

# Panic Attacks: The Silent Cries of the Soul

THE EMOTIONAL COMPONENT IN THE EXPERIENCE OF PANIC ATTACKS

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ELENA BORG

DEFENCE PRESENTATION

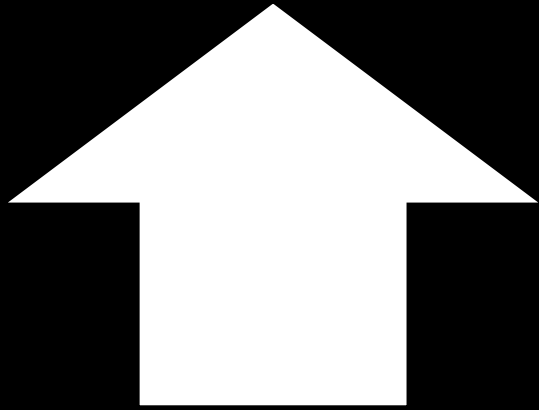
DOCTORATE IN GESTALT PSYCHOTHERAPY

GPTIM 2023

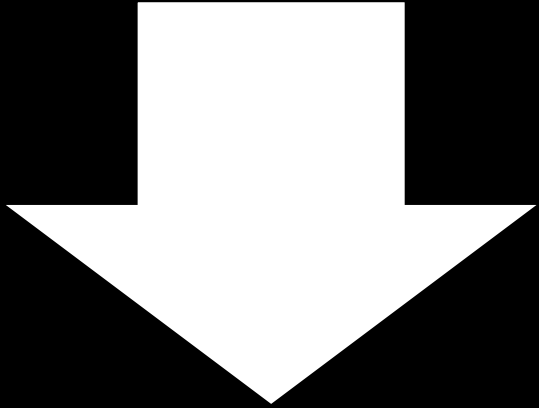


# *Research Gap*

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Research worldwide is indicating that people at risk of developing panic attacks show prevalence in suffering from alexithymia, a comprehensive psychological construct which refers to the individual's difficulty in identifying and describing feelings.



Nonetheless these indications, studies on panic attacks and the role of the emotive component within the Maltese islands is non-existent.

# *Aim of Research*

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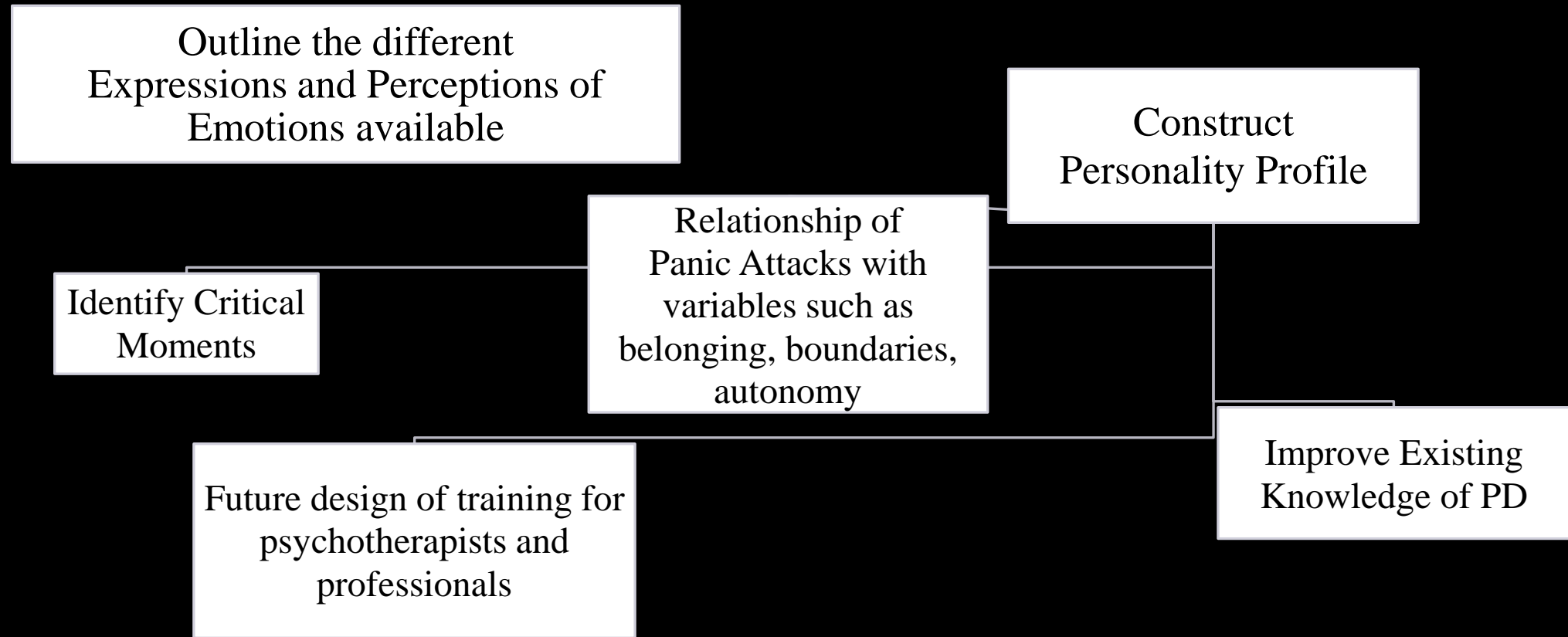
This thesis explores the role of perception and expression of emotions in the development of panic attacks while building a personality profile of individuals who are at risk in developing panic attacks in Malta, so far missing.

