

# NAVIGATING TRANSITIONS THROUGH TERTIARY EDUCATION: THE INFLUENCE OF THE FAMILY

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of the family on Maltese young people as they negotiate transitions through tertiary education at the University of Malta (UM). The findings presented in this paper are part of an ongoing PhD project and findings solely related to the family are discussed. The paper explores how the family shapes the expectations, choices and trajectories of young Maltese people. The findings are embedded in the narratives of sixteen Maltese participants in relation to the family. Taking a qualitative longitudinal approach, three sets of interviews were held with each participant, whose ages vary between eighteen and twenty-three. The first set of interviews was conducted while the participants were registered as freshers at UM. The narratives are explored through the Three-Dimensional Narrative Space Structure framework, developed by Clandinin & Connelly (2000) guided by Dewey's theory of experience. The findings highlight the interdependent relationships between parents and young people notwithstanding the change in the form and function of the family. The themes elicited are the strong family network, the matriarchal influence and the delaying of young people in moving out of their parents' home. The findings indicate that transitions are protracted and extended, while young people are reaching adulthood later and in a different way, therefore constructing a new concept of adulthood.

**Keywords:** *Transitions, tertiary education, family, young people, new adulthood.*

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## 1. Introduction and Background

This paper investigates the role of the family in the tertiary education transitions of young Maltese people. It attempts to explore how tradition and family-oriented principles shape the trajectories and aspirations of young Maltese people.

Youth is a time of accentuated change, a decisive stage in the lives of young people. Youth transitions such as navigating tertiary education are a very important process in their life course. Across Europe there has been a significant increase in the number of young people who prolong their studies at tertiary level. In Malta, access to higher education is no longer reserved for the elite. Statistics for 2021 show that there was an increase of 6.1% of students who enrolled in tertiary level courses when compared to the previous academic year (National Statistics Malta, 2021).

Much of the literature on youth transitions deals with school-to-work transitions and the focus is on young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). There is insufficient research about young people's transitions through tertiary education, perhaps because one tends to think that since these young people have managed to enter a tertiary institution, their life is finally in order. The aim of this paper is to explore the influence of the family on the journey of young people as they negotiate transitions. These transitions are characterized by a number of choices, links and destinations and are all interwoven into different life domains in the journeys of young people. This paper investigates the role and the influence of the family on the choices of young people in tertiary education: whether to continue with their studies or join the labour market, or do both; whether to commit to a relationship and start a family; the attainment of independence and 'quasi-citizenship' (Jones and Wallace, 1992) and other key decisions at such an important stage in their life.

## 2. Societal changes and transformations

The negotiation of transitions and the influence of the family are explored through the lens of the socio-economic changes occurring in the past two decades. These changes present unprecedented opportunities to young people, but also heightened risks, differentially distributed across social groups.

Over recent years, the life course of young individuals has become fragmented and more complex. Today young people no longer follow a predetermined linear pattern after they finish compulsory education, but are faced with a number of choices. The 21<sup>st</sup> century, where “affluence is the key facilitator” (Ransome, 2005, p. 165), heralded major changes marked by incredible progress and innovation. Castells (2010) argues that these changes “transformed the way we think, we produce, we consume, we trade, we manage, we communicate, we live, we die, we make war and we make love” (p. 1). Society is continuously being transformed. Changes happen through various social patterns and social processes, in families, in relationships, in religion, in norms and values. In view of the family, the last twenty years have witnessed “important changes in patterns of fertility, increasing childlessness, significant increases in divorce, a growing proportion of single parent households, cohabiting partnerships and independent living ... increase in women’s employment” (Irwin, 2005, p. 1).

The structure of the family is going through a number of changes. Balancing work and family life can be complex and requires adjustments to work schedules or career ambitions. This is making parenthood more challenging. Such changes need also be explored within the context of the transformation of the role of woman in society, in the family and at the place of work. Men are slowly relinquishing their privileges and are learning to work together with women. Other changes are the delay of family formation and the increase of the age of first-time mothers, now reaching an average of 29.3 years of age (Eurostat, 2020).

