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There's no such thing as a good Arab: Cultural essentialism and its functions concerning the integration of Arabs in Europe

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Abstract

Concerns about immigration are salient in the European Union and in Malta in particular. Previous research has demonstrated deep antipathy towards the Arab community in Malta, and social representations of Arabs are mired in a conflation of ethnic and religious categories with negative connotations. This paper presents evidence of the potency, within the public sphere, of negative arguments from cultural essentialism, concerning the integration of Arabs in Europe. The data were obtained abductively from a data corpus containing positive, mixed and negative arguments about Arabs and their integration. Results pointed towards the almost total exclusivity of arguments from cultural essentialism. These posited Arabic culture as an underlying essence that makes integration difficult or impossible. Different forms of culturally essentialist views varied in their emphasis of different aspects of cultural essentialism. Reductionist, determinist, delineatory and temporal aspects of cultural essentialism were all emphasised by respondents. The essentialist exceptions to negative arguments from cultural essentialism were rare and were posed tentatively by participants. Their paucity and manner of delivery substantiate the claim that it is strictly an Arabic cultural essence

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that is deemed to make integration impossible. Findings are discussed in light of the communicative functions that these dominant argumentative strategies fulfil.

Keywords
Islamophobia, stigma, essentialism, migration, integration, Arabs, social representations, argumentation, abduction, ecological rationality

Introduction

Malta has a long history of colonisation and only gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1964 and declared itself a Republic in 1974. It now forms part of the European Union (EU) as its Southernmost, smallest and most densely populated member state (Eurostat, 2014). The Maltese archipelago opened its borders to migrants upon EU accession. During the same period, irregular migrants from North Africa also started entering the country. Issues around immigration remain amongst the most salient concerns in the EU, and Malta scores amongst the top countries in this regard (European Commission, 2016).

In Malta, Arabs are estimated to constitute around 20% of the total migrant population, making up less than 1% of the general population (Sammut & Lauri, 2017). Arabs constitute a pan-ethnic group that is heterogeneous in terms of different religious, national and cultural backgrounds (Naber, 2000). Yet, generally social representations of Arabs include depictions of being on the fringes of 'whiteness, otherness and color' (Shryock, 2008, p. 112). Helbling (2012, p. 1) notes that representations of Islam, which routinely confound the categories 'Arab' and 'Muslim', depict Muslims (or Arabs) as backwards and violent. It is worth noting that this mistaken automatic equation of categories does not constitute an unavoidable disadvantage to research on Arabs from a social representations point of view. Social representations are indeed composed of elements consistently associated together, but this consistency is not required to be formally logical (Fraser, 1994).

Apart from the social representations approach, anti-Arab views have been studied utilising other paradigms, including cultural prejudice perspectives (Echebarria-Echabe & Guede, 2007) and even experimental socio-functional approaches to prejudice looking at anger-related emotions that seem to be evoked vis-à-vis Arabs (Dasgupta, DeSteno, Williams, & Hunsinger, 2009). Local research on this topic is relatively new and has focussed on the acculturation strategies employed by diverse minorities when residing in Malta. This research showed that the primary concern with immigration – for various socio-ethnic groups locally, not just the Maltese – pertains to the integration of Arabs in particular (Sammut & Lauri, 2017). Subsequently, positive, mixed/ambivalent and negative arguments towards the presence of Arabs in Malta were studied from a

social representations approach, pointing heavily towards anti-integrationist views (Sammut et al., 2017). Social representations of Arabs in Malta include both Islamic content and an intertwining of cultural and religious categories (Sammut et al., 2017). This promising line of research, however, warrants further investigation into the particular argumentative strategies employed in advancing anti-integrationist views, beyond simply looking at argumentative valences and themes. In this respect, the literature on essentialism may be promising, as essentialisms are defined argumentatively (Yildiz & Verkuyten, 2012) and tend to feature across different intergroup scenarios (e.g., Kadianaki & Andreouli, 2015; Zeromskyte & Wagner, 2017).

