

Hen can do it!

Effects of using a gender-neutral pronoun in recruitment

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During recent years there has been a heated debate in many media in Sweden regarding a new gender-neutral pronoun; *hen*. It has been suggested as an alternative to *hon* (she) and *han* (he). The debate has revealed many strong opinions and feelings (Milles, 2011), where the use of *hen* has been described as confusing and negative for children (Lagerwall, 2012). At the same time, *hen* is an important step toward gender equality (Lagerwall, 2012; Milles, Salmson, & Tomicic, 2012). The attitudes surrounding *hen* and its possible consequences are many and strong, but to date there is no empirical research about the psychological consequences of the addition of a gender-neutral pronoun in a natural gender language that have gendered pronouns. For instance there is no research on how such an addition could contribute to gender equality in society. The current situation in Sweden is unique. No other country has successfully introduced a third gender-neutral pronoun that has actually caught on in media and the population. Hence, the main objective of the present research is to investigate how such a pronoun may affect social cognitive thinking about gender. Specifically we do this by investigating if gender bias in a recruitment situation may be reduced by the usage of *hen*, instead of using the gendered pronouns *hon* or *han* when describing an applicant for a position.

Background

Gender is one of the primary categories in the human social world. Gender is processed in a matter of milliseconds when meeting new people (Bennett, Sani, Hopkins, Agostini, & Malucchi, 2000; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), and this identification affects how subsequent information is processed, and the conclusions drawn about the individual. The fact that gender is a primary and active category is supposed to both contribute to a gender segregated

labor market (Eagly & Steffen, 1984) and explain why gender stereotypes are difficult to change (Fiske & Taylor, 1991).

Language and communication have a large impact on the creation of a common ground and reality, for instance concerning what is considered as normal or desirable (Clark & Brennan, 1991; Hardin & Higgins, 1996). Language is also seen as one of the most important tools for constructing what is perceived as 'male' or 'female' (Stahlberg et al. 2007). For example, a purely grammatical gender definition might affect judgments of an object. In one study, German-speaking participants described a bridge (*die Brücke* – feminine form) as 'beautiful', 'slim' and 'serene', while Spanish-speaking participants described a bridge (*el Puente* – masculine form) as 'great', 'dangerous' and 'tall' – that is, in agreement with stereotypes about males and females. These effects were found even when the experiment was conducted in English where nouns are genderless. Hence no cues of gender, even grammatical, were present (Boroditsky, 2011; Boroditsky, Schmidt, & Phillips, 2003; Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003). In addition, Gustafsson Sendén (in this volume) demonstrated that the words 'he' and 'she' are used in different contexts in news media in such a way that gender stereotypes are strengthened and maintained. For instance, in news messages, 'she' is more often presented with gender labels and as being passive, whereas 'he' is more active and heterogeneously described. Thus, it is obvious that language and gender stereotypes are closely intertwined.

Three language groups

Most of the world's languages can be categorized into three separate groups depending on how much gender they contain (Prewitt-Freilino, Caswell, & Laakso, 2012). While all languages have words for man and woman, there are large differences between languages concerning to what extent gender pervades words, grammar and syntax. The language group containing the highest level of gender has gender specified nouns and gender specified pronouns, such as French, Spanish or German. Then there is the group defined as 'natural gender languages' not containing gender specified nouns, but gender specified pronouns, such as Swedish, English or Norwegian. Finally, there are gender-neutral languages, which lack both gender specified nouns and gender specified pronouns, such as Indian, Turkish, or Finnish (Stahlberg, Braun, Irmen, & Sczesny, 2007). Prewitt-Freilino and colleagues (2012) investigated if there was any relation between the level of gender in a language and the national level of gender equality. They found

