

Stereotypes among Finns in Sweden

The Character of Finns versus Swedes

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National stereotyping has applications in international politics as well as in business contacts between countries. This case study of stereotypes about Finns and Swedes illuminates the varying extents to which national character traits are ascribed to any particular group. A total of 187 retired Finns living in Sweden were presented with a list of national character traits and then asked which ones they thought were more appropriate for Finns than for Swedes – or the opposite. The answers to each question have been elaborated with reference to other studies of the two national groups. Stereotyping is finally discussed in general terms. It is suggested that national stereotypes are based on (I) generalisations of the individual's own impressions, (II) hearsay i.e. stereotypes presented by others, including media, and (III) individually held values and cultural norms.

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There are at least two different entrances to the study of culturally based personalities. One assesses traits which seem significant for a particular population in a comparative perspective. To this end, personality inventories are often used, for example those which are based on Henry Murray's (1938) list of psychogenic needs. One of that kind is EPPS (Edwards Personal Preference Schedule), another one is the Swedish CMPS (Cesarec Marke Personality Scheme). The idea is to come as close as possible to inherent psychological predispositions. Such data allow for predictions of behaviour at an aggregated level.

Large-scale studies of self-reported values in different countries, such as those by Hofstede (1984) and Schwartz (1992), also depict personality traits, though primarily focusing on culture.

The other entrance to the study of culturally-based personalities is to assess how people of

different nationalities perceive other nationalities and what they think about themselves. This perspective is an emic one, presented by laymen, in contrast to the ethic perspective, presented by scholars. Emic descriptions are often but not always normative, either negative or positive. Such attributions sometimes contrast to scholarly assessed personality traits. In other instances, however, they present a good point but still exhibit rough generalisations (cf. Peabody 1985).

Perceptions of others and of oneself, whether rather true or rather false, generally effect social interaction. If a person interprets an other person's unwillingness to talk as an indication of stupidity, for example, this will have an impact on the interpreting part's way of behaviour toward the other – even if the verbal inactivity is actually caused by communication apprehension, not by "stupidity" (cf. Daun, Burroughs & McCroskey 1988). To conclude, in

order to understand social interaction, knowledge is needed about peoples' images of others and of themselves – not only about personality traits.

This study explores the link between, on the one hand, personality traits assessed among Finns and Swedes, and, on the other hand, stereotypes among Finns ascribed to Swedes and to themselves.

Finns in Sweden

Finns make up the largest immigrant group in Sweden. The number of Finnish born inhabitants was 203 371 in 1996, which means 2.3% of the total population (8 844 499) in Sweden. The national cultures in the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden) are comparatively similar in terms of work and family values, communication styles, social stratification, and religiosity. Such similarities are indicated through surveys conducted by the European Value Systems Study Group, EVSS (for a presentation, see Barker, Halman & Vloet 1992). Nevertheless, there are also significant differences.

Finland was a part of Sweden for 500 years (to be exact, between 1239 and 1818). The Swedish king ruled over Finland. As a consequence of this supremacy, the upper class in Finland was mainly composed by Swedish speaking inhabitants. However, parts of the peasant population were Finland Swedes – Swedish speaking Finns. Historically and still today, the Swedish speaking population, presently about 6% (300 000 individuals), are geographically concentrated to some areas, which are labelled as bilingual. The Finnish-Ugric language differs totally from the Swedish language. Quite a few Finnish speaking Finns have a good knowledge of Swedish, but the majority knows Swedish poorly or not at all (cf. Miljan 1966–67). It should be emphasised though, that Sweden is a “reference group” for Finns, historically and still today. When the Finnish people got their political autonomy in 1818, they wanted to articulate a national identity of their own – separated from the Swedes.¹

The non-discriminating Nordic labour market (since 1954) means free migration for Finns

who want to settle down in Sweden. Many Finns did so through many years because of the weaker labour market in Finland (not so today). In spite of historical links and cultural similarities, the Finns are hardly more socially integrated into the Swedish native population than immigrants from other European countries. This means that close friendship ties between Finnish immigrants and Swedes are comparatively rare (Jaakkola 1983:89). The first generation Finnish immigrants seem to perceive significant differences in mentality between Finns and Swedes. Albeit, this divergence is far from unknown in Scandinavia, few systematic studies have been conducted on the subject. One exception is Kati Laine-Sveiby's PhD thesis (1991) on intercultural contacts between Finnish multinational companies and their Swedish subsidiaries.