These waves of change which evolved sometimes rapidly, at other times more slowly, could not be kept away from the shores of the Maltese Archipelago. One has to keep in mind the social and cultural structures of Malta: its colonial past, its strategic position in the Mediterranean Sea and its small size, its Catholic tradition and the once strong religious and family values. Against this backdrop, in recent years Malta witnessed the introduction of divorce and same-sex marriage and adoption rights for same-sex couples. Slowly but surely the nuclear family is being transformed into different structures such as single-parent families, extended families, families with more than two parents, same sex parents, etc. Another change is the transformation of the role of women in the labour market, where the female employment rate went up to 51.5% between April and June 2015 from 31.6% in December 2001 (NSO, 2003). This led to new welfare policies such as the increase of maternity leave and measures to include childcare services for children pre-school age and after-school hours service for children aged 3-16.

### 3. Methodology

This paper utilises Narrative Inquiry as the methodological approach. Narrative research seeks to analyze individual experiences and stories of research participants regarding a particular phenomenon; in this paper, the influence of the family on Maltese young people as they negotiate transitions through tertiary education at UM. This approach investigates the personal and social interactions of the individual narrating the story, through the passage of time. A qualitative longitudinal approach was used to collect data. Three sets of interviews were conducted with sixteen Maltese participants, over a span of four years. Research participants eligible for this study were required to be Maltese citizens and at the time of the first interview, freshers of an undergraduate degree course at UM. The qualitative longitudinal approach gave me the opportunity to embark on a journey with these participants and explore their experiences and trajectories as they moved on in their undergraduate and postgraduate studies and the labour market.

Participants were recruited through an email sent from the UM Registrar’s Office, to all freshers at the University of Malta. Research ethics approval was granted by the University of Malta Research Ethics Committee. The Single Question Aimed at Inducing Narrative (SQUIN) developed by Wengraf (2001) was utilized allowing the participants to narrate their own stories. The interviews were conducted in both English and Maltese depending on the preferences of the interviewee.

The data collected is analysed through Narrative Inquiry which is “a storytelling methodology through which we study narratives and stories of experiences” (Kim, 2016, p. 118). The Three-Dimensional Space Narrative Structure developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000), embedded in Dewey’s theory of experience, enabled me to better understand this phenomenon of youth transitions and to carry out the storying and re-storying process. Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) defines re-storying as “the process of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story (e.g. time, place, plot and scene), and then rewriting the story to place it within a chronological sequence” (p. 332). Themes, patterns and categories emerged from these narratives which led to the findings in this study. In this paper, which is part of an ongoing PhD project, only the themes and patterns related to family are presented and discussed.

## 4. Results

The analysis shows that even though the Maltese family has, in these last years, changed in form and function, it still remains nuclear oriented, where strong kinship ties shape and impact the trajectories of young Maltese people. The recent changes in law, like the legalisation of divorce, same sex marriage and adoption rights to same sex couples, started bringing about a change in the structure of the family but not on the influence and the impact of the parents on the journey of their children as they negotiate their transitions to adulthood.

In this ongoing project, the themes elicited that relate to the family are: 1. The Strong Family Network; 2. The Matriarchal Influence; and 3. Delaying Leaving the Parental Home.

