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## Abstract

Psychological wellbeing is closely related to physical wellbeing and life satisfaction, and therefore crucial when studying older individuals' situation and capacity for a full life. The study aims to find explanations of older partnered individuals' psychological wellbeing by focusing on their gender attitudes, household division of labor and conformity to younger partnered individuals' commonly held gender attitudes and household division of labor. Analyses are based on a subsample (n 1764) from the Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (2012/2013) including individuals aged 60-80. The analytical strategy is logistic regression with psychological wellbeing as outcome. Findings show that traditional gender attitudes are more negatively associated with psychological wellbeing than transitional (i.e., attitudes in between traditional and egalitarian attitudes) and egalitarian gender attitudes. Lower conformity to commonly held gender attitudes is also associated with lower psychological wellbeing. However, neither the household division of labor nor conformity to common household division are associated with psychological wellbeing. In later life, gender attitudes, thus, seem more important for psychological wellbeing than the household division of labor. It may be that attitudes are more important than behavior among older couples as behavior is likely more restricted by practical circumstances.

**Keywords:** Older couples, gender equality, gender norms, conformity, psychological wellbeing Sweden



## Introduction

There are likely many components to psychological wellbeing, an area that is crucial when studying the older population. In addition to the obvious area of physical wellbeing (Ohrnberger et al., 2017) and life satisfaction (Wilhelmson et al. 2013; Puvill et al, 2016), various behavior and attitudes may be important (Blaxter, 2003), and perhaps especially how these behaviors and attitudes fit with the society one lives in. If they fit well, a sense of belongingness may be present, while if behavior and attitudes are not in accordance with the surroundings, there may be a risk of alienation and psychological distress (Allen et al. 2021). One area where this may be visible is regarding gender equality, both regarding behavior and attitudes, as so much has changed fast in this area (Grunow et al., 2018; Cavapozzi et al., 2021). Gender equality is also likely important in everyday life for couples who will be faced with how to divide household work.

Drawing on the concept of ‘belongingness’ from need-to-belong theory (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister, 2012; Baumeister & Leary, 1995), this study investigates whether older partnered individuals’ gender attitudes, division of household labor, and conformity to commonly held gender attitudes and division of household labor are associated with psychological wellbeing. Experience of depressive symptoms (feeling depressed, sad, fearful, lonely, blue or unsuccessful in life) is used as an indicator of psychological wellbeing. There are at least three interlinked reasons to why it is valuable to relate older partnered individuals’ gender attitudes and division of household labor to the most socially accepted attitudes and behaviors in a given setting. First, belongingness and the need-to-belong may help to explain the interconnection between couples’ behavior and the context. Second, belongingness may help to understand how partners normalize their gender attitudes and behavior in the unions. Third, need-to-belong theory also helps to identify the potential consequences for individuals when their ‘need’ to belong is not met, such as when they do not follow the gender attitudes and couple behaviors desired by their larger community.

The study’s research questions are important when striving to provide equal opportunities for good health and overall wellbeing in later life. Older women and men accumulate different preconditions and opportunities over their life course. The gap between women and men often widens at older ages, including regarding health, resources, roles and responsibilities as differences have accumulated over individuals’ life courses (Gumà & Spijker, 2021; Oksuzyan et al., 2018; Stocks et al., 2007). Having poor psychological wellbeing is often distressing for individuals as it likely has negative consequences on other parts of life, such as engagement with family, friends and activities outside the home. Psychological wellbeing is important for overall quality of life and for maintaining good physical health. Happy individuals have also been shown to live longer (Diener & Chan, 2011). In this life stage, a sense of belongingness has been shown to be of particular importance for individuals’ health and quality of life (Nolan, 2011).