that the most gender equal countries were not the gender-neutral ones, but rather the ‘natural gender’ countries with gender specified pronouns but not gender specified nouns (Prewitt-Freilino et al. 2012). The Swedish language belongs to this group. It may at first glance seem counterintuitive that the countries with gender-neutral languages are not the most gender equal countries, nevertheless it has been demonstrated that gender-neutral pronouns, words or names often are subjected to what has been labeled a ‘male bias’ (Lenton, Sedikides, & Bruder, 2009; Mckelvie & Waterhouse, 2005). This means that ‘neutral’ words are in fact most often connected to masculinity, and that the prototypical human being is male, unless there is explicit evidence of the contrary (Stahlberg et al. 2007). Further, this bias has been found in the natural gender languages as well, that is, the countries that are most gender equal. Hence, by neutralizing a natural gender language by for example replacing the feminine form with a generic (traditionally masculine) form, one is left with a male bias (Gabriel, Gygax, Sarrasin, Garnham, & Oakhill, 2008). To reduce the male bias, double forms are sometimes used, i.e. she/he (Stahlberg et al. 2007). This change seems to have positive effects on the individuals’ cognitive representations of gender; jobs that are described using him/her seem to be more gender balanced (Romaine, 2001; Stahlberg et al. 2007). Still, using double forms elicit representations of mostly males (Wojahn, 2013).

Taken together, these studies clearly demonstrate that the use of only gender-neutral pronouns (as in genderless languages) is not sufficient, neither is it sufficient to remove feminine forms and replace them with masculine generic terms or use double forms. This means that we are left with a dilemma of how to formulate texts about persons whose gender is not known, or is not important, as when it is desired that gender does not influence the judgment of a person.

The Swedish case

The above literature review leaves a sour taste in the mouth. Even though some reforms have indicated that it is possible to reduce gender bias, it still seems that completely escaping it may be impossible. Some scholars have pointed to the need to be creative in this process and simply come up with new words (see e.g. Wayne, 2004). As we began this article, this has already been made in Sweden, where a third gender-neutral pronoun has been suggested as a complement to the previous two gendered pronouns *han* (he) and *hon* (she). In 1994, the linguist Hans Karlgren suggested using the gen-

der-neutral pronoun *hen* in the language column of the Swedish newspaper Svenska Dagbladet, but the word is actually much older, and the linguist Rolf Dunås mentioned it in Upsala Nya Tidning already in 1966 (Björkman, 2012). However, it never caught on with the general population, until very recently. The proposal to use *hen* is today a language amendment with the explicit purpose to contribute to gender equality and to challenge the heteronormativity trend (Milles, 2011).

To our knowledge, Swedish is the only language in the world that successfully has introduced a complementary gender-neutral pronoun. Other countries have tried, on several occasions, but the suggestions have never really caught on in the general population (see e.g. Baron, 1986). Within transgender English-speaking communities of today there is a trend to use gender-neutral pronouns such as *ze* and *hir* (cf. Love, 2004; Schindel, 2008), yet these pronouns are not commonly known outside LGBT communities although there has been explicit suggestions to use them more broadly (Wayne, 2005).

Compared to the English language and the words *ze* and *hir*, the Swedish word *hen* is well known among the Swedish-speaking population. The usage of *hen* has expanded from transgender, feminist, linguistic, and gender pedagogical communities to other parts of the society (see e.g. Josephsson, 2010), and during the last years there has been an ongoing cultural debate about the existence and use of the word where a lot of people express strong feelings in relation to *hen* (see e.g. Åsell, 2012; Dalén, 2012; Lagerwall, 2012). In 2012, Språkrådet (The Language Council of Sweden, Institute for Language and Folklore), which provides recommendations on issues related to language, recommended that *hen* should not be used. However, in 2013, these guidelines were changed. The recommendations now is that *hen* could be used as a gender-neutral option if it is used with care since it may draw the recipients' attention from the content (Språkrådet, 2013). *Hen* is thus breaking ground and will probably become a natural part of the Swedish everyday vocabulary. This is also shown in how the word is used in Swedish media. During 2012, the use of the word increased by over 1000%, compared to 2011 (Svensson, 2012). During the first 6 months of 2012 the word was mostly seen in the debate about the word itself, while during the second half of 2012, the word was mostly used in texts, unrelated to the debate. In line with this, Ledin and Lyngfelt (2013) show that the use of *hen* in blogs increased during 2012 where the most popular use was to describe a person of unknown gender. However, the authors argue that *hen* cannot be considered a natural part of the written language, since it has not had a very large

impact in newspapers. However, Milles (2013) recently showed that the frequency of the word has increased in newspapers during 2013, but is still used relatively seldom. Ledin and Lyngfeldt conclude that the use of *hen* is unevenly distributed among the general public, and is used in different contexts.

