phone me now. Unlike before when we hardly used to go there. Even if I’m not feeling well, she would constantly visit me at home. Coming and going. She’d come to help me at home and cook for us. I feel like I’m her daughter now.*
Noel believes that his parents started considering him mature after the wedding and he feels that they give him more importance. His hypothesis is that this is because he is the eldest brother after his sister who had married 10 years earlier.

Noel: ... Since I got married, because I’m not very often at home and I am the eldest boy, it’s like they consider me mature now, grown up kind of. And when I am there it shows. They give me more importance. Both parents give me more importance. Even when I call because I would need something you can see my Dad rushing to help me. And when I am there they’d all try to benefit from the moment and enjoy me as much as they can. Another thing is that I have a married sister who has been married for ten years. And so nothing new has been happening for a long time. And my siblings remember me mostly as they were very young when she got married. They are 16 and 14 now.

One of the differences marriage brought about in Sharon’s relationship with her mother is that it became a telephone relationship. Her relationship with her mother-in-law is similar, though with less frequent calls. Their visits to their parents are unplanned and sporadic.

Sharon: I phone his mum once or twice a week. Just to see how she is. And I phone my mum almost daily. I also phone my grandmother quite often too. As for visits we usually go once or twice weekly. There were times in which we did not go.

The premarital story about parents and in-laws involved some concern about the parents’ potential interference. One year after the wedding, most couples’ narratives reveal no difficulties in this respect.

Patrick: Our relationship with our parents has changed of course. Even my parents seem to have accepted that I got married and that I moved away. Now that I left its my life.
Sharon: We have to ask them to come home. They never take the initiative.

Patrick: They never interfere. From both sides. Thank God. We go and visit them.

Jason however, seems to be struggling to affirm his new status with his parents.

Jason: I am not sure. My mum sometimes complains that I am not visiting enough ... My father on the other side, remained very much the same. He is always asking for my advise ... What happened also was that at home I was the one who used to do some maintenance And to a certain extent it is still like that. But even if they have other problems, they often contact me. Perhaps its because this is how my mum reared me. But I think there’s a reference point in every family.

The unexpected arrival of their newborn baby precipitated particular adjustment dynamics between Grace and Michael. Having already complained about feeling isolated, Michael is accused of giving a lot of importance to his parents, who live next door. While acknowledging that her relationship with her mother is different, Grace admits it was never a deep relationship.

Grace: He gives his parents a lot of importance. That’s how I see it anyway. He makes the point to go and see them. To me it did not make a difference. Maybe, I’m not so sure, perhaps I speak a bit more with mum. But only on the child and nothing else as I never really had a deep relationship with my mum. Although it was not a bad relationship. But there was always a certain distance between us. And it didn’t improve at all. And it bugs me a bit because as I see it its like his family comes a little bit before us. Do you understand?

Michael’s story is different.
Michael: But its not so really. For example my mother lives next door. How many times did my mother turn up? We’ve been living here for a year and a half and she did not come here more than ten times. And I only visit mum’s twice a week perhaps, for just half an hour. Not more. And she lives just next door.

7.2.3.2. Dominant Theme 1: Changing Relationship with Friends

During courtship, couples underwent a series of boundary making activities among which was a marked degree of isolation from friends. The first year of marriage, emerges as a period in which the partners express a great sense of absorption in the relationship. Claire’s construction encompasses a representative expression of the developing need to bond.

Claire: Personally since we got married, I prefer to stay home or go out with him. I mean what’s the sense of going out on my own with friends. I don’t want to. I do keep contact with them [friends] but I mostly see them at work. Then I look forward to going home and be with him. I don’t meet other friends unless he comes along with me. I don’t want to go out without him, so when we do we go out with another couple …During courtship we had to go out to be together. But now I often prefer to stay at home with him. It’s a more informal atmosphere, more comfortable. We watch a dvd or TV. Sometimes we eat in the balcony because we have a nice view. Its simpler but its nicer I think, than going out, stay in traffic, crowded restaurants. You know.

When friends were eventually encompassed in the marital narrative, participating couples preferred to hang around with other couples, as a couple, rather than each partner having separate friends.

Patrick: And the friends we have are all couples now. The only time we go out without each other is because of a staff party at work …
7.2.3.3. Dominant Theme 2: Adjusting to Work-Life Balance

As has been expected, work-life balance remains a challenging adjustment during the first year of marriage. Most of the couples admitted time poverty and felt overwhelmed by the amount of work in their lives. Joe’s narrative highlights his sense of isolation and the difficulties around the development of a healthy work-life balance.

Joe:  
*I must admit, that work took away from me a lot from my personal space. And it excluded me from many things. It isolated me. I don’t have time for relationships, I don’t have time for friends, nothing, nothing. So it might be that as well. It is possible that I might improve if work is a bit slower in pace. Cause I stopped doing everything. One thing I stopped doing and which I am annoyed about is sports. I used to enjoy playing football, playing squash and going to the gym. But I would feel guilty now if I had to do it. Because I already have a problem with time, to spend time with Linda. For me going to the gym has become like choosing the gym over my wife.*

Maria’s expectations of a romantic atmosphere in her marriage left her feeling disillusioned.

Maria:  
*... There were times I felt a bit disillusioned. Especially in relation to housework. For example once I was hanging clothes to dry at 11pm on a Saturday, instead of going out. I would say ‘look at me how I ended up’. I would say to myself ‘look where I ended up’. Yes there were moments when I felt disillusioned.*

Maria later continues:

Maria:  
*So about the romanticism you mentioned earlier. I feel that immediately after marriage I had to pack it in a bag and throw it away. Because I don’t feel there is space or time to be romantic and those trivialities. Life has become actually more practical.*
In terms of work-life balance Patrick and Sharon found their first year of marriage impressively overworked.

Interviewer: *How would you describe your first year of marriage than?*

Patrick: *Work, work, and work. And add another work ...This is something which impressed me a lot. As for life itself I cannot grumble ...But the thing that is annoying me most is that we are not having enough time for ourselves. I leave home at 7am and return back at 8pm. On Saturday I work till 12.30. Cause I work a part-time as well. But time we don’t have enough.*

The expenses to decorate the house and loans to be repaid were the reasons provided for the high amount of work.

Interviewer: *How do you explain this? Why do you feel the need to work so much?*

Patrick: *To make do with the expenses and everything.*

Sharon: *To pay the expenses there are so that when children arrive you don’t have many loans to repay. There are a lot of things to be done, to finish the house. So we use the extra money to buy things for the house. So that we prepare for the children because you have to have an income so that when children arrive and I stop for a year unpaid leave you’d need some money. So its planning ahead. In fact now that I just finished my dissertation I increased my part-time work. Then we may slow down a bit.*

### 7.2.3.4. Dominant-Theme 3: Environmental Adjustment

Adjustment to the environment includes the new neighborhood and the new home.

Linda expressed how finding herself in a new house and a new village was shocking to her and relocation meant having to learn her whereabouts afresh.
Excerpt 1:

Linda: *Living in a new village, was also ... I never thought it was going to be so tough. The unfamiliarity of things, ehm ... everything was so unfamiliar, you know? That I am walking in the streets and everything is new. This is supposed to be my home and yet everything is so new. I don’t know anyone, I don’t know anything. OK, its not that I was used to be out in my native village and speak to the neighbors. But the unfamiliarity of it, you know, was shocking for me. And even the house. I don’t know if you remember Joe, but I think I’ve told you this a couple of times, there were times in the beginning when I did not like it anymore.*

Excerpt 2:

Josienne: *Stress did not really subside immediately [after the wedding] though. Because, there were still a lot of errands to do. Paying the bills and choosing the photos. The first three months were more hectic than now. Even getting used to the new home was a tough task really. And we had never slept together [in the same bed] before marrying and it was all so strange.*

Noel: *Its different and strange. In the beginning I could not get used to it really.*

Newlywed partners seem to need to locate themselves within the house. As if a metaphor for the balance between personal boundaries and collective (relational) boundaries, partners work to find a balance between their own space and the couple space within the house. Adrian depicts how settling down also meant choosing the chair around the table and the side of the wardrobe to put his clothes in. So poetically, Adrian also explains how the partners’ sides are distinguishable and how the nice smell influenced his sense of well being.

Adrian: *Oh yes ... even at home. And we made our places as well. The chair around the table and even the wardrobes. Her place and my place. It’s a flat we live in and each of us have our things. Well, and then I like her, and she attracts me a lot. I mean not*
only sexually. But the fact that she is clean and tidy, and she puts her things very organized. I mean you’d immediately notice her side of the wardrobe. I smell her clothes and it’s a good feeling. And it makes me happy and am very satisfied of my future with her.

7.3. Category 2: Ongoing Challenges in Marriage

The themes in this category refer to a wide spectrum of mundane challenges couples faced during the first year of marriage.

7.3.1. Supra-Theme 1: Managing Change & New Discoveries about the Partner

The toughest challenge couples expressed is learning to live with not knowing the partner as they thought they did before the wedding. Amanda, like most participants, shares her challenge about how she needs to adjust to the annoying and boring aspects of her husband.

Amanda: A lot of novelties, everything is new like, you know, even though we knew each other quite well. But the fact that we never lived together under the same roof ... it's totally different. You wouldn’t know certain things about the partner. And when you come to the facts then you would say ‘oh my goodness, how bad this is or how boring’ ... you know. Certain things would start to annoy you for example. But it’s only until you settle down.
7.3.2. Dominant Theme 1: Affection and Romanticism

Expression of affect remains a challenge during the first year of marriage. Recall from the first interviews how challenging this theme was, especially for men. Joe expresses how expressing his affect remains the major challenge in the relationship.

Joe: *We are just one year down the road … … … The biggest challenge at the moment, and throughout the year we have been married, is the affectionate side of the relationship.*

Interviewer: *In what sense?*

Joe: *Again … I mean a lot of differences and we are sort of struggling to sort out the affectionate side. Ehm … It is a challenge, and in a sense it will always be a challenge. That’s what I believe now. It will always remain a challenge to a certain extent. I’m being a realist.*

7.3.3. Dominant Theme 2: Time to Have Children

During the first interviews, children emerged as the main feature constituting a family. The tension about having children featured regularly during the second interviews. On one side the couples’ relatives and ‘biological clock’ seem to exert pressure on them to have children. Simultaneously, a concern about financial and relationship status is still present at this stage in marriage.

Excerpt 1:

Massimo: *My sister asks me ‘when are you going to make me an auntie?’ and my parents would ask when are we going to make them grand parents. But even the parish priest. He saw these two dolls and he told us ‘I am going to bless them so perhaps they take life’ (laughs)...*
Excerpt 2:

Sharon: That we have children. Now we take a small break and finish the house. I want to relax a bit after the dissertation. And we need to repay some of the loans.

Excerpt 3:

Adrian: We are thinking about the kids now. In the last couple of months we are really talking about babies all the time.

Claire: I worry about our closeness sometimes, especially when children arrive. When we are home in the evening, watching a film together I often think that this will vanish with the arrival of children. We do have time together currently.

Excerpt 4:

Joe: And related to this is the issue of having children. Very much related to the first challenge. We’re theoretically open. But if we had to have children today, I would still be concerned about time. Obviously that would add to the burden on myself at the moment. She would obviously need more attention as well. They are my concerns and Linda would have hers. But I don’t know how I will cope.

7.4. Category 3: A Child is Born – A Mini Case Study

Being the only couple giving birth to a child, during the study I thought it would be interesting to highlight Michael & Grace’s idiosyncratic story. The distinctive features of this interview offer a rich and unique narrative of the interplay between the marital and parental roles at its very early stages.