The context of this study is Sweden, a country known for its high gender equality and women’s high level of participation in the labor force. Men in Sweden participate significantly in housework, and their participation has been increasing with strong support from state policies. Nevertheless, in terms of gender equality, there is much left to accomplish, and there are great gender differences in labor force participation and earnings over the life course. For instance, women of working age earn, on average, 90% of men’s income, and retired women receive pension amounts that are, on average, 70% of men’s pensions (Statistics Sweden, 2014). The gender gap in pensions results from women more often working part-time, in low-income occupations and experiencing more work disruptions during their professional life (ibid.). These circumstances shape the differences between women’s and men’s life courses, including

unequal opportunities in the face of illness and inequalities in standards of living in old age. At the same time, older individuals have in general few opportunities to change their situation when it is unsatisfactory, it may, for instance, be more difficult for them to earn more, leave a relationship and/or move (Bianchi et al., 1999).

Gender equal attitudes (i.e., women and men should be treated equally) are widespread in Sweden (Grunow et al. 2018). For instance, most adults support that both women and men do paid and unpaid work (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2010). However, also in Sweden, today's older generations are transitional generations that stand between the more traditional old-old generations and the younger, more egalitarian generations. Like many other countries (Grunow et al., 2018), particular changes in gender attitudes and couple behaviors have emerged in Sweden's transitional generations. In addition, so-called 'gender mainstreaming' is a guiding principle for most countries in Europe. It means that gender equality is applied to almost all policies in the pursuit of equal treatment for women and men (Lomazzi & Crespi, 2019). Although most countries accept and strive for equality, particularly gender equality, different countries have followed different paths with different results (ibid.). This study is therefore also relevant for many other countries.

## **Background**

### **Theoretical Background – 'Need to Belong'**

Belongingness can be characterized as individuals' "experience of a fit or congruence with other individuals, groups, objects, organizations, environments or spiritual dimensions through shared or complementary characteristics" (Hagerty et al., 1992: 174). Hence, the focus is not on belongingness as a dyadic relationship. Most studies have emphasized the individual's connection to larger groups (Allen et al. 2021). Belongingness can further be defined as social interaction that allows individuals to feel that they are part of a larger symbolic entity, such as a country (Aron et al., 2001; Mesch & Manor, 1998). Belongingness is often portrayed as the feeling of being accepted, valued and welcomed by others in a social context (Arslan, 2018). The theory assumes that individuals strive to preserve ties to other individuals, groups, organizations or countries because the need to belong is an important psychological construct for psychological wellbeing and emotional balance over the entire life course (Baumeister, 2012; Skey, 2011, 2013; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belongingness is also flexible; individuals' need to conform to the standards and norms of a particular group can lead to changes in their attitudes or behaviors. This is because, as Skey (2011) argues, being recognized as a legitimate member of a group is important for individuals' sense of wellbeing. Skey also argues that "some forms of belonging are more durable and meaningful because they have become grounded in individuals' everyday lives" (Skey, 2013).

Individuals are expected to conform to norms in order to continue to belong to a e.g., group and to be accepted. For instance, Yuval-Davis (2011) studied different criteria for belonging, such as shared attitudes, that have been used by dominant groups to exclude minorities. If individuals break the rules or if they no longer relate to the norms, they may be rejected by the remaining group members (see also Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to the theory, being excluded from a group has negative consequences on individuals' psychological wellbeing (ibid.). In line with theoretical arguments on the need to belong, empirical studies have found a positive association between community belongingness and wellbeing (Lambert et al. 2013). Individuals who feel excluded or lack a sense of belonging have been found to have an

increased risk of psychological health problems, including lower self-esteem and self-concept and greater feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Leary, 1990; Stillman & Baumeister, 2009).

This study assumes that the idea of belongingness is primarily connected to how well partners conform to attitudinal and behavioral norms rather than how well they connect within their couple itself. There is no consensus on how to assess belongingness (Allen et al., 2021). In this study, older partnered individuals' gender attitudes and couple behavior (i.e., division of household tasks) reflect whether these individuals conform to norms, i.e., their connection to place, culture and social milieu (Allen et al., 2021). These so-called cultural competencies contribute to and are reinforced by individuals feeling a sense of belonging (cultural skills include understanding one's heritage, mindful acknowledgment of place, and alignment with relevant attitudes) (Allen et al., 2021). It can be argued that the household becomes a place where individuals more or less reflect attitudinal and behavioral norms. These norms define consensual expectations about what women and men do and prescribe what they should do. In Sweden, it is socially accepted that within a couple, partners strive to be egalitarian rather than traditional (Grunow et al., 2018). Hence, this study expects that when older partnered individuals in Sweden conform to widely accepted attitudinal and behavioral norms and through that have a stronger sense of belongingness, they may have better psychological wellbeing compared to their counterparts who deviate from these norms and who may thus have a weaker sense of belongingness.

