



**ETHNIC MINORITIES
BEYOND MIGRATION:
THE CASE OF MALTA**



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The People for Change Foundation

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Introduction

“My son, for example, has a habit of waving at every coloured guy he sees [...]. Most of the time you see them on garbage trucks. So, as he was younger and you would ask him what he wanted to become, he would say, garbage collector,” a research participant who has adopted two children from Ethiopia explains. Her children are growing up in a middle class environment and attend a private school, but even outside of their parents’ and educators’ teaching and perspectives, they are learning about race and class dynamics from their observations in public spaces. As Malta has shifted to become a country of immigration, the dynamics of ethnic and race relations have grown to be synonymous with migration, mostly from Sub-Saharan Africa.

Within social discourse, policy and research, as well as in advocacy efforts, the emphasis on understanding and combatting racial discrimination in Malta has focused almost exclusively on the experiences of first generation migrants and specifically asylum seekers. Nonetheless, Malta has for multiple generations had a relatively small minority population, within a society that is and strongly considers itself to be white¹ and Catholic.

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The National Statistics Office (NSO) and service providers (e.g. hospitals, clinics, schools) in Malta do not regularly collect data on ethnicity or how this affects education, income, health or other life outcomes. This has meant that the broad ranging yet specific features and needs of Maltese citizens who are and identify themselves as being members of ethnic minorities are largely unknown.

It is within this context that this research was developed. The research and this report aim to raise awareness on the perspectives and challenges encountered by non-migrant ethnic minorities, as well as those around them – to contribute to policymakers’ efforts in improving equality, and in understanding and combatting racial and ethnic discrimination in Malta. Diversity in Malta is, within itself, varied, and its multiple formulations must be understood if services are to be well-tailored to a community that is not identical in nature.

This project therefore is a qualitative inquiry into experiences of Maltese families which include people from different racial groups. The study used semi-structured interviews to investigate how members of this group of families experience their identity and minority status, and how they navigate race dynamics.

This report starts with a background section on theory, policy and the background of minorities in Malta before proceeding to the findings from in-depth interviews with participants from the following groups:

- Maltese citizens who are members of an ethnic minority, including second and third generation migrants;
- Maltese citizens married to/in a long-term relationship with a person from a different ethnic group than their own;

¹ The ‘whiteness’ of the Maltese population has been disputed historically, perhaps most dramatically in the case of Maltese of New Caledonia Incident 1916, a ship carrying Maltese citizens to Australia, which had to be turned back as the quota of non-white migrants had already been reached that year. Read more at: www.maltamigration.com/history/newcaledonia.shtml

- Maltese families with children adopted from a different country and ethnic group.

The categories defining individuals and families were loosely and participatively defined. Membership of an ethnic group was understood informally; relationships and belonging were concepts that interviewees could define for themselves; 'difference' was measured against the common perception that Maltese persons are in the most part of central/Northern Mediterranean ethnic origin. These categories can of course be disputed, as there is no 'standard' against which to measure difference; yet the fact that the research participants themselves were keen to share what they considered to be unique experiences of being perceived as different were indicators that there is indeed a common experience of being a part of an ethnically diverse family.

Questions revolved broadly around the topics of features, experiences and needs of members of ethnic minorities in Malta, sense of identity, personal and shared experiences of minority status, friendships and relationships with members of other ethnic groups, experiences of racism and discrimination in various spheres of life and coping strategies.

Fifteen research participants were found via messages and calls for participants on social media and snowball sampling. The interviews were conducted in English and were recorded and transcribed. No research participant was in a position of dependency or vulnerability towards the researcher or the People for Change Foundation that might have affected their participation in this research. For this reason, and to maintain privacy, oral informed consent was considered sufficient and was taken in all cases. Participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the research project and that its findings would be disseminated in a research report, but that their responses would be anonymised to protect their privacy. Participants who wished to read the findings prior to publication were able to do so.

The small sample is not intended to lead to conclusions of statistical significance or wide generalization of the findings for the whole target group or across all minorities in Malta. Whilst being the most appropriate method for this type of study, the fact that participants were found through snowball sampling implies that they share a relatively similar background, although they may also have been brought together by their shared identity around minority status. It is clear, nonetheless, that most of those interviewed were highly educated. Most participants were women (three were men – one in each of the three target groups). In biracial couples, one partner was North African and one was British of Caribbean descent– all others were from Sub-Saharan Africa. Eight out of eleven foreign partners come from former British colonies. On the other hand, the sample spans across the divide between religious and secular families, and includes some religious minorities. Despite the small scale of the project, several clear trends were observed in individuals' and families' experiences, particularly in the experiences of Maltese individuals who are a part of a biracial couple.

1. Minority, ethnicity and race – the theory

Ethnic identities tend to be defined by difference and dissimilarity of culture, history and appearance from others.² According to Gilroy, identity needs effort, institutions and exclusiveness to function.³ Tajfel defined identity as “the individual knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership”.⁴ A sense of belonging and identification facilitates the development of a common symbol system, which also defines the community’s boundaries⁵ and improves individuals’ motivation, health and happiness.⁶ Being certain of one’s belonging gives a sense of “pre-reflective obviousness”.⁷

To use Emirbayer’s phrase, identity is not a “thing, being or essence”,⁸ but a relational practice resulting both from interactions with the society and pragmatic decisions of different actors. Ethnicity and race often constitute grounds for identity alongside other elements, such as nationality, social class, generation, sexual orientation, gender, religion, or family.⁹ Race refers to a group of people who have similarities in biological features that are historically deemed by the society as socially significant.¹⁰

Race, then, is a social feature, and in many cases a type of ‘colourism’ – a gradient of skin tones that influences the way the individual is treated by others and how they self-identify.¹¹ Therefore, the concept of race has recently been reconsidered in academic debates, as evidenced by the statement: “a mode of classification linked specifically to peoples in the colonial situation” and that “indeed, physical variations in the human species have no meaning except the social ones that humans put on them.”¹²

For example, a study on non-white Swedish adoptees showed how people were minoritised even when they grew up in an ethnoculturally Swedish environment. Their bodies were “decoded and read as belonging to a certain race”.¹³ In this case, the racial framework was imposed on them during everyday interactions, which assign an identity to them regardless of their own choices. From the individual’s perspective, identity can be validated in these

² Simon Harrison, “Cultural Difference as Denied Resemblance: Reconsidering Nationalism and Ethnicity,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45, no. 2 (2003): 343.

³ Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora and the Detours of Identity,” in *Identity and Difference*, ed. Kathryn Woodward (London: Sage Publications, 1997), 303.

