A phenomenological analysis of the factors influencing the motivational climate experienced by a group of female educational leaders

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Abstract

This study explored the experience of female educational leaders in their executive and personal life, identifying what motivates them and what influences their performance–related goals, well–being, work–life balance and workplace relationships. The motivational climate experienced by these leaders is discussed through the self–determination theory perspective. Six female educational leaders participated in one–to–one semi–structured interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was the research methodology adopted due to its idiographic nature. Findings revealed that social perceptions, personal traits, together with personal goals, contributed to their motivational drive. Coping strategies were adopted to safeguard their well–being and motivational drive in stress–related situations. Work–life balance and female multifaceted roles impact progression in leadership roles, while autonomously driven attitudes are interlinked with job engagement. This research proposes an insight into what nurtures and what hinders the motivational climate of female educational leaders, whereby policymakers can provide opportunities for those who aspire to pursue a career in leadership positions.

Keywords

Introduction

The scope of this paper is to empower women to overcome socially constructed gender roles and adopt motivational strategies which contribute to progression towards a leadership role. The rationale behind this study is to highlight the contributory value of female educational leaders in Malta, identify the

challenges which women encounter while pursuing a leadership role, and also identify those factors which determine the motivational climate surrounding such role. Gender–based stereotypes have preoccupied women globally and Malta is no exception (Vella, 2020), making it harder for women to strive towards attaining leadership positions without getting demotivated throughout their quest. For this reason, this study applied Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for an in–depth investigation into the most salient factors influencing the motivational climate in female educational leadership. The study sought to answer the following three research questions:

- Which are the factors that affect the motivation of female educational leaders?

- How can social and psychological dynamics influence their motivation?

- What helps and what hinders the motivational climate of female educational leaders?

In our society, expectations of women differ greatly from those of men (Vella, 2020). The caregiver role and the professional role of a woman as an educational leader quite often conflict with each other (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006). These roles strive for women's time and energy physically and mentally (Women Voices for Wellbeing, 2018). Working females have different necessities from working males, "and anyone who thinks that it is the same has never had a boob leak in the boardroom" (Storm, 2009, p. 4). It is fascinating to look at successful working females and how they manage to amalgamate work and family life. It is a journey of experiences which characterise the life path of working women. It is a review of their identity, their drive and motivation, their relationships and how they are able to adapt themselves to different situations that make them successful. The main objective of this study is to explore in depth the experiences of females who already occupy a leadership role and through the data acquired, provide recommendations to women who are exploring a career in educational leadership.

Theoretical framework

Quite often female leaders tend to struggle to prove themselves (Gersick et al., 2000). It is in such situations that female leaders need to refer to motivational strategies in order to cope positively with challenging situations while

maintaining an optimal performance. For a thorough understanding of the social and psychological influencing factors which determine the motivational climate of female educational leaders, reference is made to motivational theories. In this regard, where the relation between external forces and inner drives takes place, the Self–Determination Theory suggests that social contextual factors affect these female leaders' perceptions of autonomy, competence and understanding, hence playing an effective role in determining engagement level with their leadership performance (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 1991; Deci et al., 1991).

When applying the Self–Determination Theory within the context under investigation, the level of commitment depends on the way each individual perceives and interprets that experience (Ntoumanis, 2001). The Achievement Goal Theory recommends that by taking a task–oriented approach, where an educational leader is motivated to work on attainable goals and thus a higher insight of autonomy and capability is more likely, intrinsic motivation is strengthened (Nicholls, 1989). Psychological and social dynamics play a crucial role in all this. For an in–depth understanding, this study aims to investigate also the well–being of female educational leaders, and the importance of their work–related relationships, together with their work–life balance.

Female educational leaders

Personal standards are pivotal in our perception and approach towards reality. "Values and the corresponding personal traits are the core explanation as why some people ambitiously climb the career ladder and why others are happily content with what is" (Jenni, 2017, p. 76). Extensive research denotes that female leaders tend to manifest more transformational and democratic leadership styles than their male peers (Gibson et al., 2017). Furthermore, female leaders are defined as more social and inclusive than their male counterparts, personal traits which foster positive outcomes (Liou & Daly, 2019; Marrone et al., 2018). Unveiling these behaviours very often permits women to bridge the two roles of being a female and a leader (Stempel et al., 2015).