### **Prior Studies on Gender Attitudes, Couple Behavior, Gender Norms and Psychological Wellbeing**

Few studies have examined the association between gender attitudes and psychological health, and even fewer have included the older population. Psychological wellbeing has been found to be lower among individuals who hold more traditional gender role attitudes in several countries (e.g., Baek et al., 2022; King et al., 2020; Sweeting et al., 2014). Similarly, individuals who hold egalitarian attitudes have been found to have better psychosocial wellbeing than individuals with traditional and moderate-egalitarian values in Australia (King et al., 2021; King et al., 2019). In a study investigating cohorts born in the 1930s who were interviewed in the 1990s, traditional gender attitudes were associated with suicidal thoughts among older individuals in Scotland, which reflects a more general lack of flexibility and adaptability to social change (Hunt et al., 2006). Although the Swedish cohorts investigated in our study are different and no study has been able to claim a causal relationship, gender attitudes seems to play a role in how individuals perceive their psychological wellbeing in different settings.

Moreover, division of household labor among older couples is often gendered and remains similar to when the partners were younger (Leopold & Skopek, 2015; Leopold et al. 2018). However, less is known about how this is linked to older partner's psychological wellbeing but studies on younger couples show that there is a link to psychological wellbeing and other health outcomes. A Swedish study showed that married women who were housewives during the period of increased female labor force participation had poorer psychological wellbeing, potentially because they deviated from the new norm of working outside the home (Axelsson, 1992). Some studies have found a more gender-equal sharing of household work and parental leave to be positively related to good health (Sörlin et al., 2011). Other studies have found that the higher the practice of gender equality in a couple is, the lower their risk of being on sick

leave (Månsdotter et al., 2007) and the lower their risk of all-cause mortality (Månsdotter & Lundin, 2010).

A few studies have also found a positive association between increased gender equality on a societal level and increased public health in Sweden (Backhans et al., 2007) and in other contexts. The current state of research indicates that conformity to norms of gender attitudes and couple behavior are positively related to individual health. However, a causal relationship has not been found in these studies, and there may be other factors that influence wellbeing.

### **The Present Study's Hypotheses**

Based on the need-to-belong framework, past research and the Swedish context, this study postulates two hypotheses. The basic assumption for these hypotheses is that individuals who feel a weak sense of belonging in the Swedish context are more likely to experience lower levels of psychological wellbeing.

Hypothesis 1: Partnered individuals who hold traditional gender attitudes are more likely to have lower psychological wellbeing (i.e., higher experience of depressive symptoms) than partnered individuals who hold transitional or egalitarian gender attitudes. The assumption is that traditional attitudes go against the attitudinal norms in Sweden, weakening 'belongingness'. To assess 'belongingness', this study measures older partners' gender attitudes and how older partnered individuals conform to attitudinal norms compared with younger partnered individuals.

Hypothesis 2: Individuals in couples where there is a skewed division of household tasks are more likely to experience lower psychological wellbeing (i.e., higher experience of depressive symptoms) than individuals who share household tasks with their partner. The main assumption is that gender equality in division of household tasks is generally desirable in Sweden. Couples who do not follow this norm have a lower sense of belonging, which may negatively spill over to their psychological wellbeing. To assess 'belongingness' to norms of accepted divisions of household labor, this study measures older partners' division of household labor and how this division conforms to that the division in younger partnered individuals.

## **Data and Methods**

### **Data**

The data source for this study is the national representative Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) collected in 2012-2013 for which 18,000 individuals who were randomly selected. In total, 9866 individuals responded to the initial telephone interview. Of these individuals, 6830 also responded to the questionnaire that was sent to them by post (response rate 54%). From this reduced sample, we selected respondents who had a partner they were either married to or cohabiting with and who were aged 60–80 at the time of the interview (born between 1933 and 1953). The subsample consisted of individuals in different-sex relationships (n 1764). The survey included several questions, such as partners' engagement in various household tasks, employment status, age and education.

### Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the respondents' psychological wellbeing, for which depressive symptoms were used as an indicator. Depressive symptoms were assessed using six statements often used as indicators of depressive symptoms, that is, whether the respondent felt 1) depressed 2) sad, 3) blue, 4) fearful, 5) lonely, and 6) unsuccessful. The items were rated on a four-point Likert scale: 'never or seldom', 'sometimes', 'often', and 'most or all of the time'. These ordinal scale items were listed on the depression scale (CES-D), which has long-term application to measure depressive symptoms among both younger and older individuals (e.g., Henning et al., 2021; Silverstein & Bengtson, 1994). The descriptive statistics for six items together with factor loadings from factor analysis are displayed in Table 1. Cronbach's alpha was 0.88, which indicates high internal consistency for these items. The subsample experienced overall high psychological wellbeing, as a large share of respondents reported seldom or never feeling the sentiments in the depressive indicators. Nonetheless, on average, 26% reported feeling the sentiments captured by these indicators sometimes or frequently. We create an index in which all these items are summarized. The index variable ranges from 6 to 24, and a higher numeric value indicates higher depressive symptoms. The distribution is somewhat skewed, and the mean is 7.75 for the subsample (women have a higher mean compared with men, 7.44 and 8.12, respectively). Other studies have also indicated a high level of psychological wellbeing (negatively skewed distribution) in Swedish older individuals (e.g., ages 60-66 in Henning et al., 2021). The analytical strategy in this study is logistic regression, in which psychological wellbeing is dichotomized. The cutoff for lower psychological wellbeing is considered at the mean 7.75 or below (38%), and higher psychological wellbeing is considered above the mean (62%). The rationale behind this approach is that it implies that respondents who responded 'never or seldom' on all items or responded 'never or seldom' on four items and 'sometimes' on one item are defined as experiencing high psychological wellbeing. A sensitivity analysis (not presented here) using a continuous measure of psychological wellbeing in ordinary logistic regression models displays similar results for the main associations.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics (%) for the items measuring respondents' psychological wellbeing and factor loadings from factor analysis (n 1764)

	Depressed	Sad	Melancholic	Fearful	Lonely	Unsuccessful
Seldom or never	73	60	71	81	76	82
Sometimes	24	37	25	17	21	15
Often	3	2	3	1	2	1
Most or all of the time	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Factor loadings	0.82	0.77	0.81	0.62	0.76	0.67

### Independent Variables

This study has four key explanatory variables. The first variable measures gender attitudes, which is an index including responses to six statements about family, marriage and work. The respondents answer on a five-point scale, from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The statements are chosen after an explorative factor analysis of several other statements. The chosen latent dimension includes statements with a factor loading above 0.60 (uniqueness between 0.51 and 0.63). A Cronbach's alpha of 0.83 indicates high internal consistency among the items. The statements are as follows:

1. When parents are in need, daughters should take on more caring responsibility.
2. On the whole, men make better political leaders than women.
3. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works outside the home.
4. When jobs are scarce, men are more entitled to a job than women are.
5. In a couple, it is better for the man to be older than the woman.
6. In a couple, if the woman earns more than the man, it is not good for the relationship.

The scores range 10-30 and lower scores represent more traditional gender attitudes. The mean for the full subsample is 22.85, the mean for women in the subsample is 23.5 and the mean for men in the subsample is 22.2. This operationalization measures the respondents' gender attitudes. However, to further distinguish between different gender attitudes, the index is divided into three categories. The mean for the subsample (22.85) is used as a threshold for more egalitarian attitudes: traditional (10–18), transitional (19–23), and egalitarian (24–30). A similar approach to categorize the sum scores of an index variable into three types of gender attitudes was used by Grunow & Lietzmann (2021). Regarding the specific labels, others (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2016) have also used the distinction between traditional, transitional and egalitarian gender attitudes first defined by Hochschild and Machung (1989).

