

How many “studentes” are there in a group of “studenten”?

Bias in interpretation of generic masculines
in Netherlandic Dutch

SFL & LLF, Genre et Langage, 23-01-2024



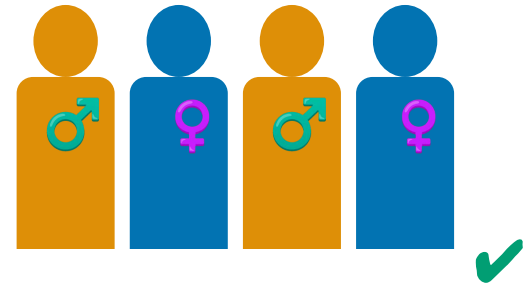
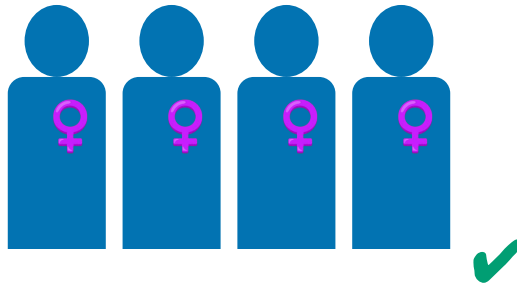
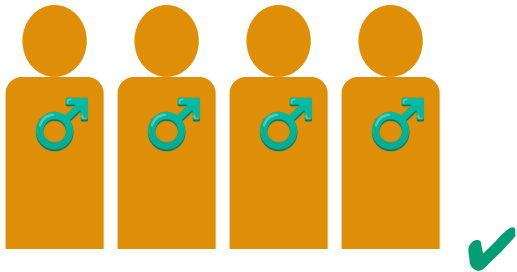
**rijksuniversiteit
groningen**

Hans Wilke & Alexander Martin

It is possible to refer to a group of just men, just women, or a mix of men *and* women, with the **masculine form** of a role noun:

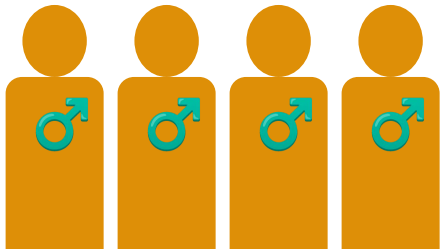
Generic Masculine

De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college
Les étudiants sont prêts pour leur premier cours

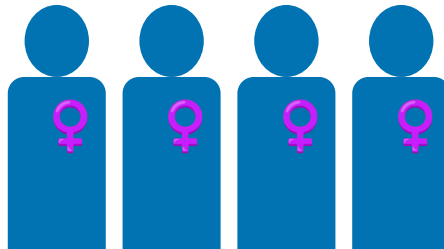


The **feminine form** of a role noun, however, is in principle only used to refer to a group that consists of only women.

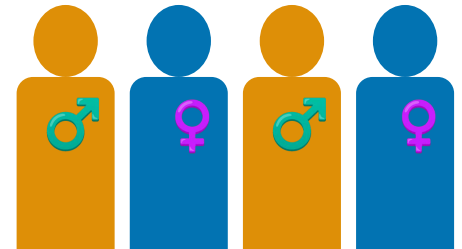
De student**es** zijn klaar voor hun eerste college
*Les étudiante**s** sont prête**s** pour leur premier cours*



X



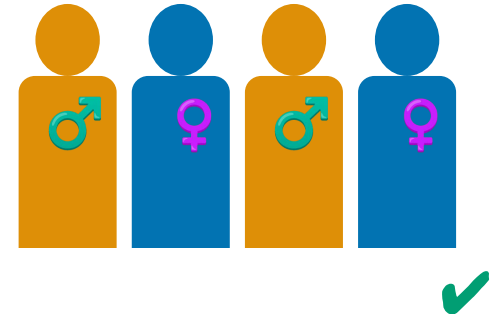
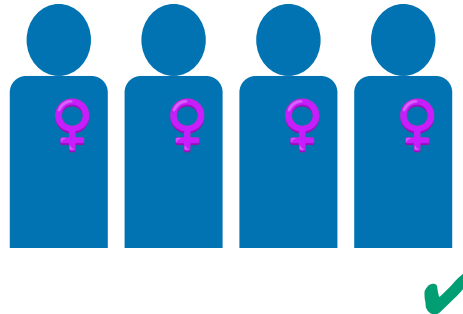
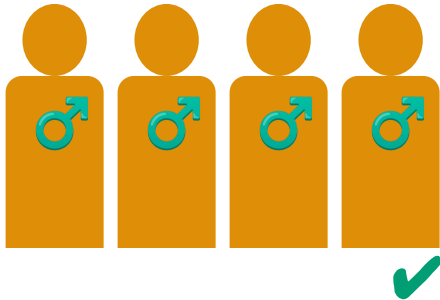
✓



X

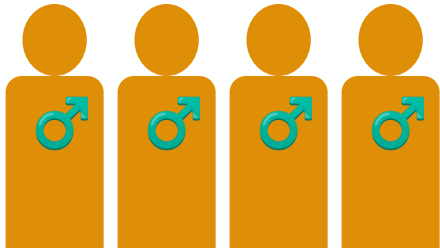
As a result, this “generic” masculine form seems less marked than the feminine form (Sauerland 2008), of even unmarked (Michard, 1996), as it can be used to refer to each of the below groups.

De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college

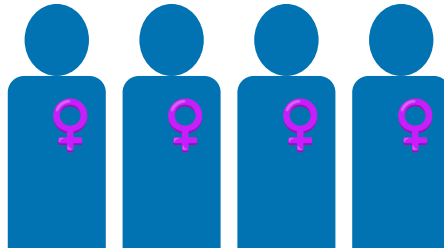


Does this mean that the generic masculine form is also *neutral* when it comes to its interpretation? Is the **expectation** that the group it refers to consists of only men, only women, or men *and* women?

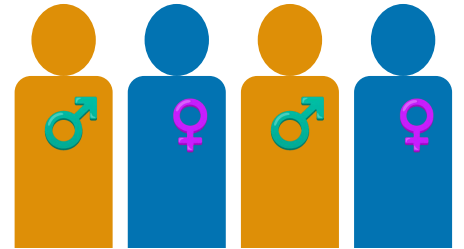
De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college



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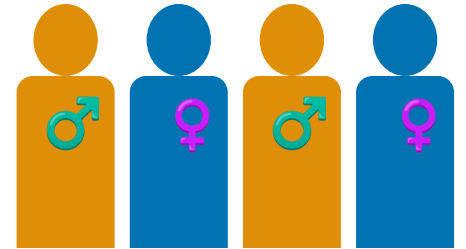
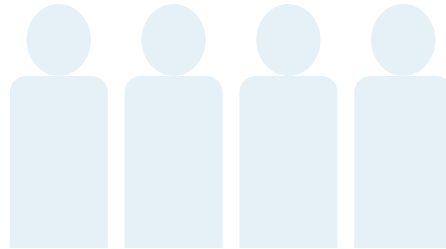
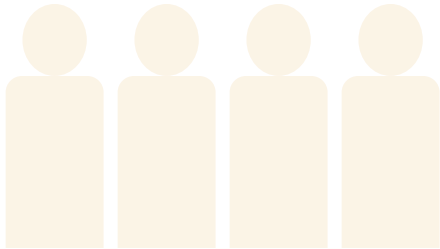
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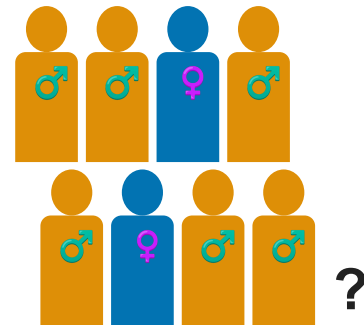
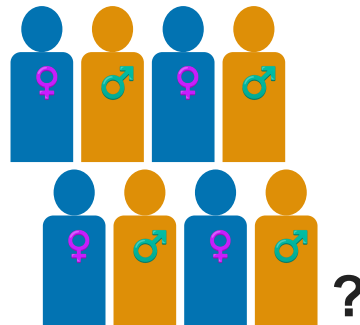
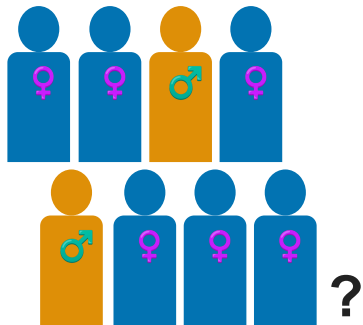
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De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college