Research Question:

*“What is the role of perception and expression of emotions in the experience of individuals suffering from panic attacks?”*

# *Aim and Objectives of Research*

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# *A Conceptual Framework*

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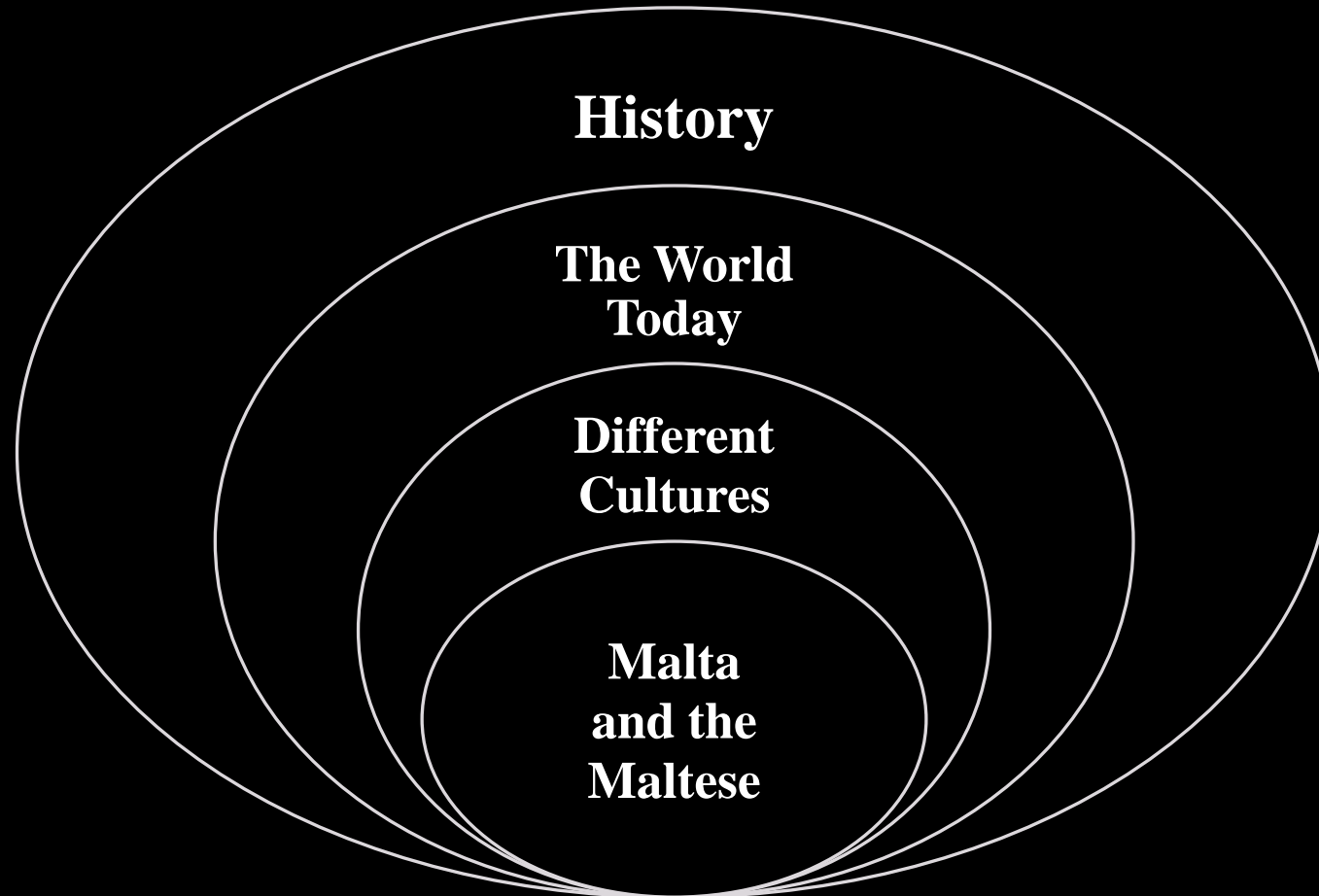
Gestalt Psychotherapy  
(Francesetti, 2007;  
Francesetti et al.,  
2020)