Michael and Grace got married in December 2003. Unexpectedly, two months after the wedding, Grace got pregnant. The changes the couple experienced were reportedly
immediate. In spite of not being able to point out the changes she herself experienced
during pregnancy, Grace has noticed great changes in Michael’s character and
behaviour.

Grace: I don’t know in myself, but in him it brought a lot of changes.
Changes in his character and in the way he treated me. He was
different ... I would say more ... calmer ... he would refrain
from saying certain things because he knows how I am ... being
more helpful around the house. Yes, I would say it changed him
a lot.

Michael also noticed changes Grace underwent during pregnancy. He started feeling
isolated during pregnancy. Grace’s seemingly unappreciative behaviour was being
constructed as difficult to handle, even though he could reframe them within the new
context of pregnancy.

Michael: Not that before I wasn’t as helpful. But I would be more patient
with her. For example, before the pregnancy I would cook and
she would eat. Then I used to cook and she would return from
work and say, I’m not hungry ... or I’m smelling it bad. So, its
not only that she would not be hungry but that she would smell
it badly. So my sacrifice and effort would be in vain. It couldn’t
be worst than this. Although annoyed I would accept it vis-a-vis
the state she was in. I would understand.

Michael admits that the child’s birth created the most radical shift.

Michael: I don’t think our relationship changed with the marriage. I
think that the hardest impact was the birth of the baby ... 

Grace recalled experiencing a lot of changes herself in all areas of her life. Michael’s
interjections reinforce Grace’s construction that she was the one who experienced the
most changes.
Grace: … The changes that occurred were mostly in myself …

Michael: … because she works and so its even more …

Interviewer: … What sort of changes have you been through?

Grace: Physical, mental, everything …

Michael: … Everything I suppose, because even …

Grace: … I mean even socially. You have to stop working … your lifestyle changes … your life changes … the relationship changes … everything changes, naturally. And it’s the first pregnancy, you wouldn’t know what you’re in for. Initially I, not that I took it badly, but I spent the first three months, sort of … feeling very down. But that may be because of the hormones as well. But then sort of … then we went for a holiday as well.

The most pronounced change the couple experienced was the immediate and sudden sense of responsibility.

Grace: The responsibility … It’s a big responsibility, a real big one …

Michael: Certainly … that’s …

Grace: … It feels like an immediate weight, like something totally dependent on you. …

The birth of the baby also brought about disruptions of the established patterns and routines developed in the meantime.

Michael: … Because before we used to share the work load, at times she cooks at other times I do it. Now there is something else, on which you cannot depend. Do you understand. It depends on you.
Mostly disruptive for Michael was the decreasing attention he receives from Grace as she shifts increasing attention onto the baby. Michael’s construction is one in which he feels increasingly peripheral to Grace’s attention. Grace’s construction is different.

Michael: *For me it diminished. Even the attention diminished. From her side I mean. Just an example she used to buy me something every now and again. She hasn’t bought me anything since the baby was born. I feel sort of out-dated …*

Grace: *I don’t even buy things for myself …*

The new balance experienced after this transition evidences both psychological and relational shifts involving the marital and parental levels of relationship. Michael continues to feel isolated at both the parental and the marital levels.

**Excerpt 1:**

Michael: *It changed radically after Daniel’s birth. Even the fact, first of all because of the responsibility incurred by the birth of the baby, and second even the fact that she was drawn closer to the boy, I myself have two to give attention to and she gives him more attention than she does to me. Its natural but in the end you feel it as well.*

**Excerpt 2:**

Michael: *Its more difficult for me now to accept it. Because now she is wasting a lot of time with Daniel. She would return from work and spend a good three hours trying to feed the baby. And he is not hungry, he refuses to eat. She would actually force him to eat.*

Grace’s construction of motherhood involves complete commitment to the child’s physical needs. Michael just started his Masters degree, which possibly intensified gender role polarization.
Grace:  *But it’s because I feel I’m more responsible for the child. Not that he doesn’t contribute … but I feel I am primarily responsible for the child. Even the fact that for example in the first three months the baby was on breast feeding he was completely dependent on me. Not that he did not do anything but he could not do much. Certain things were limited of course. And he was working as well. It’s only now that he is on holidays and is here. Between studying and work he was not really present. He was just starting his masters, at the same time we had the baby, so it was tough, first because of the responsibility that was going to befall us, he also had to work. He used to return home from work at eight in the evening. And I was mostly alone, especially in the beginning.*

Michael’s support during delivery was valuable for Grace as it was for him.

Michael:  *I was with you even during delivery. I was there for two whole days and have assisted her in the process.*

Grace:  *Oh yes, and he was very supportive to say the least. This is something for both of us. But mentally, the fact that you have someone alongside. I felt his presence very supportive. I don’t know what I would have done had he been absent. Because it’s a moment in which you need someone who is very close to you. I mean the midwife was helpful but in a different sense …*

Simultaneously, Michael and Grace experienced an important change in their relationship.

Interviewer:  *What else has changed with his arrival?*

Grace:  *We have more to talk about now. He united us even more.*

Michael:  *Even when we quarrel, we would understand that we were mistaken. We ask sorry immediately. We understand that everyone makes mistakes and so the fire would turn off immediately.*

Interviewer:  *So the child has brought along more union between you. In what way?*

Grace:  *It’s true …*
Michael:  … *He did yes. Things changed in fact. I think we have become more accepting of each other.*

At a personal level, Grace indirectly voices a sense of loss of independence, or rather a change in her identity and in her couple relationship narrative.

Grace:  … *Because I was independent … he had his own things and I had mine … He used to work and then go to the part-time … I used to return home from work and do chores around the house.*

Yet, both Michael and Grace deny the impact the birth of the baby has had on them, or in some way justify the unexpected arrival of the newborn child catching them unprepared. This contradicts their own premarital expectation to wait at least a couple of years before having a baby.

Interviewer:  *So do you feel the baby came quickly after marriage, because its like you did not have a honeymoon, a time to deepen the relationship, as you had expected?*

Michael:  *But since we had been together for very long, almost ten years, I think …*

Grace:  … *its almost better that we had the baby early on … because I feel he unites you more. As a couple you would feel much better.*

Michael:  *I think its true. We are not the type who go out very much. We do go out, but not staying out late. So the boy gave us an opportunity, sort of something else to do together. In fact we were looking forward to find something to do together. Because our hobbies were different.*

The couple’s narrative about their situation is therefore both consolidating and isolating. I hypothesize other underlying, or perhaps unconscious, meanings around this early pregnancy, in particular, Michael’s last statement is indicative an
unconscious willingness to have the baby. The baby was repeatedly said to have been an opportunity of increased closeness. The statement “in fact we were looking forward to find something to do together” is indicative of a degree of (sub/un-conscious) willingness for the baby’s birth. This willingness becomes increasingly evident as Grace provides further reasons for jeopardizing her original expectation about wanting to wait for at least two years before bearing children. With Michael working long hours and doing his Masters she felt lonely. The baby seems to keep her busy.

Grace: ... Without the children, as he is saying, we were on our own. For example I think I wouldn’t have been able to cope with him doing the Masters isolating himself in his studies, I was alone and I don’t really have hobbies as such. I used to go out to mum’s or doing some shopping. But how long would I do that. So now that the baby is born ... he sort of filled that emptiness. I’m sure I wouldn’t have coped. I would have found something else to do for myself because he would isolate himself to study. Perhaps.

From this perspective, Daniel’s ‘unexpected’ birth emerges as a kind of protective element for the relationship. For Grace, Daniel’s birth may be said to have a deeper meaning. I dare say Daniel is her new meaning in the relationship.

Interviewer: What else has changed with his arrival?

Grace: We have more to talk about now. He united us even more.

Daniel’s birth brought other dilemmas too. Grace could not give up her job or stay away for longer than four months without a pay. With Michael working full-time, a part-time, and still reading his Masters, the couple needed to find alternative care for the baby while Grace would be at work.
Grace: *I leave him with nanna, my mother I mean. Because he would have to study even now during summer holidays. He’s doing his Masters in science education.*

This is another disillusioned expectation for the couple, whose premarital expectation was that of rearing the baby themselves, without the intrusion of parents and in-laws.

Michael: *And she was afraid to leave our son with her mum. She used to tell me that she doesn’t want to leave Daniel with her mum. She used to tell me ‘he’s my son and I don’t want him to think she’s his mother’.*

In spite of her difficulty with separating herself from the baby, Grace admits she had to return to work. Now that she did it, she acknowledges the benefits of returning back to work.

Grace: *It was the four months paid pregnancy leave which I took. I had to return to work after that. I wanted to stay much more with the boy. I was going mad when I left him to go to work. I couldn’t leave him. But mentally I feel better like this. I used to feel like a vegetable here at home. I used to go out to mum’s and to shop, or meet a friend. But the fact that my mind … I’m used to being busy all day. And my work is important in my life. I feel calmer now that I’m back to work. Before I was feeling a bit frustrated.*

Career advancement was at stake had Grace decided to extend her parental leave.

Michael: *But even … I think that what drove her back so quickly was that she did not want to loose her job. Because then she would have lost the position she reached now. That’s a drawback for her. They would have changed her job on her return and she would have lost a grade.*

Leaving the job wasn’t even an option.
Grace: *Moreover, I was getting paid for the four months but after that it would have stopped. And it would have been hard living with one pay. Very hard. I don’t know how we could have lived with one salary. It would have been impossible.*

Grace noticed other changes brought about by Daniel’s birth. Grace seems to be bothered by Michael’s increased closeness with his parents. This contradicts Grace’s earlier statements of increased closeness between herself and Michael.

Grace: *He gives his parents a lot of importance. That’s how I see it anyway. He makes the point to go and see them … … And it bugs me a bit because as I see it its like his family comes a little bit before us. Do you understand?*

Michael refused such an ‘accusation’ and attempts to clarify his position.

Michael: *But its not so really. For example my mother lives next door. How many times did my mother turn up? We’ve been living here for a year and a half and she did not come here more than ten times. And I only visit mum twice a week perhaps, for just half an hour. Not more. And she lives just next door.*

However, Michael later admits that his relationship with his parents actually improved after marrying. The closeness he rejects above is not necessarily the same closeness he refers to below which implies a deeper closeness based on an internal need to be with them.

Michael: *I think, with my parents I became closer. There is some lack because you would not see them as often and that lack may create a greater need to be with them. Even when we meet up we share certain experiences, and this draws us closer together. At least this is my point of view.*

Michael and Grace’s construction of closeness refers primarily to the parental level of their relationship. What Michael was complaining about was the marital level of the
relationship instead. Drawing from the participants’ own comments, I hypothesize that if they hadn’t had the baby, they would have probably experienced some problems. Grace would have felt lonely and would have probably increased her demands on Michael. Grace talked about feeling “empty” while Michael admits he was unprepared for the pregnancy. Grace, by speaking in the second person form, also acknowledges her ‘unpreparedness’ for the pregnancy.

Grace: As for other expectations regarding the relationship I feel we did become closer. I think my son united us much more. Had there been no children I think I would have felt much isolated. We would have had a lot more clashes because I would have felt lonely. He would study and work a lot.

Michael: The fact that we have had the boy alleviated that space. He gave her a meaning and an opportunity to fill her time. But I reduced some work so that I can spend more time with my son too. And if I am with my son I am also with her. He organized us, in a way. I know I cannot give time to study alone. This was unexpected as we were expecting to leave a couple of years before having children.

Grace: Me more than he did. Because I am younger and I felt we could wait some time before having kids. I feel that you have to be mentally prepared to have children. Ours was unexpected. Its not that I did not wish to have children, because even as a woman I think it’s the greatest desire a woman can have. But to have children you have to be prepared, your body tells you whether you are ready. And I don’t feel I was ready. I had to adapt. And everything went well, thank God.
7.5. Interpretation

7.5.1. Adjustment

This interpretation of the analysis addresses the major categories that emerged from the second interviews. Links with the first interviews data and its subsequent discussion will be made.