Female educational leaders in Malta, in contrast to other leadership positions, compare rather well with males, notwithstanding various barriers in their quest for this role due to a number of factors, mainly social stereotyping, internal barriers and culture (Bradbury & Gunter, 2006; Fuller, 2017; Guihen, 2019b). Child caring (Elton–Chalcraft et al., 2018), family concerns (McKillop &

Moorosi, 2017), and domestic responsibilities are common hurdles that very often hinder women from fulfilling their leadership positions (Lechner et al., 2018; Yeoward & Nauta, 2020). Generally, females are not acclaimed for being fit for the demands of a senior educational leader position (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Knipfer et al., 2017; Smothers et al., 2011; Van Den Brink & Benschop, 2012). Women are viewed as promising when they portray the image of highly competitive and independent (Deem, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2014). Consequently, the social standards imposed on women highly influence their motivational drive to pursue a leadership career and achieve high educational roles (Godfroy–Genin, 2009). Hence, women perceive themselves as constantly in competition with their male colleagues for advancement in career (Jones, 2017), and they feel that they are outsiders "who struggle to prove their fitness to play the game" (Gersick et al., 2000, p. 1040). In this context, further research on the subject would break down social and cultural barriers for young women who aspire to work towards achieving a leadership role in the education sector (Guihen, 2019b). Reference is made to motivational theories for a better understanding of the psychological and behavioural dynamics which determine the motivational climate surrounding the research subject matter.

Motivational theories

Motivation "is a critical element in cognitive, social, and physical development because it is through acting on one's inherent interests that one grows in knowledge and skills" (Ryan & Deci, 2000a, p. 56). Values are a motivational behaviour drive (Jenni, 2017) in striving to achieve a leadership role (Schuh et al., 2014). Successful leaders are those who strive ahead, and are committed to self–evolve together with those around them, by adopting innovative approaches, competences and understanding (Senge, 1996; Waldman et al., 2012). Motivation to lead is a crucial predictor of one's behaviour, motives and performance (Bergner et al., 2018). Personal interests and one's perception of success and experience are contributory constructs to an educational leader's motivation.

Two variants of motivation can be distinguished, with intrinsic motivation at one end of the continuum and extrinsic motivation at the other. Intrinsic motivation refers to personal satisfaction in pursuing a goal, an omnipresent human phenomenon (Deci et al., 2017), while extrinsic motivation refers to a drive towards achieving a goal, for its consequential value (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan &

Deci, 2000b). Early research suggests that intrinsic motivation is linked to 'free choice' (Deci, 1971), which eventually developed into Self–Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). Extrinsic motivation contrasts with intrinsic motivation, in that it values the outcome rather than the activity itself. Leaders are generally motivated through setting personal and organisational goals, whereby the more these are in congruence, the higher the satisfaction and reaping benefits for both the organisation and themselves (Fisher, 2009).

Achievement goal theory

An insight into career adaptability and motivation from a social cognitive perspective reveals that situational factors regulate the motivational climate of work. Consequently, individuals conceptualize a meaning of accomplishment in such situations and adjust their goals to fulfil their perception (Furness, 2018). Achievement Goal Theory helps us understand the direction of behaviour, the 'what' individuals want to achieve and the 'why' they want to achieve it (Sommet & Elliot, 2017). Whereas those implementing mastery goals are defined as seeking to acquire and master skills, those adopting performance goals focus on showing their ability and skills to others (Bardach et al., 2019; Furness, 2018). A mastery goal approach perceives challenges and obstacles as opportunities to learn and evolve. Such an approach inspires individuals to invest effort in tasks which are most likely to be challenging and stimulating, whereby their aim is to succeed in their goals rather than to outperform others (Dawe, 2019).