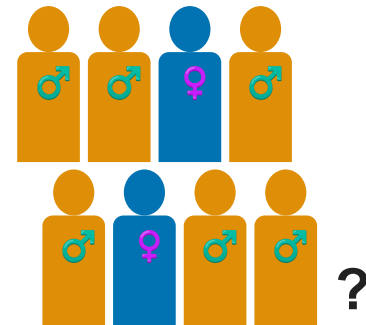
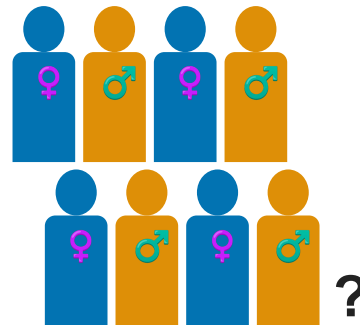
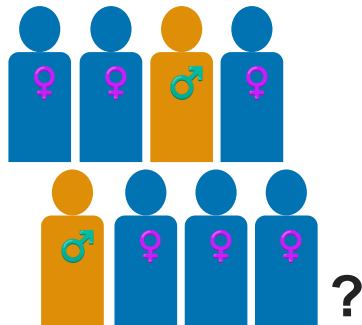
What is the gender ratio in this mixed group?

De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college



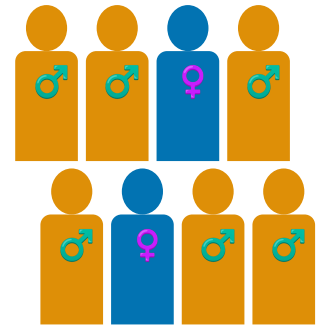
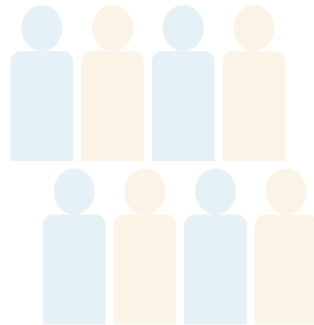
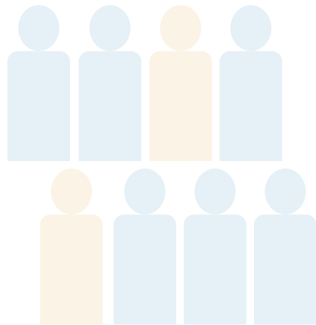
What is the gender ratio in this mixed group?

Les étudiants sont prêts pour leur premier cours
Die Studenten sind bereit für ihre erste Vorlesung



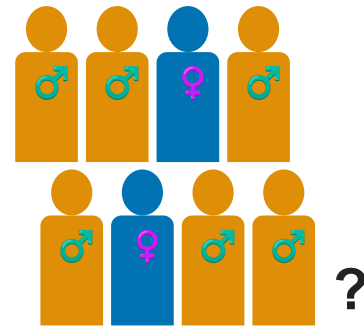
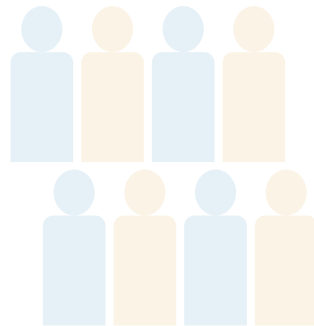
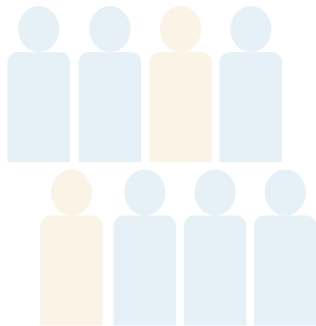
When the generic masculine form is used to refer to a group, the amount of women in that group is underestimated in French (e.g., Gygax et al., 2008) and in German (e.g., Irmen, 2007).

Les étudiants sont prêts pour leur premier cours
Die Studenten sind bereit für ihre erste Vorlesung



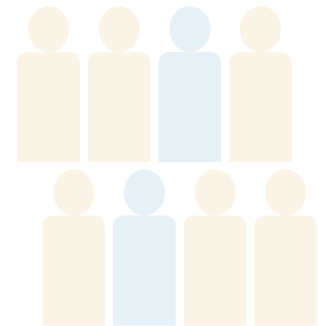
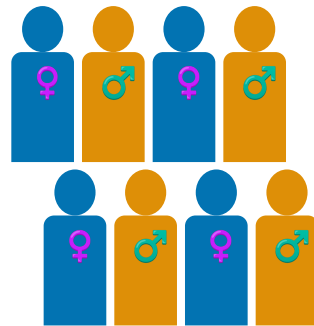
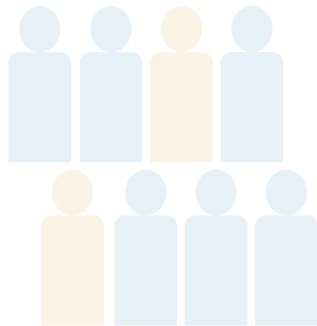
When the generic masculine form is used to refer to a group, the amount of women in that group is underestimated in French Frans (e.g., Gygax et al., 2008) and in German (e.g., Irmen, 2007). Will this also be the case for Dutch?

De studenten zijn klaar voor hun eerste college



When instead of the generic masculine form, a more inclusive form is used, the ratio of men to women is estimated to be in balance in French and German (Xiao et al., 2023; Kollmayer et al., 2018).

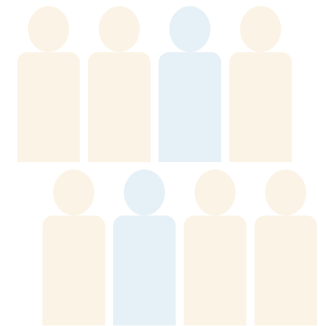
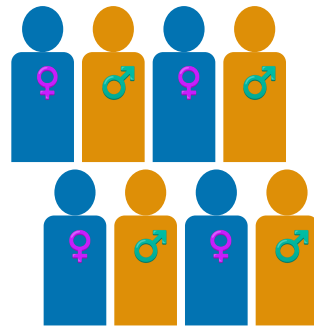
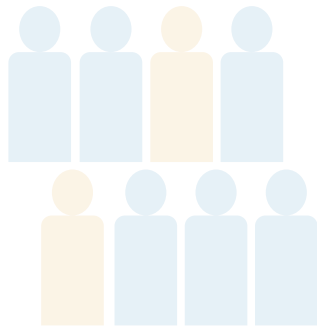
Les étudiant·e·s sont prêt·e·s pour leur premier cours
Die Student*innen sind bereit für ihre erste Vorlesung



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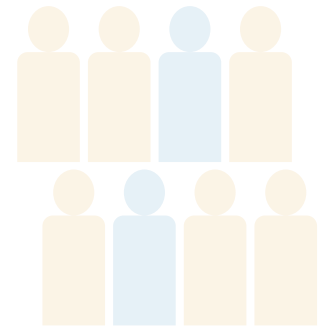
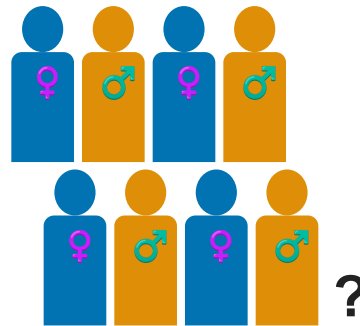
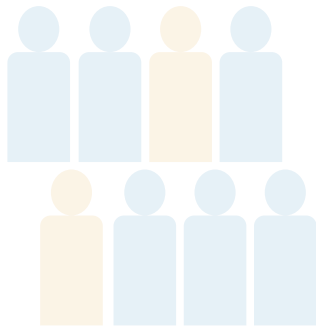
The same is true when the masculine and feminine forms are used together (mixed form: Xiao et al., 2023).