Essentialism and its cultural variant

Essentialism is a polysemic concept that lacks a precise definition (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000). However, some common themes abound in the literature. An essential category is commonly understood to be natural, immutable, historically stable, capable of informing or shaping the features of its members, discrete, bounded, exclusive and homogeneous (Kadianaki & Andreouli, 2015). An essence is also perceived as being a necessary and sufficient condition for something to be considered part of a category (Wagner et al., 2010). In other words, an essence is that which underlies a particular category and necessarily constitutes and determines it. An essence is distinguished from other peripheral features which may be contingent or inessential. Essentialism in psychology usually also falls within the remit of attribution theory and is understood to have evolutionarily adaptive functions (Barrett, 2001). Essentialism has been construed as an early cognitive bias (Gelman, 2004) that tends to leak into different areas of human concern.

Fittingly, Wagner, Holtz, and Kashima (2009) observe that essences are endowed with an inductive potential, whereby they are accompanied by the belief that even if there is no observable effect of an essence on a particular exemplar at present, such an effect may become evident in future. What concerns us in the present paper is more precisely 'cultural essentialism', that is, an essentialism that attributes cognitions and behaviours of a group to an underlying and shared cultural essence. This refers to a type of essentialism (Phillips, 2010) whereby culture *determines* phenomena and characteristics attributed to a certain group and to which everything is reduced in turn. Here, the essence of *culture* is the central characteristic with causal and inductive powers. Furthermore, cultural essentialism often features in language and discourse making appeals to rights and claims (Grillo, 2003). This discourse may also be justified on the basis of cultural essentialism itself.

Cultural essentialism can be fruitfully juxtaposed with other types of essentialism, such as biological essentialism. In contrast to cultural essentialism, biological essentialism consists of talk of 'blood' and 'genes' (Zeromskyte & Wagner, 2017). What these essentialisms share in common is that they have psychological

functions that allow majority members to refrain from engaging in direct prejudice and to instead focus their arguments on *essential* incompatibilities between in-group and out-group (Yildiz & Verkuyten, 2012). Yet, whereas biological racism and other forms of xenophobia still abound in the public sphere, in recent decades, we have witnessed the culturalisation of racial discourse. In turn, this is tied to, or leads to, a perception of cultural differences as being unbridgeable (Taguieff, 2001). Such beliefs undermine positive intercultural relations and may instantiate a spiral of conflict between diverse ethno-cultural groups, making it worthwhile to look at the socio-cultural conditions legitimating sense-making in these beliefs and vice versa (Sammut, Bezzina, & Sartawi, 2015; Sammut & Buhagiar, 2017).

In the present paper, we present findings on cultural essentialism from a study that investigated social representations of Arab integration in Malta. We asked respondents about their opinions concerning the integration of Arabs and proceeded to question respondents' points of view argumentatively (see Sammut & Gaskell, 2010, 2012). We presently focus on utterances demonstrating a marked degree of cultural essentialism concerning Arab integration. Arabic culture featured extensively in arguments about Arabs, as a universal *explanans* for Arab mentality and behaviour, and subsequently served to justify negative views concerning Arab integration. The data indicate the central role of cultural essentialism in the argumentation strategies of our participants, carrying implications for intercultural relations. Of particular interest is the almost total exclusivity of *cultural* essentialism in respondents' points of view. We conclude by arguing that unpacking cultural essentialism in argumentative terms helps in understanding its ecological rationality (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002) and the psychological functions that this phenomenon serves.

Method

The method adopted for the overarching inquiry – argumentation interviewing and analysis – relied on the qualitative elicitation and analysis of arguments articulated by respondents in support of or against the integration of Arabs in Malta. The procedure adopted was detailed extensively in Sammut et al. (2017), where the logic and structure of different argumentative themes were presented. An argument is understood to be composed of separate claims, each with their own justificatory streams (see below). For the purposes of the present paper, we conducted an abductive analysis (Salvatore, 2017) of the arguments previously identified, in order to study cases of cultural essentialism vis-à-vis Arabs that featured in our inquiry. We proceed to present a summary of participant characteristics and an outline of the abductive approach to elucidate our investigation further.