Achievement Goal Theory offers a credible explanation for a leader's motivation to gain knowledge and expertise which consequently influence performance levels and hence success. Achievement Goal Theory identifies mastery goal approach and performance goal approach as the motivational attitudes adopted towards learning, whereby the first refers to acquisition of skills for their own value and the latter refers to comparing one's performance to that of other leaders (Dawe, 2019). Achievement Goal Theory merges both personal and circumstantial motivational facets (Bardach et al., 2019). It also suggests that environmental factors affect the achievement goals that leaders advocate. Within the context of this study, goals are defined by the Maltese Education Division policies and practice, making attainment of such goals significantly rigid and salient. Furthermore, goal–related messages from policymakers are communicated to educational leaders, making the education environment infused towards the attainment of such goals. Given that the

Maltese educational system has seen the introduction of assessment–based accountability policies and hence an increase in school leaders' accountability, Achievement Goal Theory can capture important aspects of educational leadership.

Self–determination theory

Self–Determination Theory addresses personal goals and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017), and its philosophy can provide an explanation for behaviour and attitudes at the place of work (Gagné & Deci, 2005). According to Rigby and Ryan (2018), motivation should be boosted through the individual's interests, needs and values. Within the context of this research, Self–Determination Theory provides a structure which assists employers to provide the ideal work setting which fosters individual perceptions of autonomy and competence, hence ensuring a more effective workforce (Deci et al., 2017).

Self–Determination Theory postulates that people have three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence and relatedness (Rigby & Ryan, 2018). Self–Determination Theory posits that when individuals are autonomously driven and feel confident, they are more likely to experience positive social and psychological outcomes (Trepanier et al., 2012). Autonomous motivation at work has been related to performance of employees (Kuvaas, 2009). In fact, Self–Determination Theory suggests that interpersonal relationships are essential for optimal functioning (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Self–Determination Theory goes far beyond carrot–and–stick theories to stipulate not only appropriate incentive methods, but also the psychological gratifications required to enhance the best motivation. Particularly, in situations of employee retention, it is common knowledge that people don't quit their jobs, but they quit their superiors. Self–Determination Theory research emphasizes the role of leadership styles not only in envisaging employees' income targets, but also as indicators for their work quality such as commitment, efficiency, job satisfaction and absenteeism (Slemp et al., 2018).

Psychological and social dynamics

The following sub–themes will unfold by looking briefly at these factors: well–being, relationship–building, relationships with superiors, and work–life balance, which are dynamics that affect the prevailing motivational climate, in order

to place the reader in the framework of the phenomenon which is being investigated.

Well–being

Nowadays, women's lives are more multifaceted and hence their well–being is dependent on the fulfilment or otherwise of various phases in their life than ever before (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2009). Research on the subject matter defines psychological well–being as "a multifaceted domain encompassing positive self–regard, mastery of the surrounding environment, quality relations with others, continued growth and development, purposeful living, and the capacity for self–determination" (Ryff & Keyes, 1995, p. 724). Social well–being also highlights the importance of an individual's social functioning (Sandardos & Chambers, 2019). Well–being goes hand in hand with emotions, hence an understanding of emotional phenomena is rudimentary in comprehending educational leaders' attitudes, behaviours, and outcomes. Vella (2020) suggests that there are various solutions to enhance a positive well–being among female educational leaders such as work–life balance and responsibilities, partners' support, equal access in maternity matters, mentoring and support. Furthermore, a professional learning community work environment helps school leaders to cope successfully with everyday tasks and challenges, hence creating a positive motivational climate while safeguarding their well–being (Van Veelen et al., 2017). Self–Determination Theory claims that ambitions sought in terms of personal development, physical well–being, association and community foster psychological well–being, while expectations of income, identity image and recognition hinder well–being (Roche & Haar, 2013).

There are various factors that might influence a leader's well–being such as burnout, exhaustion and cynicism (Ryce, 2018). "Successful leadership often surfaces when people become aware of critical personal experiences in their life, understand the driving forces, respond by rethinking about self, redirect their moves and reshape their actions" (Manasa & Showry, 2014, p. 15). The education sector is evolving rapidly and this implies that educational leaders have to find the right strategies to adapt to this constant change (Smith, 2015).

Relationship–building

In today's globalisation, education is constantly changing due to political

leaders' new educational visions, hence educational leaders have to be particularly influential and energizing with their personnel (Liou & Daly, 2019). When educational leaders are able to work in a collaborative manner with their staff who possess different skills, a positive motivational climate is prevalent, making those around them feel confident to propose and share new ideas for the benefit of all. A successful strategy to enhance relationship–building is by increasing personal interaction. By maintaining an open channel with their staff, educational leaders are investing in ensuring job satisfaction (An et al., 2020).