⁴ Tajfel H. E., (1978), *Differentiation between social groups*, London, Academic Press, cited in Jaak Billiet, “Questions about National, Subnational and Ethnic Identity,” *European Social Survey (ESS-ERIC, 2002)*, 386, https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/docs/methodology/core_ess_questionnaire/ESS_core_questionnaire_national_ethnic_identity.pdf.

⁵ David W McMillan and David M Chavis, “Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986): 6–23.

⁶ Karyn Hall, “Create a Sense of Belonging: Finding Ways to Belong Can Help Ease the Pain of Loneliness,” *Psychology Today*, March 24, 2014, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/pieces-mind/201403/create-sense-belonging>.

⁷ Andrew Smith, “Rethinking the ‘everyday’ in ‘ethnicity and Everyday Life,’” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 7 (2014): 1137–51, doi:10.1080/01419870.2014.987307.

⁸ Mustafa Emirbayer, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 282.

⁹ Moha Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco* (New York: Springer, 2005), <http://www.springer.com/gp/book/9780387239798>.

¹⁰ Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (New York: NYU Press, 1996).

¹¹ Lauren Monsein Rhodes, “Being Latvian: Discourse and Identity Among Individuals of Black African Descent” (Thesis, 2013), 6, <https://digital.lib.washington.edu/443/researchworks/handle/1773/22459>.

¹² Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association, “AAA Statement on Race,” May 17, 1998, <http://www.americananthro.org/ConnectWithAAA/Content.aspx?ItemNumber=2583>.

¹³ Carina Tigervall and Tobias Hübinette, “Adoption with Complications: Conversations with Adoptees and Adoptive Parents on Everyday Racism and Ethnic Identity,” *International Social Work* 53, no. 4 (2010): 492.

interactions, but can also be misrecognised.¹⁴

The concepts of ethnicity and race often overlap and are used interchangeably, yet analytical differences remain. Ethnicity is based on shared characteristics such as language, culture and nationality – ethnic identification is hence a means by which culture is transmitted.¹⁵ Modood et al. emphasise that ethnicity is defined using boundaries: “an ethnic group would be defined as a community whose heritage offers important characteristics in common between its members and which makes them distinct from other communities”. It works when the distinction is recognised on both sides of that boundary.¹⁶ Ethnicity thus allocates actors positions “in their cognitive 'maps' of the social world”.¹⁷

Ethnicity and race feed into dividing the society into majority and minority groups, alongside other characteristics such as gender, sexual orientation, social class or age. The distinction between majority and minority group may be related to the group size, but it is always and inevitably linked to their power position in the country. Members of ethnic minorities tend to self-identify with their group’s generalised features and be recognised by other members of the group.¹⁸ Joppke and Morawska argue that state policies which reify ethnicity, especially official multiculturalism, provide a framework of reference for the salience of ethnic identity.¹⁹ Identity thus becomes a strategy for claiming right to a territory, position in a society, or resources.²⁰

Recognising the resilience of race implies talking about the power of phenotype in social interactions.²¹ A study on non-white adoptees in Sweden found that non-white bodies were constantly in the spotlight, “whether expressed as ‘curious questions’ concerning the ethnic origin of the adoptees or as outright aggressive racialization”.²²

Individuals, therefore, can identify as members of a minority group, can be pushed into this category by those around them, and can be rendered minorities by proximity (real or perceived) to others of that minority group. Mixed-race individuals, scholars in the US and in the UK have pointed out, are usually categorised by observers in line with the ‘one drop rule’,^{23,24} that is that they are considered to be a part of a minority group if any member of the family belongs to it.

Research on multiracial children revealed that they were better supported by parents who discuss race and racial identity instead of pretending that these are not an issue in the society.²⁵ In the case of transracially adopted children, studies have revealed a degree of inability among white parents to support children’s needs and to deal with racism.²⁶ Although white families are

¹⁴ Miri Song and Peter Aspinall, “Is Racial Mismatch a Problem for Young ‘mixed Race’ people in Britain? The Findings of Qualitative Research,” *Ethnicities* 12, no. 6 (2012): 733, doi:10.1177/1468796811434912.

¹⁵ Hector Betancourt and Steven Regeser López, “The Study of Culture, Ethnicity, and Race in American Psychology.,” *American Psychologist* 48, no. 6 (1993): 631.

¹⁶ Tariq Modood et al., “Ethnic Minorities in Britain: Diversity and Disadvantage” (London: Policy Studies Institute, 1997), 10, http://www.psi.org.uk/pdf/Ethnic%20Minorities%20In%20Britain_small_file.pdf.

¹⁷ Christian Karner, *Ethnicity and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2007), 31.

¹⁸ Stefan Wolff, “Ethnic Minorities in Europe: The Basic Facts,” Policy Report (Flensburg: European Centre for Minority Issues, December 2008), <http://stefanwolff.com/publications/ethnic-minorities-in-europe/>.

¹⁹ Christian Joppke and Ewa T. Morawska, eds., *Toward Assimilation and Citizenship: Immigrants in Liberal Nation-States*, Migration, Minorities, and Citizenship (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 8–9.

²⁰ Nadia Lovell, ed., *Locality and Belonging* (London: Routledge, 1998), 6.

²¹ Rhodes, “Being Latvian,” 38.

²² Tigervall and Hübinette, “Adoption with Complications,” 481.

²³ Waters, *Black Identities*.

²⁴ Wright, Olyedemi, and Gaines Jr, “Perceptions of Mixed-Race: A Study Using an Implicit Index.”

²⁵ Gibbs J. T., and Moskowitz-Sweet G., (1991), Clinical and cultural issues in the treatment of biracial and bicultural adolescents, *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*, 72(10), 579-592, cited in Charmain F Jackman, William G Wagner, and JT Johnson, “The Attitudes toward Multiracial Children Scale,” *Journal of Black Psychology* 27, no. 1 (2001): 86–99.

²⁶ Ravinder Barn, “White Mothers, Mixed-Parentage Children and Child Welfare,” *British Journal of Social Work* 29, no. 2 (1999): 269–284.

ready to adopt transracially when encouraged by adoption consultants or friends, adopted children were found to be vulnerable to internalising implicit negative attitudes from their white environment.²⁷ According to Ali, parents constantly struggle with a complex process of balancing the needs of children concerning their racial, ethnic and cultural background with other developmental needs.²⁸

Finally, research on interracial couples has pointed out that respondents viewed interracial couples as less compatible when involving a black person, compared to intra-racial or white-Asian couples. Since the interracial couple challenges perceivers' belief of an appropriate relationship, the two partners may not be perceived as a couple at all but rather as separate and mismatched individuals.²⁹

Regardless of experience of negative perceptions, this study shows that individuals in biracial families believe diversity in their family or their own background enriches and empowers them. Whereas some of the research participants showcased their rooted identities and a strong sense of belonging, others were proud to identify as cosmopolitans and citizens of the world. Cosmopolitanism is defined either as a practice or competence to engage with diversity, or a moral aspiration to do so.³⁰ The attributes of cosmopolitanism until the mid-20th century were "well-travelled experience, sophisticated style and savoir faire, until the second half of the 20th century saw working class migration normalised and gave rise to terms such as 'everyday cosmopolitanism' and 'tactical cosmopolitanism'".³¹ For example, using interviews with Eastern European construction workers in London, newly empowered by their countries' EU accession, Datta showed how their cosmopolitan attitudes and behaviours were not only survival strategies, but also products of their enjoyment of exposure to other cultures.³² Therefore, in negotiating their position in less than favourable social circumstances, individuals are likely to craft a cosmopolitan identity, enriched by exposure to different cultures, or try a different strategy – emphasise their rooted, local identity.