A person described as *hen* could be a female, a male, or a transgendered or inter-sexed person. However, since the phenomenon is so new there is a lack of research investigating whether *hen* really is perceived as gender-neutral or not. Our overall aim is to investigate psychological consequences, such as gender stereotyping, positive or negative attitudes, to the use of the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*. We chose to do this in a recruitment situation for several reasons, which we will explain below.

The segregated labour market and its possible roots in language

The Swedish labor market is today heavily gender segregated, where only 13 % of the adult population has occupations with an equal gender distribution (SCB, 2012). This is despite the laws against discrimination in Sweden; in relation to recruitment of new personnel, companies and organizations are obliged to actively work for achieve gender balance.

Since language is so closely connected to the transmission of stereotypes, one way to work for a more balanced labor market could be to look over the words used in job advertisements and descriptions of job candidates. Language in recruitment advertisements can be more or less gender-stereotypical, for instance in how a desired candidate is described. To actively work to change language in relation to recruitment could decrease prejudiced and stereotyped (conscious or unconscious) influence of gender in the recruitment process.

Advertisements associated to traditionally feminine jobs are more often described with stereotypically feminine traits such as perceptiveness and focus on relations, while jobs associated to masculinity are more often described in more instrumental terms (Gaucher, Friesen, & Kay, 2011). Choice of words in an ad, might thus prime (i.e. pre-activate) concepts related to male- and femaleness, which affects how men and women are judged during a recruitment process, as well as affects to what extent men and/or women are interested in the announced job. It has earlier been demonstrated that both women and men are more interested in a job when the language in the ad matches their own gender (Gaucher et al., 2011). Thus,

women are more likely to apply for a job that is described in feminine terms, whereas men are more likely to apply for a job described in masculine terms. This functions to uphold the segregated market, when ads are termed in relation to the stereotypicality of the job. In Sweden, gender-discrimination in recruitment is prohibited. In this, advertisements for jobs should be presented as to decrease gender inequality within the field. It is therefore likely that the effects found in Gaucher and colleagues' studies may be less pronounced in a Swedish context. Still, studies show that descriptions of what competence is needed are strongly in line with what gender dominates the field (Westberg, 1996).

Regarding the use of pronouns, matches between an applicant and an ad affects judgments such that a 'she' (compared to a 'he') who applies for a typically feminine job constitutes a better match, which in turn leads to more positive judgments and higher probability of employment (Heilman, 1981). The overall purpose of the present research is to compare which kind of mental representations are evoked from the use of an old and a new form of gender-neutral person descriptions. The hypothesis is that an old form evokes a stronger male bias than a new one, since the new is consciously implemented to reduce the effects of gender (Milles, 2011). Thus, we aim to establish the gender neutrality of *hen* as compared to a traditional gender-neutral description.

Bases for positive or negative evaluations

There are several reasons for expecting that a person being described with the gender-neutral pronoun *hen*, or a person who use the word, would be negatively evaluated. First of all, most people seem to oppose and dislike the word itself (Wojahn, 2013). In addition, there are factors that work against the implementation of anything that is new. For instance, in political psychology, a large body of research indicates that people strongly prefer the system that they currently live in, even though it may not actually be beneficial to themselves (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). In addition, people are reluctant to risk what is known and safe (Bäck, 2013; Bäck & Lindholm, 2014; Eidelman, Pattershall, & Crandall, 2010; Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). People prefer to keep things stable and predictable. A new word, any word, would thus elicit some resistance. However, there is reason to believe that a word that explicitly challenges gender roles should elicit even more resistance. Not knowing the gender of a person leads to uncertain predictions, since no prior knowledge is available to apply, which should be experienced

as discomfort. However, there are still some factors that may lead to positive evaluations of those described with, or who use, *hen*. For instance, it signals progression, compliance to norms of being politically correct, and the taking of gender issues seriously – matters that may be especially important in a recruitment situation.