Relationship with superiors

The relationship between 'high above' superiors and educational leaders is a significant social factor in influencing the educational leader's motivational behaviour and performance (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Relationships with superiors contribute to educational leaders' intrinsic and self–determined extrinsic motivation completed through autonomy–supportive actions, educational settings and participation (Hollembeak & Amorose, 2005; Mageau & Vallerand, 2003). Autonomy–supportive behaviour occurs when a supervisor considers his subordinate's "perspective, acknowledges the other's feelings, and provides the other with pertinent information and opportunities for choice, while minimizing the use of pressures and demands" (Black & Deci, 2000, p. 742). As suggested by Deci and Ryan (2002), autonomy–supportive behaviour enhances intrinsic motivation and self–determined extrinsic motivation, since it entails believing in the leaders' skills and abilities. The motivational climate created by superiors is determinant in the development or otherwise of the educational leader's performance potential. Educational leaders have different needs, characters, attitudes and behaviours, and generally superiors from 'high above' behave in accordance with what they expect from their educational leaders, and such expectations are based on their perceptions about that particular leader's performance.

Work–life balance

"Although the flexibility work–life balance discourse is positioned as gender neutral, and inclusive, in practice it still tends to be interpreted as largely for women" (Lewis et al., 2007, p. 364). Work–life balance issues are evident in traditional societies, where family responsibility and housework spill–over shows an imbalance against women (Chandra, 2012; Rehman & Roomi, 2012).

Local government is committed to increasing work–life balance–friendly measures, such as flexible work arrangements, providing free childcare, telework and parental leave, to encourage workers to be autonomous. Such flexibility contributes in maintaining a healthy work–life balance. Through these measures, governments seek to enhance work performance (Beham et al., 2012; Fiksenbaum, 2014), while at the same time retain valuable human capital (Butts et al., 2013). Senior leaders are particularly affected by work–life balance challenges, since their role places "profession and family into competition for a limited amount of time and emotional commitment" (Kasper et al., 2005, p. 441). In her qualitative research, Heath (2012), explored the life of women in leadership roles for a better understanding of the work–life balance phenomena. In her findings she listed useful proactive strategies such as strong work ethics, professional development, having faith in managing different roles simultaneously, getting involved with other things such as hobbies, building a support system with partner or relatives, intentional parenting, finding a mentor for tips on how to juggle work–life balance issues, time management, and gaining confidence in technology since networking is crucial in today's world (Heath, 2012).

Methodology

In order to address the goals of the current study, the researcher adopted a methodological approach that would allow a detailed and in–depth analysis of the research participants' understanding and sense–making of their lived experience. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis being a qualitative approach which lends itself to a thorough exploration of the way people make sense of their experience, it was the ideal methodological approach to assist the researcher to explore the phenomena under investigation, as Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis "has the potential to generate rich and in–depth analysis of the career experience and trajectories of educational leaders" (Guihen, 2019a, p. 2).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was specifically developed by Jonathan Smith to allow arduous investigation of idiographic subjective experiences, and more precisely, social perceptions of individuals (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2009). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is all about discovering meanings (Smith, 2018), "the meaning of meaning–making … for both the participant and the researcher" (Smith & Eatough, 2018, p. 163). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis allowed the researcher to shed

light on the mechanisms employed by female educational leaders throughout their life experiences and social worlds (Guihen, 2019a; Love et al., 2020). A purposeful sample of six female educational leaders was selected to provide the required information to answer the research question in view of their experience within the context under investigation (Robinson & Smith, 2010). This is in line with the theoretical foundations of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, whereby random or representative sampling was unsuitable. The individuality and uniqueness of the research participants lies in their diversity, having different backgrounds, coming from various walks of life and leading different institutions at different levels of leadership. Furthermore, they differ in lifestyle, status and age.