To assess conformity to attitudinal norms, the mean for the subsample of older individuals is compared with the mean for a subsample of younger individuals (aged 18-59) in GGS using an equivalent index. The mean for the subsample of younger individuals is 25.3 (mean for women, 26.1; mean for men, 24.4), which indicates that the subsample of older individuals (60-80) has more traditional gender attitudes than the subsample of younger individuals. The mean of the younger subsample indicates the common gender attitudes and is used to create the second explanatory variable. The variable indicates whether the older partnered respondent's gender attitudes is 1) less than, 2) more than or 3) the same as ( $\pm 0.5$ ) the mean shown for younger partnered respondents aged 18-59 in the sample (mean 25.32). The variable is labeled 'conforms to gender attitudinal norms'. The variable cannot be included in regression models with the variable measuring respondents' gender attitudes because of its high multicollinearity and is therefore analyzed in a separate model.

The third explanatory variable reflects which partner in the couple performs most of the household tasks. More precisely, it captures whether and how the individuals in the couple share five tasks: preparing meals, dishwashing, grocery shopping, vacuuming and doing repairs on the house. First, the tasks are analyzed separately to find patterns. Subsequently, a variable is generated to identify which partner mainly performs these tasks. In cases where a third party most often performs the tasks, both partners are coded as performing them. These cases are very rare (meals 0.1%, dishes 0.5%, groceries 0.2%, vacuum 3% and repairs 6%). The variable is thereafter gender-specified: 1) the woman performs most tasks, 2) the man performs most tasks, 3) both partners perform the tasks, and 4) unclear division of tasks. Categories 2 and 3 are considered a skewed distribution of household division of labor. The variable is described statistically in Table 2.

The fourth explanatory variable captures whether the couple's division of household tasks conforms to norms of division of household tasks among the younger partnered subsample. Conformity is measure by comparing the subsample of older individuals with the younger



partnered respondents' reports on the division of household tasks. In total, 60% of the younger partnered respondents report that they and their partner perform the same amount of household tasks or practice an unclear division of tasks. We consider that older respondents who report having a skewed distribution of household division of labor conform less to the behavioral norm of more equal performance of household tasks. Older couples in which both partners perform household tasks equally or practice an unclear division of labour are considered to conform to norms of division of household tasks. The variable is labeled 'conforms to division of household tasks' (yes/no). Like the variable 'conforms to gender attitudinal norms', this variable cannot be included in a regression model with the variable measuring the division of household tasks because of its high multicollinearity and is therefore analyzed in a separate model.

The logistic regression models are adjusted for respondents' and couples' characteristics, that is, partners' activity status, combined education level, disability status, marital status, and age. These variables have been shown to relate to psychological wellbeing (Becker et al., 2019; Kim & Moen, 2001; López Ulloa et al., 2013; van Campen & van Santvoort, 2013). Activity status is categorized as 1) both are retired, 2) both work, 3) the woman is retired and the man works, and 4) the woman works and the man is retired. The combined education level is categorized as 1) high for the woman and low for the man, 2) low for the woman and high for the man, 3) low for both, and 4) high for both. A high education level corresponds to tertiary education, and a low education level corresponds to secondary or primary education. Disability measures whether one or both of the partners have any health-related limitation or disability. The age of respondents is categorized into five age categories: 1) 60-64, 2) 65-69, 3) 70-74, and 4) 75-80. Marital status reflects whether the couple is married or cohabiting.

## **Results**

### **Descriptive Results**

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 show that 19% of the respondents hold egalitarian gender attitudes, 49% hold transitional gender attitudes, and 32% hold traditional gender attitudes. A large share of men holds traditional or transitional gender attitudes compared with a more limited share of women, and a larger share of women hold egalitarian gender attitudes compared with the share of men who do. Compared with younger partnered subsample aged 18-59, 57% of the sample of older individuals are less traditional, 31% hold the same gender attitudes, and 12% are more egalitarian than the subsample of younger individuals. In the sample of older individuals, compared with the sample of younger individuals, fewer women and more men hold traditional gender attitudes. Regarding the division of household tasks, in 43% of the couples, the woman performs most of the household tasks; in 23% of the couples, the man performs most of the household tasks; and in 23% of the couples, both partners share the tasks. In 10% of the couples, the partners use another division. Additionally, 65% practice a division of household tasks similar to that of younger individuals, and there are no gender differences. Table 2 displays descriptive statistics of the other variables in the study.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the study variables