Overview of present research

Gender bias may enter at different stages of the recruitment process. We are interested in the stage where a professional recruiter has made written evaluations of the applicants. Judgments of these evaluations may be affected by what pronoun is used. Our main goal is to investigate if *hen* is perceived as gender-neutral in comparison to another gender-neutral description. The reason for this is that many of the opponents of the word *hen* claim that it does not add anything to the language, since it is already possible to use gender-neutral descriptions if one wants to express gender in a neutral way. By varying fictional written evaluations of candidates described as either *hen* or ‘the applicant’ (*den sökande* in Swedish), we investigate 1) if there is a male bias connected to ‘the applicant’, as would be expected (Stahlberg et al. 2007), but less so to *hen*, and 2) if negative evaluations of the word *hen* spill over to negative evaluations of a) a person being described as *hen*, or b) a person using the word *hen*. Or, put differently: how is a person described as *hen* perceived and how is someone using *hen* perceived? We aim to answer these questions with two separate experimental studies, where the second experiment was designed to cover possible caveats in the first.

Study 1

In our first experiment we chose a gender-neutral position as team leader for an insurance sales team. This position is according to Official Swedish statistics (SCB, 2012) gender-neutral in the sense that there is an equal distribution of men and women employed within the branch. The reason for choosing a gender-neutral position was to avoid possible stereotypes about the profession affecting later judgments, that is, to isolate our independent variable.

In order to evaluate our overall goal we formulated the following hypotheses:

H1: A description of a person described as *hen* evokes more gender-neutral mental representations than other gender-neutral descriptions (i.e. ‘the applicant’), such that:

- a) *hen* will be less subjected to a male-bias than will the other gender-neutral description, and;
- b) *hen* will be perceived less agentic than the other gender-neutral description (which would be subjected to a male-bias).

H2: Individuals *described* as *hen* are perceived more negatively, and are seen as less hireable than individuals described as he/she/‘the applicant’.

H3: Individuals who *use* the pronoun *hen* are perceived more negatively, than individuals who use he/she/‘the applicant’.

Participants and design

To get a fairly representative sample, we conducted the study at Stockholm Central station. Participants were 80 travellers (54 women, 26 men, mean age = 31.6, $SD = 13.7$), who were approached and asked to take part in a short survey about recruitment, where their task was to judge a candidate for a position, as well as to evaluate the recruiter who had ostensibly written the evaluation. They were informed about anonymity and after participation they were reimbursed with a lottery ticket.

The experiment had four conditions: the described applicant for a fictional job was presented as a *hen*/‘the applicant’/he/she. The last two conditions were mainly used as controls.

Procedure and material

Participants were first given a job description of a neutral position as a sales manager for insurances (SCB, 2012). The description was carefully formulated to avoid interpretations as directed to either a male or female.

The participants were then asked to read a description of a candidate, supposedly written by a professional recruiter. This description was also carefully formulated to avoid any gender references. For instance, the description stated that the applicant was 32 years old, had a bachelor’s degree in business, mentioned previous jobs and stated that the applicant’s interests were travelling, training and socializing. The description started with a paragraph referring to ‘the applicant’, after this first paragraph and throughout the rest of the text the applicant was then either referred to as

‘the applicant’, he, she, or *hen*. Conditions were randomly assigned to the participants.

Following this, the participants were given a questionnaire with questions regarding their judgments. Our dependent measures were ascribed agentic and communal traits to the applicant, hireability (Rudman & Glick, 2001), feelings and judgements of the recruiter, and remembered gender of the applicant. The agentic traits were individualistic, self-sufficient, competitive, independent, hierarchical and autonomous (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$), and the communal traits were cooperative, supportive, kinship-oriented and connected ($\alpha = .73$). All traits were rated on 7-point Likert scales indicating to what extent each trait was characterizing the applicant (1 = *not at all*, to 7 = *very much*), and combined to create mean indices of agentic and communal traits.

Hireability was assessed, using a scale by Rudman & Glick (2001) where the participants were asked to indicate to what extent they:

- (a) would be willing to call the applicant to an interview if they had been recruiters;
- (b) believed the applicant was appropriate for the job;
- (c) would be willing to hire the applicant;
- (d) considered the applicant’s qualifications as sufficient; and finally:
- (e) evaluated the overall qualifications of the candidate.