The researcher was interested in understanding how each participant made sense of their experience as a female educational leader. Hence, the connotation was arbitrated "through the researcher as instrument, data analysis [was] inductive and the outcome [was] descriptive" (Merriam & Grenier, 2019, p. 8). This study is phenomenological since it focuses on the essence of experience and it is engaged to its core philosophical approach (Adams & Van Manen, 2017; Brown et al., 2018). Phenomenological interviews were adopted for their capacity to capture the participants' perspectives on their lived experiences for a deep understanding of the phenomenon (Biddix et al., 2018; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). As suggested by Seidman (2013), in–depth interviews have a process which involves three stages: the initial interview to determine the context of the participant's experience; a second encounter where the participant is allowed to reconstruct the experience in depth; and the final meeting where the participant is given the chance to reflect on the meaning of the lived experience. A semi–structured interview schedule was constructed to stimulate a discussion with the participants, as the researcher wanted to understand the experience of the female educational leaders. This data collection method allowed the researcher to interact at length with the participants, giving space to further probes and questioning in issues which were deemed to provide an insight on the subject matter.

Data analysis

The interviews were analysed through a systematic organisation of data, note taking, sorting, reviewing and reflection on the most relevant emergent themes. Data collection and interpretation were conducted simultaneously,

hence ensuring that no useful data was jeopardised in the process (Micallef, 2015). Upon the initial encounter with the transcripts' texts, relevant thoughts, concerns and observations were written down. Consequently, emergent themes which categorised the experiential significance of that described by each participant were identified. Themes from individual transcripts were examined with an interpretative engagement with the text, where emergent themes underwent abstraction and consequently, superordinate themes were developed (Smith, 1996). This process was applied to individual transcripts and further on across the whole. Recurrent themes were clustered to safeguard the participants' experience and to ensure that the interpretation given to those experiences were categorised. To ensure conformity, reference was made to the original script throughout the abstraction process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The progress of the interaction between the researcher, the data, and the production of knowledge added interpretative meaning to the interviewees' perceptions.

Ethical issues and considerations

"Ethics has to do with the application of moral principles to prevent harming or wronging others, to promote the good, to be respectful and to be fair" (Sieber, 1994, p. 14). There were several issues that the researcher took into consideration. While participants were invited to participate in this study, they were under no obligation to do so. The researcher guaranteed issues of confidentiality, anonymity and non–traceability (Cohen et al., 2007). Since the research subjects were specific in their experience interpretations, every precaution was taken so that they will not be distinguishable. In order to ensure this, a number code was used instead of participant names, and when specific people were mentioned by name or reference to such people would have revealed their identity, the researcher replaced that name or reference by using dots. The researcher did not ask any sensitive or threatening questions that made the participants feel unsafe or uneasy in any way. All six participants had the right to withdraw from the research at any time as stated in the consent form given before the start of this study. The researcher ensured fairness, reliability and validity through the avoidance of bias. Participants were ensured, both orally and in writing, that the conclusions would be professionally analysed and presented. The researcher provided them with the contact number of the counselling services of the Directorate just in case the need arose.

Member reflections were also conducted whereby participants were called

for a second encounter to reconstruct their experience, and for the third time to reflect on the meaning of their lived experience, as presented to them in an interpretation of results. As suggested by Elliot et al. (1999), results were explored in relation to the main themes and additional concerns were asked to ensure accuracy of such results, hence giving strength to the interpretation given, authenticity and validity of the acquired data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Tracy, 2010). In situations where interpretative misconceptions were identified, the participant's perception took precedence.

Findings and discussion

Table 1 presents a master table of the subordinate themes and superordinate themes through which the research questions were addressed. Through an analytic process using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, the themes that emerged were those related to the leaders' personal traits, their goals and how psychological and social factors influence their motivation. This study sought to discover and understand the dynamics between the emergent factors, particularly their influence on the existent motivational climate. An effort was made to investigate individual cases and move on to the whole, and from the descriptive to the interpretative to identify convergence and divergence between data (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, a level of empathy was employed in trying to get into the participants' shoes for a thorough understanding and sense–making of their experiences (Reid et al., 2005). The purpose of this study was twofold, whereby the gathered data was presented and made sense of, followed by an interpretation of such data based on the literature presented.

