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*When worlds meet. Fostering intercultural awareness among young people.*

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**Abstract**

This paper will focus on appraising the influence that a particular series of interventions had on the intercultural sensitivity of a group of twelve 16 to 18 year old unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who, after arriving in Malta, were assigned to a purposefully set up residential setting by the competent authorities. These interventions were carried out by Maltese volunteers from a local NGO (Caritas, Malta) to generate a better understanding of Maltese culture and way of life amongst the asylum seekers and to enhance their intercultural communication skills. The interventions were constituted of once-weekly experiential sessions which were based on activities such as team-building and language games, arts and crafts activities, and cooking. The study is based on a qualitative methodology that involves both researcher-based participant observation and ongoing interviewing with the young people concerned.

## Introduction

Geographically, Malta is positioned in a central position in the Mediterranean Sea. It is located 93km (58 miles) from the south of Sicily and 288km (179 miles) from North Africa. It thereby has proximity to both mainland Europe (Malta is the southernmost tip of the European Union) and the African continent. Due to its particular location, it sometimes serves to be the place where people who leave Africa surreptitiously (so as to build a better future in Europe or elsewhere) land, after crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Such crossings are normally made in small boats that are filled to capacity. These boats are hardly seaworthy and many who undertake these types of voyages die at sea as a result of the perils encountered (Pisani, 2012, Spiteri 2012, Texeira, 2006). These Africans are referred to generally as ‘irregular migrants.’ This is because they travel without any identification documents either because these are non-existent in their home-countries, or because they destroy them since they fear possible forced repatriation if they are found on them. In most cases, they are formally referred to as ‘asylum seekers’ or ‘people from an asylum seeking background’ since they would normally apply for some form of national or international protection so as to be enabled to remain on the island legally. Most of the Africans come from countries in the Horn of Africa, namely Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti and Somalia, although some have also come from West African countries such as Mali and the Ivory Coast (Pisani, 2012, Spiteri, 2008, St. John, Delicata and Azzopardi, 2008). The majority are single men who are mainly young adults in their 20s or 30s, although, on some boats, women and children are also present.

The phenomenon of asylum seekers landing in Malta by boat is fairly recent. It is believed to date back to 2001 when a boat-load of 57 such people landed on Malta’s shores. Prior to 2001, particularly in the early 1990s, other asylum seekers had come to Malta from crisis areas in the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe, at that time coming mainly from Iraq and Bosnia. However, since the Africans came in regular waves and at the moment there appears to be no end in sight when they will stop coming, their arrival in Malta has caused alarm amongst the local population. Most Maltese people see the consistent arrival of asylum-seekers from Africa on Malta's shores as posing economic challenges to the country. They believe that particularly

due to Malta's small geographic size (318 square meters) and its high population density (Malta's population is roughly slightly less than half a million people), there is a limit to how many asylum-seekers the country can take in (Pisani, 2011, Spiteri, 2008, Spiteri and Zammit, 2011). In effect, in terms of relative population statistics in relation to Malta's size and population density, the arrival of just one asylum seeker to Malta is computed as being approximately equivalent to the arrival of 140 migrants in Italy or 150 migrants in the United Kingdom (Department of Information Report, 2008).

Expressing sentiments of nationalism, the newly formed political party *Azzjoni Nazzjonali*, in its electoral manifesto for the 2008 general election, claimed that open centers that were set up to house irregular immigrants and asylum seekers in Malta ought to be closed down and that these people should be detained until they are capable of leaving Malta (Malta Media News, 2008). It is likely that what instigated these comments is a basic fear that Maltese people would lose their jobs to the immigrants since they appeared to be arriving on the island in droves. The validity of this tenet can nevertheless be refuted on the grounds that the total number of asylum seekers in Malta at any one time is often seen as larger than it actually is. In effect, it is computed as being at less than 1% of the island's 400,000 population (The Economist, June 21<sup>st</sup>, 2007). Moreover, the unemployment rate has not changed significantly with the arrival of the asylum seekers in Malta (Texeira, 2006), and although fresh asylum-seekers arrive, others leave (Spiteri, 2008). Antagonism to the presence of asylum seekers in one's midst is not particular to Malta. The French politician Marine Le Pen has stated publicly that she would like France to be free of all asylum-seekers, arguing that they are a drain on the French social security system (Le Pen, 2011). Using similar reasoning, the British National Party in the UK and the Lega Nord (Northern League) in Italy have viewed the presence of asylum-seekers in European countries as a threat to national integrity, identity and values (Ignazi, 2005)

