**Study Report on the ICCFR Conference on The Couple Relationship in the 21st Century**

Mark McCormack

Professor of Sociology, University of Roehampton, London

It was a great pleasure to attend and participate in the ICCFR conference on The Couple Relationship in the 21st Century in Malta this year. The conference was a warm, collegial event, where academics from across the world were keen to share their own experiences and research and, importantly, listen to the diverse perspectives. I am particularly grateful to the ICCFR for providing a bursary to enable me to attend the event.

The conference was unique in my experience in its focus on sharing diverse practices of the couple relationship, notably on how to inform policy and practice within Malta. That the President of Malta attended the conference, and the substantial attention from the media, were testament to the seriousness with which social science research about the family was being treated. Professor Angela Abela was a welcoming and insightful host, and is doing wonderful research on the couple relationship and the family.

My panel discussion focussed on the romantic ideal and how norms and expectations around this were changing. I focussed on the role of the internet and smartphone dating apps, in terms of how couples first meet but then stay together. For couples in a long-term relationship, smartphones brought benefits but also added stressors into relationships: while they can bring couples together when apart, through texts, voice messages and phone calls, they also can push couples apart when together, through diverting focus from each other. Importantly, participants in my study mostly agreed that there were strategies that could reduce this stress – from banning smartphones at dinner to not checking emails after an agreed upon time. It was fascinating to hear other academics in this session from Africa and Asia speak about the markedly different issues that are prominent in contemporary romance in their cultures.

Something I value greatly is the opportunity to have learned about Malta and the fascinating social change regarding the couple relationship that has occurred in the past few decades. The length of time between the legal right to divorce and the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Malta is one of the shortest in the world, and Malta as a country is actively engaged with helping its citizens adapt to these changes. After the conference I read Professor Angela Abela’s work on attitudes towards remarriage, and used Malta as an example for additional reading in my new Sociology textbook, *Discovering Sociology*. The writing is freely available here: <https://www.macmillanihe.com/resources/CW%20resources%20(by%20Author)/M/McCormack-Discovering-Sociology/DSATG/DS%20Marriage%20and%20Radical%20Social%20Change%20in%20Malta.pdf>.

I believe a great deal was learned and thought-provoked across the two days. What still informs my thinking from the Malta conference is the need to approach the romantic relationship, as researchers, sympathetically and empathetically. Hearing from academics across the world, what shone through was how central the romantic relationship is in its diverse forms across these cultures. Even where there is conflict in overarching norms or the structures of different societies, in terms of laws, policies and social attitudes, there is a will to effect change that benefits people and enhances the experience of the coupled relationship. The ICCFR conference at Malta was a shining example of how academics can come together and work for this social good.