To explain the data collected, themes are addressed distinctly, keeping in mind their relatedness as well as their complementary features. The 'personal traits' superordinate theme takes the initial stage since it gives light to the participants' characters and the way they handle their lived experience. The second section presents the 'goals' due to its weight in explaining the participants' vision and potential in their leadership role, consequentially making it an influencing factor in their motivational climate. The subsequent sections identify the motivational, psychological and social factors, together with the working environment, which determine the motivational climate of educational leaders. The final section tackles the influential role of the relationship between educational leaders and their superiors.

Table 1: Master Table of Themes: A phenomenological analysis of the factors influencing the motivational climate experienced by a group of female educational leaders

Research questions	Superordinate themes	Themes	Sub-themes
What are the factors that affect the motivation of female educational leaders? How can social and psychological dynamics influence their motivation? What helps and what hinders the motivational climate of female educational leaders?	Personal traits	Strategic planner	
		Effective communicator	
		Perfectionism	
		Determination	
		Trust	
		Relationship-building	
	Goals	Personal goals	
		Ambition	
		Continuous professional development	
		Teamwork	
		Leadership skills	
	Motivational climate	Motivational factors	
		Psychological state	Well-being
			Attitude
		Social factors	Being a woman
			Private life
			Work-life balance
			Healthy lifestyle
		Working environment	
	Relationship with superiors	Superiors' support and appreciation	
		Superiors' lack of support and lack of appreciation	

Next to every quote there are two numbers in brackets. The first represents the quote number whilst the second represents the participant code, for example (44:2) represents the 44th quote of participant 2.

Personal traits

Findings clearly suggest that the majority of research participants are strategic planners. They set realistic goals and commit themselves to achieve them with clear purpose: "And I've learnt how to prioritise, what is urgent. My to–do list is divided into two categories: to do and urgent" (32:1). Such emergent trait is rudimentary in keeping them motivated and focused towards their objectives, whilst being able to communicate their vision in an inspiring way to get their followers on board and committed towards achieving such common goals. Strategic planning is also linked with leaders' autonomous actions (Andersen, 2000), which is in line with Self–Determination Theory since intrinsic motivation takes place (Ryan & Deci, 2000b). In accordance with what the majority of respondents said, an open communication channel is imperative if they value their relationships with their staff, thus ensuring job satisfaction (An et al., 2020): "Everyone is different and so that is why meeting and ongoing dialogue are vital" (14:6).

A sub–theme that emerged from the data was perfectionism. Although results suggest that these three educational leaders are highly oriented achievers and are very attentive to detail with high aspirations, at times they need to be in control, with high expectations from others: "Being a perfectionist, I don't see space for personal failure" (45:1). Findings from this research indicate that quite often this situation impacts their motivational climate negatively due to the fact that the majority of those around them are not on their same wavelength: "Since I am very work–oriented and I do tend to skip breaks, I felt that I was going to clash with my team" (44:5). Hence, perfectionism has two different faces since it can be a motivational key factor to strive in order to achieve the best performance, while it can also influence negatively the individual psychological aspect (Harari et al., 2018).

All six female participants showed a great sense of determination when recalling their lived experience: "The fact that I never give up and always look out for solutions when faced with difficulties makes me proud" (20:5). In line with Self–Determination Theory, this research reveals that participants'

autonomy awareness in achieving their goals increased their competence and accomplishment, thus increasing their intrinsic motivation. Findings also suggest that trust determines the motivational climate of educational leaders. Trust is a motivational factor which influences one's attitudes and behaviour, and leaders are more likely to succeed when they experience mutual trust with those around them due to the positive relationships they share (Trepanier et al., 2012): "Once you gain [the] trust of your stakeholders success is inevitable" (25:1). Findings propose that leaders are successful because they feel committed to develop their subordinates. Results are in line with literature regarding the importance of interpersonal skills (Callan, 2001; Day, 2001) to ensure healthy relationships with colleagues.