Les étudiants et étudiantes sont prêts pour leur premier cours



Dutch does not have similar more inclusive neo-forms like German and French (among others) have, but of course it does have the possibility of using the masculine and feminine forms together. Will this – as in French (Xiao et al., 2023) – lead to the estimation that the ratio of men to women is (more) balanced?

De studenten en studentes zijn klaar voor hun eerste college



Animate referents

1) De man is populair.
Hij krijgt regelmatig bezoek.

4) De mannen zijn populair.
Zij krijgen regelmatig bezoek.

2) De vrouw is populair.
Zij krijgt regelmatig bezoek.

5) De vrouwen zijn populair.
Zij krijgen regelmatig bezoek.

3) Het meisje is populair.
* Het krijgt regelmatig bezoek.
Zij krijgt regelmatig bezoek.

6) De meisjes zijn populair.
Zij krijgen regelmatig bezoek.

Masc. • Fem. •
Neut.

Inanimate referents

7) De berg is groot.
Hij springt in het oog.

8) Het huis is groot.
Het springt in het oog.
Hij springt in het oog.

9) De tafel is groot.
* Zij springt in het oog.
Hij springt in het oog.

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

7) De berg is groot.
Hij springt in het oog.

8) Het huis is groot.
Het springt in het oog.
Hij springt in het oog

9) De tafel is groot.
* Zij springt in het oog.
Hij springt in het oog.

De haren **ten berge** rijzen...

Ten huize van...

Wat verder **ter tafel** komt...

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

It may be that the Dutch gender system influences what interpretations listeners make.

Backer & Cuypere (2012) found that role nouns such as *apothecary* are less likely to lead to a specifically masculine interpretation in Dutch than in German, whose gender system leads to more restrictive interpretations.

Further experimental research on interpretation of gender in Dutch has mainly focused on personal pronouns (e.g., Redl et al., 2022):

**Iedereen/iemand met een absoluut gehoor kan snel
zijn instrument stemmen.**

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

*“U kunt luisteren naar voordrachten van ... zijn
oud-student Lisa Rooijackers, schrijfster van
gedichten, verhalen, essays en liedjes.”*

“U kunt luisteren naar voordrachten van ... zijn
oud-**student** Lisa Rooijackers, **schrijfster** van
gedichten, verhalen, essays en liedjes.”

student / **studente**

schrijver / **schrijfster**

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

Omroepbericht van Nederlandse Spoorwegen in juli 2017:

„Beste dames en heren, jongens en meisjes, LGBTQIA+’ers en iedereen met een geldig vervoersbewijs.” Wij vonden het wat lang. En toch vinden we het van belang dat iedereen zich bij ons welkom voelt. Daarbij: Is “beste dames en heren” niet wat afstandelijk anno 2017? Daarom kiezen we ervoor om onze reizigers vanaf de nieuwe dienstregeling aan te spreken met ‘beste reizigers’. In onze treinen en in onze correspondentie. Daarnaast stellen we andere ov-vervoerders voor om dit ook op de stations te gaan doen. Is ‘dames en heren’ dan in vervolg verboden? Natuurlijk niet. Maar de standaard wordt voor nu ‘beste reizigers’.

Announcement from the Dutch national rail company in July 2017.

*“Dear ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, LGBTQIA+ people and anyone with a valid ticket.” We thought it was a bit long. And yet we think it is important that everyone feel welcome with us. Isn't “dear ladies and gentlemen” a bit distant in the year 2017? This is why, starting with the introduction of our new timetable, we are choosing to address our passengers as “dear passengers” on board our trains and in our correspondence. In addition, we suggest other public transport companies to start doing the same at stations. Will “ladies and gentlemen” then be forbidden from now on? Of course not. But the standard for now will be “**dear passengers**”.*

*“**Dear passenger**, this is a gender neutral announcement. The train is available to every person with a valid ticket, regardless of gender and gender identity and whether these are in congruence or not. Whether you feel male or female or something in between, NS runs for all people. As you know, the toilets on the train have been gender-neutral for years. This is how we want to address you from now on.”*

-Ronald van Noorden, train station announcer NS

Beste reizigers...

reiziger / reizigster

How can we determine whether the use of a generic masculine form indeed is more inclusive than using a mixed form?

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

Le rassemblement régional des ROLE NOUN a eu lieu cette semaine à Amiens. La localisation centrale de cette ville a été particulièrement appréciée. Les ROLE NOUN ont aussi adoré l'apéro offert à l'hôtel de ville le premier jour.

1. *Qu'est-ce qui a été apprécié à propos d'Amiens ?*
2. *Qu'est-ce qui a été offert à l'hôtel de ville ?*

Selon vous, quels étaient les pourcentages de femmes et d'hommes dans ce rassemblement ?