Participants and initial procedure

Snowball sampling was employed and this involved contacting the first gatekeeper who agreed to an interview and in turn suggested three further participants who

agreed to an interview. In turn, these three participants suggested three more interviewees themselves, and so on, until a total of 21 participants from Malta were recruited. Seven respondents were female and 14 were male, with age ranging from 26 to 40 years old. Levels of education varied but all reported a minimum of a secondary level of education. Thirteen respondents stated that they are Roman Catholic, of whom eight reported being practising members; and another eight respondents reported no subscription to any organised faith. Maltese nationality was reported by all respondents. One respondent reported dual nationality, and another reported a mixed cultural background. Seven respondents were single and 14 respondents reported being in a committed relationship. All participants stated that they are engaged in employment.

The interviews were carried out between December 2015 and January 2016 at locations chosen by the respondents themselves. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours. Interviews were conducted bilingually (Maltese and English) and subsequently transcribed and translated into English before data analysis. The interviewer was Maltese, and there is no explicit reason to assume undue influence on participants despite the focus on argumentation during the interview. The emic nature of this research meant that information loss was kept to a minimum during translation. Informed consent was obtained for every participant before the interview took place, and the data were analysed using NVIVO 11.

Argumentation interviewing and analysis. The interviews started with a direct question aimed at soliciting the central claim(s) featuring in the respondent's point of view concerning the integration of Arabs in Malta. The claims made by respondents were revisited during the course of the interview using clarifier questions, and a summary was provided by the interviewer at the end of the interview in order to confirm understanding. The protocol also included questions meant to elicit support for these claims in the form of warrants (e.g., 'Why do you think that?'), backings to the same warrants (e.g., 'How do these assumptions hold?'), data (examples that respondents provide to support their claims) and qualifiers (e.g., 'Is this always the case?'). Questions aimed to elicit rebuttals to respondents' own claims were also asked (e.g., 'Are there any exceptions to this?').

Data analysis involved an initial coding of claims for each participant and a consequent grouping of such claims across respondents. A thematic categorisation exercise was then conducted to bring together claims that represented similar arguments. This led to 6 different argumentative themes (cultural, socio-political, psychological, religious, stigma-related and economic) with a total of 15 arguments nested beneath them, advancing a total of 31 claims. The 15 arguments were categorised by valence, that is, there were positive, mixed/ambivalent and negative arguments, drawing on the different argumentative themes. The rest of the dataset was then analysed to code the various warrants, backings, data, qualifiers and rebuttals, providing the justificatory streams for claims (Sammut et al., 2017).

Abductive procedure

Following argumentation analysis, we proceeded to identify instances of essentialism from the data corpus and categorise such instances by essentialist form in the following abductive manner. Abductive reasoning involves going from incomplete observations to the simplest most likely explanations (Salvatore, 2017). An example of abductive logic is to conclude that it rained after observing puddles of water in the street. In abduction, observations do not guarantee conclusions but make them more likely in light of context. After observing the prevalence of anti-integrationist views amongst respondents and continual references to culture as something discrete, natural and essentially problematic, our abductive analysis zeroed in on observations within the data corpus that pointed towards essentialist argumentation. This was conducted in the context of intercultural animosity between Arabs and the native Maltese and in view of the literature on essentialism.

Abductive analysis involved demarcation criteria that were outlined and redefined iteratively. We started by focussing on essentialist *modalities* (e.g., cultural vs. biological). This meant that arguments simply attributing labels (e.g., violent) to Arabs were omitted unless they were explicitly justified by appeal to some sort of essence. The abductive analysis involved using the following keywords to search for instances of essentialism in our dataset: *cultur**, *custom*, *mentalit**, *tradit**, *upbringing* and *way* for the cultural modality and *biol**, *blood*, *DNA*, *gene*, *rac** and *IQ* for the biological modality. During the process of identification, demarcation criteria for what constitutes an essentialist *form* of argumentation were outlined and redefined iteratively. This involved grouping together essentialist arguments that had aspects that featured consistently together. For instance, the immutability, exclusivity and boundedness of 'Arabic culture' featured consistently together, whereas the potential of 'Arabic culture' to cause problems featured consistently with the idea that the cultural essence will reveal itself over time. This co-constructive process – informed by the literature, the Maltese context and communication between the first two authors – resulted in the following findings.