Contrary to the premarital expectation that marriage is a continuation of courtship, the couples’ reviewed narrative involves unexpected challenging adjustment experiences. Rather than being an end in itself, the couples’ experience of marriage emerges as a new beginning involving three levels of adjustment, including personal, relational, and contextual. This tallies with Huston’s (2000) ecological framework, emphasizing the importance of mapping the larger terrain of couple relationships. For the sake of clarity an attempt is being made to distinguish between the three levels. However, one needs to appreciate that all three levels are intertwined and an understanding of their systemic nature is essential.

7.5.1.1. Level 1: Individual Adjustment and Experiential Learning

The participants’ developing narrative about marriage involves various unexpected experiences involving satisfactory and disappointing ones. All experiences can be considered as opportunities for learning, which influenced the new evolving marital narrative. For most couples the first three months of marriage were the most difficult to handle, landing some participants into a disappointing reality and some others on a satisfactory and adventurous experience.
The direction participants’ adjustment takes seems to be determined by the interplay between the three levels of adjustment. For example, marriage brought about a change in home and town, which for Linda was shockingly upsetting while Josienne was enthusiastic about it during her first year of marriage. This difference can tentatively be attributed to the difference in the women’s personality in relation to their context. Linda, for example, experienced a lot of time on her own, while Noel, Josienne’s husband, was very often at home with Josienne during the day. Josienne also experienced a particular closeness with her mother-in-law, and Noel’s brothers, who lived nearby and visited frequently, while Linda did not have the same strong relational connectedness with her in-laws or parents.

The relatively long betrothal and the expectation that marriage is a continuation of courtship can also be involved in the effect the unexpected experience has on participants. However, research has indicated that cognitive learning made before marriage, during marriage preparation courses, in no way replaces the experiential learning one undergoes after the wedding (Laner & Russel, 1995). Arond and Pauker (1987), in their survey among American newlyweds have found “no relation between whether or not spouses vacationed together, bought a house or a car together, or how long they knew each other before the wedding, and whether or not their adjustment to marriage had been easy or difficult” (p.11). The map is not the territory and the couples interviewed for this research did not manifest any particular ease adjusting to marriage, in spite of their relatively long courtship. Marriage itself invokes a psychological shift, which needs to be further explored and understood.
The majority of participants in this research immediately realised that ‘marriage changes everything’. In contrast to pre-marital expectations and to popular belief, the participants’ experiences of the first year of marriage is far from a blissful honeymoon phase and tally more with Duvall and Miller’s task oriented model. Marriage brings a lot of unexpected changes even in couples who had lived together before marrying (Arond & Pauker 1987), let alone among couples who, in spite of their long courtship, are culturally prohibited from living together.

Although apparently superficial, the changes experienced by the couples seem to have resonated with deeper personal values. For example, Patrick and Sharon found themselves having to deal with frozen cheese and ham which triggered personal values around economy. For Maria and Emanuel, learning to use the washing machine resonated with deeper values about practicality, time, and common sense. Linda’s experience of house chores resonated with values around dependence/independence and equality.

The relatively longer courtship, however, contributed to the couples’ construction of marriage and their eagerness to live together as the final step of their relationship. Such eagerness could have been hyped by the participants’ desire to legitimize their sexual activity or initiate it depending on their choice. The mundane experiences, however, proved even more disappointing, with downward spiraling romanticism, leaving participants like Maria questioning the value of hanging washed clothes late at night and feeling disappointed. This narrative fits Waller’s disilllusionment model which views courtship as a process of idealisation with the inevitable consequence of disillusionment (Waller, 1938).
The honeymoon phase may have gender implications with participating women generally experiencing a harder time adjusting during the early days of marriage. Generally speaking, men in this sample appear to have continued in the same vein, with work being their primary activity. On the contrary, women widened the spectrum of their activities to include housework, cooking, shopping, and an increasing concern about the relationship, particularly women like Linda, Maria, Sharon and others who were not used to house chores before marrying. Men however, were expected to widen their behavioural spectrum to include expression of affect and house chore contribution, which should not be undermined. Both men and women were therefore challenged by the demands of married life, albeit the challenges addressed different aspects of the self.

7.5.1.2. Level 2: Relational Adjustment

Adjusting to differences between partners emerged as a major milestone during the first year of marriage (Arond & Pauker, 1987; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). The first interviews revealed optimistic constructions of partner and relationship, often blurred by positive sentiment override (Hawkins, Carrere, & Gottman, 2002). Participants tended to highlight the similarities between them, claimed deep empathy, as well as an ability to predict their partner’s behaviour. Differences were perceived as problematic. This was interpreted as a protective mechanism serving participants to soften the leap into the ‘closed box’ of marriage. One year of marriage, however, changed some of the participants’ construction of marriage from one that is a continuation of courtship to a ‘marriage [that] changes everything’.
Josienne:  *And we had been together for ten years before marrying. But still in those ten years you never really realize certain things about the person. When you then live with the person, sleep and wake up with the person, then you start knowing the person. And my mum used to tell me this.*

Living together seems to educe new ways of managing differences, particularly the newly emerging ones. The way Shirley expressed it connotes a gradual emergence of differences: “more and more I understand our differences”. As the partners start letting their guards down and behaving more naturally, they expose more of themselves, making way for differences to emerge. Living together intensifies the relationship. The repertoire of interactions and behaviour increases as couples do more things in each other’s presence, due to increased spatial and temporal closeness, thus giving rise to further opportunities for differences to emerge. For example, Josienne could not sleep on hearing her husband Noel breathing beside her in bed and Emanuel found it difficult to handle Maria’s way of using the washing machine. Before marriage, Joe joked about Linda’s emotionality and called her ‘feline’. One year into marriage, Joe feels he is struggling with the difference between the ways Linda and himself make sense of the connection between feelings and actions. For him, crying is the result of sadness, whereas Linda cries also when she is angry.

Marital interaction and the emerging differences are tensions that challenged the participants’ construction of themselves and each other. A new construction of each other and themselves consisting of the *domain specific self* (Randle, 2006) is a necessary milestone for a coherent relationship narrative to emerge. *Positioning theory* (Langenhove & Harre, 1999; Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006) is a systemic expansion of Kelly’s (1955) *personal construct theory* which views individuals as constructing
the world in terms of whatever meaning they apply to it. Positioning theory uses this basis to create a systemic, process-based, idea of interactive positioning (Campbell & Groeback, 2006). Because the basis of positioning is discourse, power (and powerlessness) in marital relationships, and therefore gender, are implicated through the position discourses held both within the relationship and between the relationship and the other culturally available stories (Dallos, 1997).

Some major challenging differences among participating couples emerge as polarized positions (Campbell & Groeback, 2006) involving power and gender. One example is the degree of verbosity between the partners, with men generally positioning themselves on the silent end and women on the more verbal end (Tannen, 1990). The couples’ understanding of closeness and distance also involves polarized positions with men more in need of distance and independence and women of dependence. The affect expression dimension is also polarised with men positioning themselves not in need of it and women in need of affect.

Eventually, it is assumed, relational adjustment will continue to require mutual action in the development of a necessary shared narrative, or sets of understandings (Dallos, 1997) which are necessary for the definition of the relationship, involving roles people play, tasks to be performed, obligations, power distribution, and so on.

**a. Symbiotic traditional relationships and increased sense of responsibility**

*Symbiosis* refers to the complementary and extreme positions partners take in the relationship, as opposed to the idea of equality and sameness they had anticipated
before marriage. Symbiosis was detected in two levels of the relationship. The first involves personal characteristics in which the couples’ construction of the self was one opposing that of one’s partner. For example, some couples like Joe and Linda, and Noel and Josienne, pointed to the difference in the degree of verbosity and expression of affect between them, with Joe being on the retentive extreme and Linda on the expressive. The effect of such differences on the relationship can be devastating. Gottman’s (1993) research has shown how predictable gendered patterns of marital interaction, in which women seek contact through talk about relationship, while men avoid it, are likely to lead to an unhappy marriage (1994). So while difference in itself can be enriching to the relationship (Gottman, 1993) the way partners handle it can be devastating.

In spite of the premarital expectations for an equal relationship, symbiotic rather than equal relationships, were detected in relation to gender roles. Generally, participating men appear to construct the role of the married man on provision of security, including financial and structural security. For example Michael, Joe, Emanuel, and others like Adrian, work longer hours and take full responsibility of the house maintenance. Emanuel also thinks about how to save the money to buy Maria a new car because of her ailing back. On the other hand, women’s construction of the woman’s role in marriage primarily revolves around the provision of care, including house care, childcare, and provision of affect. For example all the women in the sample have taken primary responsibility of house care with men only expected to help around the house. Michael and Grace’s unique story involves Grace’s absorption in childcare, while Michael is immersed in career development and work.
All this tallies with the widespread pattern suggesting that few married couples actually achieve relationship equality (Hochschild, 1989; Borg, 1999). Instead many tend to replicate traditional gender patterns (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998), with women carrying primary responsibility for the provision of care, even when they are employed outside the home, and men carrying primary responsibility for provision of finances and security. Only two couples in my sample constructed relatively equal relationships. Josienne and Noel, and Massimo and Shirley both attempted to maintain an equal relationship, even though equality was conceptually limited to housework.

Adrian and Clarie are an example of this process of constructing polarized positions (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Claire tolerated Adrian’s involvement in house chores, who in return ‘helped’ Claire. After some time, Adrian’s involvement in house care subsided to be replaced by planning to increase his business. Thus Claire’s positioning as ‘femaleness’ defined Adrian’s position as ‘maless’ and Adrian’s position of ‘maleness’ continued to define Clarie’s position of ‘femaleness’, with both partners influencing each other with their positioning. Emanuel and Maria are moving along a similar co-constructed path, whereby Emanuel dedicated the first year of marriage predominantly to enhance his career, thus positioning himself in the breadwinner position, with the hope of compensating for Maria’s loss of income when she bears the baby, thus positioning her in the provision of care position.

Michael and Grace’s story also portrays a typical example of constructed symbiotic traditional gender roles with Grace’s added tension of expecting to embrace both the role of the mother and that of a career woman. We see a couple who is radically shifted from the romantic, honeymoon phase, into the childrearing phase. The arising tensions between the ideal equality and the real inequality is narrated through
incoherent verses of closeness and distance, with Michael complaining of neglect and Grace complaining about his intensified closeness with his mum. The birth, as well as pregnancy, precipitated an increased sense of responsibility, which demanded a shift in both construction of oneself and the marital relationship. The birth of the first child has already been associated with increased child-oriented (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990), and increasingly traditional gender roles (Cowan & Cowan, 1988).

The above reinforces the argument that the family life cycle stages are event-bound rather than time-bound. If this was the case the life-course of a childless family would be markedly different from that of a family with children. Yet, other participants, particularly women, such as Maria, Linda, and Sharon, though still childless by the second interview, still felt a surprisingly marked decline in romanticism.

MacDermid, Huston, and McHale’s (1990) study compared marital relationship changes between those who become parents and those who do not during the first two and a half years of marriage. They found that all couples irrespective of whether they became parents or not, experienced declines in their feelings of love. It is not difficult to discern some of the causes of the declining romanticism. Linda admitted her naiveté before marrying and she explains how mundane practicalities robbed her of her precedent lifestyle, about which she felt disillusioned. Maria’s excerpts concord.