éboueur / éboueuse
musicien / musicienne
maquilleur / maquilleuse

Masculine stereotype

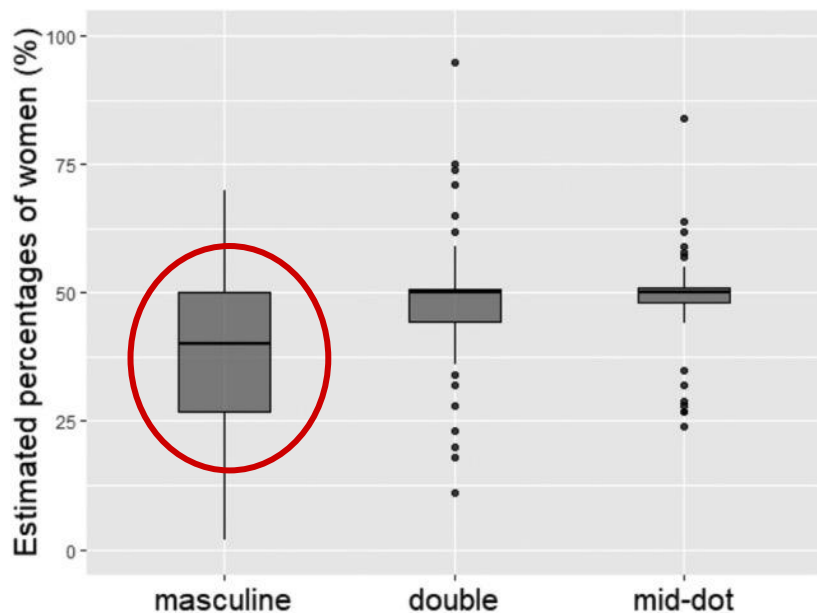
No stereotype

Feminine stereotype

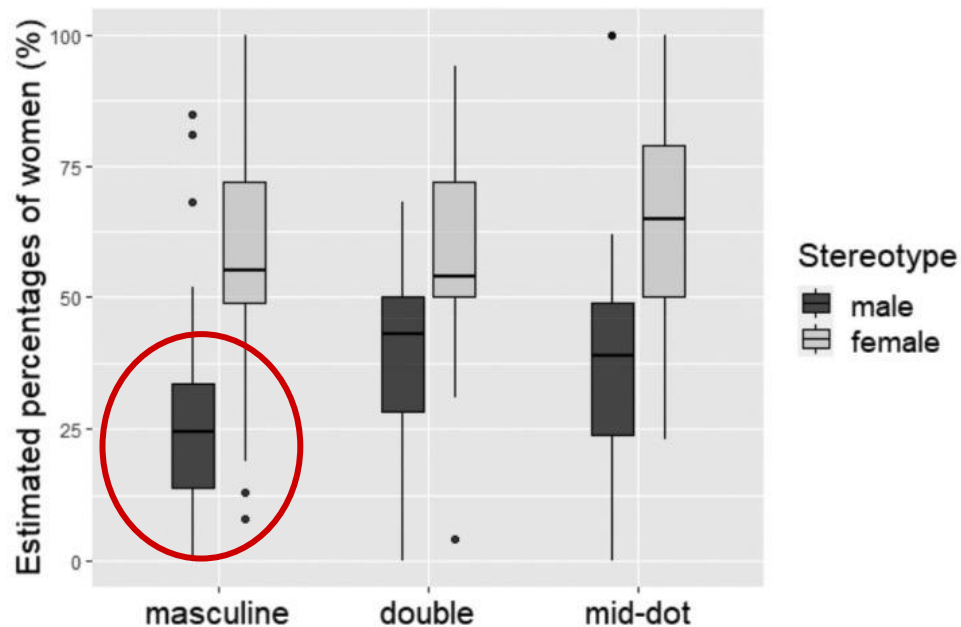
Les maquilleurs
Les maquilleurs et les maquilleuses
Les maquilleur.euses

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

No stereotype (**musicien** / **musicienne**)



Masculine / Feminine stereotype



Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

What would this look like in Dutch?

Do generic masculine forms lead to an underestimation of the number of women for role nouns with a masculine stereotype and/or without a gender stereotype?

No large-scale study on the gender stereotypes of role nouns in Dutch, so we need a norming experiment to determine which role nouns are associated with different gender stereotypes (à la Misersky et al., 2014).

Methodology: Norming and Experiment

In deze studie zijn we geïnteresseerd in wat mensen denken dat de genderverhoudingen zijn binnen verschillende groepen. Zijn de meeste juweliers in Nederland vrouwen of juist mannen, of is het een 50/50 split?

Tijdens deze taak krijg je 25 zelfstandige naamwoorden te zien, die verwijzen naar bepaalde groepen (zoals 'juwelier'). Bij elk zelfstandig naamwoord vragen we je om met behulp van een schaal aan te geven wat je denkt dat de verhouding is tussen vrouwen en mannen in Nederland binnen deze groep. Het gaat hier alleen om jouw inschatting van de huidige stand van zaken in Nederland; je hoeft het niet zeker te weten.

Geef jouw inschatting van de verhouding van vrouwen / mannen aan:



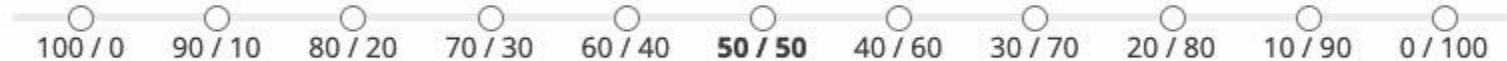
**Pedagogisch
medewerksters** ♀

**Pedagogisch
medewerkers** ♂

In this study, we are interested in what people think gender ratios are within different groups. Are most jewellers in the Netherlands women or men, or is it a 50/50 split?

During this task, you will be shown 25 nouns that refer to certain groups (such as 'jeweller'). For each noun, we ask you to use a scale to indicate what you think the ratio of women to men in the Netherlands is within this group. This is just your estimate of the current state of affairs in the Netherlands; you do not need to know for sure.

Geef jouw inschatting van de verhouding van vrouwen / mannen aan:



**Pedagogisch
medewerksters** ♀

**Pedagogisch
medewerkers** ♂

We asked 76 native speakers of Dutch to indicate for 25 nouns what their perception was of the gender ratio for that group within Dutch society. We then selected the 5 most masculine, 5 most feminine, and 5 most neutrally rated role nouns.

noun	score	noun	score	noun	score
Manicurists	8.476190	Innkeepers	5.511111	Wood workers	3.081081
Birth attendants	8.463415	Political activists	5.461538	Carpenters	2.439024
Beauticians	8.256410	Chemists	5.435897	Football coaches	2.333333
Knitters	8.166667	Astrologists	5.300000	Soldiers	2.289474
Kindergarten teachers	8.076923	Runners	4.951220	Firefighters	2.285714
Tarot card readers	7.794872	Campers	4.820513	Lorry drivers	2.225806
Prostitutes	7.725000	Government officials	4.805556	Hunters	2.033333
Fortune tellers	7.529412	Philanthropists	4.783784	Crane operators	2.025641
Nursery teachers	7.342105	Poets	4.675676	Rubbish collectors	1.894737
Ballet dancers	7.000000	Lawyers	4.476190	Plumbers	1.707317
Nurses	6.818182	Orthodontists	4.475000	Road workers	1.666667
Aerobics instructors	6.790698	Meteorologists	4.312500	Construction workers	1.609756
Primary school teachers	6.744186	Landscape gardeners	4.083333	Roofers	1.486486
Synchronized swimmers	6.409091	History professors	3.918919	Bricklayers	1.463415
Florists	6.243243	Accountants	3.550000	Car mechanics	1.437500

Our results are comparable with those from Misersky et al. (2014).

dakdekker / dakdekster
hardloper / hardloopster
nagelstylist / nagelstyliste

Masculine stereotype
No stereotype
Feminine stereotype

Dakdekkers
Dakdekkers en dakdeksters
Dakdeksters en dakdekkers
Dakdeksters

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

De jaarlijkse bijeenkomst van ROLE NOUN vond deze week plaats in de Jaarbeurs in Utrecht, op loopafstand van het station. De toegankelijkheid van de locatie werd door iedereen gewaardeerd. De ROLE NOUN hebben echt genoten van de door de lokale sponsor aangeboden borrel aan het einde van de dag.

- 1. Wat werd door iedereen gewaardeerd?*
- 2. Wie heeft de borrel aan het einde van de dag aangeboden?*

Volgens jou, wat was de verhouding tussen vrouwen en mannen bij de bijeenkomst?