Findings

We identified four different forms in which culturally essentialist views can be expressed that vary according to which aspect of cultural essentialism they emphasise. We term the four forms of cultural essentialism resisting Arab integration as (i) reductionist, (ii) determinist, (iii) delineatory and (iv) temporal. It is worth noting that throughout the entire corpus, we identified very few instances of essentialism other than negative cultural essentialism. Specifically, there were 30 instances of reductionism, 36 instances of determinism, 38 instances of delineation and 31 instances of the temporal form of cultural essentialism, as opposed to only 2 instances of negative unspecified essentialism and 2 instances of negative biological essentialism. Furthermore, we identified only a single instance of cultural

essentialism used to promote the integration of Arabs. A total of 140 instances of essentialism were thus identified. We proceed to present these forms alongside illustrative quotes that demonstrate how cultural essentialism sustains anti-integration arguments. Following this, we also review the exceptional cases of (i) unspecified essentialism, (ii) biological essentialism and (iii) positive cultural essentialism. Taken together, these findings demonstrate (a) the preponderance of cultural essentialism and (b) how cultural essentialism sustains anti-integration arguments with regard to Arab migrants in Europe.

Reductionist form

The first form of cultural essentialism involved reducing Arab psychology or the impossibility of Arab integration to Arabic culture. Arguments within this form held culture as a generalised referent when explicating why Arabs are the way they are. These were typically matter-of-fact claims whose self-contained nature served as an argument in itself, directing the rest of the discussion and serving as a pre-emptive buffer against counter-arguments. For instance, in the claim that religion and culture combine to cause issues, culture is seen as the basis of all that's wrong with Arabs:

> Chris: . . . I think that the culture, the culture, let me put it this way, Islamic culture or Arabic culture or whatever, is somewhat prepotent [. . .] in the case of Arabs, what worries me a bit, not to say bothers me, is the fact that, their religion, plus the culture that joins/combines with their religion in this country, the effect that it could have on our way of living. (Chris: male, 38 years old, sales executive)

In this essentialist form, culture is the only and final explanans for Arab psychology. Through argumentation, Arabs were reduced to a cultural product to the extent that when asked to provide alternative explanations for difficulties in Arab integration, a number of participants could not conceive of a non-cultural explanation:

> Interviewer: Is there any other explanation that maybe isn't cultural, as to why relations with Arabs can be a bit difficult?
> Max: Apart from the culture and religion, I don't see any. Right? Because I don't think that, I don't know, but I literally never, I never personally said, listen, because he's black, or Chinese, or Arabs. I integrate with everyone, personally. Ehm, the culture and the religion, yes. (Max: male, 40 years old, lecturer)

Determinist form

Determinism featured mostly as a way of explaining why Arab integration specifically is impossible. Respondents argued that Arabs, by virtue of being moulded by their culture, become set in their own ways. This makes other forms of

essentialism – namely, Arab rigidity and boundedness, and their potential to cause problems (temporality) – more salient, as seen below. Furthermore, respondents claimed that Arabs do the things they do because they are brought up a certain way. This form of argumentation also featured anticipatory statements that served to dismiss arguments from determinism that are actually sympathetic to Arabs. It also provides evidence for Grillo's (2003) observation that cultural essentialism is found in conjunction with appeals to rights and claims, in this case promoting separatism:

> Simon: Now I say, you could tell me but they are brought up like that and that is their culture. Yes man, fucking stay there, if you're gonna act in that way. (Simon: male, 39 years old, property administrator)

References to Arabic political scenarios as being deterministic were also commonplace. Respondents claimed that adverse conditions in Arabic countries resulted in a culture that is different from European culture and that consequently moulds Arabs in a different way. This provided an opportunity to posit determinism as a situational occurrence without blaming Arabs directly for it:

> Interviewer: And do you think there is something about Arabs that makes them different from, ehm, from other communities?
> Edward: Well, their upbringing, as I was explaining before
> Interviewer: All right, those three points you mentioned
> Edward: Exactly. Those
> Interviewer: Culture, mentality and upbringing
> Edward: The cul-, exactly, exactly. Those, yes, those obviously shape their character. This is like when you have a boy, since he was 7 years old he was brought up in a war
> Interviewer: All right, all right
> Edward: Automatically, when you got him out of that country, still, he, his culture, if he saw wars, if he was brought up in that fighting, automatically his instinct will not be like that of a boy who was always raised with the family, going to Church and everything. The culture will be different. (Edward: male, 33 years old, self-employed)

