

Empirical Article

Differences between prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes and gendered self-evaluations in SwedenEMMA A. RENSTRÖM *Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden*Renström, E. A. (2023). Differences between prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes and gendered self-evaluations in Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*.

This study investigates prescriptive (how women and men should be) and proscriptive (how women and men should not be) gender stereotypes in Sweden and how these stereotypes relate to self-ascribed gendered traits. In an online survey with students at three major universities ($N = 679$) it was found that participants believed that the societal view was that women should be more communal than men, but less dominant and men should be more agentic than women, but less weak. In comparison, self-ratings only differed for communion, such that women rated themselves as more communal than men (there were no differences in self-ratings of agency, dominance, or weakness). Thus, prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes and self-views differed. Women mainly perceived differences between self-ratings and prescriptions of communion, whereas men mainly perceived differences between self-ratings and prescriptions of agency. Moreover, women mainly perceived differences between self-ratings and proscriptions of dominance, and men mainly perceived differences between self-ratings and proscriptions of weakness. Hence, both women and men perceive larger gaps between self-evaluations and societally desired and undesired gender stereotypical traits. Future studies should investigate the consequences of such mismatches.

Key words: Prescriptive, proscriptive, gender stereotypes, Sweden.

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INTRODUCTION

Norms about gender include ideas about what traits and behaviors are socially desired among women and men. These ideas are socially consequential. Prescriptive gender stereotypes prescribe how women and men should be, while proscriptive gender stereotypes stipulate non-accepted behavior (e.g. Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan & Nauts, 2012). For instance, women are desired to be communal and men are desired to be agentic (Koenig, 2018). At the same time, it is undesirable for a woman to show dominance and for a man to show weakness (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Individuals who violate these pre- and proscriptive stereotypes are punished (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2010; Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

Sweden is considered a highly gender egalitarian country (World Economic Forum, 2022), yet the Swedish labor market is deeply segregated (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2023). This segregation is both vertical, where men more often than women occupy leadership roles, and horizontal, where women and men occupy different sectors. Hence, Sweden constitutes a paradox where gender equality is a salient issue, but the labor market is segregated. Because gender stereotypes can be rooted in the division of labor (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012), this paradox could influence perceptions of stereotypes, but also how individuals view themselves on gender stereotypical traits.

This article aims to: (1) assess how Swedish citizens perceive the societal pre- and proscriptive stereotypes regarding communion, agency, weakness, and dominance; (2) assess individuals' self-ratings on these traits; and (3) compare perceptions of societal stereotypes with self-ratings.

Prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are sometimes discussed as being rooted in the societal division of labor (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012). For instance, men, who as a group are overrepresented in occupations related to engineering, corporate leading and law enforcement, are assumed to possess traits matching those roles. Women, who as a group are overrepresented in occupations related to caring, are instead assumed to possess traits related to care-taking roles. This idea leads to that these gender stereotypes may change with a changing societal structure (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

Because different societies have different distributions of labor, stereotypes may vary across time and place (Bosak, Eagly, Diekmann & Sczesny, 2017; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000). Sweden ranks high on aggregated measures of gender equality, like the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2022) and women are strongly represented in the Swedish work force. Still, the horizontal segregation remains high. Only 15–20% of employees work in jobs with equal gender distribution. Moreover, the vertical segregation is also high (Statistics Sweden, 2022) and in fact larger in Sweden than in many other European countries (Ellingsaeter, 2014; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2023). Hence, Sweden constitutes a paradox when it comes to gender equality, which may influence the construction of gender stereotypes.

The perceptions of women's and men's traits pertains to two core dimensions in social judgment, referred to as agency and communion (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). Agency relates to goal-achievement, whereas communion relates to the maintenance of social relationships (Bakan, 1966). Because men disproportionately occupy roles that are agentially demanding (e.g., police officer and

CEO), social perceivers attribute agency to men as a group and individuals (e.g., assertiveness, independence). Similarly, because women disproportionately occupy roles that are communally demanding (e.g., nurse and social worker), social perceivers attribute communion to women, as a group and individuals (e.g., caring and understanding). Hence, agentic traits are traditionally associated with masculinity while communal traits are traditionally associated with femininity. But these inferences are not only descriptive, describing how people believe that women and men are, but also function prescriptively and proscriptively. The perceptions that women and men possess traits corresponding to their roles in society leads to normative ideas about how women and men should and should not be, which are socially consequential.

Prescriptive stereotypes are ideas about how women and men should be, what is desired from a woman and a man (Gill, 2004; Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Prescriptive stereotypes are desired traits and behaviors mainly designated for one of the two traditional genders more than the other, such as communion for women and agency for men. While descriptive stereotypes describe how women and men in a society are perceived to be, the prescriptive stereotypes prescribe how women and men should be and do. Research show that women should be communal (caring, nurturing, empathic) and men should be agentic (assertive, competitive, independent) (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Prescriptive stereotypes hence represent the group-specific behavioral norms that group members must uphold to avoid being socially punished through for instance ridiculing or rejection (Gill, 2004).