All items were assessed on 7-point Likert scales where 1 = ‘*not at all willing*’ / ‘*not at all appropriate*’, etc. and 7 = ‘*very willing to call to interview*’, ‘*very appropriate*’, etc. Items were combined to create a mean index of hireability ($\alpha = 0.63$).

We also included a feeling thermometer, where the participants indicated their own feelings towards the applicant ranging from 0 = ‘*very cold feelings*’ to 100 = ‘*very warm feelings*’ on a continuous scale. After this, we assessed what the participants thought about the recruiter who had supposedly written the description, with our intention to measure how people perceive a person using the word *hen*. Participants judged the recruiter on how professional, objective, and trustworthy they believed this person had been, and if they had confidence in the recruiter. Again, answers were assessed on 7-point Likert scales, ranging from 1 = ‘*not at all professional/objective*’, etc. to 7 = ‘*very professional/objective*’, etc. The items were combined to a mean index ($\alpha = 0.87$) of recruiter judgments. Finally, we also had a feeling thermometer assessing the participants feelings for the recruiter, ranging from 0 = ‘*very cold feelings*’ to 100 = ‘*very warm feelings*’.

Lastly, the participant was asked to indicate what gender they remembered that the applicant in the description had. They chose from he, she or *hen*.

Results

To test our first hypothesis, that a description of a person described as *hen* would evoke more gender-neutral mental representations than other gender-neutral descriptions (i.e. ‘the applicant’), we tested first, if participants remembered ‘the applicant’ as being male to a larger extent than when using *hen*, and second if *hen* was rated as less agentic than ‘the applicant’.

In order to test the first part, a chi-square test between condition (*hen*/‘the applicant’) and the remembered gender (he, she, *hen*) was conducted. The relation between these variables was significant, $\chi^2(3, N = 40) = 9.14, p = .03$). Results are presented in Table 1, where we have also included the conditions he/she, for an overview (we have not hypothesis-tested these since it is not relevant here). As can be seen in Table 1, when he or she was used in the description the participants correctly remembered the applicant as a he or as a she respectively. When ‘the applicant’ was used, most participants thought they had read about a man, even though a few of them did not state an answer. When *hen* was used, most people remembered this person as a *hen*, and thus using *hen* evokes a more gender-neutral representation of an individual.

Table 1. Cross-table of remembered gender in description of candidate compared to condition

		Perceived gender			
		he	she	<i>hen</i>	no answer
Gender in description	he	17	0	0	3
	she	0	17	0	2
	<i>hen</i>	6	3	9	2
	‘the applicant’	9	4	1	6

The second part of hypothesis 1 was that individuals described as *hen* would be perceived as more gender-neutral than ‘the applicant’. Here, we expected that ‘the applicant’ would be subjected to a male bias and thus perceived as more agentic than *hen*. In order to test this, we performed an independent samples t-test, using condition (*hen*/‘the applicant’) as independent variables, and the agentic index as dependent variable, but no significant dif-

ference was found, $t = 0.02$, $p > .05$. Thus, it could not be concluded that *hen* is perceived as less agentic and more gender-neutral than ‘the applicant’.

Our second hypothesis was that individuals described as *hen* would be perceived more negatively, and as less hireable than individuals described as he/she/‘the applicant’. In order to test this, we conducted a one-way ANOVA, using condition (he/she/*hen*/‘the applicant’) as independent variable and hireability index as dependent variable. No differences in hireability were found between the conditions, $F(3, 78) = 0.20$, $p > .05$. Thus, when *hen* was used to describe an applicant for a position, the person was not perceived to be less hireable than when using he, she or ‘the applicant’. We also conducted another one-way ANOVA with the feeling thermometer as dependent variable. This analysis did not reveal any significant differences, $F(3,78) = 0.07$, $p > .05$. Again, a person described as *hen* was not perceived as less warm than a person described as a he, she or ‘the applicant’.

Our third hypothesis was that individuals who use the pronoun *hen* would be perceived more negatively than individuals who use he/she/‘the applicant’. Thus, we expected that the recruiter, who in this particular case was using *hen*, would be perceived more negatively and receive lower ratings both on the recruiter index, and on the feeling thermometer. To test this, we conducted two one-way ANOVAs with condition (he, she, *hen*, ‘the applicant’) as independent variable and the recruiter index and feeling thermometer as the dependent variables.

