

Couples' choice of Cana Counselling Service (Malta)



Moviment ta' Kana

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Presentation

- Introduction to the study
- Background
- An overview of the Maltese context
- The Cana Movement
- Methodology
- Findings
- Discussion

Which factors influence choice?

- Clients do not immediately seek the help of counsellors but first resort to family, friends and even the clergy in an attempt to resolve problems.
- Many clients seek an agency that has been recommended by significant others or other professionals.
- The fact that an agency had a good reputation and that it had a Christian/religious affiliation may influence.
- Financial considerations as well as practical ones such as location impact choice.

Manthei (2006)

Which factors influence choice?

People who rate themselves high in religiosity were more likely to choose psychologists who described themselves as having a religious background and as being affiliated to a major religion.

Gregory et al. (2008)

Which factors influence choice?

Research findings on client choice of counsellor have remained inconclusive however some characteristics are identified as influencing this choice:

- Personality traits specifically agreeableness & conscientiousness.
- Perceived overall psychological wellbeing of the counsellor.
- Qualifications

These qualities were found to have a positive effect on the quality of the therapeutic relationship

(Vera et al., 1999).

The Maltese Context

Geographical:

Malta is the largest island and barely covers 320 square kilometres while Gozo is half this size.



The Maltese Context



Historical:

Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Arabs, Normans and others ruled the Islands. Christianity was introduced under Roman rule and in time the Islands passed into the hands of a Roman Catholic religious order, the Order of the Knights of St. John of Jerusalem.

The Maltese Context

Socio-cultural:

- **Lilliputian:** “*L-ajru ghandu ghajnu u l-hajt ghandu widintu!*”
- **Mediterranean:** an unwritten code of honour governs social behaviour and dictates social standing (Schneider, 1971).



The Maltese Context

- **Roman Catholicism:** Christianity traces its origins to the year AD 60 and remains to this day an immensely powerful social agent.

“it is thanks to the Christian faith that the Maltese family is so strong”

(Archbishop of Malta, Jan 2010)



The Maltese Context

- **Legacy of Colonialisation:** Role-modelling, particularly for the young and affluent, was provided by the metropolitan British society but has become increasingly Italianised.
- **Secularisation:** Maltese society is losing its traditional religiously based, enchanted world. Perhaps the most actively resisted aspect of this process is the secularisation of marriage.

(Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994).

The Cana Movement

- Established in 1950's
- It is a Roman Catholic organization offering:
 - Marriage preparation courses
 - Support groups (10 groups)
 - Natural family planning seminars
 - Counselling services
 - Publication of 'Familjakana'

The Cana Movement

The Organisational Mission statement reads:

‘Our mission is to present marriage as a relationship which is lifelong, faithful and open to life. ...it is also our mission to help persons prepare for marriage; to work with couples and families so that they grow in love, joy and stability; to stand by couples and individuals’

The Cana Counselling Services

- There are currently 18 counsellors providing counseling on a voluntary basis. Qualifications are varied with counsellors and practicing psychologists offering consultation along side a number of trainees.
- Each counsellor offers up to a maximum of 3 hours of counselling per week.
- The theoretical orientation is humanistic although more than half have completed up to a diploma level in Systemic Practice.
- The service follows BACP ethical guidelines.

The Research

Methodology:

A qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews was chosen so as to:

- capture an insiders' perspective of a social phenomena and
 - learn about the real life experiences of the participants
- (Creswell et al., 2007)

The Research

- Interview guide consisted of two sections:
 - a. Section 1 collected demographic data
 - b. Section 2 explored the participants' decision to attend counselling services at Cana
- The sample was selected from current service users.
- 30 interviews were conducted at the offices of the Cana counselling service.
- Thematic analysis of the audio-recorded interviews was undertaken by the two researchers who compared findings allowing for increased validity.

Demographics

- Age:

Between 20 and 56 years with more than 50% of sample in the 30-45 age group.

- Sex:

75% of interviewees were female which reflects the trends within the client population.

- Status:

65% married, 15% separated, 20% single.

- Prior experience of counselling:

60% never, 10% Cana, 30% other.

- Number of sessions:

50% up to 5, 5% over 20 sessions.

What is the users' perspective?

Main Themes:

Theme 1: Affiliation with Catholic Church.

Theme 2: Respected voluntary service.

Theme 3: Counselling at Cana fulfils external expectations.

Theme 4: Counselling as a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement .

Theme 5: Counselling at Cana leads to valued change.

Theme 6: Influence of an effective media presence.

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 1: Affiliation with Catholic Church

'I believe that the Church is a place where I can find help and support, and that I can find a sense of community and belonging. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of purpose and meaning, and that I can find a sense of hope and faith. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of love and compassion, and that I can find a sense of peace and tranquility. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of joy and happiness, and that I can find a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of belonging and acceptance, and that I can find a sense of love and care. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of hope and faith, and that I can find a sense of peace and tranquility. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of love and compassion, and that I can find a sense of peace and tranquility. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of joy and happiness, and that I can find a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction. I believe that the Church is a place where I can find a sense of belonging and acceptance, and that I can find a sense of love and care.'

Sub-themes:

- i. A natural part of call for practicing Catholics.
- ii. Identification of service with Church instils hope of recovery.
- iii. Focus on contractual obligation and the responsibility towards children.

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 1: Affiliation with Catholic Church

Sub-themes:

- iv. Affiliation offers guarantee of confidentiality.
- v. Affiliation justifies anger.
- vi. Affiliation offers surety of counsellors' personal integrity and willingness to help.
- vii. Services perceived as endorsing Catholic pro-marriage values by practicing, non-practicing Catholics as well as non-Catholics.