**Excerpt 1:**

Linda … yes it took me months. I mean there was the change about house chores, ehm … I mean stupidities, but they need to be done. I mean housework, shopping, washing, cooking, … Ehm, that you go home after work and you have to start from scratch.
Excerpt 2:

Maria: *There were times I felt a bit disillusioned. Especially in relation to housework. For example once I was hanging clothes to dry at 11pm on a Saturday, instead of going out. I would say ‘look at me how I ended up.*

Excerpt 3:

Maria: *So about the romanticism you mentioned earlier. I feel that immediately after marriage I had to pack it in a bag and throw it away. Because I don’t feel there is space or time to be romantic and those trivialities. Life has become actually more practical.*

Both childbirth and house chores may be implicated in the unexpected decline in romanticism. The underlying construction involves an increased sense of responsibility. The fact that women voiced it can be attributed to gender difference in verbosity in general and expression of affect in particular (Basow & Rubenfeld, 2003). An equally powerful decline in the level of romanticism among men was voiced however. Instead of admitting lower levels of romanticism, which they did during the first interviews anyway, men talked about an increasing sense of responsibility after the wedding. It is perhaps this increased sense of responsibility that accounts for the increased symbiotic traditional gender roles.

From this perspective it becomes easier to appreciate the fragility of this stage in the family’s life cycle. Such sense of increased responsibilities is the result of the shifting construction of values and priorities. General relationship developmental theories (Duvall & Miller, 1985; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982) and researchers (Arond & Pauker, 1987; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990) both acknowledge the fragility of this phase. Fitting the Disillusionment Model (Waller,
disappointment and disillusionment of pre-marital expectations therefore begin immediately after the initial idealisation of the perfect match (Dominion, 2006). However, some couples like Emanuel and Maria are more inclined to fit the Emergent Distress Model in that it suggests that couples expect a decline in romanticism (Huston, et al., 2001).

b. Togetherness & Separateness

One year into marriage, the couples’ construction of the balance between togetherness and separateness is a positive one. Some, like Patrick and Sharon, and Emanuel and Maria, agreed that they need to work harder to achieve improved togetherness. The first interviews revealed gender differences in the construction of togetherness/separateness, with women voicing their expectation for increased connectedness and men for separateness. One year after the wedding these expectations were retained.

The participating men’s construction of togetherness involves doing things together, while women’s construction actually consists of sitting down and conversing together. For men, the meaning of the term reflects their practical, hands-on orientation; for women togetherness reflects their emotional/relationship orientation. This difference fits into the bigger picture of gendered differences and is embedded within the dominant cultural narratives assigning particular tasks to men and to women (Dallos, 1997).
Far from the pre-marital claim of deep empathy, one year into marriage the partners still struggle with their different definitions of togetherness and separateness. Emanuel’s excerpt below reveals the emotion/action difference very clearly:

Emanuel: At times I think …our cars are old, and Maria has a knee problem. I hear the problem but I empathise for a while and then move on to thinking ‘so perhaps she needs another car with an automatic gearbox’. But I don’t spend a lot of time empathising and listening, I just move into action. And that’s my way I express my love and to show her she’s important to me. I don’t change my car if she needs one. She’s first and her health. But I do not link it to romanticism.

c. The balanced and the struggling couples

Participants can generally be split in two types of couples. There are those who during their first year of marriage appear to have managed to settle into a satisfying balance between togetherness and separateness (e.g. Josienne and Noel, Shirley and Massimo, Adrian and Claire, Amanda and Jason, and Patrick and Sharon), and those who seem to be still struggling to find the right balance (e.g. Emanuel and Maria, Joe and Linda, Grace and Michael).

Attachment theory may hold some explanations and loosely one can view the difference between the struggling and the balanced couples in terms of the attachment dance the partners co-created by synchronizing their personal choreographies.

The balanced couples appear to be those who were able to construct relationship patterns that provide a sense of security for each other. Massimo and Shirley, for example, created spaces whereby they can be together. Together, they both learned to protect, and trust that their partner can likewise protect, their relationship from
intruding in-laws and friends. Both claimed a high degree of empathy with each other. Massimo also felt Shirley’s support during his dismissal from work. Josianne, having experienced Noel’s capacity to attend to her needs while she fell sick, became increasingly reassured about her future with him.

Among the struggling couples, empathy doesn’t seem to retain its premarital ‘mind-reading’ potency as a method of prediction. Some partners strongly felt they’re facing the unknown. Linda’s reaction to her new status shocked Joe. He expressed how alienated he felt from Linda. Maria’s experience of alienation from her new husband Emanuel was also revealed as she felt alienated from the person sleeping beside her. One year into marriage and she feels “I am still not 100% now”. The struggling couples’ construction of the relationship lacks the secure base (Ainsworth, 1989) characteristic of secure relationships (Crowell & Treboux, 2001) and because empathy is low, the partners’ needs are not being resonated and met. Michael and Claire both experience feelings of insecurity. Without having the possibility of analyzing their childhood attachment patterns or their representational models, one can infer an insecure couple attachment style, with a marked unawareness “of the nature of the other’s experiences, or of the effects of those experiences on either the self or the other” (Fisher & Crandell, 2001). Both partners feel deprived and emotionally abandoned, so characteristic of the preoccupied type.

Joe and Linda face a similar fate. With Joe’s inability to connect physically and emotionally with Linda, the portrayal is that of a dismissive attachment. Recall how Linda’s way to come to terms with this was by increasing her work load. The couple is
also finding difficulty connecting sexually and emotionally with Joe indirectly admitting an inability to empathize.

Joe:  

*And related to this is the issue of having children. Very much related to the first challenge. We’re theoretically open. But if we had to have children today, I would still be concerned about time. Obviously that would add to the burden on myself at the moment. She would obviously need more attention as well. They are my concerns and Linda would have hers. But I don’t know how I will cope.*

That Joe’s internal working model is an insecure/dismissive one is further revealed by Joe’s recollection of his childhood attachment with his family of origin.

Joe:  

*With my parents, since I was 12, although I define it as a good relationship, it was always a distant relationship. I mean good, but distant. And more than that, I don’t feel attached to my parents. And with my brothers as well. …I am a very silent person even at home. I don’t talk much … they know that its hard for me to say something and that I take long to say something or to commit myself into something. My relationship changed with them in the sense that at times I feel I offend them a bit. For example if Linda does not remind me to visit them I won’t go. I forget. For me, I hate to say it, for me its not important.*

An attempt to attribute the difference between the balanced and the struggling couples to career orientation is restrictive. Dual career couples are found in both the balanced and struggling groups, as are partners with high career-oriented intentions. Sharon, like her husband Patrick, is very career-oriented in spite of the apparent balance. She has just finished her Masters. Claire is also very much career-oriented like her husband Adrian who is also planning to open a small business. It is evident, however, that the very busy couples are those who seem to find it difficult to establish a togetherness/separateness balance as expected before the wedding. Emanuel and Maria, for example, have never really sat down to watch a movie together as they had
originally planned and expected. On the other hand, Noel and Josienne’s, non-career orientation provides them with ample time to be together.

However, the fact remains that the fulfilment or not of expectations around the balance between togetherness and separateness is contingent upon the partners’ construction of togetherness, based on mental representations formed with the original attachment figures (Fisher & Crandell, 2001). The way partners negotiate their internal working models in the process of the construction of an evolving relationship narrative is highly implicated.

d. The emergent androgyne

Work-life balance, gender equality, and the relevant themes that emerged from the first and second interviews, seem to be connected by a call for a more flexible gender identity. It means both encouraging women’s and men’s emancipation from stereotyped sex-roles.

Popular belief and scientific literature alike have focused on women’s emancipation and encouraged women to rise above men’s dominant position (Jones, 1999). However, the systemic nature of relationships highlights that men need encouragement, rather than criticism, to emancipate into more flexible men. Almost all men in this sample voiced a concern about expressing affect for example, an area in which men do not have transgenerational role models to follow. Such encouragement is justified by the finding that throughout the first year of marriage, couples tend to ‘regress’ to traditional gender roles, particularly if a baby is born. This contradicts the couples’ expectations of equality expressed in the first interviews.
For example Adrian stopped cleaning around the house and started thinking of increasing his business. Emanuel used the first year of marriage to set the ground to enhance his career so that when his wife Maria gets pregnant he would be able to compensate for her loss of income. Abela (2000) showed how “men in Malta just like in Europe, generally, are more likely to hold traditional views on gender and the family than their women counterparts” (p.67). The fact that men need encouragement in developing a more flexible gender identity has also been shown by the finding that “Maltese women are changing faster than men, and even faster than other European women” (Abela, 2000. p.67). In my view this is because women’s emancipation started well before that of men, who are just recently realising the need to change. Yet other research shows that androgynous behaviour develops over time (Sinnot, 1982; Hyde, et al., 1991), with men becoming androgynous later than women generally do (Hyde et al., 1991). By implication, therefore, men in Malta seem to be having a harder time adjusting to post-traditional gender-roles than their European counterparts.

Gender-role emancipation has serious implications in marital adjustment. It has been shown above that one common denominator among the balanced couples appears to be a greater degree of androgynous behaviour, particularly in men. The struggling couples appear more sex-typed generally. The balanced men admitted a good degree of involvement in housework, thus reflecting sex-role behaviour traditionally associated with women. Noel almost does everything at home, including cleaning and cooking, and Josienne finds everything ready when she returns from work. Massimo and Shirley admitted they share the workload without Shirley taking full responsibility of housework.
The relationship between gender and sex role orientation to the domestic division of
labour appears to be an important feature in marital adjustment (Gunter & Gunter,
1990). Supporting the contention that androgyny may contribute to a balanced sense
of togetherness-separateness in the first year of marriage, Isaac and Shah (2004), in a
study of Indian couples, found that androgynous dyads show better marital
adjustment. This resonates with Bem’s (1974; 1975) original contention that
androgynous persons are better off socially and psychologically than sex-typed
individuals. Later research continued to support this contention (Orlofsky, 1977;
Taylor & Hall, 1982; Shimonaka, et al., 1997; Guastello & Guastello, 2003).

However, participants like Patrick and Adrian don’t seem to contribute as much as
Noel and Massimo do and the balance they achieved in togetherness and separateness
seems to be linked with their wives’ seeming contentment with the amount they
actually contribute. This indicates that the couple’s happiness does not necessarily rely
on a standard (objective) degree of androgyny but on the systemic combination of
subjective constructions held by the partners in the couple. In fact, research has
indicated that adaptation is more linked with role satisfaction than with actual amount
of work shared (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). From this perspective, if Grace and Sharon,
for example, prefer to wash the floors themselves, it doesn’t necessarily mean that
they are less emancipated than women like Josienne whose husband does everything
at home. On the other hand, men’s common difficulty in expressing their affect is an
aspect they have to be encouraged to develop, as their wives are not happy with this
limitation.
e. The internal struggle of identities: The ‘me’ and the ‘we’

The bi-directional nature of attachment in intimate adult relationships suggests a developmental interplay that is expressed both behaviourally and verbally. Language is an important means through which couples negotiate the terms of their relationship (Knudson-Martin & Mahoney, 1998) and express their developing relationship narrative and perceived closeness (Tannen, 2003). The first interviews hinted at the use of the words ‘we’ and ‘I’ and their connection with the construction of the degree of closeness in the relationship. Based on Bowen’s contention that differentiated people use more "I" statements in their conversations, two early studies used 'I' and "We" statements to measure the degree of differentiation (Weinberg, 1978; Citrin, 1982). However, these measures have not been psychometrically tested. Kear's (1978) Differentiation of Self Scale was another early attempt to measure differentiation. He developed a 72-item scale, but subsequent attempts to demonstrate validity were not successful (Haber, 1984). Consequently, the scale was never widely used.

