

Title:

Self stereotypes, Maltese identities and intercultural relations: A comparison of Maltese in Malta and the Australian Diaspora

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Abstract:

The present paper presents findings from a study which has investigated Maltese identity amongst the Maltese in Malta and the Maltese in Australia. The study inquired into how the Maltese perceive the positive and negative aspects of Maltese identity, and proceeded to compute general identity ratios for comparative purposes. The study demonstrates that the Maltese in Malta hold Europeans in higher esteem than they do themselves. Conversely, the Maltese in Australia hold their own group in highest esteem. The paper concludes by discussing the identity and intercultural relations implications of the present findings.

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Self stereotypes, Maltese identities and intercultural relations: A comparison of Maltese in Malta and the Australian Diaspora¹

Gordon Sammut

Human beings, the world over, in every culture and society that exists, strive to acquire a legitimate place for themselves in the world that justifies their existence. They do so by defining who they are, for others. Individuals may define themselves in terms of their occupation, social relationships, creed, and other social and demographic groups. In doing so, they fashion a social identity that describes who they are relative to other groups (Tajfel, 1981). They strive to define themselves in ways that legitimate who they are and their ways of existing, in an effort to negotiate a positive identity that can provide them with self-esteem. Self-esteem is the value we perceive of ourselves, the value that inheres out of how we define ourselves, who we are. Self-esteem accrues as a function of the groups we belong to. It matters whether an individual is classifiable as a member of a respectable social group or a denigrated one. Likewise, nationality matters inasmuch as it typifies individuals in terms of characteristics associated with one's national origins in the eyes of others. More importantly, it matters in terms of how individuals define themselves in their own eyes. What does it mean to be Maltese? What features and characteristics do we believe typify us as Maltese? Which aspects of our Malteseness do we think are positive, and which ones negative? More importantly, given what we believe is positive and negative about being Maltese, are we left with a positive sense of our identity that makes us proud to be Maltese when we encounter different others? Or does our Malteseness leave us ashamed of who we are?

These are important questions, not least due to the fact that these identity constraints go on to determine our interactions with others. If we are proud to be Maltese, then we will strive to protect our Malteseness in the face of a challenge by others. If we are ashamed, we might opt to acquiesce all too readily with demands placed on us by others. In an era of immigration, globalisation, as well as European unification, these are clearly relevant concerns (Giddens, 1991). And whilst obviously there are individual differences in

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how we think about ourselves, the social representation (Sammut & Howarth, 2014) that we use for defining who we are provides us with the necessary resources to develop a social identity, and to draw on the self-esteem associated with it, in our dealings with others. In this paper, I report the findings of two studies that have been undertaken in an exploration of Maltese identity. The studies address the two questions that have been raised in this introduction, that is, in what terms do we identify as Maltese, and what value do we attach to our national identity? I will consider each question in turn with reference to self-stereotypes (Sammut, Sartawi, Giannini & Labate, 2014) amongst the Maltese in Malta and the Maltese in Australia.

Self-stereotypes of the Maltese

I will start by describing the terms respondents have used to describe the Maltese in the two settings studied. We asked respondents to provide us with a list of features that typify the Maltese. We were interested in both positive and negative features. Following saturation, we selected the eight most popular positive features and the eight most popular negative features that respondents claimed typified the Maltese.

The Maltese in Malta described themselves in the following positive terms: *Dħulin* (sociable), *Beżlin* (hardworking), *Ospitabbli* (hospitable), *Ferħanin* (happy), *Ta' għajnuna* (helpful), *Ġenerużi* (generous), *Onesti* (honest), and *Reliġjużi* (religious). For the Maltese in Australia, the Maltese are *Family orientated*, *Hardworking*, *Friendly*, *Helpful*, *Proud*, *Responsible*, *Religious* and *Respectful*. On the other hand, the Maltese in Malta listed the following negative features as most typical of Maltese identity: *Storbjużi* (loud/noisy), *Nervusi* (short-tempered), *Sindikajri* (nosy/gossipers), *Għażzenin* (lazy), *Ħamalli* (chavvy/trash), *Arroganti* (arrogant), *Razzisti* (racist/xenophobic), and *Moħħhom magħluq* (closed-minded). For the Maltese in Australia, the negative aspects of Maltese identity are: *Indulgent*, *Competitive*, *Jealous*, *Stubborn*, *Blasphemous*, *Impatient*, *Shifty* and *Gossipy*. As Table 1 demonstrates, there is a higher correspondence in positive traits between the two samples than there is in negative traits.

Malta	Australia
Positive Traits	
Hardworking	Hardworking
Helpful	Helpful
Religious	Religious
Sociable	Proud
Hospitable	Respectful
Happy	Friendly
Generous	Family orientated
Honest	Responsible
Negative Traits	
Gossipy	Gossipy
Loud	Indulgent
Short-tempered	Competitive
Lazy	Jealous
Chavvy	Stubborn
Arrogant	Blasphemous
Racist	Impatient
Closed-minded	Shifty

Table 1: Self-stereotypes by the Maltese in Malta and the Maltese in Australia

Table 1 suggests that the social representation of the Maltese held by the Maltese in Malta and the Maltese in Australia varies between the two contexts, but that there also is a degree of correspondence between the two. This was expected due to the fact that the social representation of the Maltese in Australia can be traced back to its origins in Malta.