In line with its international obligations, the Maltese government has designed and implemented services aimed at protecting and promoting the rights of asylum-seekers locally. Two significant interventions took place in the last decade. Firstly, in

2003, the Maltese government opened its first residential setting for young (minor) asylum seekers, and opened a second in 2006 (Schlenzka, 2007). Secondly, in the beginning of 2007, a unit within the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity was set up to coordinate, manage, and oversee the Open Centers and residential units initially operating out of the Ministry for the Family and Social Solidarity. This unit had originally been called the Organization for the Integration and Welfare of Asylum Seekers – OIWAS, but its name was eventually changed to AWAS – the Association for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers. (This was so named to formally acknowledge that the service offered is mainly that of providing residential services to asylum seekers rather than for developing interventions aimed at the integration and mainstreaming of its service-users).

AWAS is responsible for the running of the residential settings for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers and employs care-workers, social workers, administrators and cultural facilitators, amongst other professional staff. This is in order to give the young people it is serving as holistic a care-service as possible. The Church also offers accommodation to asylum-seekers through its open centres. While, normally it does not offer residential facilities to unaccompanied minors, it sometimes accommodates accompanied children and young people together with their families. Other open centres in Malta are run by NGOs and include the Foundation for Shelter and Support of Migrants (which was established in August, 2010) and the John XXIII Peace Lab.

The initial contact that all asylum seekers have with the Maltese is usually with border and immigration police and with personnel from the Ministry of Justice and Home Affairs, under whose portfolio is the responsibility for the running of the 'Detention Centres'. After being detained for some time, minor asylum seekers are usually subject to a fast-tracking procedure that enables them to leave detention after a few weeks at most. While human rights groups have protested against the detention of minors for any amount of time, some minors have been detained longer than others. This is particularly so if they seem to be older than they claim to be to the Maltese authorities. In such cases, it is likely that they would have to undergo age testing

procedures. This is in order for the authorities to (attempt to) establish if they are minors (in the manner they are claiming) before releasing them from detention. This procedure could, nevertheless, work out to be a time-consuming endeavour. This is particularly so if large numbers of irregular immigrants and asylum seekers arrive in Malta at more or less the same time and the workload of the detention personnel thereby increases. This would leave them with less time on their hands to attend to such matters (JRS, 2010). The age-testing procedure has also been criticized for being highly inaccurate (Spiteri, 2012).

This paper will focus on appraising the influence that a particular series of interventions at one of the residential settings for unaccompanied minor asylum seekers run by AWAS has had on the intercultural sensitivity of the young migrants who lived there. This setting is being given the (fictitious) name of Dar is-Sultan. The interventions are constituted of once-weekly experiential sessions that were offered to the asylum seekers by Maltese volunteers from a local NGO (Caritas, Malta). These sessions offered team-building games, language charts, arts and crafts activities, Maltese nights, and cooking. All the sessions lasted for around two to two and a half hours each. They were conducted in the early evening. Their objective was that of empowering the Africans to achieve greater adeptness at communication and to bring about a better understanding of Maltese culture and way of life.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach adopted is based on a qualitative methodology. Data was gathered using one of two methods, namely what shall be termed as ‘field data’ techniques, and *ad hoc* observations and discussions. Field data was gathered by the researcher working alongside the volunteers and the residents in their once-weekly sessions at Dar Is-Sultan. Rather than using a previously formulated set of questions, ongoing interviewing was employed to gain further understanding of the participants’ experiences. *Ad hoc* observations of consisted of the researcher’s observing the residents at Dar Is-Sultan. This was by his occasionally ‘popping in’ to ‘chat’ with the residents. In this manner ‘naturally occurring data’ to further substantiate the findings presented in the study could be gathered. Fetterman (1989) believes that such

interventions are an important data-gathering technique by qualitative researchers. They lie at the core of informal interviewing since they “have a specific but implicit research agenda. ... The researcher uses informal approaches to discover the categories of meaning in a culture (p. 48).”