### 4.1. The strong family network

The model of the Maltese family is similar to the model of the Southern European family presented by Guerrero and Naldini (1997), which incorporates the characteristics and tendencies of the Southern European family: having generations living together in one household, the high institutionalisation of marriage, and relatively low cohabitation, divorce rates, births outside wedlock and lone parent households. The legalization of divorce in Malta happened in 2011 and according to Eurostat (2020) Malta has the lowest divorce rate in the European Union. Out of the sixteen participants taking part in this study, the parents of fourteen of them are together, while the parents of two of them are separated. This does not necessarily mean that most of the Maltese people are happily married. There can be other factors that are not reflected in official statistics, such as separation which is not picked up by Eurostat or spouses who are not happily married but not ready to start the proceedings for a divorce, one of the reasons being the influence of Catholic traditions and values in Malta. One of the participants, Cynthia, gets very anxious when she speaks about the relationship of her parents, *because my parents aren't happy together and it's obvious. They are together because of me and my sister.*

Some of the parents do their best to financially support their children while in tertiary education. Nancy's parents, even though her mother is a housewife and therefore has no financial income, paid half of the amount when she bought a car. Ramona, who hails from Gozo and pursues her studies at UM, did not need to rent a flat in Malta since her parents have property in Malta, *I don't have to pay rent. The flat is mine. So those E500 are mine.* The parents' support function as an effective 'social shock absorber' (Ferrera, 2010, p. 622) but it leads to a greater economic dependence of youth on parents while they are studying. Walther (2006) claims that young people are continuously faced with situations where they are expected to make their own decisions, leading them to individualized pathways. This process of individualization, as young people are negotiating their transition into adulthood, according to Furlong and Cartmel (2007), portrays "a subjective weakening of social bonds" (p. 143). Though pressure from society is placed on young people to take on a more individualistic attitude, they still rely on structural factors that influence and shape the processes faced by them as they move from one stage of life to the next. The family is one of the structures that still plays a pivotal role in the life course of young people. Shaun is very close to his family and also very much involved in various activities held in his village. He hails from the sister island Gozo and is studying in in Malta. He finds it hard to accept the fact that to study he has to travel to Malta. *I am involved in a lot of activities in Gozo. Coming to Malta every day will not leave me time to take part in these activities. Moreover, I am very close with my family and I find it very difficult not to see my family for a whole week.* Furlong and Cartmel (2007) propose that in late modernity, life revolves around an epistemological fallacy. The paradox of late modernity is that although collective foundations of social life have become less relied on, they continue to provide powerful frameworks which support young people's experiences and life chances.

### 4.2. The matriarchal influence

The narratives of this study portray the matriarchal influence in the life course of young people especially as they are navigating life changing decisions. Saraceno (2000) discusses the cultural emphasis of southern European countries and speaks about "the crucial role of mother's presence and care" (p. 140) within the family. This is clearly portrayed in Daniela's interview. As she narrates her story, I could see her resilience and strength to overcome challenges in her life. However, as Daniela crafts her story, she attributes her success to her mother. Daniela completed her course at UM because *my mother brainwashed me that I need to achieve an award to make it in life.* Even though Daniela's mother never studied and never joined the labour market, she offered great support and guidance to Daniela and her siblings. While at University, Daniela bore two children. Her mother took it against Daniela and encouraged her *to put her life in order and marry.* Daniela did not give in to her mother's comments. Notwithstanding this, her mother stood by her and Daniela completed her undergraduate studies, followed a higher diploma course and joined the labour market. Another participant, Nancy, narrated the story of

when she had a car accident and slightly damaged her car. She speaks about the need, at that point in time, to speak to her mother, *A couple of days ago I had a small accident with my car, just some scratches nothing big, but I wanted to feel reassured, so I called my mother, I told her 'Mum I hit the car'*.