The relationship narrative refers to couple identity, that sense of ‘we’ characterised by the constructions with which each couple defines itself (Burke & Tully, 1977). It is being assumed that the definition of the relationship narrative is positively related to the togetherness – separateness balance. A balance between being oneself and being part of the couple (Rusczynski, 1995) entails a more gender-neutral construction of marriage that reflects the partners’ increasing gender-role flexibility. This means that men and women have to learn to abandon sex-typed behaviour while simultaneously assimilating some of the opposite gender. Role taking in fact, has been found to facilitate the assimilation of some aspects of the spouse’s self (Bruke & Cast, 1997),
gradually shifting the relationship from a symbiotic, traditional one, into a couple with more integrated personhoods characterised by increased androgyny.

Identity theory postulates that individuals are understood as having identities that are processes which manifest stability and change simultaneously depending on the context (Burke & Cast, 1997). In the same manner, partners’ construction of the self, other, and the relationship is a process manifesting stability and change in terms of togetherness and separateness. Where does the spouse start, and where does he or she finish? Where does the couple start and where do the individuals start?

The dance most participating couples dance in their attempt to establish a functional togetherness/separateness choreography emerges through various experiences the couples recounted during the interviews. Some, for example Joe and Linda and Maria and Emanuel, seem to be struggling with the issue of ‘time on their own - time together’ balance. Work, in their case, takes a lot of time and leaves little for togetherness. Joe and Linda are also in the process of redefining their personal construction of time together into a collective relationship construction of time together through the negotiation of personal definitions. On his side, and perhaps on a more masculine tone, Joe conceives time together as being 'physically together'. Linda’s construction of time together is different and more inclined towards psychological togetherness and presence. Because of their working on two different shifts, Josienne and Noel have found an alternative balance between togetherness and separateness with Josienne accompanying Noel to work during the weekend nights.
Some of the participating couples have also shown how important this feature is in their relationship narrative. Maria and Emanuel have demonstrated this juggling between being themselves and being a couple through their struggle to maintain their own way of doing things. Maria’s way is to read the manual before using any kind of appliance while Emanuel’s way is to be pragmatic and learn by doing it.

The birth of the baby in Michael and Grace’s story has brought about various challenges to the previous balance between togetherness/separateness. Michael, on feeling left out of the mother-child bond, was accused by Grace of going to his mother more frequently. In this way, both Grace and Michael feel increased distance from each other, putting them closer towards the separateness end of the togetherness/separateness continuum. This phase has been mildly described as a challenging milestone, involving specific tasks (Duvall & Miller, 1985; McGoldrick & Carter, 1982). The birth of the first child, however, can be much more challenging (Dominian, 1979; Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2001). Apart from a third party, parenthood brings into the marital relationship another level of relating which adds to the complexity of interconnectedness. The spouses’ activities become more instrumental and child-oriented (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990), and the division of tasks becomes increasingly traditional and polarised (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). More recent research supports the findings that following the birth of a baby, men become more masculine and women more feminine (Burke & Cast, 1997). In the case of Michael and Grace, Daniel’s birth challenged their inter-relatedness which both partners experienced and expressed differently. Michael felt he could not penetrate the exclusive mother-child relationship and expressed feeling lonely. Grace felt very much attached to the newborn child and became extremely protective of him at the
exclusion of all, possibly also Michael. This may in part account for the couple’s struggle to establish a balance between togetherness and separateness.

f. Culture and perceived togetherness and separateness.

The balance people perceive as ideal between togetherness and separateness also seems to depend on cultural and political contexts (Guisinger & Blatt, 1994). In an annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations in St. Paul Minnesota, Buunk and Hupka (1983) revealed how the then Communist countries like Soviet Union, Hungary, and Yugoslavia emphasised togetherness in intimate relationships, while Western democratic countries, like the United States, Ireland, and the Netherlands, promoted autonomy and individualism, particularly in having separate friendships, jobs, and hobbies. They further reported that the higher the gross national product per capita of a nation, the more women valued independence and separateness relative to males in that society.

This distinction between the Communist/Socialists and Western democracies compares to the distinction between the fading traditionalism and the emerging post-traditionalism phases in Malta. That the Maltese are in transition between traditional values of togetherness and union, and post-traditional values promoting individuality and separateness has already been shown (Abela, 2000; Tabone, 1995).

The link between the participating couples’ expectations around the togetherness-separateness balance to culture is highly visible. The fact that all the couples bought their own house, rather than renting one for example, is indicative of the homeownership culture that escalated in the last three decades. It has now culminated in the
purchasing of a second property as a form of investment. Other indicators of the transition include dual career, expectations around equality, and expecting two children among others. Such culture was perhaps the result of the political struggles towards Malta’s sovereignty after almost two thousand years of foreign rule and occupation. It could have been, therefore, that home-ownership started to be a statement of national independence which trickled down to individual/collective meaning of independence as was found in the first interviews carried out with the participating couples.

Embedded in the general Maltese context, my clinical experience on the island has shown me how couples, particularly women, are often caught in the dilemma of choosing between the ‘chains’ of a traditional marital arrangement and the relative freedom of a post-traditional, equality based marriage. Participants in this research replicate the clinical scenario with the difference that they seem to be struggling to integrate, rather than choose between, traditional and post-traditional values.

**g. Togetherness and separateness and length of courtship**

That some of the couples seem to have found their right balance between togetherness and separateness quite early in the marital relationship may also be related to the length of courtship. Length of courtship has been repeatedly found to be related positively with marital adjustment (Cate & Lloyd, 1992; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Kurdek, 1991a, 1991b, 1993). While this factor might have contributed to some of the couples, it does not explain the difference between the balanced and the strugglers in
this sample. Massimo and Shirley, for example, are one couple who reported a balanced adjustment in spite of their relatively short courtship. Joe and Linda, in spite of their five and a half years of courtship, found adjustment to marriage quite traumatic. Perhaps an idiosyncratic explanation for each couple needs to be generated, one which is embedded in the couple’s own story.

7.5.1.3. Level 3: Contextual Adjustment

Contextual adjustment refers primarily to the adjustment couples experience after the wedding in relation to the external environment, including among others their extended families, work, and friends. Generally, various boundary making activities were detected, including house-buying, information keeping, and isolation.

a. Adjustment to family of origin

The couples did not find it particularly difficult to assert themselves as a couple with their families of origin during the first year of marriage. For example all of the couples managed to establish a satisfactory pattern of visiting their parents. Even Massimo and Shirley, who seemed to struggle harder than other couples to keep their respective over-powering parents at bay, expressed how they managed to establish and maintain a balanced pattern of visiting and being visited.

The only sense of disillusionment is that experienced by Grace who complained about her husband’s frequent visits to his mother. With the insecurity created by the tight mother-child bond, Michael may have unconsciously attempted to re-establish his
infantile balance of connectedness with his mother. On her side, Grace must have felt very disappointed as Daniel’s unexpected birth must have spoiled her expectation of a two year period to consolidate her relationship with Michael. Moreover, Grace and Michael’s dream of rearing the child themselves has also vanished as they have no other option other than to leave Daniel with Grace’s mother.

This theme is inseparable from the togetherness-separatness theme above. Transgenerational theories propose a positive relationship between individuation from family of origin and adjustment in adult relationships. A balance between togetherness and separateness in intimate relationships is possible if partners have equally differentiated themselves from their respective families of origin (Bowen, 1971;1979). An optimal level of individuation from parents is believed to be necessary for healthy adjustment of newlyweds (Amstutz, Haws, & Mallinckrodt, 1998).

An ongoing debate, however, has developed between two American Bowenian couple therapists, Schnarch and Hendrix, about whether individuation from family of origin is a prerequisite of a successful intimate adult relationship or whether a good intimate adult relationship can promote individuation (James, 2007). While Schnarch’s view of individuation is based on an individualistic, autonomy-oriented paradigm, Hendrix is situated within a relational paradigm that promotes fusion and empathy (James, 2007). My view encompasses both Schnarch’s and Hendrix’s positions. Intimate couple relationships embrace both the promotion of individuality and connectedness simultaneously. Relationships, therefore, require individuated partners. But because complete individuation is idealistic, the relationship offers the potential to heal past
wounds related to primary attachment figures. In view of this debate, Gottman (1999) warns that couple therapy needs to focus and base itself on solid empirical evidence about couple dynamics, rather than on personality variables such as differentiation which enjoy little or no empirical support (Gottman 1998).

Taken from a transgenerational perspective, past local research may have constructed this task as particularly difficult for Maltese couples (Cachia, 1997) and parents and in-laws were portrayed as intruders. Participants in this research, however, seem to suggest some kind of optimal idiosyncratic balance of separation-individuation, more likely to fit attachment and systemic theories. These theories postulate that the healthiest adjustment is the result of a balance between the extremes of individualism and fusion, or disengaged and enmeshed (Amstutz Haws & Mallinckrodt, 1998; Anderson & Sabatelli, 1992).

Systemic theory suggests that parental over-involvement is the responsibility of the newly-wed couple and their respective parents, rather than attributing all the responsibility of over-involvement to parents. As in the last couple of decades, parents of new spouses are more likely to be both busy working and enhancing their careers (NSO, 2005), they are less likely to be meddling with their children’s marriage, unless their children involve them. My clinical experience has taught me how intruding parents are often, directly or indirectly, ‘called in’ by the insecure young partners themselves.

The desired degree of separation-individuation is culturally specific carrying widespread gender implications (Chodorow, 1989). Rather than subscribing to
normative prescriptions of a healthy degree of separation-individuation from family of origin, I appreciate Bartholomew’s (1990) and Mallinckrodt’s (1997) views that the optimal balance between enmeshment and disengagement is variable and depends on individual differences, shaped by early unique childhood experiences. There might even be local differences in the desired degree of individuation from family of origin. O’Reilley Mizzi (1997) detected a close bond between working-class women and their families of origin which may not be detected among other the professional classes.

While apparently, settling down for a standard of weekly visits to their parents, participating couples have shown specific differences, idiosyncratic and contingent upon the way they personally feel towards their parents. Noel and Josienne visit Noel’s family on an almost daily basis because both feel closer to Noel’s family than to Josienne’s parents, whom. Josienne phones rather than visits. Joe doesn’t even remember to go and visit his family and for him that is fine. While Adrian admits he misses his family, he also speaks about how this union has made a difference and that he doesn’t miss his parents that much anymore. On the other hand, Maria felt closer to her family than ever before after the wedding. Massimo and Shirley both felt they have to work harder to maintain their distance from their respective families of origin.

b. Adjustment to work-life balance & the link between a balanced life and career ambition

In the first interviews, couples expected to find a suitable work-life balance. Participants were also optimistic even though aware of the related difficulties. During the second interviews, most of the participating couples admitted their disappointment.
The second interviews revealed a connection between the couple’s capacity to construct a functional work–life balance and their ambition for a career. This relationship became increasingly evident through the participants’ own narratives. Josienne and Noel did not find the work-life balance difficult to establish. They both have full time jobs outside the home and are happy to lead a simple, un-ambitious life in terms of career. During the first year of their marriage they happily established patterns of housework and leisure.