1.1 Some Policy Considerations

The normative and policy framework towards ethnic minorities in Malta is mostly defined in terms of anti-discrimination and of protection of individuals from hate speech and hate crimes. No legislative and policy framework is present to enshrine collective rights of ethnic or racial minorities.

'Minorities' are defined on the basis of their ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic identity, as stipulated in the 1992 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities.³³ The non-dominant positions that groups hold in

²⁷ Derek Kirton, "Race", *Race, Ethnicity and Adoption*, Race, Health, and Social Care (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), <http://www.mheducation.co.uk/openup/chapters/0335200028.pdf>.

²⁸ Suki Ali, "Multicultural Families: Deracializing Transracial Adoption," *Critical Social Policy* 34, no. 1 (July 25, 2013): 66–89, doi:10.1177/0261018313493160.

²⁹ Donna A. Lewandowski and Linda A. Jackson, "Perceptions of Interracial Couples: Prejudice at the Dyadic Level," *Journal of Black Psychology* 27, no. 3 (August 1, 2001): 288–303, doi:10.1177/0095798401027003003.

³⁰ Vered Amit and Pauline Gardiner Barber, "Mobility and Cosmopolitanism: Complicating the Interaction between Aspiration and Practice," *Identities* 22, no. 5 (September 3, 2015): 543–50, doi:10.1080/1070289X.2014.975714.

³¹ Steven Vertovec, *Cosmopolitanism in Attitude, Practice and Competence* (Göttingen: Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, 2009), 5.

³² Ayona Datta, "Places of Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: East-European Construction Workers in London," *Environment and Planning* 41, no. 2 (2009): 353–370, doi:10.1068/a40211.

³³ UN General Assembly, "UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities," Adopted by General Assembly resolution 47/135 of 18 December 1992 § (1992), <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Minorities.aspx>.

a given society are also important in defining their status. The notion and practice of minority rights encompass not only non-discrimination, but includes effective participation.³⁴

The European Convention Act lists 'association with a national minority' status separately, in addition to race, colour, language, religion, national or social origin, in stipulating that rights and freedoms set forth in the Convention will be secured without discrimination.³⁵ Meanwhile, the Employment and Industrial Relations Act prohibits discriminatory treatment on the basis of colour or religious conviction.³⁶ The Equal Treatment of Persons Order prohibits direct and indirect discrimination, and harassment based on racial or ethnic origin.³⁷ The Equal Treatment In Employment Regulations aim at combating discrimination on the grounds of, inter alia, religion or religious belief, and racial or ethnic origin.³⁸

Malta has set up a number of legal instruments that support the safeguarding of ethnic minorities. Most relate to non-discrimination, such as provisions of the constitution, the Criminal Code, the 2002 Employment and Industrial Relations Act, and the 1987 European Convention Act³⁹, which implements the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. In 2015, following a public consultation, the government started a process to restructure human rights legislation with the aim of establishing a new independent commission for human rights, yet this has not yet been set up.

The Criminal Code prohibits hate speech and hate crimes against people defined by their ethnic or national origin, race, colour, language, religion or belief.⁴⁰ Additionally, hate speech is prohibited in the Press Act, which lists race, colour, language, ethnic origin, religion or belief as grounds on which discrimination is prohibited.⁴¹ The Broadcasting Act⁴² prohibits incitement to hatred or discrimination based on race, religion or nationality. Subsidiary legislation to the Broadcasting Act requires that broadcasters do not invite persons with racist ideas or opinions when selecting presenters and participants for programmes dealing with racism.⁴³

Upon joining the EU, Malta transposed EU legislation on equality. The Employment Equality Directive sets up a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation and prohibits discrimination only on the grounds of religion and belief, age, disability, and sexual orientation, without mentioning race or ethnicity.⁴⁴ The Race Equality Directive⁴⁵ is considered

³⁴ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, "Minority Rights: International Standards and Guidance for Implementation" (New York and Geneva: United Nations, 2010), www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/MinorityRights_en.pdf.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 14.

³⁶ General provisions para. 2 "Employment and Industrial Relations Act," Chapter 452 Laws of Malta § (2002), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8918&l=1.

³⁷ "Equal Treatment of Persons Order," S.L.460.15 Laws of Malta § (2007), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11800&l=1.

³⁸ "Equal Treatment in Employment Regulations," S.L.452.95 Laws of Malta § (2004), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=11229&l=1.

³⁹ "European Convention Act," Chapter 319 Laws of Malta § (1987), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8795&l=1.

⁴⁰ "Criminal Code," Chapter 9 Laws of Malta § (1854), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8574.

⁴¹ "Press Act," Chapter 248 Laws of Malta § (1974), www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8743&l=1.

⁴² "Broadcasting Act," Chapter 350 Laws of Malta § (1991), <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=8820&l=1>.

⁴³ "Requirements as to Standards and Practice on the Promotion of Racial Equality," SL 350.26 Laws of Malta Chapter 350 § (2007), para. 1.2., <http://www.justiceservices.gov.mt/DownloadDocument.aspx?app=lom&itemid=10181&l=1>.

⁴⁴ Council of the European Union, "Council Directive 2000/78/EC of 27 November 2000 Establishing a General Framework for Equal Treatment in Employment and Occupation," 2000/78/EC § (2000), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1489064448756&uri=CELEX:32000L0078>.

⁴⁵ Council of the European Union, "Council Directive 2000/43/EC of 29 June 2000 Implementing the Principle of Equal Treatment between Persons Irrespective of Racial or Ethnic Origin," 2000/43/EC § (2000), <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32000L0043>.

to be the key piece of the EU legislation for combating discrimination on the basis of race or ethnicity in employment and welfare services, and it is transposed by the aforementioned national legislation in Malta, but further transposition is envisaged in the Equality Bill of 2015. The scope of the bill encompasses to individuals, organisations and entities within the private and public sectors, extending to advertising, banks and financial services, access to goods and services, including medical care, social services and housing, among others.⁴⁶

Malta has signed, but not ratified, the European Convention on Nationality to address acquisition of citizenship through naturalisation. Restrictive citizenship regulations are likely to imply that some individuals within the scope of this research continue living as foreigners in Malta.