Goals

The majority of the participants showed that their motivation towards achieving their goals was a driving force in surpassing the hurdles encountered along the path of their career. As proposed by Achievement Goal Theory, the participants have mentally developed an ulterior meaning of success and modified their goals according to the situations in which they found themselves. Thus, their perception of success and failure was an influencing factor that affected the concept of their goal achievement (Nicholls, 1984): "In my life I always set goals. If I manage to achieve them, I am successful" (1:4). From the collected data, surprisingly, no participant referred to ambition as a means to pursue climbing the ladder in the educational leadership sector. This can be a contributory factor that holds female leaders back from seeking to advance towards achieving higher roles. On the other hand, almost all the participants desire to gain knowledge through professional development and active involvement in their job, and this empowers them with a sense of autonomy: "So as regarding my professional development I give it an utmost priority" (11:5). The motivational drive and urge to seek knowledge could be due to an increased need to prove themselves when compared to their male counterparts (Gersick et al., 2000). Results show that when teamwork is dominant, research participants are inclined to develop and flourish further, as teamwork with common and specific goals, rather than individual goals, increases productivity and motivation (Lunenburg, 2011): "Everyone will have his piece of the puzzle so when we gather together we are able to reach the final vision" (5:6). Results show that the leaders in question inspire their staff to succeed by promoting healthy working relationships which enhance their motivational climate. The fact that transformational leadership is

commonly used could be due to the fact that most transformational attitudes suit stereotypical female behaviours such as empathy and support (Stempel et al., 2015): "Transformational because I managed to bring a change amongst the staff" (59:1). Furthermore, it could be that this leadership style aids women to avoid incongruence between their position and their gender (Eagly et al., 2003).

Motivational climate

Participants were asked about the influencing factors that motivate them to go to work every day, and what hinders their motivation at work. Most of the answers were multi-factorial and the spectrum of the motivating factors reported is surprisingly wide and varied. Results of this research indicate that motivating factors often appear to differ based on personal traits, attitude and psychological state. These participants' feelings and cognitive components are related with emotions and the lived experience in various situations (Chawla & Sharma, 2019) having an impact on their motivational climate. Exhaustion and pessimism became evident when the participants experienced burnout, with a negative influence on their motivation. This suggests that the working environment, job procedures, and relationships all contribute to one's well-being: "I don't feel good. So my personal well-being is low" (69:1).

The attitude of the educational leaders in question goes beyond their call of duty since they go out of their way to make things right. Consequently, their actions give them a sense of peace and satisfaction: "I have self-confidence. I am very happy with what I have achieved" (50:1). Hence, the research findings show what Self-Determination Theory suggests, that when individuals are autonomously driven, they are more likely to experience a series of positive psychological outcomes (Trepanier et al., 2012). All participants mentioned the fact that at some point or another they felt disadvantaged just for being a woman: "I had to shout louder, repeat more … if a man shouts, you should shout louder, if a man is smart, you have to be smarter … A female has to prove herself more" (47:3). Autonomy was a key motivating factor (Deci & Flaste, 1995) which managed to control their behaviour against various challenges. As the data suggests, most of the research participants make an effort in order to be able to manage their different roles, preventing a two-side role negligence (Lantara, 2015). This goes in line with Achievement Goal Theory, whereby the participants feel competent to achieve their goals in every role they occupy, with a mindset

which determines the direction that they find most fit to achieve a sense of competence (Murayama et al., 2011).

The majority of these leaders said that family support is vital due to the fact that quite often they carry their work problems home. Findings from this research indicate that the majority of the participants managed to develop a routine which intertwined the demands of both their family role and that as a leader at the workplace. They succeeded in giving full justice to both their roles by delegating duties to family members and set daily targets. Unexpectedly, only two participants gave importance to following a healthy lifestyle. Although their schedule is quite tight, they still manage to find some time for their daily exercise routine and follow a healthy eating plan. Unfortunately, four participants recalled what it was like to experience a toxic environment with consequential influence on their behaviour and emotions: "Due to my situation at work I am very down. My mood is affected, I feel lonely" (65:2).

Relationship with superiors

Four of the participants experience a healthy and inspiring relationship with their superiors. They are allowed to take initiatives and they have full support to achieve the desired goals: "This backing motivates me to work more" (18:4). Findings from this research suggest that support and appreciation assist the participants' perceived goals, fulfilling their basic psychological needs and self-directed motivation. This plays a crucial role and is in line with Self-Determination Theory, directing educational leaders' performance through various initiatives (Hocine & Zhang, 2014). All participants, at a particular point in their leadership role, experienced negative encounters with one of their superiors: "My past superior … was a control freak" (54:1); "I believe that I can contribute more but I can't due to my superior" (42:2). This shows how controlling environments diminish the participants' experiences of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, whereby individuals do not try to internalise the value of doing activities that are not initially interesting. This is due to the fact that they are being worn out from being controlled. This is in contrast to what Self-Determination Theory posits with regard to autonomy-supportive environments (Hocine & Zhang, 2014).