On the contrary, couples like Joe and Linda, Maria and Emanuel, Michael and Grace, and Patrick and Sharon admitted to have struggled quite a lot during the first year of marriage. Finding a functional work-life balance was difficult for them as both partners in both couples orient themselves towards greater career independence and work very long hours. What suffers of time-poverty is the relationship. Grace and Michael’s unique example portrays a work-life balance difficulty impregnated by the difficulty of managing a newborn baby. This evidence further reinforces research emphasising the difficulties career women find in establishing a desirable work-life balance (Borg, 1999).

c. Implications of work-family balance

Family and work are the two most significant life domains for most adults (Fu & Shaffer, 2001) and have been considered so since time immemorial (Mattinson, 1988). Family and work are in fact the two priorities the Maltese admitted to value mostly in their lives (Abela, 2000). Such balance becomes, therefore, widely implicated at
different levels of social organisation, including the family system. (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) have identified three types of conflict namely time-based, strain-based, and behaviour-based. Time-based conflict results when time demands of two different roles become incompatible with one another (e.g. long working hours prohibit person to be with partner). Strain-based conflict is the result of a strain in one role leaking into another role (e.g. coming from work tired and stressed interferes with one’s romanticism with the spouse). Behaviour-based conflict is the result of incompatible behaviour patterns between the two domains (e.g. leadership behaviour expected at work is incompatible with the collaborative behaviour expected at home).

The toughest challenge among the participating couples in their first year of marriage remains time-based conflict with most of the career-oriented couples complaining about the lack of time they spend together. Recall how Maria and Emanuel’s pre-marital expectation to make time to be together every evening has not been met. Joe admits how work robbed him of all his time and how isolated he feels. Patrick’s answer to my question about a description of his first year into marriage was “work, work, and work. And add another work”. Even Massimo and Shirley, who are simply glad with their jobs as teacher and facilitator respectively, found the first year of marriage as a very challenging one in terms of time. Jason’s experience echoes that of the other participants. The Time-Use Survey (2002) has shown similar trends across the Maltese population. In a recent study entitled The Dual Worker Family in Malta,
Rizzo (2006) found that 40% of his sample find problems in handling their work-life balance.

Strain-based conflict, although present during the first year of marriage, was often expressed as fatigue after work, and therefore solely as an intrapersonal conflict. Massimo and Shirley often referred to how tired they would be after work and how early they slept because of this. My hypothesis is that this type of conflict will eventually escalate, like time-based conflict, into an interpersonal conflict. Joe and Linda’s situation is an example whereby Joe’s highly demanding work ‘pushed’ Linda to increase her workload and find a part-time job to occupy her time. While during the first interviews she had simply expressed some concern about this, in the second interview she expressed her complaint very seriously, criticising Joe for not being present at home.

What Greenhaus and Beutell (1985) fail to address is that these three types of conflict can be both intrapersonal and interpersonal. For example time-based conflict in the first year of the couples’ marriage emerges only as an intrapersonal conflict. It must take some time before it spreads into the relationship and becomes an interpersonal conflict. Maria has not yet started complaining about Emanuel’s very long working hours, perhaps because she was busy finishing her training, or perhaps because of the recent job change, which must have been exciting to her. However, Emanuel does feel an internal conflict which he mentioned when talking about doing things together. Grace’s internal conflict becomes very clear as she recounts how she felt when having to leave her newborn baby behind on her return to work.
This research suggests an addition to Greenhaus and Beutell’s (1985) list: ideology-based conflict. At this point in history, the Maltese are becoming increasingly ideologically conscious of the gender-equality discourse. Witnessing this is the setting up of several initiatives promoting women’s rights, for example the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality. An increasing consciousness is also located in the data generated by the interviews of the research, whereby women’s consciousness has led them to raise narratives about equal distribution of house-work. Clinical experience has shown me how women who feel a persistent sense of inequality in their marital relationship become more vulnerable to separation when the children grow up. Ideology-based conflict, however, is more likely to strike later on as the couple matures, rather than in the first year of marriage when couples are struggling with other dilemmas.

The ongoing debate about woman’s role in post-traditional Maltese society is hot, particularly due to the Church’s repeated condemnation of post-traditional values and roles, which the government is reinforcing (Archdiocese of Malta, 2005; The Sunday Times, 2003; The Sunday Times, 2004). An almost continuous dispute has developed through various letters in local newspapers where readers express their disdain towards and incomprehension of the local Church authorities stance in view of the increasing cost of living and other financial demands the Maltese are currently experiencing. There is an existing tension between what is being transmitted by the Church and what is being transmitted politically. This contradiction is contributing to the confusion the Maltese find themselves in at this point in history.
d. The Maltese couple in transition

The unprecedented shift from traditional to post-traditional constructions about family organisation is calling for great identity leaps. It is only natural, that these leaps are imbued with ambivalence and incoherence as one foot is in the past (traditionalism) and the other is in the future (post-traditionalism). This is one of the toughest challenges the Maltese are currently facing for various reasons.

First, this leap is unprecedented and therefore transgenerational links fail to provide adequate role models. Consciousness about post-traditional family life exists only intellectually and hence the Maltese can be said to have the map but still have to explore the territory. Naturally, such transitional phases are characterised by various homeostatic mechanisms at different levels of organisation including macro-systems and micro-systems. In the interviews, these mechanisms have manifested themselves in the shape of dilemmas, ambivalences, among which are for example women’s call for domestic help and men’s increasing hours at work. This shift is partly desirable and partly forced by the changing socio-economic priorities and changing values. It is desirable because women are rightly calling for a better deal in marriage. It is forced because of the increasing cost of living, which does not allow the traditional one-wage earner family to survive. Moreover, post-traditionalism promotes individualism which contradicts family life values.

e. Adjustment to Friends

Traditional Maltese culture upholds the sacred nature of the marital union and considers friends as a possible threat to the marital union. Independent friendships are
discouraged as unhealthy. This was evident in various proverbs already mentioned. O’Reilly Mizzi’s (1997) review of her precedent study further showed how low friendships are valued among the working class women of Senglea. Post-traditional Western values conversely uphold and encourage independent friendships as healthy. Research on social networks and couple development has consistently reinforced the structural interdependence theory, which implies that the couple’s social networks influence the couple’s adjustment and identity development (Milardo, 1986).

The couples participating in this research all expressed how important it is for them to invest in their relationship and keep away from friends. Almost all couples admitted that they prefer to stay home together rather than going out meeting others. This functions as a protective isolation that favours the couples’ inherent need to consolidate their developing relationship narrative. The drive is towards an intensification of the relationship through the exploration of their internal territory, as well as towards the reinforcement of the relationship boundary. Even those whose pre-marital expectation was to maintain some contact with friends, like Adrian for example, expressed preference towards being with their partner during the first year of marriage. The men in this sample did not maintain their preference towards independence as they expected before the wedding.

Adjustment to friends is also a practical matter that resolves the couples’ complaint about lack of time and lack of money. With all the money they spent for the wedding, and the pending repayments, there is little money left to go out with. The first interview had already revealed how this process of isolation from families and friends
when the couples bought the house. Recall how Joe and Linda had to change their lifestyle remarkably upon the decision to buy the house.

A *multiple factor model* may be proposed which considers the couple’s increasing isolation from friends in particular as the result of different factors, including willingness, necessity, and unconscious choices. Such increasing isolation is mostly deliberate and often starts before marriage. Kearns and Leonard (2004) have recently found that the major period of change the couple goes through with *network interdependence* occurs between pre-marriage and the first year of marriage. This continues to highlight the transition from courtship to marriage as the formative period upon which the future marriage is based.

### 7.5.1.4. Sexuality as an Invisible Theme

It is fascinating, how in spite of my asking, at times repeatedly, on expectations about sexuality, no couple produced long-enough, or clear enough, explanations that could lead to themes related to the topic. The lack of responses is in itself important and valuable information.

One way of interpreting this phenomenon among this sample is to link it with the couples’ recruitment for the research through parish priests around Malta. The couples might have believed that I am a religious person involved with the Church with whom talk about sex and sexuality is taboo. They might have been concerned about appearing promiscuous. The Church in Malta strongly condemns sex before marriage
and just as I am writing this thesis, a whole campaign making use of various media is promoting sexual abstinence before marriage.

My hypothesis is that most of the participants have engaged in sexual activity before marriage. Research findings show that 66% of university students disagree with the Church’s teachings about the prohibition of premarital sex (Tabone, et al., 2003). Tabone and his colleagues highlight that “we are in the presence of a cultural change, where our understanding of sexuality is different from what it was before” (p.38). That sexual activity is not confined to the marital union is reinforced by the increasing figures of childbirth to unmarried women. The 1995 census has shown that 26.7% of all children born were born to single women, separated women, and widowed but not remarried women.

7.6. Summary of Findings from Second Interviews

Marriage challenged the participants’ construction of the self, the partner and the relationship. While the participants’ premarital construction of marriage involved the continuation of courtship, the challenges they faced during the first year of marriage revealed unexpected experiences. They grossly undermined the impact of living together as husband and wife on themselves and on their relationship.

Adjustment during the first year of marriage emerged in three main domains namely; the personal, the relational, and the contextual/social domains. It is clear that the three levels are both intertwined and embedded within a cultural context that is in transition between traditionalist and post-traditionalist values. Partners mutually influence each
other’s expectations’ development at the service of the developing relationship narrative.

Personal adjustment generally involved dealing with unexpected occurrences which at times were shocking. Most participants felt disappointed in their realization that one has to live with the partner to know him or her, thus incapacitating their pre-marital assumptions about their capacity to empathise with each other.

Relational adjustment involved adjustment to differences between partners and the process of creating a relationship narrative involving the developing relational dynamics, role assimilation, and a mutually acceptable balance between togetherness and separateness. Prominent differences that emerged included the degree of verbosity between partners, financial management, gender differences, time-orientation differences, and expression of affect differences. Most of these differences continue to persist from courtship.

Couples’ construction of the marital relationship involves a symbiotic traditional gender roles discourse rather than the equality constructed and expected before marriage. A decline in romanticism was also reported. Such a shift has been linked with the increasing sense of responsibility partners experience after the wedding.

The couples construction of the balance between togetherness and separateness emerged as an important feature in the establishment of a satisfactory marital relationship. The first three months of marriage were generally found to be particularly difficult. Balanced and struggling couples were distinguished by their
construction of a secure base in the relationship as well as by the participants’ gender role flexibility. The need for continuous encouragement for male and female emancipation was also visible.

Contextual adjustment involved a shift in relation to participants’ families of origin and in-laws, an increasingly distanced relationship with friends, and new positions on the work-life continuum. Generally couples did not find separation – individuation from families of origin particularly difficult and seemed to have constructed a personal balance. Relationship with families of origin emerged as particularly personal with different couples establishing different relational patterns.

The couples’ experience of work-life balance revealed the disappointing time-poor reality. A relationship between career-orientation and time-poverty emerged with career-oriented couples finding it more difficult to make time together. Because of several commitments, time remains one of the toughest challenges during the first year of marriage.

Having a baby before the planned time has taken the only childbearing couple into a different stage of relationship. New and unexpected relationship dynamics involving families of origin evolved as a consequence, leading the husband to feel isolated from the mother-child bond and the woman to feel strongly attached to and absorbed by the new-born baby. This couple also reported a sudden overwhelming sense of responsibility.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION:

AN EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP NARRATIVE
8.1. Introduction

The themes that emerged in this study are encompassed within an over-arching theme about an evolving relationship narrative. The Evolving Relationship Narrative involves the co-construction of a unifying identity which starts during the adolescent years through one’s fantastic constructions of one’s future intimate relationships and evolves during courtship and marriage. The seeds of such narrative are sown in the partners’ early attachment experiences and continue beyond the first year of marriage. In short, an evolving relationship narrative traces the person’s lifelong concern about one’s construction of oneself, others, and the surrounding world (see Diagram 8.1).

8.2. Childhood Influences and Adolescent Fantasies

Early attachment experiences and construction of parents’ attachment patterns remain the most valuable representations upon which participants constructed their own model of marital relationship. An undesired construction of one’s parents’ marital
relationship motivated participants to look for alternative models in their construction of a reparative script (Byng-Hall, 1985) about their future marital relationship. Media, particularly TV viewing, emerged as the primary source to which participants reverted in their attempt to construct alternative expectations of marriage. This is particularly true in the case of women.