		All %	Woman reporting %	Man reporting %
<i>Gender ideology</i>	Traditional	19	14	23
	Transitional	49	47	51
	Egalitarian	32	39	26
<i>Conforms to gender attitudinal norms</i>	Less than sample aged 18-59	57	49	64
	Same as sample aged 18-59	31	36	26
	More than sample aged 18-59	12	15	10
<i>Division of household tasks</i>	Woman does most tasks	43	48	38
	Man does most tasks	23	18	27
	Both partners perform tasks	24	22	26
	Unclear division of tasks	10	12	9
<i>Conforms to division of household tasks</i>	Yes	65	66	65
	No	35	34	35
<i>Partners' activity status</i>	Both retired	60	65	54
	Both work	18	15	22
	Man works and woman is retired	8	9	8
	Woman works and man is retired	14	11	16
<i>Education level</i>	Both low	57	57	58
	Woman high and man low	16	17	15
	Woman low and man high	10	9	10
	Both high	17	18	17
<i>Married</i>	Yes	87	87	87
	No	13	13	13
<i>Partners' disability</i>	Both or one partner disabled	28	30	25
	Neither partner disabled	72	70	74
<i>Age of responding partner</i>	60-64	30	31	29
	65-69	33	34	32
	70-74	23	23	23
	75-80	14	12	16
<i>Sex of responding partner</i>	Woman	53		
	Man	47		
<b>Total n</b>		<b>1764</b>	<b>835</b>	<b>929</b>

## Regression Results

Table 3 presents the results from the logistic regression models using odds ratios and asterisks for corresponding significance levels. Model 1 in Table 3 shows the bivariate associations for the explanatory variables, the respondent's gender attitudes, the division of household tasks, whether the respondent conforms to norms of gender attitudes and the division of household tasks. Model 2 shows the results for gender attitudes, division of household tasks and the adjusting variables. The final model, Model 3, includes whether the respondent conforms to norms of gender attitudes and the division of household tasks together with the adjusting variables.

The first hypothesis suggests that respondents who hold traditional gender attitudes are more likely to experience lower psychological wellbeing than respondents who hold transitional or egalitarian gender attitudes. The results in Model 1, Table 3 confirm the hypothesis that the likelihood of respondents who hold egalitarian gender attitudes reporting lower psychological wellbeing is 31% lower compared with the likelihood that respondents who hold traditional gender attitudes report lower psychological wellbeing (or 0.69). Similarly, respondents who have transitional gender attitudes have a 24% lower likelihood of reporting lower psychological wellbeing compared with respondents who have traditional gender attitudes (or 0.79). This pattern is present in both the bivariate model (Model 1, Table 3) and the adjusted model (Model 2, Table 3). The associations have high statistical significance ( $p < 0.01$ ). The results in Model 3 show that respondents who are more egalitarian than the younger partnered respondents in the sample (aged 18-59) have a 26% lower likelihood to experience lower psychological wellbeing than respondents who are more traditional as the younger partnered respondents (or 0.74). Respondents whose gender attitudes are similar to the younger respondents are also less likely to have lower psychological wellbeing than respondents who are more traditional than younger partnered respondents (or 0.95).

The results in Table 3 also show that the ways in which partners divide household tasks does not seem to be associated with psychological wellbeing among older couples in the bivariate model (Model 1) or in the adjusted model (Model 2). Hence, the results do not support the second hypothesis that respondents in a couple where there is a skewed division of household tasks are more likely to have lower psychological wellbeing than respondents who share household tasks with their partner. In the adjusted model, the sign of the odds ratios changes for the division of household tasks. Additional stepwise models reveal that it is the gender of the respondent that changes the sign. This is potentially because women experience worse psychological wellbeing, which is also found in a cross-tabulation that takes into account the gender of respondents and their psychological wellbeing (56% of women and 43% of men have lower psychological wellbeing,  $\chi^2 32.88$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In line with the lack of statistically significant results for the division of household tasks in Model 1 and 2, the results in Model 3 show that whether partners conform to norms of division of household tasks is not statistically significant.