Limitations

This study is limited to the data collected due to the purposeful sample. The study looked solely into the experience of female participants occupying different levels of leadership roles, and each participant was selected on purpose to provide an understanding of her lived experience. Data collection was limited to in–depth one–to–one semi–structured interviews, using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis as the sole research tool since triangulation was not suitable for the purpose of this study (Marshall, 1996). Other methods such as diaries (Smith et al., 2009) could have added richness to data collected, but they would not have been possible to accomplish within the timeframe of this study. Another limitation of this study is a degree of subjectivity, since the researcher might have had personal biases, which could have affected data collection, analysis and interpretation. In this case, the study was an insider research since the investigation was carried out by an individual who is already associated with the establishment (Humphrey, 2012).

Recommendations and conclusions

The study proposes that in order to make a meaningful progress and bring about a balanced gender–related development, policymakers and administrators should be aware of the factors that affect the motivation of female educational leaders, thus conflicting abilities and impartiality (Kellerman & Rhode, 2014). A way forward could be that Ministry for Education focus on women who are already in a leadership role, and ensure they receive the support, encouragement and motivation they need to accomplish their duties, move forward, and take opportunities offered by the state. This can inspire other women to advance their career in the educational sector.

It is thus suggested that Ministry for Education provide ongoing professional development opportunity specifically targeted to empower women with the necessary leadership skills to become proficient leaders. Opportunities should also be created to provide social interaction and collaboration, learning, peer reinforcement, coaching and mentoring, together with training specifically addressed towards enhancing healthy work relationships between leaders and their superiors. As suggested by the data, a major contributory factor that impeded motivational climate was lack of support and appreciation from superiors. Thus, it is rudimentary that due consideration is given to enhance relationships between leaders and superiors.

Mentoring programmes addressing work–life balance should be provided for female leaders, together with training in mastering effective psychological coping skills when dealing with multiple roles. Programmes promoting a healthy lifestyle at the workplace should also be given due consideration, since the feel–good factor generated could positively impact one's motivational drive. These services will also bring about reciprocal partnerships which are a gateway to shared learning and experiences. Provision of a leadership well–being course specifically addressing females, providing solutions to deal and overcome hurdles which undermine their motivational drive, is highly recommended. Nourishing and fostering one's psychological well–being through practical strategies is fundamental for an effective performance in a leadership role.

If Ministry for Education wants to maximize gender–based opportunities in top management roles, it needs to ensure that female educational leaders' performance is perceived in its true light and respected for its true value. Since factors that influence motivation tend to differ based on the person and the conditions, the educational sector needs to pay greater attention to the beneficiary's social and psychological states. As suggested by literature, being content reflects the individual's mindset, behaviour and contentment with the situation, whereby fulfilled individuals perform better (Cauchi Cuschieri, 2007).

Although the administrative policies are pushing women towards leadership positions, in Malta, like in other countries, the glass ceiling still exists across all sectors, with women facing various barriers to reaching senior leadership positions. Women still have to be exceptional and accomplish much more than their male counterparts to get to a senior leadership position. Thus, it is recommended that in order to close the gap, the local legislation needs to ask the question 'Why are women's power and potential stifled?' The administration should tackle the barriers that are hindering females from reaching their full potential by organising several conferences and seminars, giving voice to females to recall the impediments that they are facing while they are trying to get to senior leadership posts. Furthermore, women should be given opportunities to develop their potential rather than be cut off from the race for leadership posts for the mere fact that they are women. Gender–gap issues should be addressed from an early age, whereby girls' perceptions about self are at par with those of males. Investing women with leadership positions is a step forward in changing social and cultural perceptions, where young girls can look up at their female role models and get inspired to work hard in their footsteps.

Acknowledgments

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