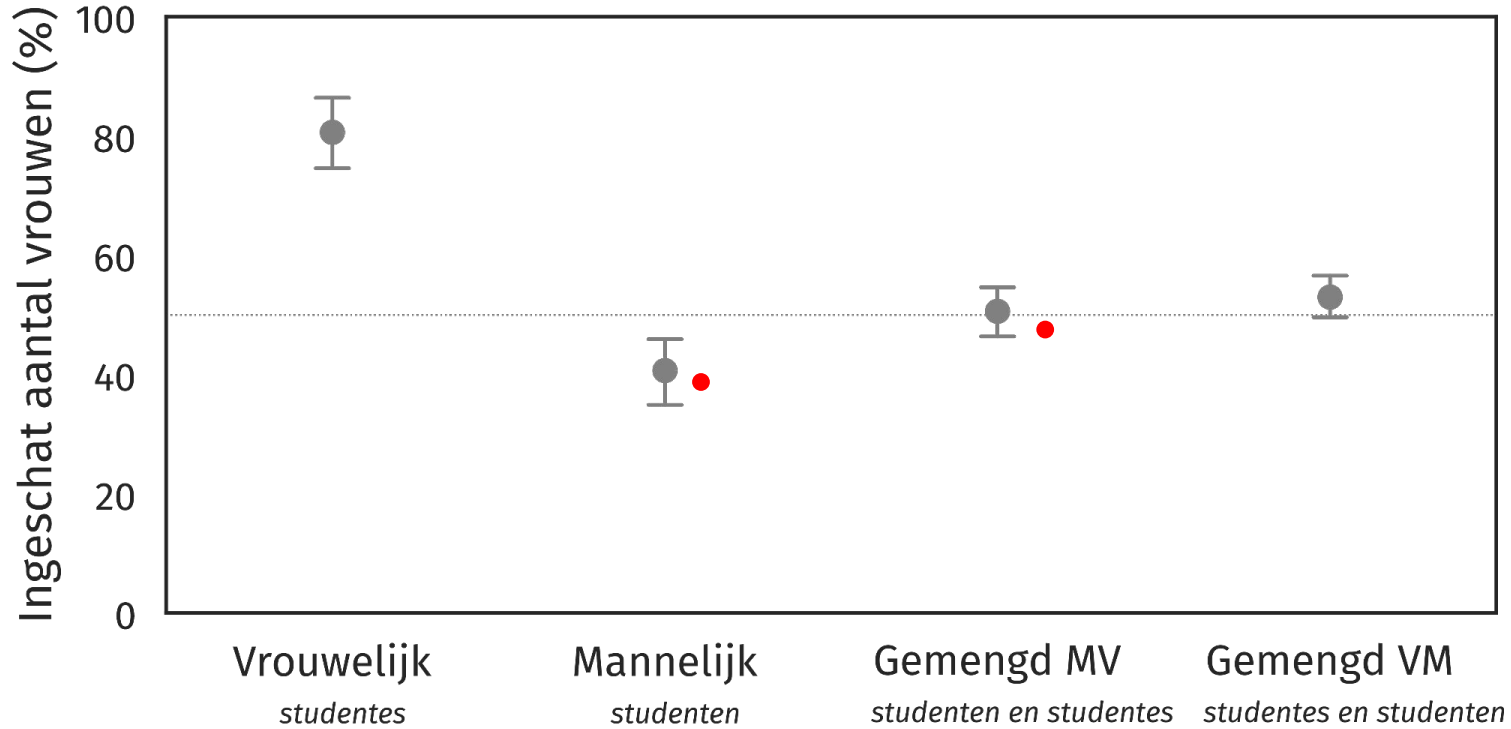
The annual meeting of ROLE NOUN took place this week at the Jaarbeurs in Utrecht, within walking distance of the railway station. The accessibility of the venue was appreciated by all. The ROLE NOUN really enjoyed the drinks offered by the local sponsor at the end of the day.

- 1. What was appreciated by everyone?*
- 2. Who offered the drinks at the end of the day?*

According to you, what was the ratio of women to men at the meeting?