With regard to the adjusting variables, female respondents and respondents from couples where a partner has a disability are more likely to experience lower psychological wellbeing. The older age groups, that is, respondents aged 70-74 and 75-89, are also more likely to experience lower psychological wellbeing. However, this study does not find statistically significant variations in psychological wellbeing based on partners' activity status, combined education levels or whether the couple is married.

Table 3. Odds ratios predicting lower psychological wellbeing using logistic regression models

		<u>Lower psychological wellbeing</u>		
		Model 1 <sup>A)</sup> or	Model 2 or	Model 3 or
Gender ideology	Traditional (ref)	1	1	
	Transitional	0.76**	0.72**	
	Egalitarian	0.69***	0.66***	
Conforms to gender attitudinal norms	Less than sample aged 18-59 (ref)	1		1
	Same as sample aged 18-59	0.96***		0.95***
	More than sample aged 18-59	0.73**		0.74**
Division of household tasks	Woman does most tasks (ref)	1	1	
	Man does most tasks	0.95	1.06	
	Both partners perform tasks	0.95	1.01	
	Unclear division of tasks	0.98	0.99	
Conforms to division of household tasks	Yes	1.02		1.02
	No (ref)	1		1
Partners' activity status	Both retired (ref)		1	1
	Both work		0.97	0.99
	Man works, woman is retired		0.90	0.90
	Woman works, man is retired		1.09	1.08
Education level	Both low (ref)		1	1
	Woman high and man low		0.94	0.94
	Woman low and man high		0.82	0.79
	Both high		0.88	0.88
Married	Yes (ref)		1	1
	No		1.11	1.12
Age of responding partner	60-64 (ref)		1	1
	65-69		1.23	1.24
	70-74		1.38**	1.37**
	75-80		1.39**	1.41**
Partners' disability	Neither partner has a disability (ref)		1	1
	Both/one partner have/has a disability		1.79***	1.80***
Sex of responding partner	Female		1.83***	1.80***
	Male (ref)		1	1
Total n		1764	1764	1764

<sup>A)</sup> Bivariate models. Significance levels: \*\*\* p < 0.01; \*\* p < 0.05; \* p < 0.1

## Discussion

This study investigated the link between gender equality and psychological wellbeing among older partnered individuals aged 60 to 80 in Sweden. According to need-to-belong theory, when individuals conform to norms, they feel accepted by their social environment and therefore experience better psychological wellbeing (Baumeister, 2012; Skey, 2013). Relatedly, the study expected that older partnered individuals who hold traditional gender attitudes on family, marriage and work would be associated with lower psychological wellbeing when compared with partners who hold transitional or egalitarian gender attitudes. The results supported the expectations. Egalitarian gender attitudes are the norm in Sweden; this pattern was also observed in the subsample that included younger partnered respondents in this study (aged 18-59) and in other studies (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2010). The findings indicated that partnered individuals who had a strong sense of belonging (i.e., they conformed to Sweden's gender attitudinal norms) were more likely to experience better psychological wellbeing. This result was true for both the individuals' gender attitudes and for the indicator conformity to gender attitudinal norms. More recent cohorts of older individuals have reported holding more egalitarian attitudes in other studies (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). Hence, traditional attitudes may be outdated, even among older cohorts, and older individuals with more traditional attitudes may feel that they are not socially accepted by society.