Another advantage of employing informal approaches of this nature in exploratory research is that they are relatively unobtrusive and the researcher is more often than not inconspicuous. It is highly likely that any informal conversation which is carried out would have occurred even if the research was not taking place. Consequently, the validity of the study is enhanced by the fact that, effectively, the participants are “unaffected by the presence of the observer and/or the recording equipment” Taylor (2001, p. 27). The researcher recorded the inputs using a note-pad and pen but was as unobtrusive as possible in how he went about this so as not to stress the participants in any way.

The ethical aspects of the research were spelt out to the participants from the outset and they were informed that any notes taken during the study would be destroyed on its completion and that their anonymity would be safeguarded throughout. A total of eight field data visits and a further twenty seven *ad hoc* visits were carried out between the months of February and May, 2008, for data collection purposes. The participants were twelve African unaccompanied minor asylum seekers. Informing the study were also the four Maltese volunteers who chose to dedicate some of their time to help the African youngsters achieve a higher level of intercultural competence. The volunteers were in their early twenties. They were enrolled at the University of Malta in courses leading to their first degree in different helping professions including social work, psychology and nursing. Although originally, eight volunteers were active at Dar is-Sultan, two of whom were young men, only four (all women) were actively volunteering at Dar is-Sultan when the study was conducted. The volunteers were called upon to clarify or elaborate on any of the data provided by the asylum-seekers when the researcher believed that he needed to understand further what the African young people were saying. Ten young African men aged 16 to 17 and two young women of the same age participated in the study. They formed part of a

larger group of people who resided at Dar is-Sultan. They were the ones, however, who were purposely singled out as participants in this study. This was because they had all lived at this residential setting for around six months, unlike the others who were more recent arrivals, and who may not have had enough time to 'adjust' in Malta. Eight participants came from Somalia. These included the two girls. There was one participant from Ethiopia while the remaining three were from Eritrea. While the other residents also participated in the experiential sessions that were offered by the volunteers and thereby had a role in the co-constructing of data that was employed in this study, interviews were only carried out with the selected research participants.

The research method adopted in this study is based on grounded theorizing as proposed originally by Glaser and Strauss (1967). It is based on documenting the world from the point of view of the people studied (Hammersley, 1990) and is targeted at producing a people-centred understanding of social phenomena (Silverman, 2000). This infers that the researcher needs to be in personal contact with these phenomena and yet remains as detached enough to be as objective as possible (Yin, 1984), if the aim of grasping the opportunity of experiencing first-hand what other people, in a given set of circumstances, may be potentially inclined to 'do, think, or feel' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000) is to be reached. Stated otherwise, the methodology adopted "allows the inquirer to see the world as his subjects see it, to live in their time-frames, to capture the phenomenon in and on its own terms and to grasp the culture in its own natural ongoing environment" (Lincoln and Guba, 1981, p. 193).

In consonance with Glaser and Strauss' proposed method this study engages in purposive sampling and inductive analysis and is characterized by a constantly emerging design. *Purposive sampling* was employed in this study when recruiting research participants and deciding upon the size and nature of the sample from before the study started. This was so as to ensure that the participants chosen were all capable of offering valid data inputs not only in virtue of their different cultural backgrounds but also since they interacted together regularly at Dar is-Sultan. The *inductive analysis* that was employed consisted of (i) coding; to define/identify leading characteristics by 'breaking down' the data into broad categories, and (ii) categorizing;

whereby the data that was coded was organized in such a way to expose both repeated themes in the data and the deviant cases that merited further exploration and that led to the process of the coding of data being started afresh. New categories sometimes came to be nominated as a result. The *constantly emerging design* relates to the research being carried out 'with' rather than 'on' the participants (Schulz, 2000). In consonance with this, any hypothesis or theory is not proposed prior to the study but rather emanates 'from' the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