While prescriptive stereotypes dictate how women and men should be, *proscriptive* stereotypes dictate how women and men should *not* be. For instance, women should not show dominance and men should not show weakness (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). While these traits are negative in general, they are even less accepted when displayed by one gender than the other. It is less accepted for a man than a woman to display weakness and for a woman, than a man to display dominance. Prescriptive stereotypes thus dictate what is desired, while proscriptive stereotypes dictate what is not acceptable.

Violations of approved and disapproved behavior for either gender has negative consequences (Rudman & Glick, 2010). For instance, prescriptive gender stereotypes have been linked to prejudice and bias against women, particularly in career-climbing contexts (Heilman, 2002). Women focusing on their career violate the expectations of how women should be, such as caring and family-oriented. Moreover, such women may violate the proscriptive stereotypes for women when they display dominance. Consequently, evaluations tend to be negative (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). For instance, women who were described as dominant were disliked and less likely to be hired for a certain position, even when they were competent for the position (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2010; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). To avoid negative evaluations, women and men could hide their gender non-conforming behavior and engage more in gender stereotypical behavior. Such gender compliance functions to maintain, or even increase the stereotypes based on what people see (Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman & Glick, 2010; Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

Prescriptive stereotypes involve the transformation of a descriptive stereotype from mere description to moral injunction (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2002). These kinds of stereotypes foster bias and discrimination because they represent societal ideals. Because they are ideals, societal norms about what women and men should and should not be, they are likely to be quite rigid and resistant to changes (Zehnter, Olsen & Kirchler, 2018). In fact, prescriptive stereotyping seems to persevere after behavioral information has undercut descriptive stereotyping (Gill, 2004), clearly indicating that descriptive and pre/proscriptive stereotypes represent two different processes with different outcomes.

Because prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes stipulate expectations of women and men and can predict prejudice (Gill, 2004) it is important to know to what extent individuals perceive that agency and communion is desired by society, and to what extent dominance and weakness are undesired, particularly in an egalitarian context such as Sweden.

Stereotypes and self-views on gender stereotypical traits

Little research has explored how individuals see themselves in terms of gender stereotypical traits, and the available research on self-evaluations shows inconsistent findings. For instance, Obioma, Hentschel and Hernandez Bark (2021) found that German women and men rated themselves equally agentic as well as equally communal. That is, German women and men see themselves less in line with gender stereotypes on both agency and communion. Other research from the US showed that women see themselves as more communal than men see themselves (Hentschel, Heilman & Peus, 2019; Spence & Buckner, 2000), and hence comply to the gender stereotypes of communion. Results for self-ascribed agency are more complex. Some studies found that men ascribe themselves with more agency than women do (Diehl, Owen & Youngblade, 2004; Powell & Butterfield, 2015), while an older study found no gender differences in self-ascribed agency (Twenge, 1997). Moreover, some studies found that gender differences in self-ascribed agency depend on the type of agentic trait being considered (Hentschel *et al.*, 2019; Spence & Buckner, 2000), such that there are no differences in agency facets like competence (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann & Sczesny, 2020). I have not found any studies assessing self-ratings of dominance and weakness.

While the research on self-views of gender stereotypical traits is scarce, there is even less when it comes to comparing self-views and prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes. Such a comparison is important, because gender stereotypes can become internalized standards of behavior and subsequently essential parts of people's identities and self-concepts (Wood & Eagly, 2015). If individuals internalize prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes, this means that people might come to comply with gendered expectations, and we would expect that self-ratings show a similar pattern as prescriptive and proscriptive stereotype ratings. However, as discussed earlier, stereotypes are sometimes discussed as being rooted in role divisions on the labor market (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012), which could also influence how individuals see themselves. Because Sweden is perceived by its citizens as highly egalitarian (Swedish Gender Equality

Agency, 2022), self-perceptions may be less stereotypical than the perception of the societal stereotypes. Moreover, in one study, Swedish citizens largely underestimated the gender segregation in highly gender segregated jobs (Gustafsson Sendén, Klysing, Lindqvist & Renström, 2019), which could also contribute to perceptions of women and men, and perhaps the self, in less stereotypical terms.

If self-ratings of gender stereotypical traits are less pronounced than pre- and proscriptive stereotypes, this results in a discrepancy between prescriptive/proscriptive stereotypes and the view of the self. A discrepancy between prescriptive/proscriptive gender stereotypes and self-view may have consequences for behaviors, where people might be motivated to modify their behavior to be gender compliant since such compliance is socially rewarding (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Thus, discrepancies between self and perceptions of what is desired might function as a barrier to apply for certain jobs or to present oneself authentically, ultimately perpetuating the gender segregation and gender stereotypes.

Overview and hypotheses

This study aims to analyze how Swedish citizens rate prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes and position these ratings in relation to self-ascribed gender stereotypical traits. Hence, the purpose is three-fold. The first aim is to describe how desired individuals perceive that it is for a woman to be communal and for a man to be agentic, and how undesired it is for a woman to show dominance and for a man to show weakness. The second aim is to describe how women and men perceive themselves on these traits. The third aim is to compare the stereotype ratings to the self-ratings. This is done by comparing women's perceptions of how desired/undesired it is for women to be communal/dominant with women's self-ratings of communion/dominance, and by comparing men's perceptions of how desired/undesired it is for men to be agentic/weak with men's self-ratings of agency/weakness.

Prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes are beliefs about what is desired from a woman or a man in society and hence represent how individuals perceive the societal view to be. Because prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes represent normative ideals (Gill, 2004), these are expected to follow the same patterns as has been found in previous research where women are supposed to be communal, but not dominant, and men are supposed to be agentic but not weak (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

If gender stereotypes are internalized, we could suspect that self-views would follow prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes. However, Sweden is among the most gender egalitarian countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2022), and citizens seem to believe that gender equality is greater than it is (Gustafsson Sendén *et al.*, 2019). If such ideas are internalized, we would expect that self-views that are less gender-stereotypical. Yet at the same time there is still major horizontal and vertical segregation on the labor market (Ellingsæter, 2014; Statistics Sweden, 2022; Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2023), which also could influence self-views. The following hypotheses were specified:

Hypothesis 1: Prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes will follow traditional gender patterns, such that perceived

beliefs about the societal view of women is that they should be more communal than men but less dominant, and that men should be more agentic than women, but less weak.

Because it is expected that self-views will be less stereotypical, it is expected that there will be discrepancies between the perceived societal view of women and men and the self-view.

Hypothesis 2: Women will see themselves as less communal than they perceive that the societal stereotype for women is, and men will see themselves as less agentic than they perceive that the societal stereotype for men is.

Because no studies exploring self-views of dominance and weakness were found, no hypotheses about these traits in relation to self-ratings were formulated.

METHODS

The present study was part of a larger research program dedicated to exploring gender stereotypes across several nations (www.towardsgenderharmony.se). Participants were undergraduate students both from psychology and other areas at three large universities in Sweden. Data was collected during 2019. Because the present data is part of a larger project, participants also responded to other measures than the ones presented here (for more information see <https://osf.io/fqd4p/>).

Participants

Participants were students at three major universities in Sweden. Participants were recruited via mailing lists and announcements on course platforms. Participants were rewarded a cinema voucher for their time. In total, 679 participants who cleared the attention checks were included in the sample. Out of these, 342 self-identified as women, 327 as men, eight as non-binary and two did not identify with any gender. In the statistical analyses, binary gender woman and man were used. No other inclusion or exclusion criteria were used. Because the survey was in Swedish only, only participants fluent in Swedish could participate. Age ranged from 17 to 66 ($M = 26$, $SD = 7.76$).

Procedure

Participants were recruited by research assistants through e-mail and course platforms and were asked to take part in a large international project about how people perceive others in today's society. They were given a link to the survey and could choose to participate any time they wanted. They were informed that the survey would take about 25 min and about ethics, such as voluntary participation, right to withdraw and data handling. Before starting the survey, the participant was required to provide informed consent. The study was approved by the Ethics Review Board in Sweden, Dnr 2019-04082. The survey was performed online. After the survey, participants were thanked and reimbursed for their time.

Instruments

Four domains of gender stereotype traits were measured: agency and communion, weakness and dominance in terms of how women and men rate themselves, and how they perceive that women and men should or should not be. All domains included 12 traits reflecting central parts of the domains. Example traits for communion are compassionate, warm, helpful, and for agency, decisive, competent, independent. Traits for weakness included weak, submissive, childish and for dominance, aggressive, dominant, arrogant.

Gender stereotypes for women and men were introduced with the question "How desirable is it in your society for a woman [man] to

possess each of the following traits?" Participants indicated to what extent each item was perceived to be desirable or not on a scale from 1 = Not desirable at all, to 7 = Highly desirable. The same formulation was used for both prescriptive (desired traits) and proscriptive (not acceptable) traits. This measurement is similar to what has been used earlier to measure prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002).

Mean indices were computed for women stereotypes of communion ($\alpha = 0.86$), agency ($\alpha = 0.89$), weakness ($\alpha = 0.90$), and dominance ($\alpha = 0.88$); and for men stereotypes of communion ($\alpha = 0.92$), agency ($\alpha = 0.89$), weakness ($\alpha = 0.84$) and dominance ($\alpha = 0.91$).

Self-assessed traits were introduced with the question "Rate the extent to which each of the traits describes you personally." Participants indicated to what extent each characteristic described themselves on a scale from 1 = Does not describe me at all, to 7 = Describes me very well. Mean indices were computed for self-views of communion ($\alpha = 0.84$), agency ($\alpha = 0.83$), weakness ($\alpha = 0.84$), and dominance ($\alpha = 0.83$).

A further eight difference indices were created, four for each gender, corresponding to the four stereotypes (agency, communion, weakness and dominance) to compare prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes to self-ratings.

RESULTS

The results section is structured as follows. First, ratings of pre- and proscriptive stereotypes corresponding to H1 are presented. Second, analyses of self-views and comparisons to stereotypes, corresponding to H2 are presented.