Psychopathology

Affective  
Neuroscience  
Panksepp (1998;  
1991;1995)

# *A Gestalt Phenomenological Approach*

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# *Choice of Methodology*

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A *Qual-Quan sequential mixed-method* design was adopted to answer the research question of ‘What is the role of perception and expression of emotions in the experience of individuals suffering from panic attacks?’

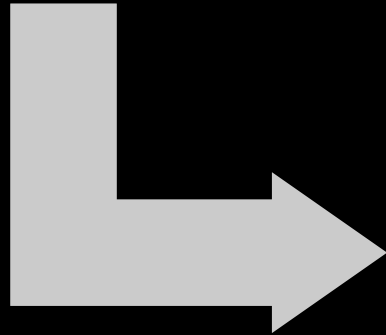
A mixed method design was used to benefit the research from the strength of both the qualitative and quantitative approaches. This approach has been chosen in order to enable the researcher to gain “both the required *depth* and *breadth* for the research purpose” (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, p. 357).

# *Process of Methodology*

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**Qualitative Phase  
8 Retrospective Studies  
utilising IPA methodology**

3 Interviews for each participant  
8 Helping Professionals  
Zoom Recorded  
Ethical Considerations  
Constructs emerged



**Quantitative Phase  
Questionnaire built  
from the Qualitative  
constructs and the  
Administration of the  
TAS-20**

- 110 participants answered online Questionnaire
- 7 participants Paper format
- Data analysed through SPSS
- TAS-20 and APA measured in their authentic form
- Ethical considerations



# *Findings*

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## **Qualitative Findings**

### **Super-Ordinate Themes**

**Panic Attacks: Illness or Creativity?**

**Critical Moments**

**A Roller Coaster of Emotional Turbulence**

**Understanding the Healing Process**

**Emerging Constructs: Separation, Trauma, Belonging, Boundaries, Autonomy, Fear of Change and Critical Life Events**

## **Quantitative Findings**

The *Main Hypothesis* is stating that people who suffer from panic attacks show high level of alexithymia.

The *Second Hypothesis* states that participants who undergo solely psychotherapy as part of their treatment for panic attacks indicate less levels of alexithymia.