1.2 Minority groups in Malta

In its public registers and census, Malta does not disaggregate data on the basis of race or ethnicity, but only by language, gender, age, disability, place of birth, and citizenship(s).⁴⁷ The population of Malta is defined by a great degree of homogeneity: less than one in ten of Malta's residents identify as a religious or linguistic minority. As a result, most studies on ethnic minorities are qualitative.

Earlier research has called Malta's Indian community, whose origins can be traced back to the first half of the 19th century, 'well-established and respected', as well as 'integrated fully into Maltese society and at the same time [...] proud of its roots'.⁴⁸ In the late 1990s, persons of Indian origin owned clothing and souvenir shops, among other businesses.⁴⁹

A 2005 study claimed that Arabophobia and Islamophobia were embedded in the Maltese collective imaginary due to historical connections, along with perceptions of security pertaining largely to the 20th and 21st century. "The airport? As soon as they [the police] detect an Arab, they take hours searching his belongings," her informant complained.⁵⁰ Participants in this study reported being treated like other foreigners if their complexion was fair, yet were sometimes denied entry into clubs if they looked typically Middle Eastern.⁵¹ Some participants in the same study claimed that their employers believed employing an Arab to deal with clients would be bad for business. Hostile relations with colleagues led many to opt for self-employment.⁵²

In the area of education, research has shown that Malta has not appropriately considered the diversity of the students and that teachers lacked the tools required to work with a multi-ethnic classroom; minority students were treated as having special needs.⁵³

A 2013 ECRI report on Malta noted that racial and ethnic discrimination continues to exist in public life and entertainment. Citing an older report, it reminded Maltese authorities that over

⁴⁶ Ministry for Social Dialogue, Consumer Affairs and Civil Liberties, "A Bill towards an Equality Act" (2015), http://socialdialogue.gov.mt/en/Public_Consultations/MSDC/Documents/2015%20HREC%20Final/Bill%20-%20Equality%20Act.pdf.

⁴⁷ An overview of collected population data is available at NSO website: <http://nso.gov.mt/en/publicatons/Pages/Publications-by-Date.aspx> (Last accessed on 26 August 2016)

⁴⁸ Mark Anthony Falzon, "Origins and Establishment of the Indian Business Community in Malta," *Bank of Valletta Review* 24 (2001): 73.

⁴⁹ Falzon, "Origins and Establishment of the Indian Business Community in Malta."

⁵⁰ Deborah Cassar, "Maltese-Arab Marriages: A Measuring-Rod of Maltese Racism" (University of Malta, 2005), 49, http://www.thinksite.eu/userfiles/Deborah%20Cassar%20-%20Maltese-Arab%20Marriages_%20A%20Measuring%20Rod%20of%20Maltese%20Racism.pdf.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 69–70, 73.

⁵³ Colin Calleja, Bernard Cauchi, and Michael Grech, *Education and Ethnic Minorities in Malta* (University of Malta, 2010), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236618475_Education_and_Ethnic_Minorities_in_Malta.

a third of Africans claimed they had faced discrimination in catering and entertainment venues within a year. Not being allowed into bars and clubs was commonplace,⁵⁴ and this is confirmed by findings of the present study. Discrimination in public transportation ranged between refusing to stop for passengers with a visible minority background to verbal abuse. Furthermore, prejudiced attitudes impeded the process of finding a place to rent for individuals with minority background. A study published by the National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE) found that estate agents were the main perpetrators of housing discrimination. Distrust in institutions left the victims feeling powerless and lowered reporting rates of discriminatory instances.⁵⁵ A pan-European study showed that Africans in Malta were the second most discriminated overall, the most discriminated in catering and entertainment, the fifth most harassed, and the most underemployed minority in the EU.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ European Commission against Racism and Intolerance, "ECRI Report on Malta (Fourth Monitoring Cycle)."

⁵⁵ Marika Fsadni and Maria Pisani, "I'm Not a Racist, But... Immigrant & Ethnic Minority Groups and Housing in Malta," Qualitative study (National Commission for the Promotion of Equality (NCPE), December 2012), [https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/l_m_Not_Racist/imnrb_research\(1\).pdf](https://ncpe.gov.mt/en/Documents/Projects_and_Specific_Initiatives/l_m_Not_Racist/imnrb_research(1).pdf).

⁵⁶ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, "European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey," Main results report, (2009)

2. Minorities Beyond Migration – The Case of Malta

2.1 Managing difference in the family

Maltese citizens who have formed bicultural couples nearly universally agreed that cultural differences did not impede building a home and a family together. Many could mention differences such as attitudes towards time management, the woman's role in the family, and the strength of family ties as the main cultural differences. Several women, who are married to Africans, mentioned 'not seeing the colour' as their personal stance towards relationships. Yet for most, it was the family that perceived the far greater difference:

Some people say that maybe it is a waste that I am with a black guy if I could have got with a white guy. [...] But in general at least in my face they weren't that negative – and accepting. (F, 1988, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

My family were a bit surprised, maybe. [...] To them it was all very, very distant, a different culture, different continent [...]. What helped was the fact that he is Roman Catholic as well, so that [...] bridged the gap [...]. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

In many cases the more distant the relatives, the more likely they were to judge:

In my immediate family, there was never an issue. In my extended family, there was, but to be honest I've addressed it and good luck to them. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Most research participants were glad to share that initial resistance was overcome:

I must be honest, when I met my husband even my mom found it difficult to accept. For six months we didn't speak, then she saw that he was of a certain standing. It is the way we were brought up, and my mom's generation even more. Now they are very close. (F, 1976, bicultural couple, partner of Caribbean/UK origin)

Another participant found out that their partner's perceived class was more salient than race. This could either help overcome worries of cultural difference, or even exacerbate them:

I had no issues with my family at all. Sure, they asked a few questions [...], raised a few eyebrows but my family is pretty reasonable when it comes to race. Race would not be an issue, yeah. Other things might be but not that. [...] [Rather] religion and financial prospects. (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African/Cameroonian origin)

Many families found religious barriers more difficult to overcome. One participant remembered how her mother refused to accept her marriage to an Egyptian Muslim, and another mentioned that it took a very long time for the marriage to be accepted. For a number of families, a daughter's conversion felt like a betrayal of the family's heritage and identity. Perhaps more surprisingly, the same was experienced even in a family that was already bicultural. When a daughter in a mixed family married a Christian African, her Muslim father found it very difficult to accept. This research participant's story was quite unique compared to stories of others who had similarly already been exposed to diversity within their families. Religious differences in the

family, being a minority, or having a multicultural ancestry were most often factors mentioned while explaining relatives' more relaxed attitudes to diversity.