First, analyses of prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes are presented. H1 stated that the societal perception of women is that they should be more communal than men but less dominant, and that men should be more agentic than women but less weak. A repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) with trait (communion, agency, weakness, dominance) and target gender (woman, man) as repeated factors was performed. The analysis showed a main effect of type of trait, $F(3,659) = 3,894,06$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.86$. Agency was rated as most desired ($M = 5.48$, $SE = 0.03$) followed by communion ($M = 5.28$, $SE = 0.03$). Weakness was seen as least desired ($M = 2.34$, $SE = 0.03$) and dominance a little more accepted ($M = 2.65$, $SE = 0.03$). All pairwise comparisons using Bonferroni corrections were significant, indicating that all traits differed from each other, $ps < 0.001$. There was also a main effect of target, $F(1,659) = 26.76$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.04$, such that women targets ($M = 3.95$, $SE = 0.02$) were rated higher overall compared to men targets ($M = 3.88$, $SE = 0.02$). Of more relevance, there was a significant interaction between type of trait and target, $F(3,659) = 231.30$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.26$. To explore these differences, follow-up *t*-tests between the target genders was performed for each trait. The results from these tests and means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The results are illustrated in Fig. 1.

As can be seen in Table 1 and Fig. 1, women targets were desired to be more communal than men, but less dominant. Men targets were desired to be more agentic than women, but less weak. Hence, these results support H1, that pre- and proscriptive stereotypes follow traditional patterns.

The second hypothesis stated that women will see themselves as less communal than they perceive that the societal stereotype for women is, and men will see themselves as less agentic than they perceive that the societal stereotype for men is. Before testing the differences between stereotype ratings and self-ratings, analyses of self-ratings are presented. A mixed ANOVA was

performed with self-ratings on the four types of traits as repeated factor (communion, agency, weakness, dominance) and binary participant gender as a between groups factor. There was a main effect of type of trait, $F(3,665) = 1,144,56$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.63$. The participants rated themselves highest on communion ($M = 5.15$, $SE = 0.03$) followed by agency ($M = 4.80$, $SE = 0.03$). Dominance was rated lowest ($M = 3.03$, $SE = 0.03$) and weakness was slightly more prevalent among the self-ratings ($M = 3.20$, $SE = 0.04$). Pairwise follow-up comparisons with Bonferroni corrections showed that all traits differed from each other, $ps < 0.01$. The interaction between trait and participant gender was also significant, $F(3,665) = 12,24$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$. To explore this, *t*-tests between women and men participants were performed for each self-rated trait. These results are shown in Table 2 and illustrated in Fig. 2. As can be seen in Table 2 and Fig. 2, both women and men rated themselves equal on all traits, except for communion, where women rated themselves higher than men rated themselves.

To test H2, a difference index between women's ratings of prescriptive stereotypes for women (communion) and women's self-ratings on communion were created. Conversely, a difference index for men's ratings on prescriptive stereotypes for men (agency) and men's self-ratings on agency were created. There were no clear hypotheses about dominance and weakness, but exploratory these difference indices were also created, that is, women's ratings of proscriptive stereotypes for women (dominance) and women's self-ratings of dominance, and men's proscriptive stereotypes for men (weakness) and men's self-ratings of weakness.

The indices were computed by taking the stereotype rating and subtracting the self-rating. This means that if the index is 0, there is no difference between the stereotype rating and the self-rating. If the index is positive, the stereotype rating is higher than the self-rating, and if the index is negative, the stereotype rating is lower than the self-rating. To test if the means presented in Table 3 differ from 0 (no difference in stereotype- and self-ratings), one-sample *t*-tests with test value 0 were performed. These results are presented in Table 3, where highlighted areas represent hypothesized effects, and visualized in Fig. 3, where error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

H2 stated that women will see themselves as less communal than they perceive that the societal stereotype for women is. As can be seen in Table 3 and Fig. 3, women rated themselves lower than their perceived stereotype for women on communion (index is positive), indicating that there is a discrepancy between perceptions of what is perceived to be socially desired for a woman and the view of the self regarding communion. H2 further stated that men will see themselves as less agentic than they perceive that the societal stereotype for men is. Again, as can be seen in Table 3 and Fig. 3, men rated themselves lower than their perceived stereotype for men on agency (index is positive), indicating a discrepancy.

Exploratory, potential differences between self-ratings and proscriptive stereotypes for dominance (for women) and weakness (for men) were tested. As can be seen in Table 3 and Fig. 3, both these indices were negative indicating that participants rated themselves higher on these traits than they rated the stereotype. Hence, women rated themselves as more

Table 1. Means and standard deviations for women and men targets across the four stereotype dimensions, as well as *t*-values and effect sizes of difference tests

Trait	Target gender		Mean difference	<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Men	Women			
Communion	4.87 (1.12)	5.68 (0.82)	-0.81	-15.71***	0.60
Agency	5.71 (0.86)	5.11 (0.95)	0.60	14.41***	0.55
Weakness	1.96 (0.72)	2.72 (1.07)	-0.76	-16.51***	0.64
Dominance	3.00 (1.12)	2.31 (0.88)	0.69	12.25***	0.48

Note: ****p* < 0.001.