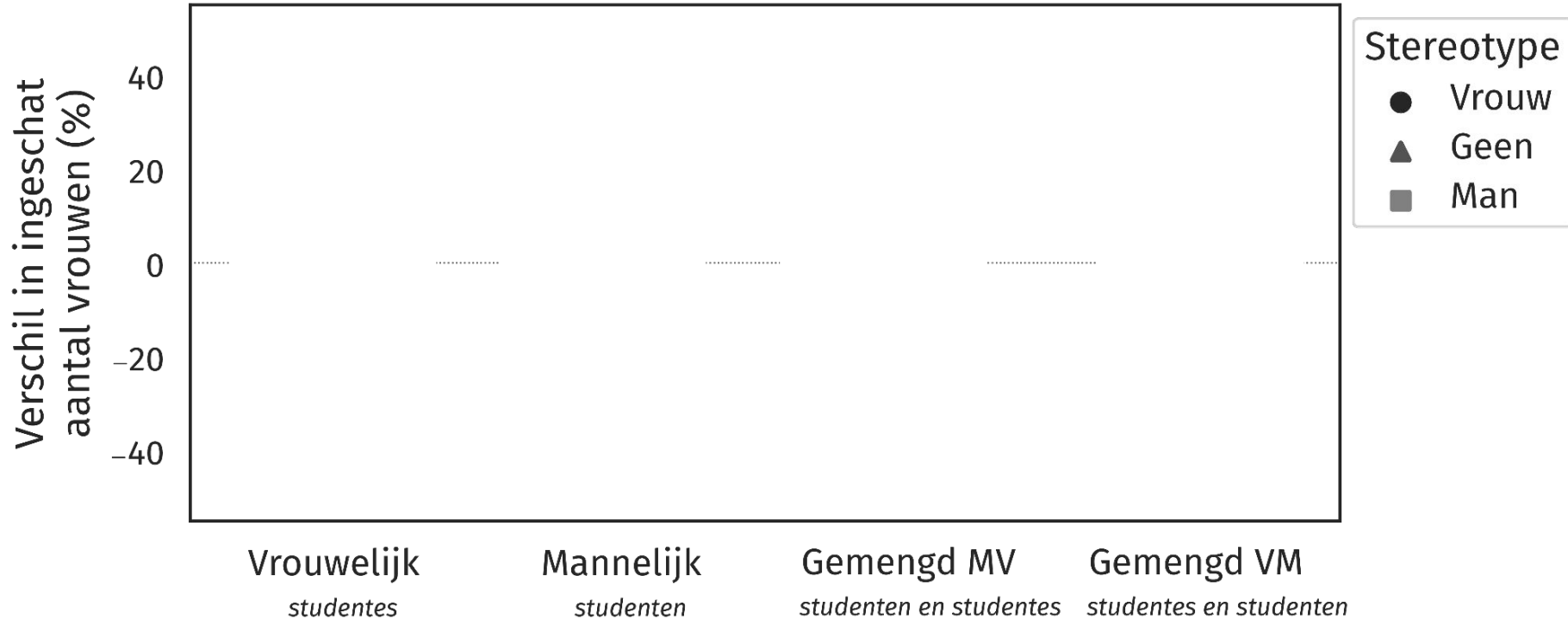


Results



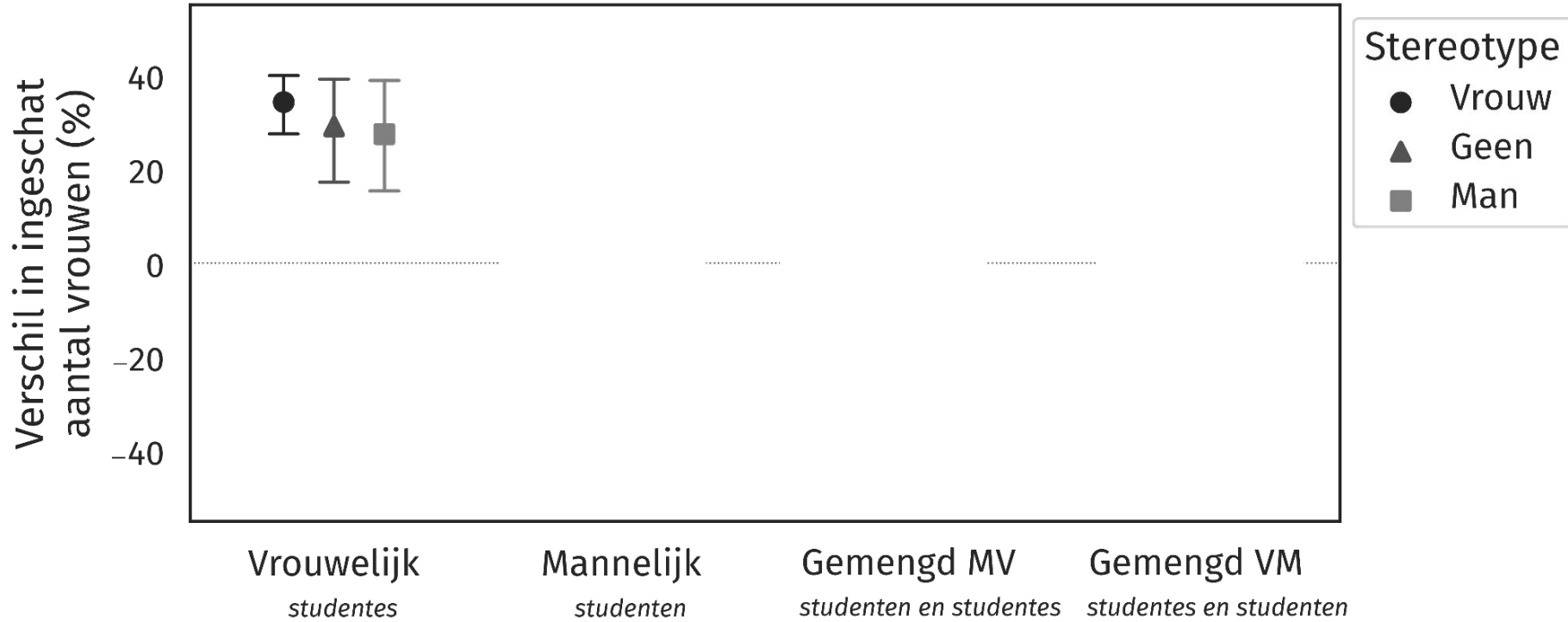
! N = 275

Difference in relation to parity



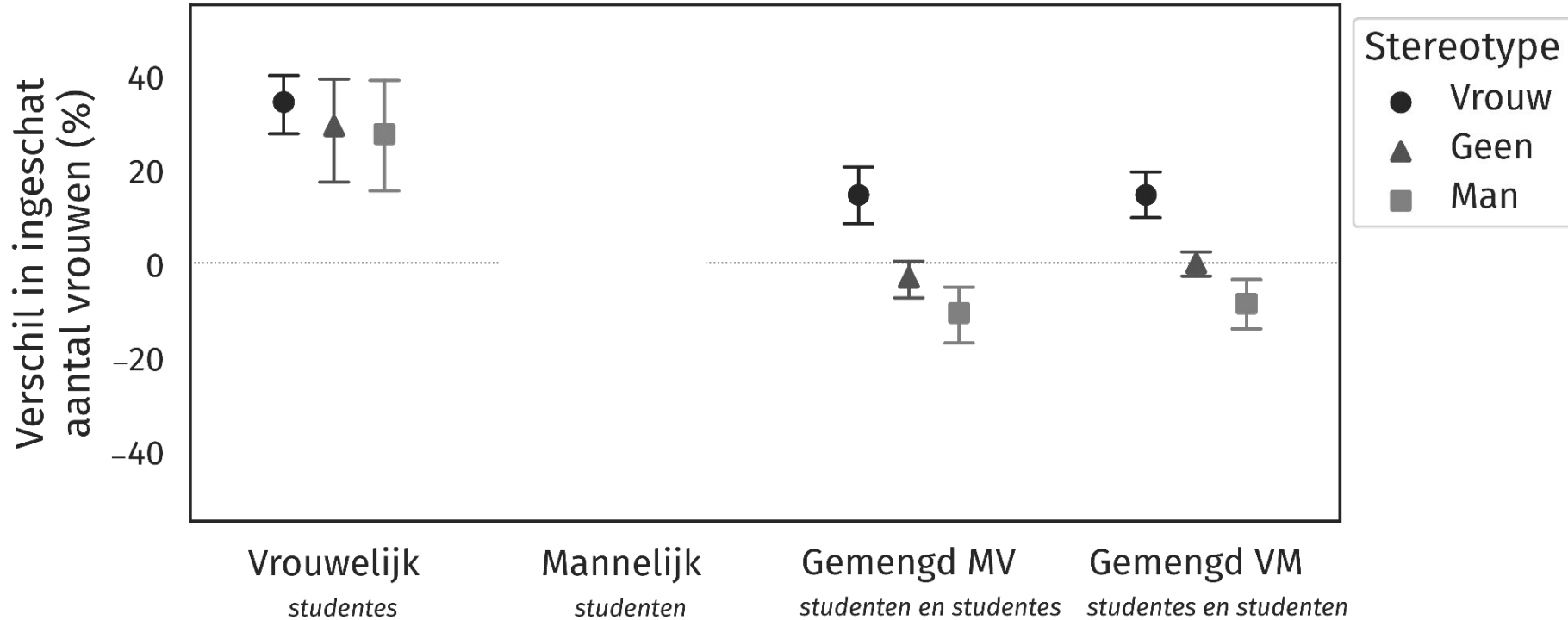
⚠ N = 275

Difference in relation to parity



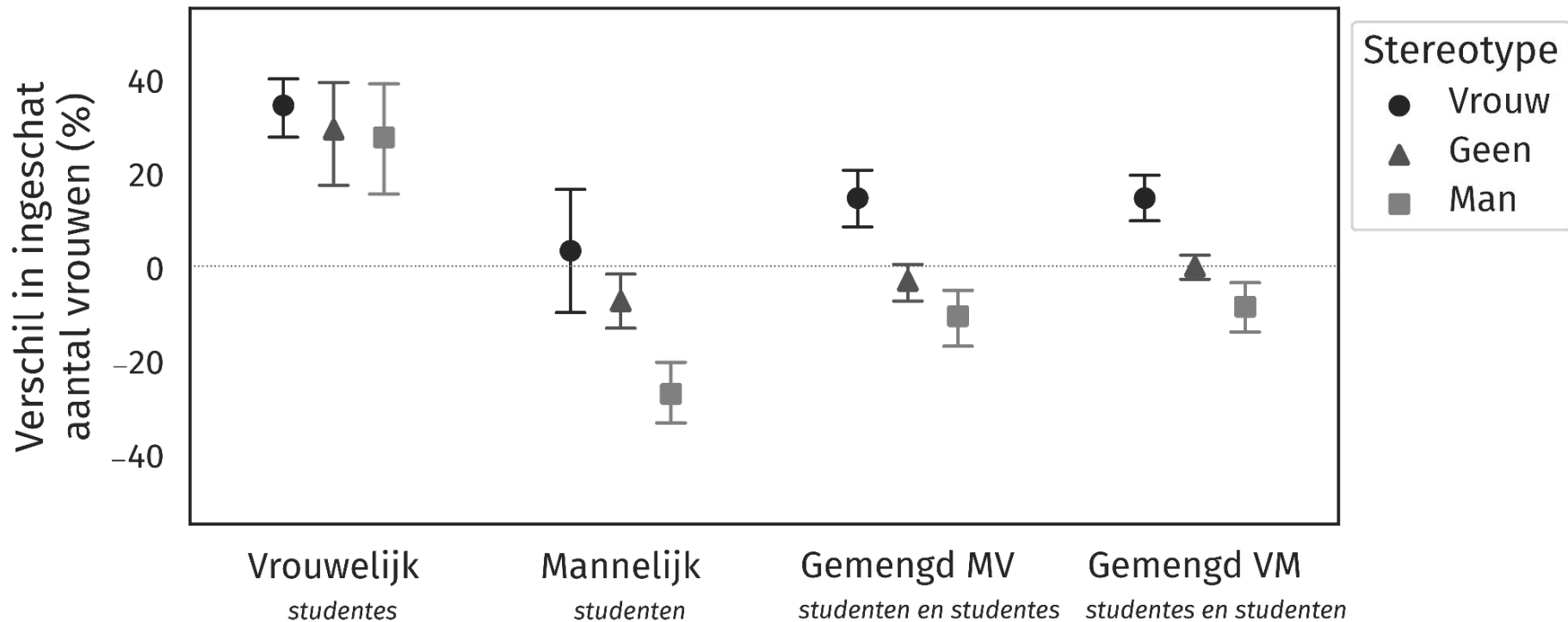
! N = 275

Difference in relation to parity



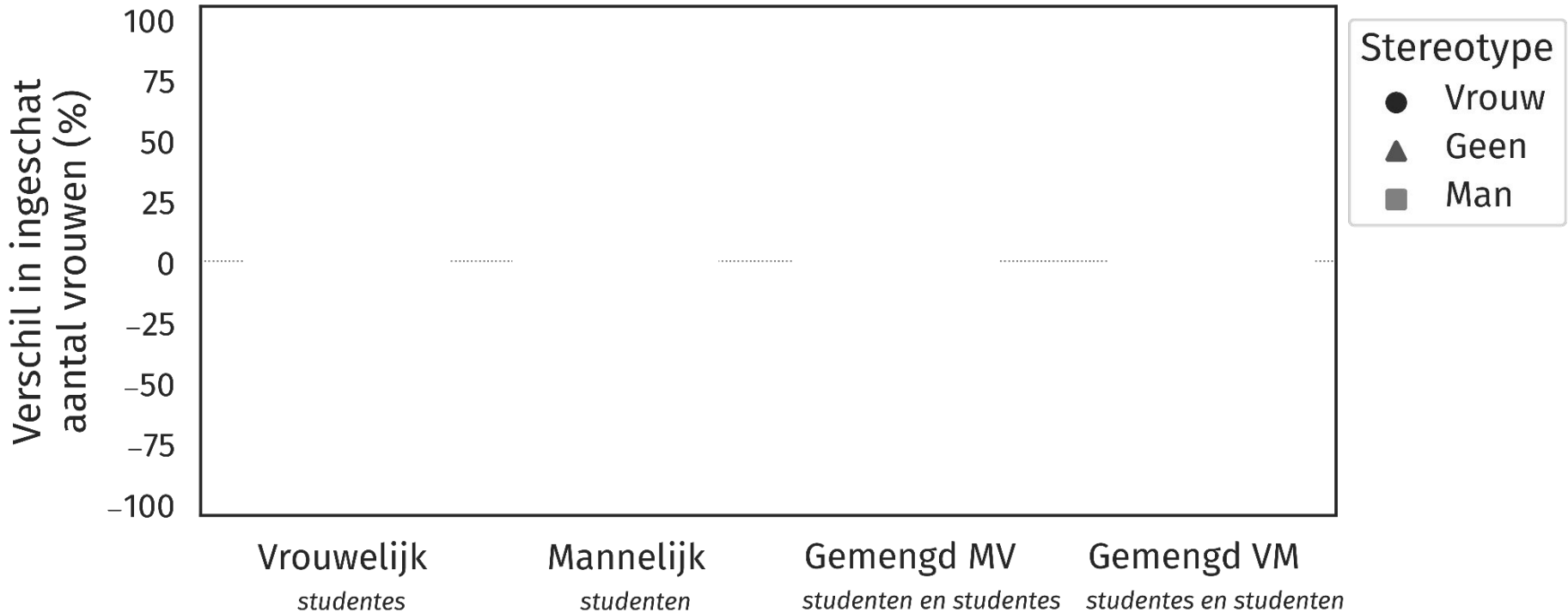
⚠ N = 275

Difference in relation to parity



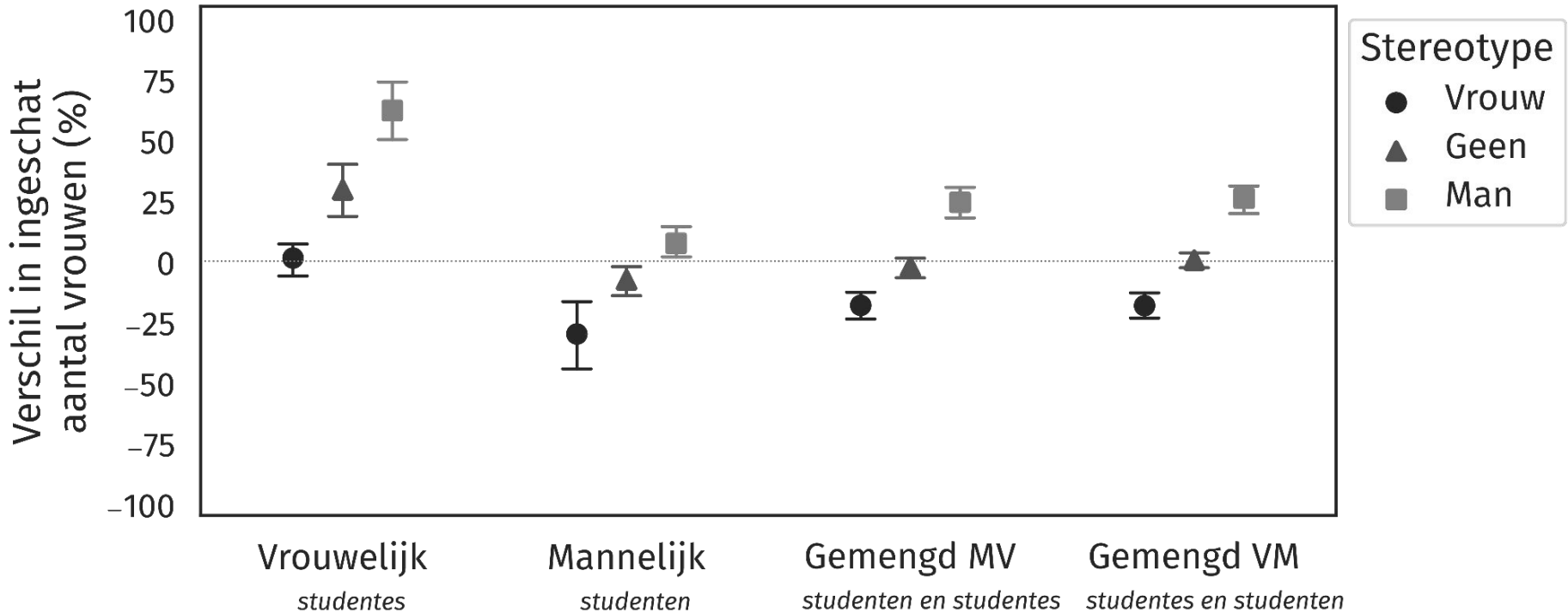
⚠ N = 275

Difference in relation to norming



⚠ N = 275

Difference in relation to norming



⚠ N = 275

Our preliminary data show that using a generic masculine form leads to an underestimation of the number of women within a group.

This does not seem to be the case for mixed forms.

Compared to parity, the generic masculine form leads to the largest underestimation of the number of women for role nouns with a male gender stereotype.

Mixed forms lead to a small overestimation of the number of women (compared to parity) for role nouns with a female gender stereotype.

Difference in relation to norming: less informative. It is clear which forms would *reinforce* existing stereotypes, but not how to combat stereotypes by using a specific form.

Discussion

Is there possibly an influence of subjects' gender? Redl et al (2022) found that there is more bias towards a male interpretation for singular personal pronouns (someone → his) than when they are conceptually plural (everyone → his):

Iedereen/iemand met een absoluut gehoor kan snel zijn instrument stemmen.

Anyone/someone with absolute hearing can quickly tune their instrument.

However, this effect is found only among the men in their sample. Women showed no interpretation bias.

A similar interpretation bias was found by Cocq & Redl (2021). They examined whether women were perceived more professionally when they were referred to with a male role noun, **neuroloog** or with a female role noun, **neurologe**.

They found that women were perceived as more professional when they were referred to with a female role noun.

However, this was only the case for the men in their sample. Women showed no interpretation bias (cf. Redl et al., 2022).

A first look at this distinction in our data shows no differences based on gender identity.

Masc. • **Fem.** •
Neut.

What can we do?

Some feel that (re)positing or emphasising a binary opposition in language is not the right path to further inclusiveness, even though (according to our data) this would be more inclusive for women.