Fantasies about relationships emerge as a reaction to the construction about the parents’ marital relationship. Gender differences were detected with men recalling less detailed fantasies than women. Women’s fantasies replicate traditional gender role expectations of care provision, at times in tension with other expectations about equality. Loss in childhood seems to have a deleterious effect on fantasies about future marriage and attachment is implicated.

### 8.3. From Courtship to Marriage

Courtship offers partners an opportunity for the joint reviewing and joint recreation of expectations of marriage in an attempt at constructing a unified and coherent narrative about their future marriage. Differences between partners become challenging to negotiate as partners co-create themselves through each other (Dallos, 1997). The resulting expectations constructed from this systemic interplay remain genderised with men’s expectations focusing predominantly on provision of finances and protection and women’s expectations focusing on provision of care. Men also tended to be more inclined towards safeguarding their separateness while women towards increased togetherness.
Courtship involves stages of development linked with specific tensions all directed towards the sharpening of the couple’s evolving relationship narrative. Such tensions are resolved through activities like boundary making, comparison, empathy, and the construction of a balance between togetherness and separateness. All these activities involve personal and relational tensions which necessitate and simultaneously aid the construction of the relationship narrative. This temporarily provides the partners with a sense of security and predictability to make the leap into the unknown marriage. Concurrently, a concern about a possible future separation emerged indicating the contextual effects of increasing separation on the participants.

Most participating couples expect to juggle between a career and a family. Most also expect this to be very difficult, resulting in time poverty with consequences on the relationship. However, couples expect to work hard to make the relationship work and also expect recreation time to feature minimally in their future marriage. Their narrative of a future family involves the traditional type of family of with two parents, married in Church as a sign of lifetime commitment, and two children, the first one of whom will be born about two years into marriage and reared by the spouses themselves.

This study has shown how men seem to enter marriage from a position of independence and women from one of dependence. So, generally speaking, in their search for an attachment balance, men express the need for distance and women their need for connectedness. Men for example yearned to keep their daily jogging (Michael) or weekly football (Joe) slot. Women, on the other hand yearned for closeness and for doing things together, ‘everything together’.
Contrary to the participants’ premarital construction that marriage is a continuation of courtship, the first year of marriage proved disillusioning and challenging. Rather than an end in itself, the marital experience entailed a mutual revision of narratives, at the service of the evolving joint relationship narrative. This involved constant mutual adjustment processes both within the relation and between the relationship and the outside world.

The three levels of adjustment involving the personal, the relational, and the contextual, emerged as intertwined and embedded within a shifting culture attempting to embrace both traditional and post-traditional values, particularly those related to gender, work, and family life and the balance between them. One important balance in the first year of marriage remains that between togetherness and separateness; a systemic collaborative dance of oscillating yet polarised positions (Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006) retaining one’s individuality and one’s belonging within an evolving relationship narrative. Contrary to the focus on similarities typical of their courtship days, the tension created by the partners’ constructions of differences between them features more strongly during the first year of marriage. From the position of deep empathy partners shifted to “one needs to live with someone to really come to know the person”.

The shape each couple’s evolving narrative takes depends on the various fascinating patterns and processes involving the exploration of self and other’s stories, towards the construction and validation of one ‘preferred’ relationship narrative. This process involves negotiation of values, emotions, power, gender, positions and depends on the unconscious attachment patterns partners dance this choreography with. Each
partner’s construction of the common relationship narrative may be different, and at times polarized positions are taken (Dallos, 1997; Campbell & Groenbaek, 2006). Marriage seems to shift the couple back towards traditional narratives, away from the post-traditional narratives they embarked to embrace on their wedding day. Such shift was linked to the increasing sense of responsibility experienced upon marrying.

8.4. Attachment Dilemmas

The first three months of marriage proved generally hard for the partners to construct a sense of a secure base in their home and in each other. Balanced and struggling couples were distinguished by their capacity to invest in the construction of a secure base in the relationship which was generally facilitated by the participants’ relatively easy, yet personal, construction of separation patterns from their respective families of origin and friends. As in Joe and Linda’s story, original childhood attachment dilemmas may re-emerge as the partners re-enact their internal working models (Bowlby, 1980) in the marital relationship.

Time poverty remains a tough enemy in the construction of a comfortable attachment narrative between the novel spouses. Career-oriented couples found it more difficult to make time to be together and negotiate a functional work-life balance. Many participants have part-time jobs along with their full time, thus reducing both time availability for each other and time quality when they eventually are together at home. The happiest and more balanced couples emerge as those who managed to achieve a degree of gender role flexibility and manifest androgynous features. Androgyny
emerges as a valuable personal and relational construct in the development of a coherent and satisfactory relationship narrative.

Having a baby before the planned time intensifies attachment dilemmas and precipitates the partners into new patterns of interaction between them. A shift in relational dynamics was also noted between the partners and their respective families of origin, as well as work. A sense of isolation was experienced by the man, whose increased sense of responsibility helped him construct the mother-child bond as virtually impenetrable and increased his visits to his parents next door, leaving his wife feeling neglected. The result of these new emotional investments is attachment instability between the partners whose baby brought a triadic opportunity within which new attachment patterns will eventually evolve.

It is understood that the shift from the traditional to the post-traditional is not only about women’s rights and emancipation. Men seem to be having a harder time adjusting to the new post-traditional demands of juggling between work and family life. They seem to feel insecure about attempting the psychological and social leaps required for androgynous functioning. This means that men need to be encouraged and supported equally to women in their attempt at learning to embrace both valid traditional values and new post-traditional constructions that fit the emerging demands in changing Malta.
8.5. Limitations of the Present Study

The study was carried out among ten Maltese Catholic couples and therefore caution is needed when it comes to apply the findings to other populations. Because of the small number of participants and the idiosyncratic nature of this study, generalizations have not been attempted. However, some wider application was possible in cases where findings matched findings in larger studies. Links with these studies actually potentate findings in this research and locate it within the larger field of systemic knowledge.

While an idiographic approach, like the one used here, yields greater profundity and provides a greater understanding of participants’ meanings, the information is limited of the width often generated by quantitative approaches.

Contrary to most research in the field interviewing individuals, this research made use of joint couple interviews. Its limiting factor might have been the fact that partners might have restricted each other from being open, thus limiting the generation of information. Another possibility in this respect could have been an unrealistic degree of confluence in the information provided.

The longitudinal nature of the study may have had some counter-effects too. While appreciating the developmental nature of expectations that could be captured, restricting the focus on the first year of marriage may have been limiting, in that not all expectations could possibly be challenged by life experience in such a short span.
The unfolding of disillusionment in relation to specific expectations, particularly those which fall beyond the first year of marriage, was not captured by this research.

My clinical experience of working with couples in distress and the interest in this area of research and practice prior to carrying out this study may have had its toll on the outcome of the study. Whether such experience permitted me to develop an analysis that contained greater understanding than may have been possible without such knowledge and experience, or whether the prior experience constrained me from possible alternative understandings and extrapolations of the data, has to be borne in mind when judging the merits of this study.

8.6. Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

This study highlighted the diverse features of expectations of marriage, their origins, and their evolution in the first year of marriage and generated more questions about the topic thus increasing my curiosity in the area of study.

The importance of researching courtship and its vicissitudes emerged. The area of expectations of marriage in particular needs attention. As if the disillusionment of original expectations of marriage is taken for granted as a natural occurrence in developing relationships, little is known about the psychological and relational dynamics involved in this phenomenon.
One increased curiosity is in the role expectations of marriage play in the leap into marriage. In spite of the decreasing rate of marriage all around Europe, Malta still enjoys a high marriage rate. Are therefore the Maltese more Catholic? Is it because marriage is considered as the only acceptable way of leaving home? Are unrealistic expectations necessary to make the leap into the risky business of marriage, and how? What’s the nature and function of the apparently triadic nature of relationships?

The findings of this research also highlighted the important role parents play in the development of expectations of marriage. Attachment patterns also feature highly during courtship and the first year of marriage and were related with adjustment. It therefore emerges convincingly that investment in the area of parents’ education is needed so that parents understand their unequaled and unequivocal role in influencing their children’s expectations of marriage and their future intimate relationships. Further research is needed to identify the exact role parents play in such development in relation to gender differences.

The various conundrums couples expressed during the interview, particularly the different levels of adjustment, gain importance as tensions that can make or break the relationships in the long run. All these have both clinical and research implications. Tough dilemmas like work-life balance, gender roles adjustment, togetherness and separateness, and so on, all need further research, contextualizing them within a shifting Maltese culture.

One of the above-listed limitations of this study has been its time-limited nature. Further interviews with the same number of participants at yearly intervals, over a
longer period of time, would be the ideal method so that developmentally idiosyncratic features can be detected in time. Research of a longitudinal nature would track differences between successful and unsuccessful couples as they journey through the family life cycle. The family life cycle is another area that needs to be well researched in Malta. This research has contributed more insight about the peculiarities of courtship and early marital relationship among the couples interviewed. These need to be deeply and clearly understood before any generalisations can be made.

There seem to be implications involving the previously assumed relationship between the long courtship experienced by the majority of the participants and marital adjustment. The couples interviewed for this research did not manifest any particular ease adjusting to marriage because of their relatively long courtship. Marriage itself seems to invoke a psychological and relational shift. This research has linked this shift with the construction of increased responsibilities involved in marrying, and which seem to erode the fun and romanticis out of the relationship. However, other factors may be involved and research addressing this area specifically needs to be conducted to further microscopically highlight these factors.

The need for quantitative research able to detect local idiosyncrasies emerges. Such research will aim at getting a wider and clearer general picture of the Maltese population. Some of the dilemmas being faced by young couples on the doorstep of marriage appear to be unique and culture-bound, and quantitative research detecting and elaborating on these dilemmas makes sense in a shifting Malta.
8.7. Implications for Clinical Practice

Maltese practitioners working with couples and families often draw on foreign literature as a source informing them in their practice. Abela et al. (2005) highlighted the importance and need of researching small populations and cultures like the Maltese in an attempt to fine-tune practice to the local needs.

One powerful insight gained from this research is the role attachment issues play in intimate adult relationships. The link between childhood attachment patterns and intimate adult relationship emerges strongly and partners often re-enact old and ineffective internal working models which unconsciously lead them to replicate their families of origin scripts. Attachment theory is increasingly featuring more prominently in my systemic clinical practice as I increasingly appreciate its value along with other approaches. The current debate on integrating attachment theory and systemic practice is rightly heading in that direction (Dallos, 1997; Byng-Hall, 1999; Akister & Reibstein, 2004). These two approaches, along with the experiential model have already been beautifully integrated in *emotionally focused couple therapy* (Johnson, 2004). One wonders how the small size of Malta and the reported strong link between married people and their families of origin influences adult attachment in intimate adult relationships. Further research in the area might highlight cultural peculiarities.

In spite of their relatively long courtship, the couples interviewed for this research did not manifest any particular ease adjusting to marriage. While popular belief has it that longer courtship might be beneficial and contributes to marital adjustment, the
psychological and relational shift invoked by marriage, which this research linked with the construction of increased responsibilities involved in marrying, seem to erode the fun and romanticism out of the relationship. This leads to increased realization of how popular narratives interact with theory and practice discourses during therapy, and that therapy should be based on empirically validated research available (Johnson, 2004; Gottman, 1999).

Narrative approaches and social constructionism in systemic therapy are challenging the way clinicians think about how they locate themselves within the therapeutic relationship (Flaskas, 2002). However, this collaborative positioning in the therapeutic relationship does not always fit with the client’s demands of concrete answers to questions they pose. The challenge posed by Patrick and Sharon’s question after the interview for my opinion is a case in point.