Delineatory form

This form emphasises the spatial dimension of Arabic culture, seeing it as being clearly demarcated, separate and inalterable. Boundedness, inalterability and difference featured in multiple arguments. Particularly revealing were a number of claims stating that Arabs do not learn, and these were also tied to recent Arabic political scenarios:

> Amanda: I don't think that they learn. They had an opportunity, right, and they used to talk against Gaddafi, because I think, I think the greatest, the worst thing that could happen [laughs] was that Gaddafi finished, they had the chance to start afresh

> and instead they split into tribes and fought each other, so I think that even their mentality, right? I think it's much more backwards. (Amanda: female, 36 years old, senior relationship officer)

Furthermore, even when the Maltese themselves were depicted as inalterable, there was still a contrast to be made with Arabs. Respondents claimed that the Maltese could also be rigid about their culture. However, they held Arabs to be even more rigid than locals. Consequently, the Maltese were portrayed as being more flexible and Arabs as being different and inalterable due to their culture. The concession portraying the Maltese as rigid only served to make the argument stronger:

> Mandy: Because we, all right, we can be, I mean, as Maltese we can be rigid on our culture. But I think we're more capable, of going along with different people, than they are ready to not be so rigid about their culture. (Mandy: female, 31 years old, learning support assistant)

A good example of contrast can also be seen in the claim that for Arabs, certain dress codes do not make sense:

> Simon: That's right. To them, it does not make sense that for us, that our women go out with, with, with the bikini top and stuff like that. (Simon: male, 39 years old, property administrator)

Finally, the claim that Arab culture contrasts more with Maltese culture than other cultures do was a potent and highly warranted claim, providing the best example of this form. Framing multiculturalism in terms of contrast rather than diversity served to place the former automatically in a negative light. For Chris, Arabs *actively* distinguish themselves and take this contrast to an extreme:

> Chris: Because other cultures, let me put it this way, they're similar to us. The Orthodox, for example, there are things that are different from us, the Orthodox don't have Sharia Law for example, they don't have the idea that the woman should be less than the man, or that the woman should not drive or the woman sits on the backseat or, etc etc etc. Heq, this is extremism then, heq, there are certain Arab places where the woman does not even, is not even allowed to get an education. There isn't any other culture in the world, as long as I know, that goes to that, to that, to that extreme, that's why I believe that, let me put it this way, it contrasts much more with our culture. (Chris: male, 38 years old, sales executive)

Temporal form

Lastly, Arabs were perceived as being problematic either at present or in the future. This form emphasises the time-related dimension of Arab culture, with

the idea being that even if Arabic culture does not reveal itself problematically now, there is the inevitability of influence in the future. Whilst the previous three forms included content that is usually part and parcel of an essence, this last form was derivative, and based on Wagner, Holtz & Kashima's (2009) 'inductive potential', as we discussed above. Problems can be due to myriad reasons, but in this case, they were only relevant insofar as they were caused by an essence. For participants, be it as present or future problems, the Arabic cultural essence *will* reveal itself. This deflects arguments stating that Arabs do not cause problems at present. Firstly, we will consider the utterance that Arab demographics grow at a fast rate and will cause problems now or in the future:

> Amanda: And another thing that worries me is, heq, because for example, you see on the internet, sometimes I see and stuff, if you see the ratio of Europe, of families, for example, two maximum, one, but their families would be enormous, huge, so if not now then in 5 or 10 years' time, I believe that even if you consider only those there are at present, they spread so much more than Europeans, than Europeans that one day they will take over, heq, Europe. (Amanda: female, 36 years old, senior relationship officer)

For some participants, Arabs can also cause problems in a more *active* manner rather than just by passive reproduction. Apart from present/future, a dimension concerning active/passive problem causing seems to be part of this fourth form, as can be appreciated in the claim that Arabs come to Europe to actively take over:

> Interviewer: Why is it that they come to Europe?
> Amanda: Because I think that, eee, they want to take over, Islam wants to take over Europe
> Interviewer: Eee, you think this is explicit
> Amanda: I think so, yes. I think so
> Interviewer: So it's a target
> Amanda: I think that Europe, yes
> Interviewer: Of, of
> Amanda: That Europe will not, it will become an Islamic state.
> Interviewer: Right, right. (Amanda: female, 36 years old, senior relationship officer)