As a methodology, grounded theory inherently subscribes to the point of view that human action occurs "as a *durée*, and is ... not composed of an aggregate or series of separate intentions, reasons, and motives" (Giddens, 1984, p.3). There is thereby something continuous in people's interactions and in their "continuous monitoring of action which human beings display and expect others to display" (ibid.). Grounded theory makes it possible to acknowledge this *durée* by doing away with the need to predict from beforehand the multiple realities that the participants could present or to pre-anticipate the different identities that they could expose. (This was likely to be the case if the researcher simply used pre-formulated interviews for the analysis at hand). The views of the participants as presented in this paper are 'emerging,' This implies that the methodology selected takes into account the possibility that some of them would have thought about certain realities in one way when work on the paper was started initially and then thought about them in another way a few months later. In other words, the use of grounded theorizing has been favoured in this paper since it is related to the continual processing of data alongside the connecting of categories to form a theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In consonance with this, the themes that are being thereby proposed in this paper are a product of the participants' voices. These themes have formed the sub-titles in the results' section below. The first relates to the experiencing of the uncertainty and risk that the asylum seekers face even when communicating with one another whilst in Malta. The second relates to greater self-reflexivity that was evolved amongst the asylum-seekers as a result of the interventions made.



## **Empirical analysis**

### **Risk and uncertainty**

Narratives of risk and uncertainty are at the heart of what has come to be termed “late modernity” (Giddens, 1991) or the “risk society” (Beck 1992). Saying this, by no means implies they are absent from the traditional societies and those that are significantly more agrarian. Nor are they absent in the relatively more industrialized world. This implies that it is indeed difficult to conceptualize any society without its own, sometimes particular, share of risks. Certain risks, rather than being associated with societies taken as a whole are associated with particular cohorts of people, particularly the young. For instance, illicit drug consumption, sexual disease transmission, and other related concerns are reported to be commonly associated with a higher initial onset rate in youth rather than in any other age-cohort (Cleveland and Wiebe, 2008; Jefferis, Power and Manor, 2005).

The unaccompanied minor asylum seekers who participated in this study mentioned a set of risks which appear to be heavily influenced by their particular situation. These related to their being unable to cope in the face of the fast-paced changes that they were confronted with in Malta. To them Malta was a new country. Added to this, a number of them only had a very basic knowledge of English. However, apart from acquiring language-skills, what they needed was social capital. They explained that if they were to succeed in eventually leaving Malta and settling abroad (in the manner in which they all said they aspired to), they would need to have 'contacts' who would then assist them on arrival in their country of destination. Lin (2001, p.80) asserts that forging ties (for instance, with contacts of this type) are of importance since they serve as “bridges that link individuals to other social circles - for information not likely to be available in their own circles.”

The participants also acknowledged that they also needed social capital in order to cope in Malta. They needed friends in Malta with whom they could share their worries and concerns. These included both the Maltese and the Africans who were staying with them at Dar is-Sultan, since all could serve as resource-people who could somehow help them cope better, particularly with ongoing and arising situations.

Communicating at Dar is-Sultan presented its own particular challenges, however, since the residents were from different parts of Africa and some could only communicate between themselves via signs and possibly by means of the use of certain Arabic words that they had picked up whilst *en route* to Malta or which some had learned when studying the Koran (if they had an Islamic education). This was because they had no common language between them.

The risks associated with the subsequent lack of communication that was liable to ensue could only be diminished through increased communication. In order to assist the Africans to come to know one another more and also to overcome language barriers, the volunteers employed such pedagogic strategies as cooperative learning in their sessions. They also actively discouraged the asylum seekers from minimizing differences between different African cultures such as saying 'you enjoy the same dances as we do' without qualifying what 'the same dances' meant and without leaving consequently needed space for discussion and dialogue on the subject matter. The volunteers engaged the asylum-seekers in demonstrating their dances to one another and also teaching them to one another in such a way that all felt involved and entertained. In doing so, they were respecting the fact that "cultures can only be understood relative to one another and that particular behaviour can only be understood within a cultural context" (Bennet, 1993, p.46). They also encouraged the asylum seekers to accept differences more. For instance, when one of the volunteers observed one of the Ethiopian participants saying that "the people from Somalia appear to me to prefer to make their own foods with lots of spices while the Ethiopians seem to me to like foods that are more natural tasting," she praised the participant for using culture-specific tonality that allows differences to be seen as resources.