Another linked clinical implication is related to findings about gender differences, for example the lopsided verbosity and expression of affect between women and men. By their very language-based nature, psychotherapies in general and narrative therapies in particular might offer an unequal opportunity disfavouring men. My clinical experience informs me that men, being generally more pragmatic, often require direct behavioural intervention, education, and in-session practice about feelings and emotions. The promotion of women in Malta without providing equal support to men in becoming increasingly androgynous has in my view precluded men from learning, with the result that woman have moved ahead in terms of gender-role flexibility (Abela, 2000). This has implications for policy makers who devise family friendly policy. In its widest sense, those involved in the education of Maltese children need to
take heed and devise an education policy directing Maltese children towards becoming more androgynous, in line with the social and economic demands of the future. Since androgyny and gender flexibility is implicated in marital satisfaction, such direction will hopefully lead to a decrease in legal separation.

My clinical practice has now increasingly moved towards identifying the conundrums emerging in this research and attempts at reconstructing them as opportunities and possibilities at the service of the satisfying and fulfilling future narratives. Even an apparently trivial outcome as time-orientation could have serious clinical implications. The clinical picture of the couple with one partner saying “OK sorry, now let’s move on” and the other stuck in the nostalgic doldrums of the past is not a rare occurrence.
APPENDIX 1

Guiding Questions for Interviews

with Engaged & Married Couples
Guiding Questions for Interviews with Engaged Couples

**Part 1**
1. How long have you been together?
2. After how long have you decided to get married?
3. You are going to get married in Church. Why have you made this choice?
4. Why did you choose to get married rather than other options, for example staying single or cohabiting?

**Part 2**
5. What ideas, fantasies, did you have about marriage as an adolescent?
6. How did you form these ideas and fantasies? Friends, Family, Media, Etc?
   Anything in particular that struck you which you still remember?

**Part 3**
7. Now that you are soon going to be married, what expectations do you have of this marital relationship? Tell me more about expectations in all areas you think are important: Eg values, affection, intimacy, sexuality, recreation, spiritual development, extended family, conflict management, decision-making, finance management, careers, interdependence, parenting, duration of marriage, etc.
8. How, in your view, did you form these expectations?
9. Have you ever discussed any of the expectations between you?
Part 4
10. You attended a marriage preparation course, how did find it?
   a. How was it relevant to you?
   b. What was helpful to you?
   c. What was unhelpful?
   d. What’s your general impression about the course?
   e. What would you do different?

Part 5
2. Now tell me a bit about the interview?
   f. How did it feel?
   g. Was there anything that you found particularly helpful or unhelpful?
   h. To what extent did you talk about topics you don’t usually talk about?
   i. How was my interviewing style?
   j. Is there anything I can do to improve? For example in questions, style, interviewing place and so forth?
   k. Any other comments?
The second interviews aimed primarily at understanding the development of expectations of marriage during the first year of marriage. The interview was divided mainly into two parts.

**Part-one**
**Question 1:** How would you describe your first year of marriage?

**Part two**
**Question 1:** Now that the wedding is over and you have already been married over a year, what is it you are envisioning for the future?

**Question 2:** Do you expect any other challenges ahead?
APPENDIX 2

INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

& INFORMATION SHEET
Interview Consent Form

Title of Project: Maltese Catholic Couples’ Expectations of Marriage and Their Evolution During the First Year of Marriage.

Name of Researcher: Charlie Azzopardi

Contact Phone Number: 79 663265

Contact time: 9.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m.

Please tick boxes

☐ I have read and understood the information sheet provided and have had the opportunity to ask any questions.

☐ I understand that my participation will confidential and details I provide will remain anonymous.

☐ My participation is voluntary and I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason.

☐ I understand that any video recording made will be destroyed at the end of the research.

☐ I understand that any publication resulting from this research will not identify me in any way.

☐ I agree to take part in the above study and retain a signed copy of this consent form.

Names of Informants    Signatures    Date
______________________  ____________________  _________
______________________  ____________________  _________
_____________________________________________________

Researcher    Signature    Date
______________________  ____________________  _________

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Dear

Let me start by thanking you for choosing to read through this information sheet and to consider to participate in this research project. This research will be looking at marital expectations development, the couple’s expectations of marriage and how these expectations evolve in the first year of marriage. Of course, all this cannot materialize without your active contribution.

Name of Study: Maltese Catholic Couples’ Expectations of Marriage and Their Evolution During the First Year of Marriage.

Who the Researcher Is: Charlie Azzopardi, Family Therapist

Purpose of Research: My main interests include finding out what is it that unmarried couples expect from marriage, the marital relationship and themselves before getting married and about their experiences of how these expectations evolve during the first year of marriage. Another interest is how these expectations have been formed. My hope is that the information gathered will increase our understanding of the role expectations of marriage play in marital relationships.

Use of Tape and Video Recording: For the purpose of this research, it is necessary that the interviews will be audio recorded. All the recordings will be transcribed and the transcription may be sent to you to verify it is loyal to our conversation. To further guarantee confidentiality all recordings will be digital. This permits the use of electronic codes to prevent anyone from having access to them. All recordings will be erased immediately after the research project is finished.

How Results will be Used: This research will be written up as a dissertation and shown to the Tavistock Clinic staff, external examiners and possibly submitted for publication in professional specialised journals. The information you provide during the interviews will be kept completely confidential and publication will only include
What is involved for You: Your participation involves two interviews. The first one will be held as soon as possible and the second one will be organised around 8 months to one year after the wedding. An in-between meeting may be asked in the case of unclear data or clarifications that may be needed during data analysis. The interviews will be held either in my office or at any place of your choice that you feel is more comfortable for you.

Why Have You Been Chosen: I have chosen to interview couples in courtship who have completed the Marriage Preparation Course at Cana Movement as a sign of their commitment to each other. This selection was based on my interest to understand couples’ own experiences of expectations and their evolution.

Confidentiality and Anonymity: When the transcripts and the research is written up personal details will be altered to prevent you from being recognised. Only I will know who you are.

Withdrawal at Any Stage of the Research: Participation is entirely your choice and if for any reason you wish to withdraw please do so at any point without giving any reasons.

Further Information: If for any reason, you may need further information, or if there is something you may need to ask please feel free to contact me either through post at 100 Palm Street Paola, or through my e-mail address Azzopardi.charlie@gmail.com, or on my telephone numbers 21663265 and 79663265.

Best regards

Charlie Azzopardi
B.Psy (Hons.) M.Sc. (Lond.)
Systemic Family Therapist
APPENDIX 3

AN EXAMPLE OF THE PROCESS OF CODING & METHOD OF ANALYSIS
This appendix will show an example of the process of analysis which followed Smith’s et. al. (1999) and Smith and Osborn’s (2004) recommended procedure. For this purpose I will focus on one particular category, Adjustment, which featured in Chapter 7. This category consists of 3 levels, or sub-categories of adjustment each featuring supra-themes and dominant themes.

**Step 1 - Reading and re-reading of transcripts & subsequent coding:** After each transcript was read and re-read several times different codes were constructed, among which is **understanding one’s partner**. The left column features preliminary notes.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Excerpt</th>
<th>Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inexperience with women. 2. Predominant male environment 3. Women as difficult to understand</td>
<td><strong>Joe:</strong> I’m not much aware of that because I never had a sister so I don’t know the difference. But I lived in a male environment and for me … these women are … an object of fascination. I mean … the psychology … It’s not a question of negative or positive you know. It’s just fascinating. The dynamics are so, so, so different.</td>
<td>Understanding partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Concern about his back-ache. 2. Connecting backache-worry-and housework. 3. Distribution of tasks according to health.</td>
<td><strong>Claire:</strong> There’s something else too. He suffers from backache. And I found out that when we share the work equally he complains of backache at the end of the day. And I worry. So what point is there in saying that I do half the work and then in the evening I have to worry about his back? I am not happy when he is in pain. And then he does other things for me which are not physical.</td>
<td>Understanding partner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Living together reveals the ‘real’ person. 2. Different aspects of self are exposed. 3. Increased time together equals better connectedness.</td>
<td><strong>Maria:</strong> Not that I did not know him before. I do feel that I knew him before. But perhaps the fact that we live together now, we have become a bit more laid back in terms of appearances. But I have come to know him in a different way. The way we react, his moods, the way we integrate the relationship with everyday life. Whereas before, even though tired, we would stop for an hour to meet. So we would talk about the day and so forth. Now it’s better actually, because it’s more of a companionship.</td>
<td>Understanding partner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Step 2 - Cross-referencing of codes across all transcripts & construction of themes:** As seen in the example below, a multitude of codes was constructed, one of which is **understanding one’s partner** and is amplified above. Codes then were grouped in supra-themes or dominant theme according to the frequency of occurrence across couples. Below is a simplification of the grouping process which was done using NVivo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODES</th>
<th>SUPRA &amp; DOMINANT THEMES</th>
<th>CATEGORIES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understanding partner</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender difference</td>
<td>Adjustment to differences</td>
<td>Relational Adjustment</td>
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<td>Changing life-style</td>
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<td>Changing couple relationship</td>
<td>Traditional / post-traditional Gender Roles</td>
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<td>Comparison</td>
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<td>Gender equality</td>
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<td>Changes from courtship</td>
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<td>Changes in perception around</td>
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<td>housework</td>
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<td>Unfamiliarity – adaptation</td>
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<td>Changing relationship with own</td>
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<td>parents</td>
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<td>Changes in time-together</td>
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<td>Changes in relation to friends</td>
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<td>Feeling closer</td>
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<td>Freedom</td>
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<td>Honeymoon shock</td>
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<td>Financial arrangements</td>
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<td>First big fight</td>
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<td>Eating together</td>
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<td>Security</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Step 3:** Different supra-themes and dominant themes were grouped together to form Categories. In the example I am using – Adjustment - there were three levels namely Personal, Relational, and Contextual Adjustment. Grouped together, these three levels form the category of Adjustment into Marriage.
### Supra & Dominant Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supra-theme 1: Shocking Experience</th>
<th>Level of Adjustment</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supra-theme 2 – Novelties</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supra-theme 3 – Realizations: 'Nothing is what it seems'</td>
<td>Personal Adjustment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Supra-theme 1 - Adjusting to Differences Between the Partners | Relational Adjustment |          |
| Supra-theme 2 - Developing Relationship Dynamics |          |          |
| Supra-theme 3 - Traditional vs non Traditional Role Assimilation |          |          |
| Supra-theme 4 - Togetherness and Separateness - Being together in a different way from courtship |          |          |

| Supra-theme 1 - Changing relationship with Parents and In-laws | Contextual Adjustment |          |
| Dominant-theme 1 - Changing Relationship with Friends |          |          |
| Dominant theme 2 – Adjusting to Work-Life Balance |          |          |
| Dominant-theme 3 – Environmental Adjustment |          |          |

### Step 4
After all supra-themes and dominant themes were categorised the respective themes were checked for their groundedness in the excerpts. For example Maria’s excerpt hereunder is still represented at all levels of analysis, namely as a code representing understanding partner, as a supra-theme representing the couples’ adjustment to differences, as a level involving relational adjustment, and as a category representing the couples’ adjustment into marriage.

**Maria:** “Not that I did not know him before. I do feel that I knew him before. But perhaps the fact that we live together now, we have become a bit more laid back in terms of appearances, But I have come to know him in a different way. The way we react, his moods, the way we integrate the relationship with everyday life. Whereas before, even though tired, we would stop for an hour to meet. So we would talk about the day and so forth. Now it’s better actually, because it’s more of a companionship.”
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