Open and positive communication between parents and emerging adults impact the well-being of the latter (Portugal et al., 2019). However, Parra et al. (2015) in their longitudinal study carried out with 90 Mediterranean emerging adults show that parent-child communication tends to decrease during the emerging adulthood stage. Parents are seen as agents of the past. The parent-child relationship is transformed in rules and limits (Arnett, 2004), at times influencing the decisions taken by young people. Both Roberto and Miriam describe their mothers as very dominant. Roberto is pursuing studies leading to Masters in Architecture. However, his heart is very much into performing arts. Every time he participates in a festival or a theatre production, his mother makes a scene telling him that this is a waste of time. Due to his participation in the various activities at UM, Roberto is very popular and he feels that his peers look up to him. Then at home he is treated completely different, *so I don't feel comfortable at home because I have to do what my parents say, not what they say but I see a huge difference from when I am with my friends. My friends respect me*. Miriam holds closely her mother's instruction that education comes first yet their relationship is paradoxical. Miriam wants to portray to her mother that she is the perfect daughter. She studies hard because if not her mother would shout at her, *I don't want to be like my brother, she used to shout at him*.

Research speaks more about the role of the parents than the role of the mother. However, a number of the participants of this study highlight the influence and the strong presence of the mother during such a decisive phase in their life, a time when they are navigating and negotiating their transition to adulthood.

### 4.3. Delaying Leaving the Parental Home

The negotiation of transitions has become complex, fragmented and individualized (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007). Extended transitions lead young people to continue with their studies after they finish compulsory education, joining the labour market later and staying longer at their parental home. Family dependence is prolonged and housing transitions and family formation are delayed. The study confirms that young people in Malta postpone leaving their parental home and seek independent living at a later stage in life. All sixteen participants, even though they consider moving out, do not take the plunge and remain living with their parents. According to data from Eurostat (2020), Croatian youth stay home the longest, on average till 32, followed by Slovakia at 30 and Italy and Malta share the third place at 30.2. On the other hand, in Sweden, Luxembourg and Denmark, children leave their family at the age of 17.5, 19.8 and 21.2 respectively. As discussed in theme 1, the close-knit family and the parent-child relationship have an impact on the when and the why of home leaving. Jacob lives with his mother because his parents are separated. He has been in a relationship for five years but at this stage in his life he does not consider moving out, *I am happy as I am, living with my mother. At the moment both my girlfriend and myself we work and so we earn some money but we are not committed to look for a place. It is sort of something for the future*.

Since Malta is a small island, young people do not need to leave the nest in order to be closer to the place of work or university, with the exception of those who hail from the sister island, Gozo. Leaving the parental home is considered a milestone in the transition from childhood to adulthood. This shows that young people are no longer fully dependent on their parents. However, this traditional transition is taking longer and has become more complex. One of the reasons that hinder young people from leaving their parental home is the increase in the prices of property. Mario completed his studies and graduated as a lawyer but due to financial constraints, he cannot move out from his parents' house: *I need to start saving, I already have something for the deposit, because then the loan will be taken from the salary and hopefully there will be property which is affordable*. The crisis of housing affordability is crippling young people on their journey towards adulthood; "housing, be it rental or purchase, is unlikely to be a realistic prospect for young people in Malta" (Briguglio & Spiteri, 2022, p. 11).

## 5. Conclusion

In the recent years, the transitional journey to adulthood has become more extended with increasing complexities. Transitions are not all smooth and linear; some are unpredictable, elongated and fragmented (Furlong, Cartmel and Biggart, 2006). They are not one-off events, may consist of a series of events and do not necessarily happen in a chronological order. For a number of young people, transitions are like a piece of mosaic: different colours, different shapes, different sizes; to others it looks like a jigsaw puzzle that the individual finds hard to put together.

As I was listening to the narratives of these young people, I pondered on the fact that perhaps the family never really lost its influence in the journey of young people. It may have changed, but the presence and the influence are still strong and needed. It is just different.

The narratives analysed in this paper show that transitions are no longer “seen as mere ‘life-cycle transitions’ that can be neatly incorporated into the traditional interpretations of the experience of youth” (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 2). The processes of change in the life course of the young individuals lead to the emergence of a new concept, a new adulthood. It is a stage characterised by uncertainty and unpredictability but which involves more dependence and stronger ties with the family. It would be beneficial if one had to continue studying the experiences of young people across time and present new ways how they can cope in their journey to “new adulthood”.

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