In the first ANOVA, we found a significant difference in the recruiter judgments, $F(3,78) = 2.31$, $p = 0.08$. We performed a Tukey’s post-hoc test in order to investigate what conditions differed. The post-hoc test revealed that when the participant had read about *hen*, they rated the recruiter significantly more positive ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 0.61$) than when they had read about a he ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 1.25$). Thus, this result contradicted our hypothesis that a person who uses the word *hen* would be perceived more negatively than a person who use he, she or ‘the applicant’.

The second ANOVA, assessing whether there were any differences in feelings towards the recruiter did now show any significant effects, $F(3,78) = 1.79$, $p > .05$. Thus, we did not receive support for the notion that a person who use the word *hen* would be perceived more negatively than a person who use another pronoun or a neutral word.

Discussion

Our first hypothesis was partly supported in that most participants who read about ‘the applicant’ tended to remember this person as being a male, while those who read about *hen* had more difficulties to assign *hen* a gender label. However, we did not find any effects on the agentic dimension, indicating that even though our participants perceived the applicant as a male, they did not find this person to be more characterized by male traits, than when *hen* was used. Nor did we find any differences in feelings towards the candidate, indicating that people do not dislike a person who is described as a *hen*.

Even though a significant effect was found when evaluating the user of *hen*, this effect was in the opposite direction to what we had hypothesized – a person who use *hen* was perceived more positively than a person who use gendered pronouns or another neutral word to describe a person. One possible explanation to this finding is that the usage of *hen* might be perceived as progressive, and that the recruitment situation employed in the current study might have elicited thoughts about equality and fairness. In this particular kind of situation, *hen* may be perceived as a probable way to eliminate gender biases.

One possible reason for the lack of results regarding the agentic dimension may be that the descriptions used in the current study were very neutral, and thus it may have been difficult for participants to judge the candidate on gender-specific traits, since information to form such judgment was lacking. Consequently, in order to research if this was the case, a second study was performed.

Study 2

In Study 1, both the job description and the description of the candidate had a neutral language and a neutral description of the announced position. This might have accounted for the lack of effects, since it would leave participants with too little information to form their judgements on. Thus, in Study 2, we aimed at providing participants with more information in the description of the candidate. Study 2 was similar to Study 1, with the exception that we “gendered” the job advertisement to match either a stereotypical man or a stereotypical woman. Another reason for this extension was to investigate how the context affects perceptions of a candidate, depending on the used pronoun or neutral word defining the candidate. Hence, the ad

describing a person being suitable for the position contained either typical feminine or masculine traits, such as a person with a passion for people (typical ‘feminine’ trait) or a seller with a winner instinct (typical ‘masculine’ trait).

We formulated the following hypothesis:

H1: An individual described as *hen* will evoke more gender-neutral mental representations, compared to another gender-neutral description, which will be influenced by the context. That is, represented as more female in a feminine context and more male in a masculine context, such that:

- a) ‘the applicant’ will be remembered as male to a larger extent than *hen*, and:
- b) *hen* will be rated as less communal than ‘the applicant’ in the feminine context and less agentic than ‘the applicant’ in the masculine context.

Participants and design

The participants were again recruited from Stockholm Central train station. This time 194 persons participated in the experiment (109 women, 76 men, mean age: = 37.0, *SD* =18.8). Again, we varied the pronoun in the description of the candidate, such that the candidate was described as a he, she, *hen* or as ‘the applicant’. In addition we varied the context of the job ad so that it was presented in either typical masculine or in typical feminine terms. Thus, the design was a 4 (gender in candidate description: he/she/*hen*/‘the applicant’) X 2 (context gender: male/female).

Procedure and material

The procedure was similar to the procedure in Study 1, where the participants first read the job description, then the description of the candidate, and finally were given the questionnaire assessing communal and agentic traits. The description of the job was now phrased in either masculine or feminine terms. We varied the following attributes of the description, where the underlined parts refer to the female context: Applicant trait: Seller with winner instinct/ passion for people, Abilities: coaching, relation oriented, empathic, supportive, feed-back/ competitive climate, self-confident, autonomous, tough negotiator, Market: highly competitive/ good relations, and Goals: collective/ individual. In all else, the two texts were identical.