The volunteers also showed considerable intercultural empathy with the Africans and this is described by Bennett (1993) as being an integral aspect of encouraging people's adaptation in multicultural contexts. Empathy involves a change in perspective whereby instead of seeing reality in one's own terms, an effort is made to see it as defined by the other. It also involves pluralism as it invokes an inherent acceptance that there is more than one cultural frame of reference which people can

refer to. In order for such empathy to surface, people have to be able (and willing) to engage in “the process of (simultaneously) becoming a part of and apart from a given cultural context” (Bennet, 1993, p. 59). When one of the participants said “I cannot understand them” referring to the Maltese, a discussion followed on what it meant to be a national of a particular country. This concluded with the participants agreeing on the futility of stereotyping. The risks of communicating with 'the other' were thereby decreased by diminishing the distance between the young person concerned and 'the other' by making 'the other' seem less of an 'other' and more of a 'person like myself.' Empathy is also associated with constructive marginality where differences are embraced positively. This was manifested at an organizational level when a decision was taken, at Dar Is-Sultan, to enlist African people to help out in caring roles at this residence. On different occasions, misunderstandings relating to values and value-judgments were decreased simply by the African young people referring their personal issues to the African members of staff. The asylum-seekers believed that they could understand them more because of cultural similarities. They believed that they could thereby mediate on their behalf, if and when, they thought this necessary.

### **Greater self-reflexivity**

The sessions with the volunteers can be said to be a liminal journey of the asylum seekers' selves (Deegan and Hill, 1991), meaning that they elicited an awareness of their desires and needs that may have been escaping their attention. In illustration of this, when one of the African women asked that a certain piece of music be played time and time again as a back-up to one of the sessions, it was clear that this had a therapeutic focus, linking her to her own past in her homeland. Also, when one of the African young men spoke to me asking me if it would be possible that he be 'adopted' by a Maltese family since both of his parents had been killed by the war in his country, it was clear that he was desiring to set down roots and feel that he belongs somewhere. When speaking about his homeland, he said that “Over there, I lived my life always in fear because of the war my country was fighting. When I woke up in the morning, I would ask, ‘where is Ahmed?’ and they would tell me Ahmed is dead. I would ask ‘where is Said?’ and they would tell me Said is dead. Over there people die like flies.” The liminal experiences of the participants were sometimes more subtle as

when one African person asked for someone to enable him to further his education. Such a request did not only betray this young person's desire to broaden his knowledge, but also to further build on the knowledge he had acquired when younger.

One of the residents explained this with the following assertion:

“I came from Somalia, from Mogadishu. There, the country is in a civil war. If you leave the house, you do not know if when you come back, you will find your family alive. .... Your family is all important to you there...perhaps everywhere ..but there most especially. I would not be here today had it not been for the love of my family. ... I went from country to country without any papers before reaching Malta. There are no official documents from a country that has lacked a stable government since 1991. In Libya I worked long enough to pay for a boat-trip to Italy, yet after the engine of the boat died, myself and the other seventeen people aboard remained drifting at sea before being seen by a passing vessel who signalled our plight to the Maltese coastguard. Although I spent slightly over a month in detention, I was then transferred to ... [Dar is-Sultan]. It was here that I started to see the first sight of normality in my life. No longer did I live in fear for my life. I needed to be considerate of others and others were expected to be considerate of me. That is not to say that there are no clashes. There are clashes between the residents, clashes between the residents and the staff, and I suppose, like in every other place on earth, there are clashes between the staff themselves. Yet, these are things that come and go. I value the differences between the people who live here since they make me a better human being. I see these differences as an opportunity to generate greater understanding of others, rather like fasting, which helps me to understand the suffering of others.”

The liminality of this person's experience comes from the desire for security that can be traced to his past. His family upbringing appears to have been a positive experience that he is trying to recreate. So much so, that it is not the disagreements that surface at Dar is-Sultan which he attributes most importance to. Rather, it is on

understanding other people's culture, value systems, and also other specific factors that identify and differentiate the Africans from one another. This is consonant with the interventions that the volunteers are carrying out. This was elaborated upon by one of the African female participants as follows:

“What people need is time that is used in a profitable way - it takes time to get to know one another. By organizing different activities, the volunteers allow us space to understand better what it means to be a woman in a country other than our own. Although some people associate some practices with religion, they are not religion, they are simply tradition. Yet, we need to see other traditions and to see other people living those traditions and willing to talking about them so as to decide what traditions apply to us and what traditions do not. It is important that we speak - both Africans amongst ourselves and Africans with Maltese. There is no excuse for isolating ourselves.”