Partners in biracial couples and adoptive parents alike pointed out that the arrival of large numbers of asylum seekers in Malta have deeply influenced attitudes in mainstream society toward racial and ethnic groups. One research participant remembered, days before she and her partner travelled to Ethiopia to meet their adoptive children for the first time, that

I grew up with several close friends, half of them who were avowed racists [...]. I mean one of them was my best man at the wedding. So, he has completely changed. (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African /Cameroonian origin)

relatives were talking negatively and using racial stereotypes about African migrants at a family gathering. She pointed out that some people she met during the adoption process were supported by their extended families on condition that the children 'would not be black'. For a number of participants, the logistical issues overshadowed any regional or racial differences. The orphanage in Ethiopia from which they adopted their children is run by Maltese nuns and is well-known for smoothly managing the adoption process.

On the other hand, in some cases families expressed worries not about the race of one's partner or adopted children, but about possible reactions from others in society: families feared that their children would be bullied, and that they were unable to change interactions involving larger and more loosely connected groups of people, such as classrooms or school settings. However, in closely knit interactions the presence of a racially different family member alone often ignited some changes:

I grew up with several close friends, half of them who were avowed racists [...]. [After meeting my partner, one of them] has completely changed. (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African /Cameroonian origin)

Although some statements mirror those made in a Swedish study on adoptive children when considering the dilemma between cutting off contact with certain relatives or exposing children to racist attitudes,⁵⁷ most participants stated that they were not surprised by the reactions of those close to them, but that there were some tough decisions to be made. For one research participant, breaking the news of her forming a biracial couple was a test to her friendships:

As you grow older you come to choose your friends, if your friends don't accept you than they're not your friends. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

In fact, particularly in the case of newly adopted children, many were delighted to see the overall positive reaction from immediate family upon meeting the new family members:

When I arrived at the airport with the girls, there were all the relatives there. You know, it was like a feast, they were made [to feel] very welcome and [...] a part of the family. (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

The main challenge in managing diversity within a family and social context had to do with convincing extended family (and in some cases friends) to recognise interpersonal similarities as far more significant than interracial differences. Religious differences intensified the lack of acceptance of biracial families, but partners' education or first contact with adopted children soothed the fears. The interviews suggest that instead of superseding social class, ethnicity allows itself to be superseded in these interactions. Family members and friends are more likely to accept diversity when they count on the partners' integration efforts or higher social standing,

⁵⁷ Tigervall and Hübinette, "Adoption with Complications."

or when children are expected to integrate into an educated or middle-class Maltese environment because they are still young when they reach Malta. However, biracial families still need to come to terms with the ways their children's non-white identities are perceived by others.

2.2 Raising children who look 'different'

Adopted and mixed children of the families concerned are socially and culturally Maltese with non-white bodies who, similar to experiences reported in other countries, are treated with curiosity or racialized aggression.⁵⁸ Non-white adoptees are often treated like migrants, and are asked whether they speak the language or where they're from, despite substantial cultural and social differences from them.

My daughter [...] had gone to a summer school and a girl told her "I'm not playing with you because you are not white" (F, 1979, bicultural couple and family, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Biracial families and adoptive parents alike counted on their familial and social networks amongst other tactics to gain social capital to mitigate the effects of this treatment. One research participant remembered that her son, born in a biracial marriage, was bullied at school ("asked if he was dirty"), but that joining a football club helped him become accepted by his peers.

Mothers paid attention to various instances bordering between curiosity and microaggression, such as touching of the children's skin and hair by classmates. An adoptive father remembered his daughter asking to make her white because she did not want to feel special. Yet our research participants insisted that this type of behaviour was not unacceptable and their rationalization around it tended to neutralise it.

Parents were surprised that their children were exposed to 'colourism', still coming to terms with racial categories, guessing and probing. Without being aware of historical categories of race, in two cases children referred to the white skin colour as 'peach,' but the choice of colour itself does not change the fact that this statement was made to point out a difference:

My daughter [...] had gone to a summer school and a girl told her "I'm not playing with you because you are not white". My daughter was very very upset and one day she asked me "Why am I not like you?" and I asked her [in what sense] and she pointed at my skin colour. Because children don't say white, they say peach. I said how come you are saying this? And then she explained. (F, 1979, bicultural couple and family, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Mothers in biracial families also found it difficult to deal with the fact that adoption from other ethnic groups or countries has become common enough for strangers to assume that all dark skinned or biracial children seen with white mothers have been adopted.

People stop me to ask me where I got the children from, even now. That is very difficult. (F, 1976, bc, partner of Caribbean/British origin)

⁵⁸ Tigervall and Hübinette, "Adoption with Complications," 481.

When I used to walk by the [sea]front in Sliema with my children in the stroller I had a couple of people saying “you’re so charitable, you’ve adopted two African children, God bless you” and one time I got so annoyed that I said they were my children. In certain aspects [...] I’ve always been raised that if you want to see colour you’ll see it anyhow. If you don’t then colour is not an issue, that’s how I see it. (F, 1979, bicultural couple and family, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

People stop me to ask me where I got the children from, even now. That is very difficult. (F, 1976, bicultural couple, partner of Caribbean/British origin)

Although these mothers tell stories of resilience, they admitted that it hurt them to have their motherhood questioned just because of the racial differences.

People think I adopted them like someone said “Ah how cute, my cousin adopted someone from Ethiopia. Where did you get yours from?” – “Right out of my tummy”. You know it’s just, people assume, I don’t think they mean any harm, I don’t take offence, I just answer back, informing them. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

On the other hand, for adoptive mothers this curiosity and assumptions were a validating experience. Despite the undertones of charitability in comments coming from often strangers, the overt appreciation of adoption itself was a strong factor in enhancing acceptability, particularly at very young children:

I remember when they were still very young, I mean I was pushing them in the push chair, people used to stop me, people that I don’t know and ask me and congratulate me ‘Well done’, this is something very nice that they wouldn’t have left to do it. You know, we were amazed with the reaction of the people. I mean people stopping you, people you don’t know, saying ‘how sweet’, ‘I would have liked to do it’, ‘how did you do it?’ (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

An adult adoptee who grew up in Malta in a Maltese family recounted initial reactions of ‘othering’, but his cultural competence and the fact that he grew up in a place of close social contacts rather than a large anonymous city eased this ‘bombardment with questions’:

They speak English to me if they see me alone. They consider me an immigrant but if I am with white people, they are sure I am not African, maybe British. (M, 1985)

The fact that strangers make a non-white body hypervisible⁵⁹ is a surprise to both children and parents. On the other hand, the adult adoptee mentioned above learned to make use of the attention received and to treat it as social capital. A mother of two adopted girls also recounted the surprise and joy at receiving attention from strangers and even worried whether her biological son would be jealous.