**Constructs: Separation, Trauma, Belonging, Boundaries, Autonomy, Fear of Change and Critical Life events**

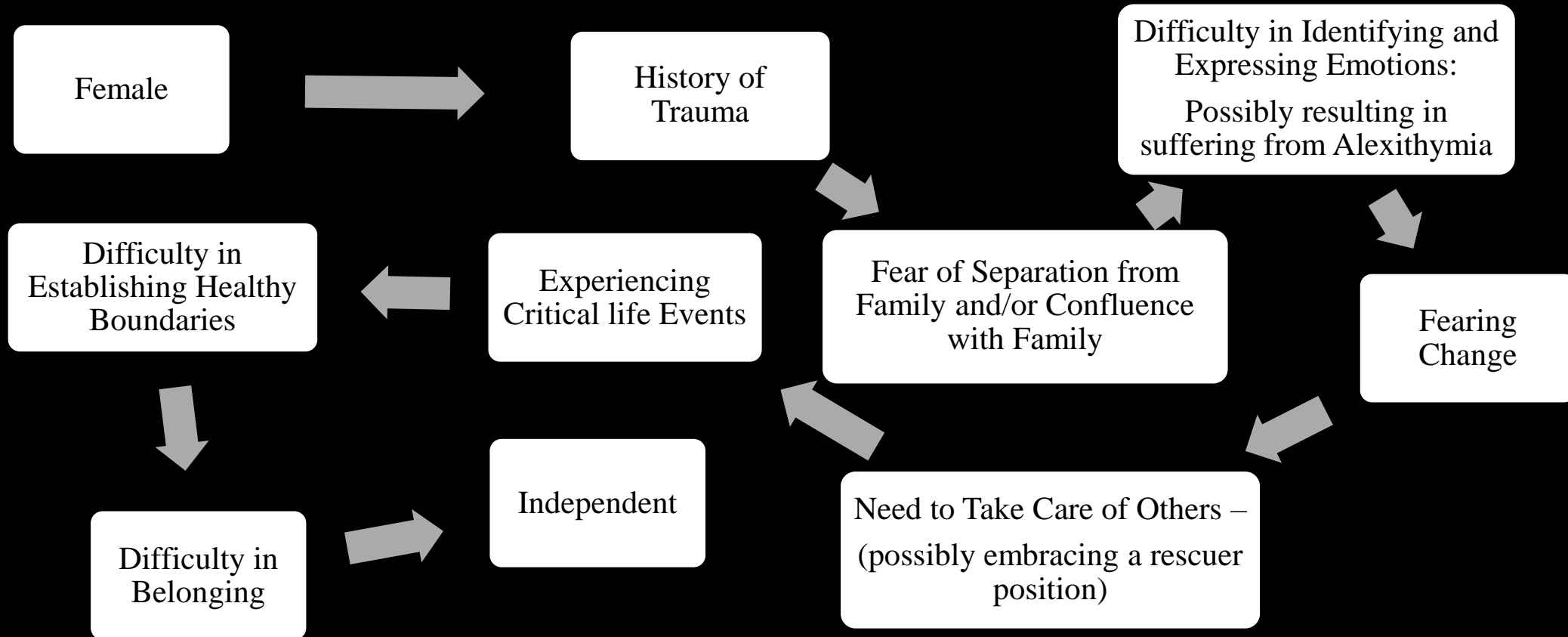
# *Triangulation of Findings*

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Integrated and triangulated findings reveal that difficulties in the perception and expression of emotions contribute in the development of panic attacks.

In essence, this thesis puts forward how panic attacks can be understood as an *'attack of emotional blindness'*.

# *Profile of the Maltese person prone to Panic Attacks*



# *Implication of the Research*

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Including the Emotive component: An alternative for those who do not respond to current treatment