Data and procedure

In 1996 a group of 187 Finnish Swedes embarked a ship at the harbour of Helsinki heading at Stockholm, all members of an organisation for retired Finns living in Sweden. On the boat they were approached by Markku Verkasalo and Pauliina Tuomivaara from the Department of Psychology, Helsinki University, who asked them to fill out a questionnaire about their ideas about differences and similarities between Finns and Swedes. Twenty-one character traits were presented, and all the Finns were asked to answer the following question on each of them: Does this trait suit Finns rather than Swedes, “much better” or “slightly better”, or the other way around, Swedes rather than Finns, or do you answer “no difference”? After collecting the questionnaires, 18 forms which had not been properly filled out were dropped, meaning that answers by 169 subjects were analysed. 68% of these individuals were female. The mean age of all the subjects was 62 (SD 7 years). Figure 1 shows the result. The two categories “much better” and “slightly better” are combined into one, for reasons of simplicity.

The subjects had lived in Sweden in average for 32 years (SD=7), minimum 15 years and maximum 50 years. The contacts with Finland in terms of visits were frequent (Table 1).

Table 1. Visiting contacts with Finland

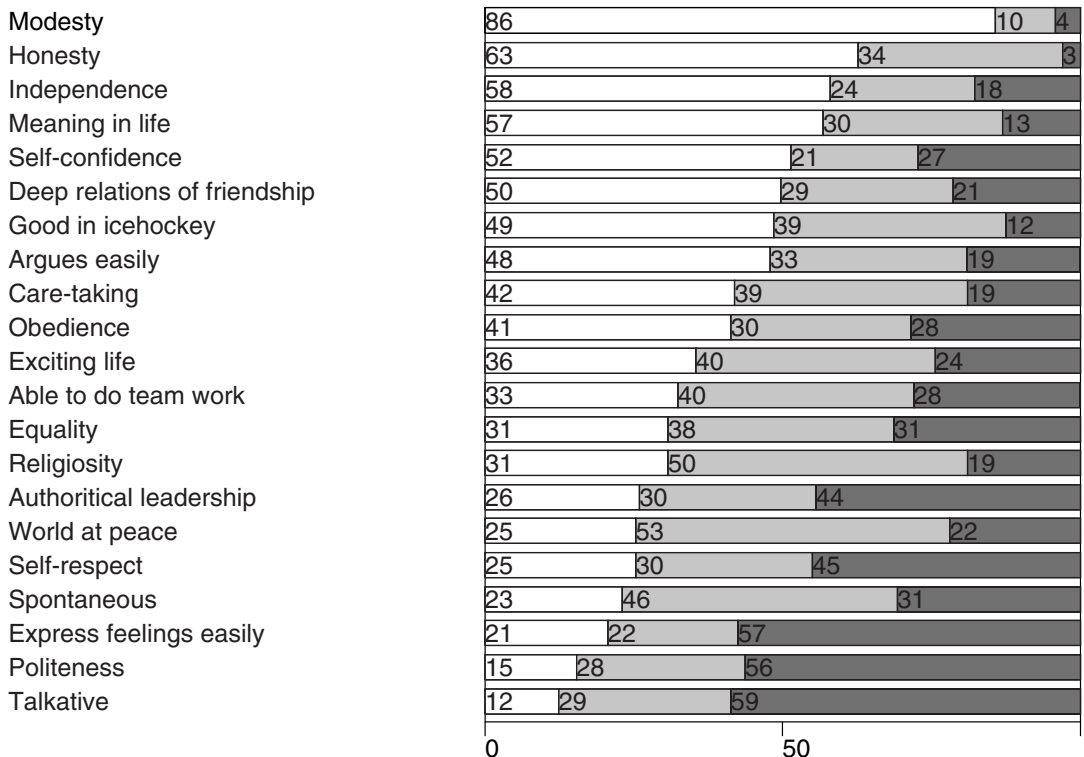
	N	%
Less than once year	20	12.1
About once a year	43	26.1
2–5 times a year	91	55.2
5–10 times a year	5	3.0
more than 10 times a year	6	3.6