Parents in this study insisted on normalising their children’s belonging and experience. Several pointed out that bullying does not need racial differences to take place at school. Families also developed their own frameworks for dealing with the awareness of racial difference:

They are Maltese but obviously you could tell their origins are from somewhere else. [...] I told my children at home – we are four different shades cause I am the white one, and my son is lighter than my daughter and my husband’s the darkest. We joke that we come

⁵⁹ Ibid., 494.

in all the shades and sizes – [...] they don't see it as unusual.” (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

The parents sounded confident that a Maltese and particularly middle class upbringing will result in full integration for their children. Their hope is validated by the experience of the adult adoptee who participated in this study. However, hearing their children expecting to become garbage collectors because of perceptions of race caused concern, not because of a classist outlook on society but rather because of both the intrinsic racial undertones of such a statement as well as their wish for their children to be able to aspire beyond current and immediate racial stereotypes. Overall, parents were uncomfortable with the level of attention and colourism experienced by their children, but they were mostly positive that people are not ill-intending. The fact that the living environment in Malta is less impersonal than in large cities allows less frequent exposure to everyday racism.

2.3 Suddenly minoritised: women's experiences

Bicultural relationships are experienced through the prism of gender. Where the foreign partners were subject to gendered, but mostly racial, stereotypes, the Maltese women who participated in this study found themselves struggling with gender-based stereotypes:

People ask if we got married because of citizenship. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

People ask if we got married because of citizenship. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Sometimes you get stupid questions like “Why did you marry a black guy, why not a Maltese? What's the difference?” there are nasty comments but I haven't received any of those recently. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Research shows how closely national and religious identity are intertwined in Malta – religious conversion is often equated with abandoning one's Maltese identity.⁶⁰ The women who converted to Islam realised that their environment reacted sensitively whenever the relationship followed a stereotype, such as wearing a headscarf or limiting social interactions outside the family:

Sometimes [friends] don't understand and make a big deal of things there are not a big deal for me at all. For example, my husband doesn't like it if I go out a lot with my friends and I don't anymore. But he doesn't too, it's an agreement between us and for me it's not a big deal, for my friends it is. (F, 1980, bicultural couple, partner of African/Ghanaian origin)

The women who participated in this study navigate a web of expectations and work on crafting a positive identity for themselves. Many claimed that their partner's culture was something to enjoy and consume, an addition to their multicultural repertoire:

Sometimes I think I am more African than him. Because with African things happening or Eastern [...] or Arabic - I'm more into it than he is I think. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

⁶⁰ Cassar, “Maltese-Arab Marriages,” 82.

Since changing one's family name to the husband's is still common practice (only one in ten keep their maiden name⁶¹), having an 'exotic' name also minoritises these women by extension:

If they see my name, sometimes they think I am not Maltese. They come and speak in English. (F, 1988, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

I've learnt to live with that, [people's reactions] used to annoy me before but now I say, oh well. Or they would think I'm foreign and speak English and be shocked when I speak Maltese. I wouldn't want to change it. At the beginning I was thinking about it but now I don't. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

For one of the research participants, the difficult, 'exotic' spelling of the family name discouraged her from taking it.

Even the way his surname is written [...] on his ID papers - there is the whole alphabet in it and people give up [trying to write it]. I don't want this for me. (F, 1988, bicultural couple, partner of African/Eritrean origin)

Partners feel minoritized by extension not only when people treated them as minorities due to their name or religion, but also when their loved ones encountered racism.

As a wife, I am hurt by these things, even if my husband doesn't notice them. (F, 1980, bicultural couple, partner of African/Ghanaian origin)

At the same time, they come to an awareness that due to their ethnic majority position some prevailing racist attitudes may be invisible to them:

I think it has changed but when I ask him he says "It hasn't really changed, I just learned to ignore it". [...] I don't really know if it's these things or his attitude or his, whatever, reaction that has changed. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

In addition to having their motherhood questioned when they are seen with their racially different children, women (as partners or wives of men from other ethnic groups) experience additional gender-specific expectations in society. This has to do with changing their name upon marriage and, if they choose to, changing their religion. Wearing religious clothing, if this is the case, having a 'foreign' name and 'foreign'-looking children leads to their environment continuously questioning their own belonging and Maltese identity.

"It hasn't really changed, I just learned to ignore it". [...] I don't really know if it's these things or his attitude or his, whatever, reaction that has changed. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

2.4 National identity, cosmopolitanism and sense of belonging

Friedman claimed that cosmopolitan identity is a privilege of the higher classes.⁶² Yet individuals from various walks of life can turn to cosmopolitanism both as a source of pride and as refuge. This identity is validated by political discourses of European integration (in fact, several participants identified as European rather than Maltese) and globalization.

The experience of being different can encourage one to cling to national identity and emphasise belonging in Malta. Belonging is linked to cultural competence and familiarity with the locals, enabled by the small size of Malta's population. The grown-up adoptee in this research voices this trend:

⁶¹ Kristina Chetcuti, "One in 10 Brides Opts to Keep Maiden Surname," *Times of Malta*, July 21, 2013, [//www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20130721/local/One-in-10-brides-opt-to-keep-maiden-surname.478807](http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20130721/local/One-in-10-brides-opt-to-keep-maiden-surname.478807).

⁶² Jonathan Friedman, ed., *Globalization, the State, and Violence* (Walnut Creek: Altamira Press, 2003).