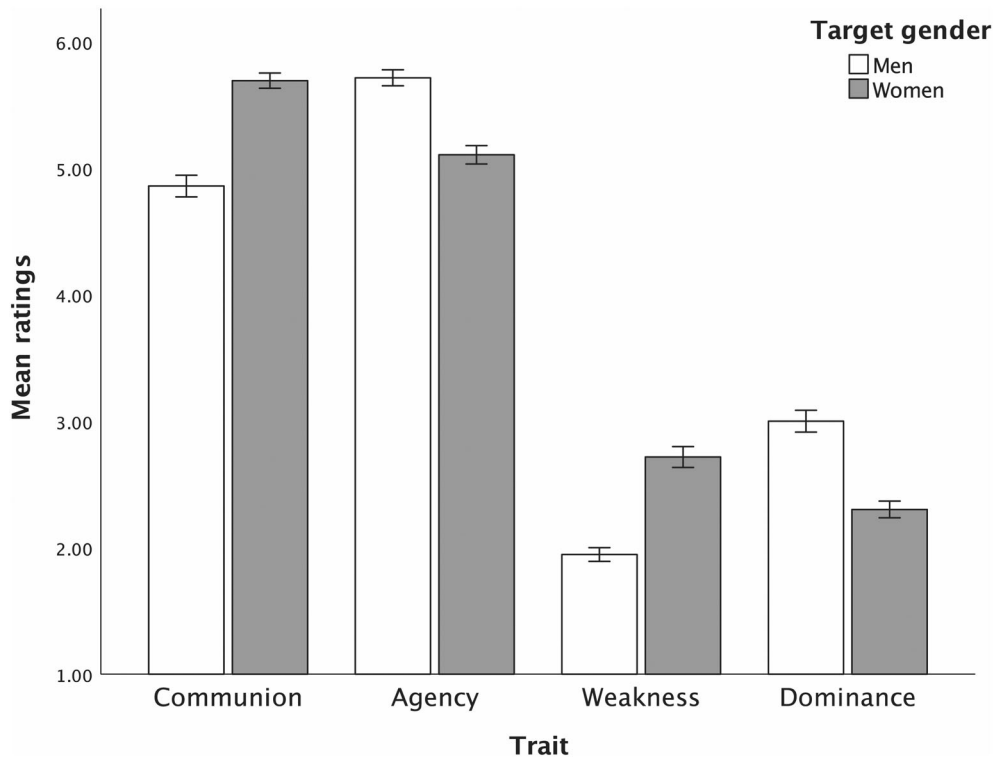


Fig. 1. Mean ratings of the four traits split on target gender. Note: Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Table 2. Means and standard deviations for men and women targets across the four dimensions of stereotype content, as well as *t*-values and effect sizes of difference tests

	Participant gender		<i>t</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
	Women	Men		
Communion	5.37 (0.72)	4.93 (0.80)	7.46***	0.58
Agency	4.84 (0.82)	4.76 (0.85)	1.25	0.10
Weakness	3.24 (0.87)	3.16 (0.92)	1.08	0.08
Dominance	2.98 (0.84)	3.07 (0.83)	1.33	0.10

Note: ****p* < 0.001.

dominant than what they perceive is acceptable for women in their society to be. Dominance is perceived to be proscriptive for women, yet women assign themselves a higher level of dominance than what they believe is accepted by society. The same was true for weakness when it comes to men. Men rated

themselves as weaker than they perceive that the stereotype for men regarding weakness is. Again, weakness is proscriptive for men, yet men see themselves as weaker than what they perceive is accepted by society.

Finally, tests of gender stereotype incongruent traits are also presented (communion and dominance for men, and agency and weakness for women). The test of stereotypes for men's communion compared to men's self-rated communion, was non-significant indicating that men rate themselves as communal as they perceive that the desired societal view of men is. Further, women rated themselves lower on agency than they perceive the stereotype for agency to be, indicating that they saw themselves as less agentic than they perceive what is desired in society. When it comes to the negative traits, the same pattern is observed. Women see themselves as weaker than what is acceptable in society and men see themselves as more dominant than what is acceptable by society. These latter effects were smaller compared to the gender-congruent stereotypes.