Since then, the two representations have circulated and adapted to a different sociocultural context marked by different intergroup relations. It is to this issue that we turn next.

Identity Ratio

Following elicitation of the most popular traits, we proceeded with two surveys in Malta ($N=336$) and in Australia ($N=140$), asking respondents to rate the extent to which they thought each trait characterised the Maltese on a 7-point Likert scale. The survey was administered to Maltese in Malta on the one hand, and to Maltese migrants to Australia on the other, up to third generation immigrants. We also asked the Maltese in Malta to rate Europeans on the same traits, and the Maltese in Australia to rate both Australians and Europeans alongside the Maltese.

For the Maltese in Malta, every trait presented except for laziness received a higher rating than the neutral midpoint of the scale. This means that all traits presented were deemed representative of the Maltese except for laziness. Relative to the Europeans, the Maltese rate themselves more positively on every positive trait, and more negatively on every negative trait. In general, the Maltese in Malta thus hold themselves to be better than the Europeans in various respects, and worse than the Europeans in various other respects. However, relative to Europeans, the Maltese rated themselves much more harshly on negative traits than positive traits. Consequently, the positive typicality of the Maltese in Malta (5.14) stands only slightly higher than the negative typicality (4.84), with a self-stereotype identity ratio of 1.06. Maltese identity amongst the Maltese in Malta is thus marginally positive. For the Europeans, however, positive typicality (4.27) stands rather higher than negative typicality (3.63), with a relatively higher self-stereotype ratio of 1.18. Overall, therefore, the Maltese in Malta hold Europeans in higher esteem than they do themselves (Table 2).

For the Maltese in Australia, the Maltese are better than both Australians and Europeans on every positive trait. They are also worse than both Australians and Europeans on four out of the eight negative traits (Jealous, Stubborn, Impatient, Gossipy). Unlike the Maltese in Malta, however, the Maltese in Australia consider the Maltese to be less Indulgent, Competitive and Shifty than both Australians and Europeans, and as

Blasphemous as Australians, although more so than Europeans. Consequently, the Maltese in Australia present a higher positive typicality than the Maltese in Malta (5.95) and a lower negative typicality (4.69), with a self-stereotype ratio of 1.27. The positive typicality for Australians (4.46) and Europeans (4.84) amongst the Maltese in Australia is lower than that for the Maltese. And whilst the negative typicality for both these other groups is also lower than that of the Maltese (Australians: 4.26; Europeans: 4.47), the self-stereotype ratio for these groups stand at 1.08 for Europeans and 1.05 for Australians (Table 2). To sum this up, the Maltese in Australia perceive Australians, Europeans and the Maltese in positive esteem. Unlike the Maltese in Malta, however, they hold their own group in higher esteem overall than they do Europeans and Australians in turn.

	Positive typicality	Negative typicality	Stereotype ratio
Maltese (MT)	5.14	4.84	1.06
Europeans (MT)	4.27	3.63	1.18
Maltese (AU)	5.95	4.69	1.27
Europeans (AU)	4.84	4.47	1.08
Australians (AU)	4.46	4.26	1.05

Table 2: Stereotype ratios for the Maltese in Malta (MT) and Maltese in Australia (AU)

Discussion

There are three issues that emerge from these findings that I believe warrant some consideration. Firstly, the Maltese in Malta seemingly demonstrate an ambivalent identity. Their self-stereotype ratio is only slightly positive. Overall, considering both the positive and negative aspects of Maltese identity, the Maltese in Malta are almost neutral in the esteem by which they hold themselves. Relative to Europeans, the Maltese in Malta demonstrate both superiority in positive traits and inferiority in negative ones, but they clearly hold themselves in less esteem than they do their European counterparts. This situation may well serve as an inclination towards European assimilation rather than integration (Sammut,

2011), by which a more positive identity is negotiated by the Maltese in European terms, at the expense of certain features that are typically Maltese.

Secondly, the Maltese in Australia demonstrate a stronger sense of self-worth than the Maltese in Malta. A factor for this might be due to nostalgia that migrants may experience when away from their homeland. On the other hand, it may also be the case that those Maltese who hold themselves in high esteem relative to other nationalities are undeterred by the challenges of migration and are thus more prone to seek better opportunities overseas than the ones who are not quite so convinced about their overall potential.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, the relative stereotype ratios demonstrated by the Maltese in Australia represent an ideal intercultural relations scenario. The Maltese in Australia hold both Australians and Europeans in positive esteem, which means that, as a community, they are open to establish ties with both groups. This sets the stage for the generation of bridging social capital, that is, establish extra-community ties to fulfil their own interests. However, in the case of the Maltese in Australia, this does not come at the expense of intra-community ties. The Maltese in Australia hold their own group in even higher esteem, which sets the stage for the generation of bonding social capital. As a community that can foster both bonding and bridging social capital (Sammut, Andreouli & Sartawi, 2012), the Maltese in Australia demonstrate an ideal integrationist acculturation strategy that presents a win/win situation for themselves and their host country (Sammut, 2011). Achieving successful intercultural integration remains a ubiquitous challenge in contemporary societies worldwide, including Malta. This is especially the case given the sociopolitical changes Malta has witnessed over the past decade. Yet, this challenge may not be insurmountable after all. The study of Maltese migrant communities worldwide may well help us identify the ingredients that pave the way to positive intercultural contact.

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