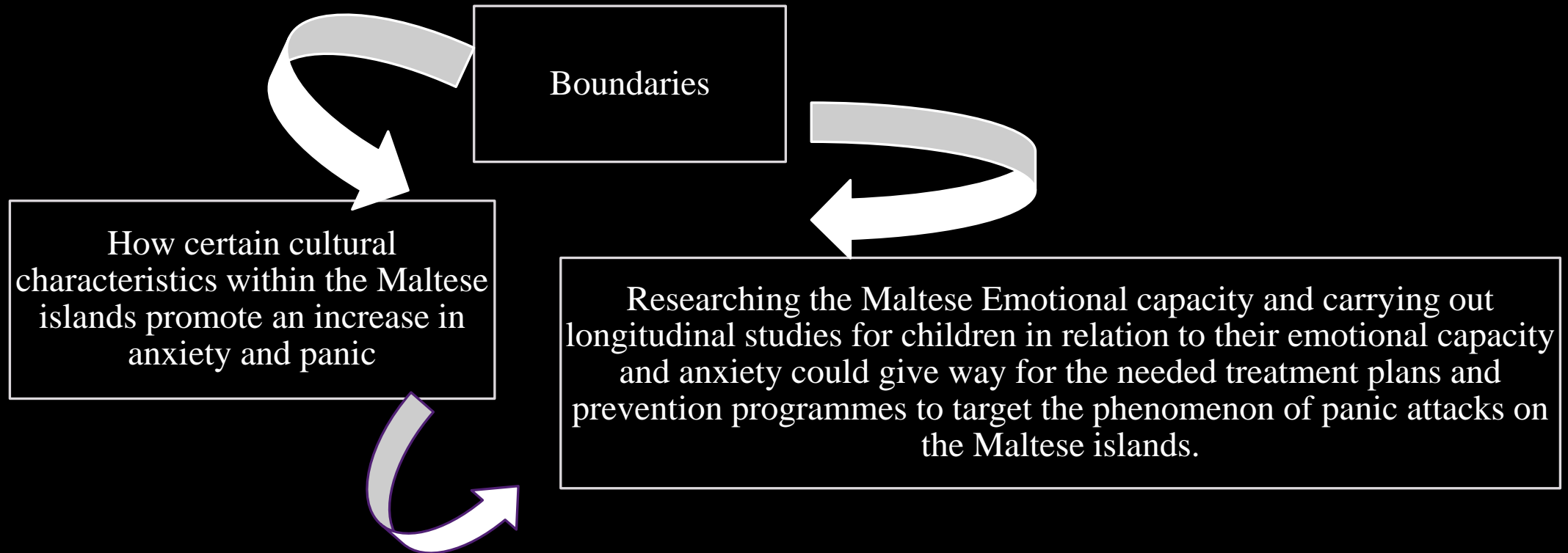
Gestalt; Emotions and Sensations: making it possible to adapt and adopt Gestalt psychotherapy along with other therapies recognized by the WHO for the treatment of panic attacks.

Visibility of Gestalt

Implications for policy, training, supervision and practice within the helping professions.

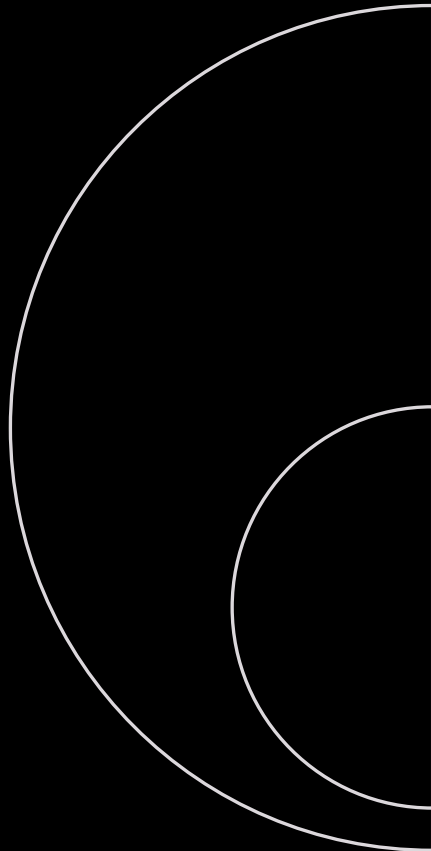
# *Future Research*

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# *My Learning Curve as a Researcher*

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My Personality Profile  
in my experience of  
Panic Attacks

- Setting my own boundaries
- Perfectionism

Research can be  
Therapeutic

- Participants in the qualitative part shared the research was healing.
- Quantitative Research can be part of Gestalt psychotherapy and still be humane.

# *Message of the Research*

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**Lose Your Mind and  
Come to your Senses'  
Perls**

**To “come to our senses” and to  
learn how to be once again in our  
bodies, and listen and understand  
our emotions.**

**Panic Attacks as  
‘an attack of emotional blindness’**

**Could bring us back to “our senses” and our emotions  
where we put our ego in the background and just  
accept what is and live what is in the here-and-now.**

*Thank You for this Journey*

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