I consider myself Maltese. I was born here. I don't have connections to other entities. Many say that I am more Maltese than they are. [...] People told me, I forget you're black. [...] I love the familiarity of the island, I love feeling safe, hearing my name being called as soon as I go out. (M, 1985)

His experience is very different from those who are first-generation migrants. For a research participant who has formed a mixed couple at a time when Malta was even more homogeneous than it is today, national identity is something to stick to when religious identity changes:

I don't belong to any race. (F, 1990, minority background and bicultural couple)

I am Maltese and proud to be one. I was a Christian but changed [to become Muslim], I wasn't forced. (F, 1961, bicultural couple, partner of Arab/Egyptian origin)

For some, it is important to make a point that having a strong rooted identity does not conflict with openness to diversity:

I consider myself a pure Maltese, I am a practicing Catholic. I've always had an interest for different cultures, for example, I had coloured dolls. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

For another group of research participants, living with diversity does not lead to such positive identification with their country. They have developed an uprooted identity – feeling disconnected from Maltese society but not having any other place to call home:

I don't think I have an identity, I'm mixed, I don't fit in one specific group, I don't fit anywhere. I am not Muslim 'cause I got married to a Christian. People say I'm not Maltese, I feel different from them and from anybody else. (F, 1986, minority background and bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

I don't belong to any race. (F, 1990, minority background and bicultural couple)

One research participant who has lived in several countries found it difficult to feel rooted in Malta:

I am [a double citizen]. I professed many religions, now I believe in all of them, but I prefer not to attach to anything. [...] I've never felt Malta is my home. I have lived [abroad] and they are so much more open there. We will probably move to Ghana, we are building a house there. I'd say I have no home. (F, 1980, bicultural couple)

Several interviewees pointed out their not being typical Maltese, and one challenged conflation of identity and tradition further:

I am Maltese, but then obviously in certain things I wouldn't say I'm the traditional Maltese person. I don't know what the Maltese traditional woman is like, does she work, does she not work, does she raise her own children all by herself and does not expect any help from the husband...if that's part of the Maltese identity then I'm not like that. [...] I can't really answer what's my identity other than demographic, you know, female, certain age, Maltese... but it's more the values that I carry rather than that. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Not having a strong national identity contributed to emphasising universal values as a building block to build an identity and connect with others.

Contrary to those research participants who feel they do not belong anywhere, others feel they can belong in multiple places. They craft their identity as a sum of several components, each of them enriching them:

Just say I am a modern European man. That's all I think of myself (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African/Cameroonian origin)

No, I don't feel Maltese, maybe European – [...] the Maltese tend to move as far as possible from the Arab world – I mean, we have a lot of influences but most people are very racist towards Arabs – more than towards Africans. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

I think I've always been open to diversity. I was already one of the minorities. (F, 1986, mixed background and bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

I like to describe that I am multicultural. Myself [...] being Maltese, automatically, I am not 100% pure Maltese because the history of Malta being an Island. I was always conquered. My surname for example is not Maltese, it is English because my grandfather came to Malta as a soldier between the two World Wars. So I have been brought up with this. On my husband's part, he says that his grand-grandfather actually came from Sicily. [...] You cannot say 'Oh, I am 100% Maltese [...]. I would like to keep this in the family'. I mean, we are not that type of people. (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

We are a multicultural family and we tried to do that in the house, even in the food that we eat, we [like] the food from Ethiopia (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

Earlier intercultural competences make it feel natural for them to be with a partner from a different region:

Probably because I am half English and not viewed as being 100% Maltese myself, that probably made things – up to a point – a little bit easier for her. (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African/Cameroonian origin)

All adoptive families professed interest in their children's heritage, which, they felt, enriched their families' lifestyle:

We are a multicultural family and we tried to do that in the house, even in the food that we eat, we [like] the food from Ethiopia (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

Several research participants, especially those who have lived in other countries, considered the option of moving to other European countries or North America, where the level of acceptance would be higher. For example, this was in the plans of a family where the partner is from Eritrea, despite them having established themselves professionally in Malta. Yet having extended family and a home in Malta have so far convinced them to stay.

2.5 Social life

Inevitably, relationships with the immediate environment are embedded within a broader framework of interactions at work, school, and society at large. It was evident that although extended family was often not an entirely safe space for diverse groupings, other, less closely knit communities risk being even less so. It can be tempting for diverse families to seek refuge in their own home, minimising contacts with insensitive neighbours or the wider society, as it is in the case with one Maltese-Ghanaian family:

We were used to be told to go back to our country. I try not to pay attention to people. I try not to let people in. I know a lot of people who had racist attacks. If I was wearing a

hijab people would not accept me, otherwise I would wear it. (F, 1990, mixed background and bicultural couple, partner of African/Ghanaian origin)

Yet in most cases partners and parents tried to anticipate and mitigate challenges, ranging from microaggressions to violent behaviour, determined to educate those who perpetrate these acts. Parents recounted having conversations with their children about being different. They tried to instil pride in their uniqueness, and encourage them to accept the uniqueness of others:

It's healthy for a child to have two different backgrounds, they grow up with an open mind. (F, 1980, bicultural couple, partner of African/Ghanaian origin)

One adoptive parent remembered how her son was the first to embrace a boy with a visible disability – this, she believes, was a sign that he is open to various kinds of difference.

What we did ... was instil in them this pride that they are different, you know, that's what we taught them: 'You are different, we are all different, and you should be proud that you are different.' (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

At the same time, parents worry about the acceptance of their children at school and took the possibility of bullying for granted. One adoptive parent was certain that children must be taught individual resilience to deal with these cases by themselves. Others were more protective and changed schools or spoke to teachers/coaches when issues arose. A sense of humour and pride in one's origins were often mentioned as skills essential for coping.

What we did, my husband and I, was instil in them this pride that they are different, you know, that's what we taught them: 'You are different, we are all different, and you should be proud that you are different.' Obviously, what we did was, we tried to instil in them the pride of their own country. They cannot say 'OK, I have a Maltese nationality. I am Maltese.' No, they are not Maltese only, they are Ethiopian as well. (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

For example, yesterday night there was a TV show filmed in Ethiopia and one of the people on the screen said that Ethiopians were dirty, poor and thieves. The children were very upset, so I visited the Facebook page of the show and found the profile of the woman who said that. I contacted her and asked her if she still thought the same about Ethiopia, and she apologized. (F, 1979, adoptive parent)

Some Maltese counterparts within mixed couples felt less protective about the issues being raised through social perception, although they did worry about them when they faced racist behaviour. Still, they often felt that their co-nationals were not malicious and hence were to be educated rather than reprimanded:

Once we were on a plane and he sat with a Maltese man and he started talking [...] – and then he asked "What do you do? Do you work in construction?" The man automatically assumed, you know "You must be illiterate. You must be uneducated. You must be desperate. You must be on the verge of starvation." [...] They don't know any better, so I don't take it bad but my husband does. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

I had warned him before he came that it was bad – I exaggerated slightly. My family thought we would have problems, it would take long - my family wasn't a problem but society in general –, [...] people are so scared that you're just different. (F, 1977, bicultural couple)

At the beginning it was horrible, everyone was looking, always looking. They are curious, they didn't understand. We were the talk of the town, we live in Valletta and we used to say that we have the secret services. They know when your husband is travelling, they know everything. It's like in a village, but of course you feel it more because he's black. They got used to it slowly. They saw that he's not a criminal. (F, 1976, bicultural couple, partner of Caribbean/British origin)

A participant whose partner is Middle Eastern noticed that most of the negative attitudes towards her children had to do with religion. She said her partner was able to handle this well and teach his daughters how to cope.