Results

The largest difference between a value ascribed to Finns versus Swedes appeared to concern modesty. 86% of the respondents thought that this character trait be typical for Finns. At the other end of the scale, Swedes were described as

more talkative by 59% of the subjects; only 5% regarded Finns as being more talkative than Swedes. These differences in answers obviously reflect cultural differences. It is commonly known that willingness to talk is less among Finns than among Swedes, a fact that might indicate a greater stress on modesty. However, in most instances a considerable portion of the subjects answered “no difference”; they did not perceive any difference whatsoever. In two cases the figures were almost the same, for which reason they will not be included in the discussion. These were equality (31% “like Finns”, 31% “like Swedes”, 38% “no difference”) and world at peace (25% “like Finns”, 22% “like

Figure 1. Number of Finns who think that certain character traits describes (1) Finns better than Swedes, (3) Swedes better than Finns, and (2) the number of respondents who think that there is no difference. Per cent.



1:Like Finns 2:No difference 3:Like Swedes



Swedes”, 53% “no difference”). It could be remarked, though, that world at peace was given higher importance by the Swedes in a comparative survey among students in Estonia, Finland and Sweden (Verkasalo, Daun & Niit 1994:110). Finally one item, *good at ice-hockey*, has been excluded from the discussion, since it is doubtful whether this is a character trait. The remaining seventeen values are discussed in the order as presented in Figure 1.

Modest. Finns were regarded as more modest (by 86% versus 4%). Like any other personality trait modesty cannot be visually observed; it is inferred from a behaviour. In Finland, silence and verbal inactivity is often positively interpreted as signs of modesty – as well as in Sweden. However, the pace of speaking is generally slower among Finns, which probably conspires to the impression of a lower level of aggression – thereby partly associated to modesty. It should be remarked that verbal inactivity is not perceived as a reflection of modesty in all cultures. In “verbal cultures”, as in, for example, Italy and the United States, it is commonly looked at as either a sign of stupidity or as arrogance (Daun 1996:31–56).

Honest. Finns are regarded as more honest than Swedes (by 63% versus 3%). The Finnish view seems to be based on the Swedish conflict avoidance, noticed by many foreigners. By Finns in Sweden it is said that Swedes are not-straight-forward. On the opposite, Swedes hesitate to express their personal opinions in situations where they feel uncertain about what the other party thinks. Swedes tend to avoid the risk of having to argue for an opposite stand. This is related to a strong proneness for conformity, which has its parallel in Japanese culture (cf. Matsumoto 1984:152). Swedes prefer to agree, whereas repeated negative responses tend to be experienced as negative distance or even repudiation. Consequently, a particular behaviour among Swedes intended to generate a sense of community might instead be interpreted as dishonesty by members of some other cultures.

Independent. Independence is regarded by most subjects as a trait typical for Finns rather than Swedes (by 58% versus 18%). This answer

seems to be accounted for by the proneness of Swedes – ascribed to Swedes by Finns – to adapt to the other party’s views and opinions, implying a higher degree of dependency among Swedes. This stereotype is consistent with the answers to the following CMPS question, which was asked in two extensive surveys in Finland and Sweden: “Do you have a feeling that your views and ideas nearly always agree with those of other people?” Only 20% of the Finns answered affirmatively to this question, as compared to 45% of the Swedes. The Swedes thus appear to be more dependent on their reference group as regards their opinions (Daun, Mattlar & Alanen 1989:41).

Independence is hold important in Finland. On the other hand, in a study by Verkasalo, Daun & Niit (1994), based on university and college students, independence appeared as more important to Swedes (15th in order of importance) than to Finns (24th in order of importance). However, “order of importance” as a score is related to the relative importance of all the other values presented in the questionnaire. Nevertheless, the distance of order indicate a greater importance among Swedes.