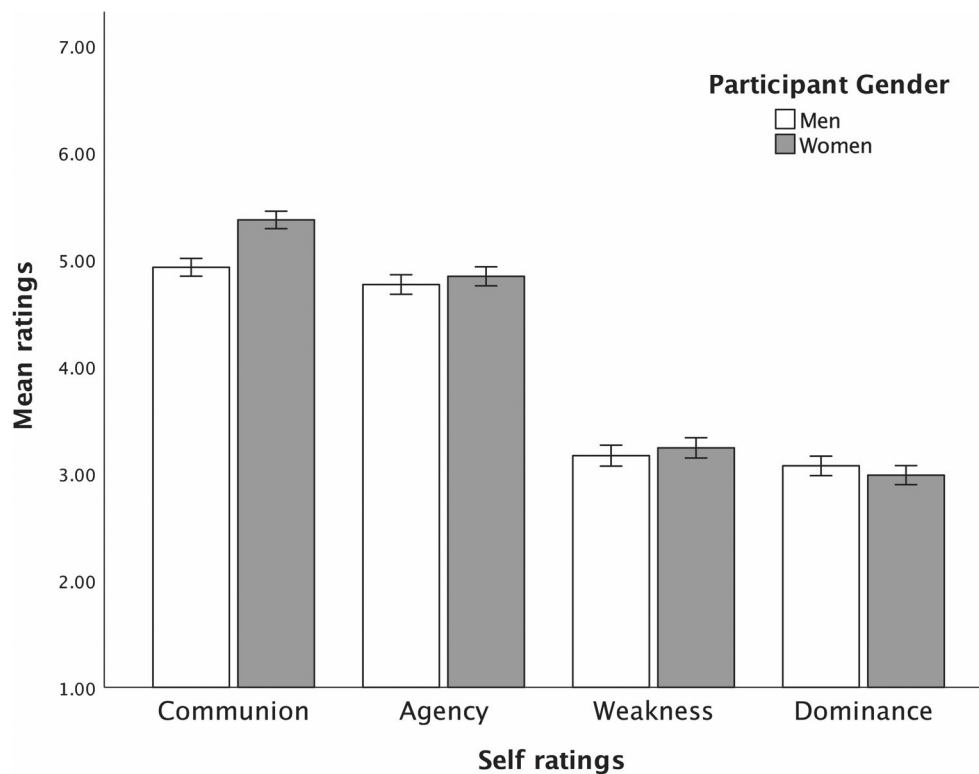


Fig. 2. Mean self-ratings of the four traits split on participant gender.

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for the difference indices, as well as *t*-tests comparing the means to 0 and effect sizes (Cohen's *d*)

Participant gender	Communion		Agency		Weakness		Dominance	
	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>d</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>d</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>d</i>)	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i> (<i>d</i>)
Women	0.51 (0.88)	10.64*** (0.58)	0.23 (1.17)	3.74*** (0.20)	-0.41 (1.33)	-5.74*** (0.31)	-0.81 (1.03)	-14.43*** (0.79)
Men	-0.02 (1.17)	-0.33 (0.02)	0.85 (1.05)	14.69*** (0.82)	-1.11 (1.08)	-18.62*** (1.03)	-0.17 (1.27)	-2.46* (0.14)

Notes: Means are for women and men participants separately.

Test value = 0.

****p* < 0.001.

**p* < 0.05.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated prescriptive and proscriptive gender stereotypes regarding communion, agency, weakness and dominance in Sweden, and related these stereotypes to self-evaluations on gendered traits.

The results showed that prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes are strong in Sweden, that is, the view of how women and men “should” and “should not” be, follow traditional patterns such that women are supposed to be more communal than men, and men are supposed to be more agentic than women. Also, women should be less dominant, and men should be less weak. These results mirror what has been found in previous research in the US context (Koenig, 2018; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Hence, while several studies show that descriptive stereotypes are fluid and change with time and context (Bosak *et al.*, 2017; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Diekmann, Eagly, Mladinic & Ferreira, 2005; Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006; Garcia-Retamero, Muller & Lopez-Zafra, 2011; Gustafsson

Sendén *et al.*, 2019; Wilde & Diekmann, 2005), prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes persist and seem to be less subject to change across varying contexts. Past research has indicated that descriptive stereotypes might be changing faster than prescriptive stereotypes (Zehnter *et al.*, 2018). One potential reason is that the pre- and proscriptive stereotypes portray societal ideals about what is desired from women and men. It has been argued as descriptive stereotypes change more rapidly as they are directly related to observed behavior (distribution of labor; Eagly & Wood, 2012) than prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes that rather are associated with normative values. This is important since it indicates a conflict between what people believe is desired for women and men and the inferences they draw about how women and men are, based on daily observations.

The results from this study are consequential. Given that Sweden is ranked among the most egalitarian countries in the world (World Economic Forum, 2022), and Swedish citizens perceive Sweden to be a highly gender egalitarian society (Gender