The study also expected to find that older partnered individuals who had a skewed division of household tasks would experience lower psychological wellbeing compared with their counterparts who shared household tasks with their partner. The results did not support this hypothesis. Instead, the division of household tasks was not related to psychological wellbeing for the older partnered individuals in this study. Similarly, the results did not indicate that belongingness and conformity to the common division of household labor in younger partnered individuals relate to psychological wellbeing. Thus, need-to-belong theory (Baumeister, 2012) did not explain this finding. The household labor division is often more flexible and blurrier than gender attitudes, especially among older and long-term couples. It is possible that at this life stage, older couples' will have to be practical in their strategy of to divide tasks, rather than base division on ideas of how they want it to be. The aim of making life as easy and smooth as possible is probably more pertinent than to conform to what is socially accepted. What is needed in household responsibilities and tasks may be most important, particularly as older partners often experience periods when their health is poor or slowly declining. It may also be that older partners can better structure their lives around what they want because they are retired and unbound by other responsibilities. To conclude, the study's findings indicated that belongingness to commonly held gender attitudes is more important for older partnered individuals' psychological wellbeing than belongingness to common division of household tasks, and that perhaps it is easier for older partnered individuals to conform to attitudinal than behavioral norms, although the latter was not investigated in the study.

## Study Limitations

The study comes with limitations. First, the data measure depressive symptoms at one point in time, but psychological wellbeing is affected by situations and emotional states, particularly in older individuals. Hence, it may not be stable over time. Nonetheless, the index provides a valuable snapshot of the present situation for these individuals. Second and relatedly, the categorization of gender attitudes may be considered arbitrary. However, by recognizing transitional attitudes (the mid-range category), this study acknowledges the dissimilarities that exist across the different levels of gender attitudes. Third, the data are cross-sectional, making it difficult to establish the direction of the associations. Hence, the analysis does not account

for causal inferences. Fourth, the data do not include respondents' gender attitudes earlier in their lives or any information about the partners' gender attitudes. Fifth, the study would benefit from a more subjective indicator of 'belongingness', such as individuals' reports of sense of belonging to a large community or what they think are normative attitudes in their community and how they fit in. Nonetheless, as Allen et al. (2021) state, there is no universal or consistent construct of 'belongingness'; therefore, the study's proxy indicators provide an informative snapshot that considers older partnered individuals' attitudes and couple behavior in contrast to younger partnered individuals. Sixth, there is always a risk that important factors are omitted that may be associated with psychological wellbeing in addition to those that are included in the study's analysis, such as both partners' subjective health. Nonetheless, the analysis is comprehensive and includes many factors that are central to the association between psychological wellbeing and gender equality in the Swedish context.

### **Policy Implications and Future Directions**

The study's findings are valuable for decision-makers and practitioners who may benefit from knowing that more traditional gender attitudes and lower conformity/belongingness to attitudinal norms, is related to poorer psychological wellbeing. In Sweden, many policies (e.g., family-friendly labor market, parental leave, subsidized child care, free public schools, cohabitation laws, social welfare for the elderly) are particularly guided by the principle of 'gender mainstreaming' and seek to ensure equal treatment for women and men (Lomazzi & Crespi, 2019). Interestingly, the level to which partners conform to behavioral norms on of the division of household tasks is not central (at least in this study) for their psychological wellbeing. This finding indicates that policies that target gender equality for couples who are still young may be less productive when it comes to conforming to a division of household tasks later in life. Perhaps other types of support that enhance wellbeing may be more important in older age.

The findings lay the groundwork for future research paths. First, longitudinal investigations may consider how conformity to gender attitudes over the life course shapes psychological wellbeing in older individuals. Relatedly, studies may further investigate whether this study observes an effect of age or relationship duration, which is in this study difficult to disentangle. Second, future investigations may also study whether conformity to gender attitudes is important for other types of health-related outcomes, such as subjective health. Third, cross-national analyses including countries with different traditions of gender attitudes would shed more light on the findings in this study. Fourth, future studies could investigate whether division of household tasks and conformity to behavioral norms for couple practices in a given setting are important for older individuals' physical health; for instance, taking the largest share of household tasks may be negatively linked with physical health. Fifth, future modeling may include partners' dissatisfaction and disagreements about the division of household tasks and how these relate to psychological wellbeing. Such research would also shed light on how individuals perceive fairness within household practices based on their social environment and gender norms. Another direction for future research would be to include the old-old, as their life situation differs greatly from the older groups studied here, particularly in regard to their health and need to belong.

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