Since we argue that most people oppose the use of *hen*, which may be one reason a person described as *hen*, or a person using the pronoun *hen*, could be perceived negatively, we also wanted to be certain that people in fact do oppose the use of *hen*. Hence, we added an item asking participants what they thought about using *hen* as a gender-neutral pronoun. Answers were made on a 7 point Likert scale from 1 = 'not good at all' to 7 = 'very good'. We have also argued that people have strong feelings about *hen*, and thus we added an item asking the participants how strong their opinion regarding the use of *hen* as gender-neutral pronoun was. Again answers ranged from 1 to 7, where 1 = 'not at all strong' to 7 = 'very strong'.

Results

First we wanted to test if people actually dislike the use of *hen* as a gender-neutral pronoun. The mean for this item was 2.87 ($SD = 2.17$), indicating that people in fact do not like the word *hen*, but the variation is quite large, nevertheless, most people (42%) stated that they thought that the use of *hen* was *not good at all* (=1). The participants also held fairly strong opinions about *hen*, with an average rate of 4.08 ($SD = 2.16$). A correlation analysis revealed no relation between attitudes to *hen* and how strong those attitudes were, $r = -.03$, $p > .05$. Thus, strong feelings may be present both with the proponents and the opponents.

The first part of our hypothesis was that *hen*, regardless of context, would not be more often remembered as neither a female nor a male in comparison to when another gender-neutral term was used. Especially, such a term would be more influenced by the gendered context. Thus, we first expected the applicant to be remembered as a female in the feminine context and as male in the masculine context, but that *hen*, regardless of context, would be remembered as neither a female nor a male. Second, we expected that *hen* would be perceived more gender-neutral than 'the applicant', such that *hen* would be rated less communal than 'the applicant' in the feminine context and less agentic than 'the applicant' in the masculine context. To investigate the first part of this hypothesis, we conducted two chi-square analyses, one for the typically masculine ad and one for the typically feminine ad. In both conditions, the applicant was most often remembered as being male; while *hen* was most often remembered as a *hen* in both conditions, see Figure 1 ($\chi^2(3, N = 47) = 12.28$, $p = .006$, and $\chi^2(3, N = 48) = 20.30$, $p < .001$, for the male and female ad, respectively). There was a small tendency for *hen* to be remembered as a male in the masculine context,

suggesting that under certain conditions, *hen* may also be subjected to a male bias. Interestingly, ‘the applicant’ in the feminine context was not affected by the context. That is, ‘the applicant’ was still perceived as a male, even when the context suggested that the applicant would be a female, indicating that what is considered as a gender-neutral description in fact is subject to a strong male bias.

The second part of the hypothesis was that individuals being described as *hen* would be perceived more gender-neutral than other gender-neutral descriptions, which would be influenced by context. Thus, we expected that ‘the applicant’ in a feminine context would be perceived as more communal than *hen*, and that ‘the applicant’ in a masculine context would be perceived as more agentic than *hen*. To test this two *t*-tests were performed, one for communal traits and one for agentic traits, using gender in the description (*hen*/‘the applicant’) as grouping factor. None of these demonstrated a significant difference, t 's < 1.23, p 's > .05. We did not receive support for the idea that *hen* would be perceived more gender-neutral than ‘the applicant’, not even when using more ‘gendered’ language in the descriptions.

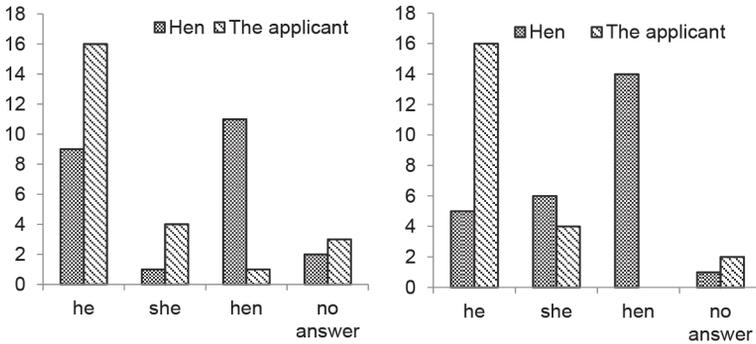


Figure 1. How *hen* and ‘the applicant’ were remembered in the masculine context (left diagram) and in the feminine context (right diagram).