Many of the reactions had to do with what research participants themselves identified as pigeonholing, when Maltese residents judged any racially different person as an undocumented migrant:

He is a traveller and speaks very good English but he was treated like a man who came on a boat. We were stopped many times in Valletta by people asking in which boat he came. [...] People make quick decisions without thinking and judge a book by its cover. It is the way we were brought up, in a white catholic society, and now because of the immigrants Maltese people [think] that they are taking their jobs, government service and see a black guy and think he's an immigrant. My husband answers that he's from London. But it was not difficult, it was more a joke, because if you make it a difficult situation then it becomes hard and it's not pleasant to live. (F, 1976, bicultural couple, partner of Caribbean/British origin)

A research participant who grew up in a white adoptive family points out that this was not always the case, and the treatment experienced by black people has more to do with discourses surrounding the current trends of migration than with Malta not being very multicultural historically:

When I was young, they were fascinated by US marines, football players from different countries. They make a distinction between Africans vs Western people of colour. [...] They treat me as one of them if I speak Maltese. Nowadays they guess I am an illegal immigrant, when I was young they considered me Western, Brazilian. (M, 1985, mixed background)

Maybe it's worse because of the migration crisis. They feel invaded. (F, 1986, mixed background and partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Several research participants mentioned cases that went far beyond microaggression. One research participant remembered her husband being called out on a street and dragged into a fight. Others could remember instances of discriminatory behaviour at work or leisure venues:

He worked as a bus driver and sometimes he was blamed for things he didn't do. People make comments on the streets. (F, 1980, bicultural couple, partner of African/Ghanaian origin)

There was a case in which my husband was employed in a restaurant and the manager threatened him with a knife to quit the job. Discrimination was, I would say, when we were trying to get a home loan from different banks. Before we were married they would not give us a home loan. We only got it after we got married. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

One time we were trying to get into a club and they asked him for a passport and obviously you don't carry your passport in a club. You don't. And he had his ID and was told that's not enough to come in. And he told them "My girlfriend's there" and they just

punched him. We had to report to the police but nothing ever happened. I had written a [...] letter to the editor at the time, I had a bit of feedback, was contacted by the local television station [...] – they wanted an interview. [...] (F, 1988, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

Despite this, the partners and parents of were positive that it was important to build up individual resilience and continue changing the attitudes by example:

“I think whenever a migrant or refugee works, he is already educating, informing, creating awareness of his own. So the employees and the employer, by interacting with him, realize that he might be Muslim, he might be illiterate but he has the same fears, the same hopes. He is a human, he has the same rights. And they learn a lot from it and I think that alone, through employment, I think a lot changes. (F, 1977, bicultural couple, partner of African/Kenyan origin)

I am a chef by trade, I am a butcher by choice at the moment. I had a customer, very racist, terribly so. We got talking and eventually it got pretty tense. When I got married,[...] she sees us outside - and what to expect? I said what I am doing and why I am doing it – and she still comes and buys meat from me, we still have our conversations, you know? I lost a few customers as well but they have come back [...]. A couple of them [stayed away] but most of them have come back. [...] You meet them outside and then you see them again and [...] I think it's breaking the ice. (M, 1971, bicultural couple, partner of African/Cameroonian origin)

Maltese partners and parents of persons with a minority background mobilised their social capital, cultural competences and individual resilience to challenge any racist patterns they encountered:

I've reached a point where I've learned...before I used to get very upset about this because people must look at me or think of me in a particular way because my husband is a foreigner and he's black. But nowadays I can't be bothered, I've learnt to ignore it and to stand up. That's the change from when we were still dating to now that we're married and having a stable relationship. You know what your priorities are and you just safeguard them and protect them. (F, 1979, bicultural couple, partner of African/Nigerian origin)

It is important to note that nearly all research participants individualised the struggle against unfavourable or even openly racist behaviour. Most of them said they stayed away from politics – only one participant was previously a party member. Three more defined themselves as activists and found it important to voice their opinions on social media and networks. Another research participant spoke of her job as a means of actively engaging in society.

I hate politics, sorry. No, what I do is just on a social level, I mean, just to help [others]. (F, 1970, adoptive parent)

The political path to change societal attitudes can be counter-intuitive. In the case of Maltese citizens who are minoritised by proximity, their full citizen rights, cultural competences and social capital represents untapped political potential. Nonetheless, most of the research participants appeared to be alienated from mainstream politics and did not see it as a pathway for creating lasting needed change. Instead, the locus of struggles against inequality was an individual, showing a positive example to his/ her environment.

Conclusion

In this study we set out to identify common experiences amongst groups living with diversity on a day to day basis. Most participants had developed cosmopolitan identities and felt that they and their lifestyles were enriched from the close proximity to another culture. Even when foreign spouses were met with excessive attention, Maltese research participants were likely to maintain a positive outlook – to explain comments away as either curiosity or ignorance and a lack of exposure to diversity. Most believed that individuals who exhibited ignorant and insensitive behaviour meant no harm and could hence be re-educated.

Their own identity strategies took several forms. Some chose to identify as European or citizens of the world. Of the three adults who have grown up as different from the majority, one felt deeply rooted in Malta, and the other two doubted whether they could really belong anywhere. Several interviewees remembered violent racist incidents happening to their partners, and yet more could identify cases of ‘playground racism’ – bullying, or tiring and consistent microaggression.

A number of research participants are raising non-white children with partners from different ethnic groups and nationalities, so that they experience diversity both within the relationship as well as in the next generation’s encounter with this complex identity. They also share many experiences with adoptive parents – personal attitudes towards normalising diversity in their family and in Malta, emphasis on individual resilience (becoming thick skinned and developing a sense of humour) and, in most cases, dismissal of political action to change the situation.

The findings show that individual experiences, connections and other factors of identity are treated as resources to craft belonging. For example, due to Malta’s colonial history, British and continental cultural repertoires are typically respected. Thus, while dismayed at the realisation that some Maltese people treated every dark skinned person as an immigrant, some used accents and European connections to negotiate a better perception of themselves among strangers.

Class was another resource to negotiate acceptance in the Maltese society. Parents appeared confident that their children, growing up as Maltese and within well-educated and middle class surroundings, can enjoy the benefits of belonging and at the same time feel enriched by their mixed heritage.

Although this qualitative study can by no means represent the range of experiences of biracial families, it sheds light on the patterns in which these families negotiate the society’s attitudes. The small size of Malta’s population emerges as both a blessing (close social ties foster acceptance) and a curse (due to its homogeneity and prevalence of gossip). The experience of those living in racially and ethnically diverse societies can teach us much about the social constructs around identity in Malta; yet perhaps most importantly it can hold the key to the development of a more inclusive society.

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