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What is the users' perspective?

Theme 2: Respected voluntary service

'Counsellors are emotionally invested in offering help and are not after financial gain. Counsellors are experts having both appropriate training and experience. Counsellors are likable and upright.'

Sub-themes:

- i. Counsellors are emotionally invested in offering help and are not after financial gain.
- ii. Counsellors are experts having both appropriate training and experience.
- iii. Counsellors are likable and upright.

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 3: Counselling at Cana fulfils external expectations

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Sub-themes:

- i. Prescribed by family members.
- ii. Recommended by significant others (family /friends).
- iii. Need to be seen as having done one's best.
- iv. Need for direction.
- v. Minimal exploration of options.

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What is the users' perspective?

Theme 4: Counselling as a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement

'I believe that the Cana Movement is a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement... I believe that the Cana Movement is a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement, and that the Cana Movement is a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement. I believe that the Cana Movement is a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement, and that the Cana Movement is a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement.'

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 4: Counselling as a continuation of the relationship with the Cana Movement

Sub-themes:

- i. Cana premarital course as a first encounter .
- ii. Previous 1-to-1 counselling positive experience.
- iii. Pre-marital course resented but facilitated seeking of counselling with Cana.
- iv. Relationship allows for possibility of reciprocating help received through voluntary service.

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 5: Counselling at Cana leads to valued change

'The most valuable change I experienced was the improvement in my relationships with my family members. Through counselling, I learned to communicate more effectively and resolve conflicts peacefully. This has led to a more harmonious and supportive family environment, which is something I highly value.'

Sub-themes:

- i. Counselling as supportive of family unity.
- ii. Counselling as helpful to the individual/couple.
- iii. Counselling as an empowering experience.

What is the users' perspective?

Theme 6: Influence of an effective Media Presence

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Sub-theme:

- i. Corporate image as family support specialist.
- ii. No other service known about.
- iii. Internet, leaflets, radio.
- iv. Talks.
- v. Magazine (periodical).
- vi. Word of mouth.

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Systemic Considerations

- The high visibility of the Cana Movement within Maltese society seems to be facilitative of a natural transition from seeking help within the family system to the family itself referring/delegating the couple to 'Familja Kana'.
- Clients' choice was mediated via a perceived similarity in values.
- Counsellors take on the attributes of the Church particularly in being seen as allies to the marriage.

Systemic Considerations

- Counsellors are imbued with the qualities associated with the Church particularly those associated with generosity, integrity and trustworthiness.
- The discourse (and underlying beliefs) about Catholicism, healing and miraculous recovery reside in close proximity to those around counselling.

Systemic Considerations

- The fact staff offer voluntary service and only a donation is asked for replicates the manner of other church-based charitable institutions. The discourse is impregnated with references to charity towards persons in need.
- The Cana counselling service is clearly located within the Catholic Church but, paradoxically perhaps, it is offering the least heavily connotated couple counselling service in Malta. Is there the need of a non-denominational couple counselling service?

Personal Considerations

- The perceived pro-marriage stance fortifies the position of the partner who wants to keep the relationship going. The corollary is that persons wanting to leave a relationship may feel that their position is less likely to be validated.
- Affiliation allows for a sense of personal atonement particularly in relation to guilt, shame and aggression.
- The exaltation of family values offers a defense from anxiety around loss of a life-long partner – loss of the partner's affection featured rarely in our interviews. Why?

Personal Considerations

- The normative Catholic position around marriage serves as an antidote to the feelings stirred up by relational crisis. This seems to help clients cope. What is the impact on the counselling process?
- The emphasis on keeping the family united and concern about children seems to relate to disavowal of personal needs.
- The prominence of social anxieties may inhibit real recovery of adult couple functioning and lead to “flight into health”. Zammit & Simmonds (2009) have documented the impact of “barriers” independently of attachment or satisfaction on Maltese marriage.

Limitations

- The use of opportunity sampling may have biased our findings.
- There is a disproportionate number of female participants in the study resulting in an under representation of men's experience of the service.
- The experience of clients who stopped using the service is not represented by this study.

Recommendations for Future Research

- It seems that the Cana Movement has found a place within the psyche and social system of clients approaching Cana counselling services. Research as to what extent this is true of the wider population would support the provision of services.
- The fact that Cana is seen as being pro-marriage and anti-separation suggest that persons wanting to leave a relationship may feel that their position is less likely to be validated by Cana counsellors.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Understanding the meaning of “the couple” within the Maltese psyche and within local social narratives.
- The study indicated a somewhat problematic relationship between the payment of fees and the counselling experience of service users. This impacts the therapeutic relations needs exploration.
- The fact that only one of the interviewees had been referred by a professional merits investigation of the service’s standing amongst mental health professionals.

Conclusion

- Clients seem to benefit from the fact the service is affiliated with the Catholic Church in managing social and internal conflict around marital breakdown - particularly shame and guilt. This may also present the risk that couples retreat from the thorough review of their relationship by subscribing to normative dictates.
- Counsellors run some risk of idealisation which may inhibit a more realistic engagement.

Conclusion

- Cana offers a counselling service that is clearly positioned within the Catholic Church. However its standing with the Maltese social landscape allows the service to have some appeal to people with varying levels of sympathy for Catholicism.
- Cana counsellors are in a unique position to address issues around shame and guilt which in Maltese culture remain imbued with religious meaning.

Thank You

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