To sum up, our hypothesis received partial support in that *hen* was remembered as a *hen*, while ‘the applicant’ was remembered as a he in both the masculine and the feminine context. We had hypothesized that ‘the applicant’ would be remembered as female in the feminine context. This result can be interpreted in two ways, either that the male bias is so strong that a supposedly gender-neutral formulation is perceived as a masculine even though contextual cues might indicate the opposite. Another interpretation is that our manipulation was too weak. However, there is some reason to

believe that ‘the applicant’ (*den sökande* in Swedish) due to its historic generic masculine form might have influenced the participants to perceive ‘the applicant’ as a man. Most Swedish nouns ending with *-e* and used as generic forms are the historic masculine forms such as *lärare*, which is the masculine form of ‘teacher’ that has replaced the feminine form *lärarinna* as generic for all teachers despite of gender (Gabriel & Gygax, 2008). Even if there has not been a feminine form of the Swedish word for ‘applicant’, it is possible that the general *-e* ending might have activated associations to masculinity.

Concluding discussion

Recently, there has been much debate about a third, gender-neutral Swedish pronoun– *hen*. *Hen* could be seen as either a way to create efficiency in language, as a complement to the gendered pronouns he and she, to be used when gender is not known or is considered as being irrelevant. However, people who do not feel that they fit in the traditional gender dichotomy also use it. Hence, the word *hen* is not only for practical reasons, but it also explicitly challenges the existing gender dichotomy (Milles, 2011). This has led to heated debates about its existence. One argument against the usage of *hen* is that the word is not adding anything to the language, since there are already possibilities to express oneself gender neutrally using already existing words. In two experiments, we tested if the newly introduced and heavily debated word *hen* truly is gender-neutral, especially in comparison to other gender-neutral descriptions.

In general, we received partial support for this notion. In both studies, the use of a supposedly gender-neutral word, in this case ‘the applicant’, made the participants believe that they had read about a man. However, when using *hen*, the participants could not state if they had read about a male or female. This makes us believe that when *hen* is used, people get motivated to think “outside the box”. That is, gender becomes more important, than when using other neutral words, which are subject to a traditional male-bias (Stahlberg et al. 2007). However, we did not find any results supporting that *hen* would be perceived as less agentic or communal, which also indicates more gender-neutrality than when using ‘the applicant.’ No evaluative differences were found, neither in the feeling thermometer nor in hireability. In study 1, we found that a person who use *hen* actually was perceived more positively than a person who use he. One positive interpretation of our results, or lack thereof, is that even though people dislike the use

of *hen*, as our results from Study 2 demonstrated, this might not rub off on judgments about people being described as a *hen*. On the contrary, in Study 1 we actually found that participants rated the user of the word *hen* more positively.

Nonetheless, people do not seem to like *hen*, as revealed in Study 2. Then, why did we not find any other results? At first sight, it might be argued that Sweden is a very egalitarian country. However, there is still a strongly segregated labor market, where women hold the lower positions, with lower wages (SCB, 2012). Thus, Sweden could not be considered as gender equal.

Another possibility may be that the recruitment situation used in the present studies is not the best way to test the gender-neutrality of *hen*. Such a situation may activate neutrality schemas, since most people are aware that a recruitment process should be free of sexism and gender bias. Thus, people may have been reluctant to negative ratings in the *hen*-condition, and also to ascribe gender stereotypical traits to either ‘the applicant’ or *hen*. It is also important to note that even though the contexts in Study 2 were “gendered”, the job was still for a non-gender stereotypical job. The results might have been different if we had used, for example midwives or engineers (Gabriel & Gyax, 2008). Another problem with the present research is that we used explicit judgments, and given that the recruitment situation may have activated schemas related to neutrality, it could have been better to use implicit measures. These drawbacks imply that further research is strongly needed to investigate the psychological consequences of using *hen*. Considering the currently occurring and rapid changes in the Swedish language, there is an urgent need for more empirical research on the subject.

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