Meaning in life. A large majority of the Finns (57% versus 13%) thought that meaning in life is more applicable to Finns than to Swedes. Meaning in life is one of Shalom Schwartz’ (1992) variables, included in the value type spirituality (together with spiritual life, inner harmony and detachment). In the survey by Verkasalo, Daun & Niit (1994) meaning in life was ranked much higher by the Finns (6th order of importance) than by the Swedes (33th order of importance).

This result is consistent with the preference among Swedes for tangible, concrete things rather than abstract ideas (Daun 1996:214). One might speculate whether it be related to the higher degree of secularism. According to the EVSS survey, fewer Swedes “think often” of death (8%), compared to Finns (18%). In most West-European countries the figures are within the layer 15–19%. Another EVSS question was the following: “How important is God in your life?” Of the Swedish respondents 8% answered “very much”, compared to 16% of the Finns (Daun 1997:137–139).

Self-confident. A majority of the Finns thought of themselves as more self-confident (by 52% versus 27%). This paradox contrasts to the higher rate of communication apprehension which is assessed among Finns. In a CMPS survey the following question was asked: "Can you be subjected to humiliation and ridicule without letting it affect your self-confidence and self-respect?" 22% of the Finns answered "yes", but as many as 45% of the Swedes (Daun, Mattlar & Alanen 1989).

How can we account for this contradiction? One factor might be the Finnish conception of the Swedish conflict-avoidance, i.e. the inclination among Swedes to agree, an impression that has been reported by many foreigners (cf. Sontag 1969). However, the self-image among Swedes is different; agreement is by them perceived as a means to generate a sense of community. A second explanation of the Finnish self-image might be the Finnish general stress on masculinity, which is perceived to include decisiveness. In Hofstede's masculinity index, Sweden got the lowest score (6), of all the forty countries, whereas Finland got 51 (and USA got 62) (Hofstede 1984:189).

Deep relations of friendship. 50% of the subjects thought that deep relations of friendship characterises Finns rather than Swedes; only 21% held the opposite opinion. The dominant conception is supported by Erik Allardt's studies of the Nordic countries (1975). To the CMPS question "Do you like belonging to groups where the members feel warmly and tenderly for each other?" 89% of the Finns answered "yes", 71% of the Swedes (Daun, Mattlar & Alanen 1989:48). In this sense, Finns seem close to their eastern neighbours, the Russians, among whom warm friendship ties stand out as a national characteristic (Smith 1976).

Argues easily. 48% of the subjects thought that Finns argue more easily; less than half as many (19%) had the opposite opinion. This result seems consistent with the Finnish self-image. They think that they themselves have a much more straight-forward communication style. The significant rate of communication apprehension among Finns which has been assessed by scholars obviously does not rule out their self-conception of being more able in argu-

ing. However, this conception contrast to a great extent to Swedes' impression of Finnish communication.

Care-taking. 42% of the subjects thought that care-taking is typical for Finns; only a minority (19%) held the opposite opinion. This self-ascribed trait seems consistent with the Finnish self-image of having deeper bonds of friendship. Care-taking corresponds to the personality trait nurturance, which has been surveyed elsewhere. "The positive attitude of the Finns to all sorts of care-taking (nurturance) ..., argues for the Finns being particularly suitable for employment in the nursing and social sector. The fact that Finnish manpower is popular in the medical service in Sweden could thus have a factual basis in personality structure" (Daun, Mattlar & Alanen 1989:43).

Obedience. 41% of the subjects thought that obedience is characteristic for Finns; only 28% hold the opposite opinion. We may remark that Finland scored lower than Sweden on Hofstede's individuality index-scale (1984:158). Finland received 63, Sweden 71. To the extent that the opposite end, collectivity, implies subordination, Finns might be labelled as more prone to obedience than Swedes. Another aspect is that Finland is a more stratified society than Sweden, including a work life characterised by a more authoritative kind of leadership (cf. Allardt 1975:142-143). Consequently, more Finns should be expected to "obey" (although obedience has been ascribed also to Swedes by foreign commentators, for example by Huntford 1971).