Finally, the claim that culture contact with Arabs is problematic was also a highly warranted claim in the dataset. Arabic culture was perceived as causing problems regardless of the dispositions of individual Arabs as being 'good' or 'bad':

> Aiden: Now as far as I'm concerned today, I'm seeing things differently, there's good ones and bad ones, the only thing that I see as bad though, maybe that I did not use to notice before, is that, ehm, most of them, they think they are still in their country, so, so they still do whatever they used to do back in their country. (Aiden: male, 33 years old, general manager)

Exceptions to negative cultural essentialism

In the final part of this section, we present exceptions to negative forms of cultural essentialism that featured in our corpus. The purpose here is to take full stock of the various manifestations of essentialist utterances in our corpus, including those that contrast with the prevalent negative and culturally essentialist forms. Furthermore, we note that these exceptions are expressed by participants in a somewhat tentative nature, which contrasts sharply with the conviction with which negative forms of cultural essentialism were employed.

Unspecified. Certain essentialist utterances posited an essence without describing its nature in biological, cultural or other terms. We argue that these utterances may represent instances of confusion on the part of the participant or else simply a scenario where the interviewee did not gravitate towards a clear essentialist conclusion. Nevertheless, respondents insisted that intercultural issues between Arab migrants and Europeans were simply due to their being Arab, typically sustaining the view that it is best to avoid dealing with Arabs, as Simon suggests:

> Interviewer: No, no, let me explain to you. You don't want to have anything to do with them because, eee, they're ugly? Because they smell bad? Because, eee, they attack you?
> Simon: Because they're Arabs man, I wouldn't know what to tell you. Because they're Arabs. (Simon: male, 39 years old, property administrator)

John's responses echo the same concerns without considering the need for further justification:

> Interviewer: On a personal level you don't trust him?
> John: No, no, no. On a personal level no
> Interviewer: Why?
> John: Because in my mind he's still an Arab
> Interviewer: And?
> John: And I have that mentality in my mind that my mum had taught me, fear the Arab, right? (John: male, 34 years old, technician)

Biological essentialism. We identified two instances of biological essentialism which were actually employed with regard to the in-group, that is, essentialising the Maltese rather than Arabs. Both comments were made with reference to racial characteristics. Simon posed a tentative rhetorical question:

> Simon: So, as, as a race, I don't know why, now it's either since I was young, they brought us up because Arabs and not Arabs and stuff, right? (Simon: male, 39 years old, property administrator)

Simon is here arguing that genes shape the way the Maltese think and make them non-confrontational. This serves to justify the reasons for why the Arab community in Malta is held to be integrated not segregated. Sean concurs, essentialising the Maltese along similar racial lines:

> Sean: I think that our genes make us different from other people who are from other countries
> Interviewer: Right, right
> Sean: So that could help, more, that
> Interviewer: And what could be, in your opinion, the ingredients in the Maltese mentality, that help?
> Sean: Us, as Maltese, I, I don't think that we're
> Interviewer: The live-and-let-live, you mean?
> Sean: We're not confrontational as a people. (Sean: male, 39 years old, director)

By extension, one could argue, on the basis of these comments, that if genes make the Maltese behave a certain way, then genes also make Arabs behave a certain way. However, this rationale did not feature explicitly in the corpus.

Positive cultural essentialism. Finally, perhaps the only clear exception to negative cultural essentialism lies in its positive counterpart. We identified only a single occurrence of this essentialist form, where a respondent argued that Arabs have a certain passion that fits the Maltese Mediterranean character:

> Andre: Because I feel close with, with the Arab character [. . .] I prefer if more people came who have fire in them rather than, or Mediterranean let's put it this way, Mediterranean, right? I prefer if more people come who have fire in them rather than cold people. I have this impression that I observe certain coldness in, in the centre of Europe
> Interviewer: Right, right, right
> Andre: That Ma-, that the Maltese character does not have that coldness. (Andre: male, 39 years old, self-employed)