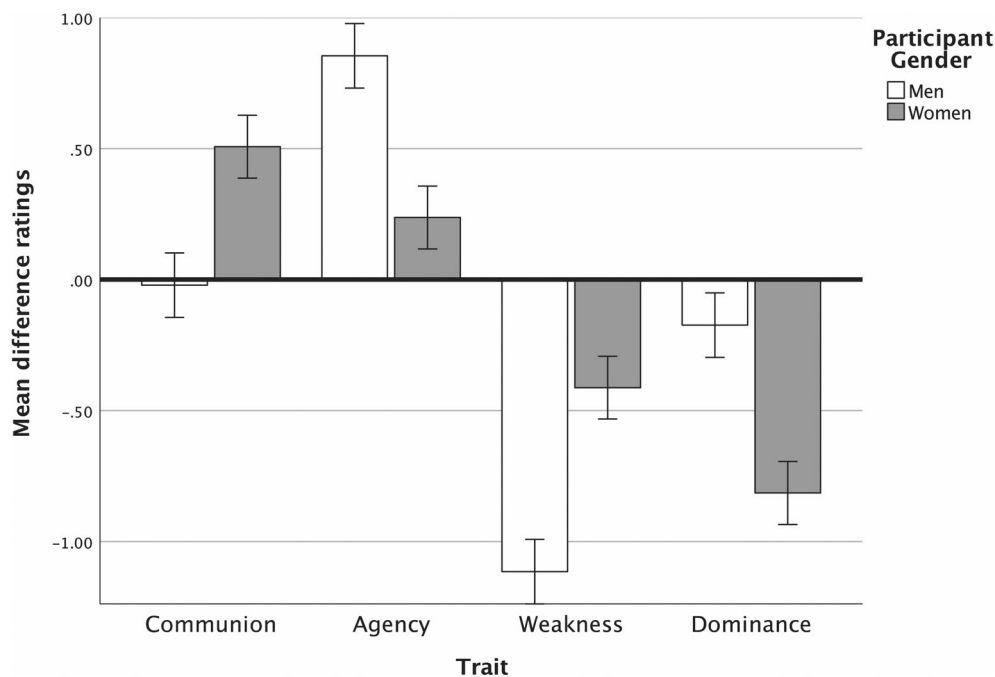


Fig. 3. Mean differences compared to 0. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Equality Agency, 2022), the fact that pre- and proscriptive stereotypes seem to prevail is worrisome. Both policy and research has focused much on feminist progress (such as affirmative actions, parental leave policies, etc.), which may have consequences for descriptive stereotypes. However, if the normative ideals about women and men persist, individuals who violate these will still be negatively evaluated (Moss-Racusin *et al.*, 2010; Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

Concerning how individuals view themselves, these views may be more closely tied to everyday experiences – how they themselves live their lives. If that is true, we would expect self-views to be less stereotypical than pre- and proscriptive stereotypes. In fact, since descriptive stereotypes reflect what people perceive that women and men do in society, what roles they perform, we could expect that self-views are more closely tied to descriptive stereotypes. We cannot test this claim with the current data. However, we know from previous research exploring descriptive gender stereotypes that women and men in Sweden were seen as equally agentic, but women were seen as more communal than men (Gustafsson Sendén *et al.*, 2019). Hence, the previously found descriptive stereotypes align with the results of self-ratings from the present study, where women and men rated themselves equal on agency, but women rated themselves higher on communion. One tentative conclusion is therefore that self-views on gendered traits are connected to descriptive stereotypes. Moreover, in the previous study men were seen as having slightly more negative masculine traits (e. g. dominance) than women and women were seen as having slightly more negative feminine traits (e.g. weakness). While the corresponding differences on self-ratings were not significant in the present study, the pattern is similar. Taken together, the results imply that young women and men of today view themselves in less gender stereotypical ways. Such an interpretation could be a consequence of the strong gender egalitarianism enforced in Sweden. For instance, women

see themselves as equally agentic as men see themselves. Also, even though men see themselves as less communal than women see themselves, they still rate themselves high on communion.

One recent study documented how self-views differed in countries varying on gender equality (Kosakowska-Berezecka *et al.*, 2022). They found that differences between women and men in self-rated agency was smaller in more gender-egalitarian countries than in less egalitarian countries. The difference was mainly driven by men in less egalitarian countries who viewed themselves as more agentic than men in more egalitarian countries did. Regarding communion, there was a general negative trend such that as national level gender equality increased, self-rated communion decreased. This decrease was larger for men, leading to a larger difference in self-rated communion between women and men in more gender-egalitarian countries, which is a bit counter-intuitive. While this study is informative for positioning the findings of self-views in the present study in a larger context, it does not say anything about the relation to prescriptive or proscriptive stereotypes.

Discrepancies between societal pre- and proscriptive stereotypes and self-views

As noted, the pre- and proscriptive stereotypes follow traditional patterns where women should be communal but not dominant, and men should be agentic but not weak (Koenig, 2018; Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, self-ratings of these traits showed that only communion differed between women and men such that women saw themselves as more communal than men. Consolidating these findings imply that there are discrepancies between how the societal stereotypes for women and men are perceived to be and how women and men see themselves.

Significant effects for all relevant traits for women and men participants were found, that is, women rated themselves lower on

communion than what they perceived is desired by a woman in society, and men rated themselves lower on agency compared to what they perceived is desired by a man in society. While there were no clear hypotheses about the proscriptive stereotypes dominance and weakness, they show an inversed pattern. That is, women rated themselves higher on dominance than what they perceive is accepted for women by society and men rated themselves higher on weakness than what they perceive is accepted by society.