We have not yet discussed truly neutral alternatives:

de **student**
hij

de **student** of **studente**
hij of **zij**

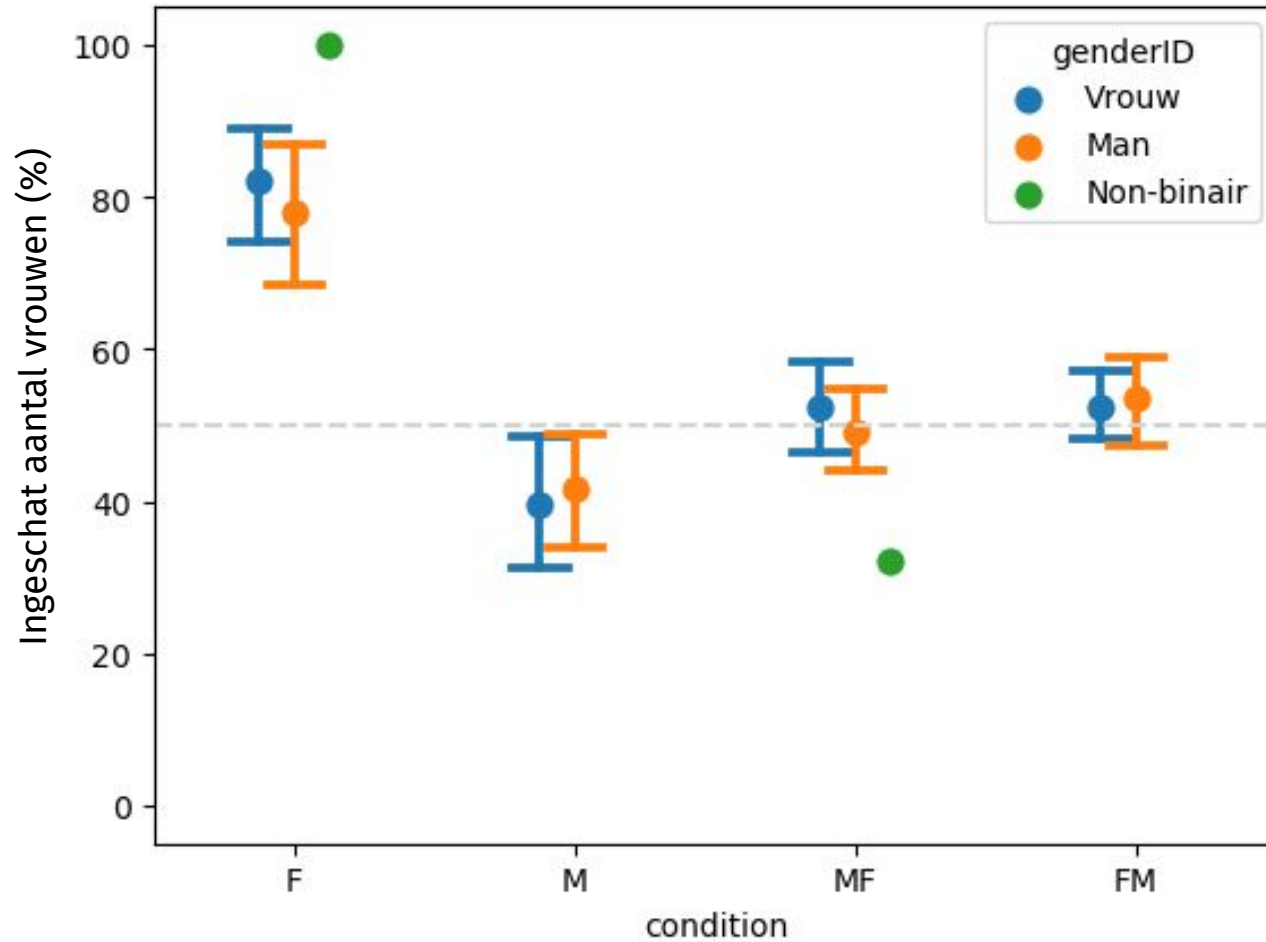
de **studerende**
die

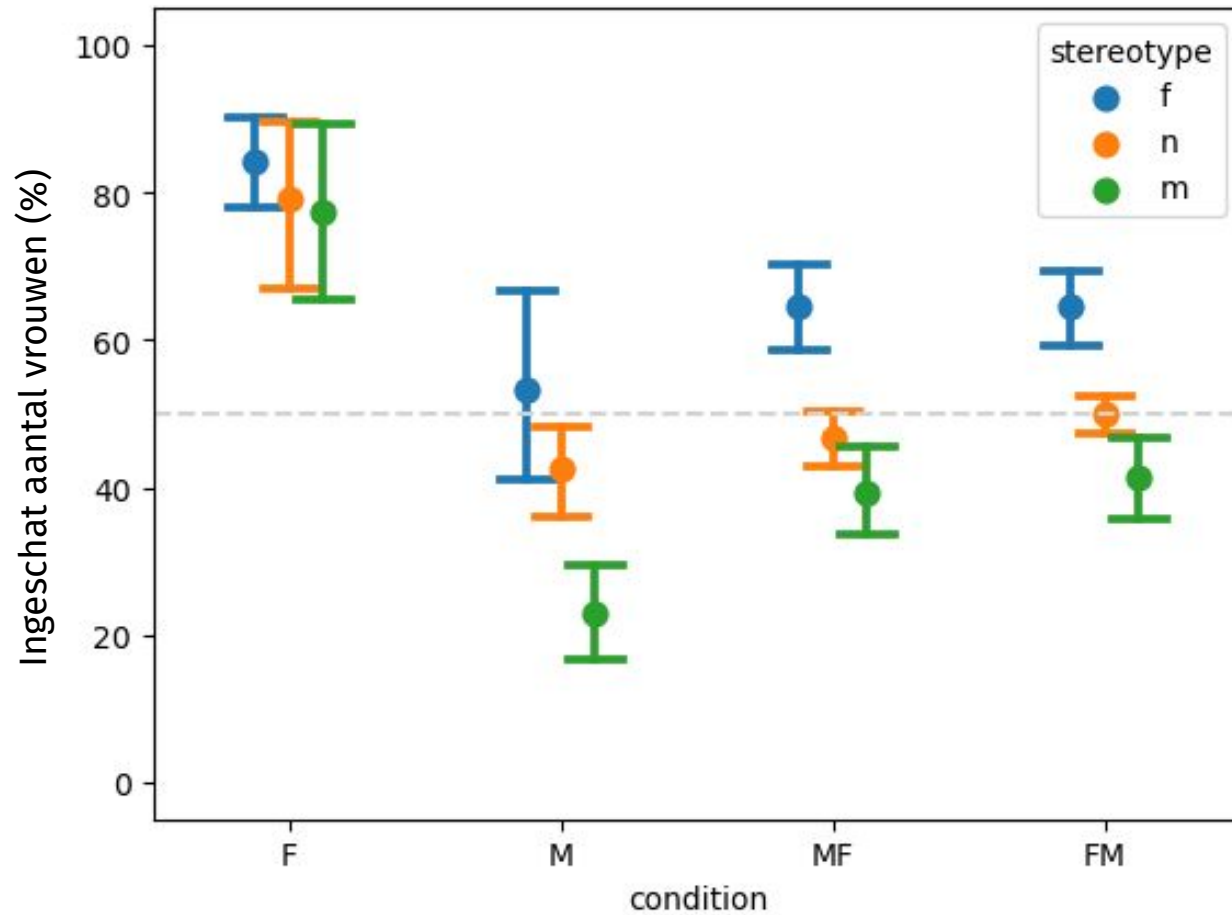
We need further research on the understanding of such forms in Dutch.

Masc. • **Fem.** • **Neut.**

• **Neutral**

Thank you for your attention! :)





Mannelijk stereotype

- wegwerkers en wegwerksters
- bouwvakkers en bouwvaksters
- dakdekkers en dakdeksters
- metselaars en metselaarsters
- automonteurs en automonteuses

Geen genderstereotype

- astrologen en astrologes
- hardlopers en hardloopsters
- kampeerders en kampeersters
- overheidsambtenaren en overheidsambtenaressen
- filantropen en filantropes

Vrouwelijk stereotype

- nagelstylisten en nagelstylistes
- vroedmannen en vroedvrouwen
- schoonheidsspecialisten en schoonheidsspecialistes
- breiers en breisters
- kleuterleiders en kleuterleidsters