Discussion

In our investigation of the social representations of Arabs and Arab integration in Europe, cultural essentialism featured as an argumentative tool that served primarily to substantiate views against the integration of Arabs. A topographical view of Arabs with Arabic culture at its base was dominant amongst participants. Negative arguments from cultural essentialism served as a fast and frugal heuristic (Goldstein & Gigerenzer, 2002), construing culture as an underlying essence acting on Arabs. Our results suggest that a stronger relational function is served by negative views rather than positive ones. Alongside other forms of essentialising, such

as the biological kind, the positive views were largely idiosyncratic and conspicuous due to their scarcity. This scarcity, in our view, demonstrates the prevalence of negative cultural essentialism and the extent to which it dominates discourse concerning opposition to the integration of Arabs in European countries. Whilst positive forms of cultural essentialism are not inconceivable, our study demonstrates that with regard to Arabs and their integration in Europe, negative forms of cultural essentialism carry a lot of weight and are much more prevalent than other forms.

Another noteworthy observation in this study is the inseparability of culture and religion in lay thinking. For the participants, it was an *Islamic culture or Arabic culture or whatever* (Chris, male, 38 years old, sales executive) that explained their views regarding Arab integration. As Grillo (2003) notes, Islam is perceived as a global cultural threat and in the present zeitgeist, it is not necessarily in any bilateral adversarial relationship with any one religion or culture. This makes it an easy adjunct that enhances the efficacy of negative cultural essentialising.

Furthermore, the scarcity of arguments using positive forms of essentialising suggests a lack of semiotic resources in the representational field through which respondents could construe a positive view of Arab integration (Zittoun, 2006). Combating negative cultural essentialism, therefore, seems to be a dire prospect. In fact, the culture–religion conjunction works given the nature of 'culture' as an essence and might be part of the explanation as to why it is arguments from *cultural* essentialism that are so powerful with regard to Arabs. In other words, perceptions of an 'Islamic biology' are improbable, to say the least.

The choice of demarcations in the world around us is a social act (Phillips, 2010). These social acts are potent such that categories like biology or culture are 'spontaneously represented as natural kinds or as entities justified by a divine will' (Wagner, Holtz & Kashima, 2009). Consider 'psychology', whose composite nature meant that Arab psychology was the explanandum itself for which 'discrete' entities, like culture, were needed as explanans. No argument from an explicitly psychological essence was expressed. Yet, despite biology being a 'natural kind', the findings of our study lend support to Taguieff's (2001) observation concerning the culturalisation of racial discourse.

These findings make further sense in light of the profound dislike of Arabs documented in previous research. The condition of inalterability of essences serves to solidify the impact of negative arguments against Arabs. In a nutshell, the cultural essentialism of Arabs serves to sustain a social representation of Arabs as being undesirable due to the fact that their culture of origin is problematic as well as inalterable, promoting the view that integration will not work. This manner of essentialising also allowed easy inferences to be made whilst avoiding charges of racism at the same time.

In conclusion, this study is novel in that it presents different forms of cultural essentialism that were demonstrated in our study to vary by emphasis. Reductionism, determinism, delineation and temporality could be seen at work

in the arguments articulated by respondents. It is worth noting that these results were not in any way necessitated by the research question itself. Asking about a category of people, at any level of specification (be it 'Arabs', 'Libyans', etc.), does not necessitate a prevalence of essentialist (and specifically culturally essentialist) views as opposed to other argumentative strategies, for example, decategorisation. Thus, charges of possible tautology are abated, especially given the local context, as detailed above.

Our chosen method enabled us to observe the functions of cultural essentialism and how its manifestation in different forms serves argumentative strategies that represent Arabs as the cultural 'other'. Cultural essentialism, in this study, constituted a barrier to entertaining views concerning Arab integration that are more positive and optimistic. Relative to Arab nationals, the essentialism used by respondents in this study transpires as predominantly negative and defensive. This may well serve to sustain a common and shared worldview amongst the Maltese, which potentially confers a degree of social cohesion (Duveen, 2008; Sammut, 2011). On the other hand, if the prevailing representation posits that there is no such thing as a good Arab due to cultural influences, then there is very little prospect of Arab communities ever fulfilling the expectations others have of them (Sartawi & Sammut, 2012) sufficiently well to negotiate a legitimate place for themselves within the EU. The negative forms of cultural essentialism concerning Arabs transpire as a clear impediment to this and highlight the need for representation (Chryssides et al., 2009) that construes Arabic cultures in a fairer and more appreciative manner.

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