While there were no hypotheses about gender-incongruent traits (communion for men and agency for women), the results showed that men rated themselves as communal as they perceive the societal stereotype for men to be, while women saw themselves as less agentic than they perceive the societal stereotype for women to be. Regarding the proscriptive stereotypes, women saw themselves as significantly weaker than they perceive the stereotypes for women's weakness, but the effect was smaller than the discrepancy for women's dominance. Similarly, men saw themselves are more dominant than the perceived stereotype for men's dominance, but again the effect was smaller than the difference for men's dominance.

Taken together, our results indicate that overall, both women and men tend to view themselves as highly discrepant from how they themselves think that women and men should be in their society. According to self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, Roney, Crowe & Hymes, 1994), such discrepancies between actual and desired self, or ought self, could lead to negative psychological consequences, such as negative self-evaluations. A potential consequence is that individuals adapt their behavior to better fit in with the stereotype for their gender, thus perpetuating gender stereotypes (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Our sample consisted of young people, and it is possible that, as they get older, they adapt to their gender roles becoming more gender stereotypical. Consequently, this could lead to that women and men restrict themselves in how they behave or what roles they submit to in order to fulfill perceived gender norms. Past research has indicated that gender-incongruent behavior might be punished or negatively evaluated by others (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). However, it is not certain that the perceived societal stereotypes correspond to the individual's desired or ought self. That is, the individual may be knowledgeable about the societal desired view, but not agree with it and hence themselves not submit to this view. If that is the case, then discrepancies would not lead to negative outcomes in terms of self-view. Hence, how gender stereotype incongruence in self-views influence feelings and behavior needs further research. In the present study, it is not possible to say anything about consequences of the observed discrepancies such as psychological health, or behaviors, but this should be explored further.

Limitations and future directions

Some limitations are worth noting. First, the present research did not include similar ratings on descriptive stereotypes. While it is important to compare self-views with prescriptive/proscriptive ratings, it would have been informative to also include descriptive stereotype ratings, that is, how women and men are seen in society. In a recent study, Gustafsson Sendén *et al.* (2019) found that the descriptive stereotype for agency did not differ for

women and men targets at the present time in Sweden, but the stereotype for communion differed such that women were seen as more communal than men. The pattern is hence similar to the self-views found in the present research.

Second, another limitation is the sample, which consisted of students. While care was taken to include a variety of students from different disciplines, the group is still not representative of the general population. Yet, students tend to be younger and often more progressive than the general population, which makes the results even more interesting. The fact that this group still has pronounced prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes is worrisome. In relation to the sample, cross-cultural work is also encouraged. The present study was conducted in Sweden, and as previous research show (Kosakowska-Berezecka *et al.*, 2022; Olsson *et al.*, 2023) national level gender equality and individual level gender attitudes matter for gender egalitarian behaviors and self-attributions.

One important future venue is to explore the consequences of the observed discrepancies. For instance, do these discrepancies lead to negative psychological well-being as would be predicted by self-discrepancy theory (Higgins *et al.*, 1994), or do they reflect individuals' opposition to the prescriptive and proscriptive stereotypes. Other consequences that should be explored are if these discrepancies are related to occupational choices for instance, which may influence stereotypes in the future, that is, does the magnitude of the difference on an individual level matter for the type of occupation one seeks out? Two possibilities are plausible. First, a larger discrepancy on individual level could motivate individuals to seek out gender-stereotypical occupations in an effort to remedy the difference (Rudman *et al.*, 2012). Because role congruity is encouraged and lack of fit between gender and role is punished (Eagly & Diekmann, 2005; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman & Caleo, 2018), it seems logical that people try to change their behavior to be more in line with what they perceive to be desired and expected by them (Rudman *et al.*, 2012).

However, the opposite is also plausible. Individuals with a large difference between self-view and pre/proscriptive stereotypes may be motivated to seek out gender-incongruent occupations that better reflect their view of themselves. As stipulated by social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012), gender stereotypes are rooted in the distribution of labor and if this distribution changes, so will the (descriptive) stereotypes associated with different roles. This malleability has been shown in earlier research across both time and context (Bosak *et al.*, 2017; Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Diekmann *et al.*, 2005; Diekmann & Goodfriend, 2006; Garcia-Retamero *et al.*, 2011; Gustafsson Sendén *et al.*, 2019; Wilde & Diekmann, 2005). Consequently, these two possible scenarios have very different long-term effects where the first would increase or at least preserve gender stereotypes in the future, while the latter would decrease gender stereotypes. Hence, there is a need to further our understanding of the consequences of the observed discrepancies.

CONCLUSION

This study showed that Swedish participants perceive the societal stereotypes for women and men on the traits communion, agency,

dominance and weakness to follow traditional gendered patterns such that women should be communal but not dominant and men should be agentic but not weak. Further, women and men did not differ much in how they perceived that they themselves possessed these traits, with the exception that women saw themselves as more communal than men saw themselves. Consequently, there are discrepancies between the perceived societal ideals and the self-views. Mainly, women and men see themselves as possessing less of traits that they should have according to their perception of the societal norm (communion for women and agency for men), and as possessing too much of what they should not be (dominance for women and weakness for men). Such discrepancies may have negative individual consequences in terms of wellbeing as well as societal consequences in terms of gender equality.

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