What both these young people are looking for is greater cultural fluency. This could have come about due to their increased intercultural contact and interdependence at Dar is-Sultan. Effectively, they are being forced to adapt to new intercultural circumstances. Shah (2004) notes that there are six blocks that prevent this from taking place, namely an assumption of similarities, the language differences that come about when language is not supported by cultural knowledge, nonverbal misinterpretations, the forming of preconceptions and stereotypes, a tendency to evaluate against known value systems and patterns of behaviour, and the manifesting of high levels of anxiety at dealing with the ‘unknown’ in intercultural interaction. All of these blocks were countered by the interventions that were undertaken by the volunteers since, as can be judged from the above cited narratives, they engaged the participants in understanding more one another and in making the effort necessary for that understanding to come about. The blocks listed by Shah run contrary to the holding down of a level conversation between people who, although different, aspire to understand one another and to be understood by one another.

## Conclusion

The study explored whether a set of interventions aimed at bringing people of different cultures together and enhancing their sense of mutual understanding generated greater intercultural sensitivity. Through their narratives, it can be concluded that the participants did not experience alienation (in that even with all possible efforts and good intentions, they could not identify with each other due to their different cultures). Rather, a more plausible assertion is that they engaged in negotiation (where they affirmed their own identities in the context of their being with people from different cultures). These cross-cultural contacts are characterized by complexity since even when messages are transacted by different people of the same culture, who may have different opinions, beliefs and ways of communicating between them it is possible for misunderstandings and misinterpretations to ensue, let alone, when people have apparently precious little in common with one another (Gao, 2006). Saying this, as Winch (1997, pg. 198) claims, “it is in any case misleading to distinguish, in a wholesale way, between ‘our own’ and ‘alien cultures; parts of ‘our’ culture may be quite alien to one of ‘us’; indeed some parts may be more alien than cultural manifestations which are geographically or historically remote.”

In terms of the development of a core theory, the study has revealed that the Maltese and African young people do communicate between and amongst themselves and that this communication has left positive influences on all. It has shown that intercultural sensitivity can be developed if people invest in bringing it about and are willing to engage in encounters with people of different cultural backgrounds. Even though there are risks involved in interacting within inter-cultural contexts, the most pertinent of which is the risk of being misunderstood or misinterpreted, there are also gains, including investing in the building of social capital that could help an asylum-seeker achieve his/her goals. Associated with this is the outlook that people adopt in relation to communicating with one another and to also experience ongoing changes. This outlook is often influenced by a person's childhood and upbringing, since very often people look to their past when making decisions throughout life. The participants described positive messages and injunctions from their parents and carers as being cardinal in developing the resilience necessary in order to reach Europe and build a

better life for themselves than they believed would have been possible had they remained in Africa.

The interventions played a cardinal role in giving the asylum-seekers space to question, discuss and reflect on where they were at in terms of becoming closer to their goals. Due to the openness of the discussions generated, it could be said that there was no attempt by anyone to block out or “asphyxiate” (Friere, 1993, pg. 120) explicit discourse. When, on one occasion, a participant tried to speak about an experience that was too personal and thereby was possibly too much of a burden for the group to handle, this was taken on board by one of the volunteers who asked the person to then speak to her once the group was over so that his problem could be given the attention it merited. This reflected Postman and Weingartner’s (1970) assertion that the “critical content of any learning experience is the method or process through which the learning occurs,” this possibly elucidating Marshall McLuhan’s idea that ‘the medium is the message.’ As one of the volunteers put it, “all along, this project has been just like a small light-bulb that is lit up in the dark; it will not light the skies. Yet, it has made a definite difference in the hearts of the Africans. It gave them space to ask questions, give answers, and reflect on those questions and answers. In doing so, it has given them hope. It has generated a sense of hopefulness in their lives”.

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