Exciting life. This value is included in the value type stimulation in Schwartz' list (together with varied life and daring). The question asked by Schwartz is whether exciting life is a "guiding principle" in the respondent's life. 36% of the retired Finns thought that exciting life was more characteristic for Finns than for Swedes; 24% had the opposite opinion. The difference is not great, but there are reasons to compare with the rankings of value types in our study based on students (Verkasalo, Daun & Niit 1994). In this survey, exciting life was ranked considerably higher by the Swedes (16th in order of importance) than by the Finns (30th in order of importance). This might be accounted for by the fact that Sweden was urbanised

earlier than Finland. The proportion of people employed in primary production (agriculture, forestry, fishing) is highest in Finland compared to the Nordic countries – and lowest in Sweden.

Able to do team work. In this case the responses hardly point in any definite direction. 40% did not think that Finns and Swedes differ whatsoever, 33% thought that Finns are better at team work, 28% that Swedes are more capable in this sense. One might speculate that the respondents were biased by the term “able”, since it has a positive connotation, rather than a negative one. In other words, it is generally considered “good” to be able to do team work. However, comparative studies of business management indicate the opposite: Swedes are more prone to discuss and decide collectively (Laine-Sveiby 1994). Sweden seems to hold something of a middle position between American individualism and Japanese collectivism. In the area of work legislation, the predominant attitude in the U.S. has been characterised as a “my boat” position, the Swedish attitude as “same boat”, and the Japanese attitude as “our boat” position (Fahlbeck 1988). (Cf. section below on *Authoritative Leadership*.)

Religiosity. 31% of the subjects thought that Finns are more religious than Swedes; 19% had the opposite opinion. This theme has already been touched upon above, in relation to the value meaning of life. Finland is somewhat less secularised than Sweden. To the EVSS question, asked in the 1981 survey, “How important is God in your life?”, 16% of the Finns answered “very important”; 8% of the Swedes (Daun 1997:139).

Authoritative leadership. 44% of the subjects thought that authoritative leadership is a characteristic for Swedes (44%); whereas 26% hold the opposite opinion. However, this view is not supported by empirical research. Studies of management in Finland underline the hierarchical relationship (Laine-Sveiby 1991), whereas the structure of Swedish organisations is regularly described as exceptionally “flat” in international comparison (cf. Mårtensson 1998:337–371).

What accounts then for the Finnish conception of Swedes? We suggest two circumstances. One is an impression of “storsvenskhet” (“big

Swedishness”), prevalent in Finland as well as in Denmark and Norway. It has repeatedly been argued that Swedes tend to perform, in their contacts with people from other Nordic countries, as if it should be taken for granted that Sweden is absolutely leading: biggest, richest, most advanced. The other circumstance is the fact that immigration tends to entail a degradation in status. About half (45%) of the respondents in a survey among Finnish immigrants in Sweden “felt inferior in the company of Swedes” (Jaakkola 1983:76).

Self-respect. 45% of the subjects thought that self-respect is characteristic for Swedes, whereas 25% hold the opposite opinion. This stereotype seems to be consistent with the conception that Swedes argues easily and that Swedes perform a more authoritative leadership, which – as it might be interpreted – reflects a higher degree of self-respect qua self-confidence. The above mentioned conception of “big Swedishness” might also make a mark on this stereotype. It has been emphasised that Finns feel uncertain about themselves in contacts with foreigners, including Swedes, not among themselves, since the social intercourse among Finns is very much selective – only relatives and close friends (Laine-Sveiby 1984:37–39).

Spontaneity. Somewhat more subjects (31%) thought that Swedes are more spontaneous than Finns, whereas 23% hold the opposite opinion. The difference is not big, a fact that could be accounted for by associations which go in different directions. One interpretation could be that Swedes are more spontaneous since they express feelings easily (see below) and because they are more talkative (see below). An interpretation in the opposite direction is that Finns are more spontaneous since they are more honest (see above), “they say what they mean”.

Express feelings easily. An overwhelming majority of the subjects (57%) thought that Swedes express feelings more easily than Finns, whereas 21% hold the opposite opinion. This stereotype is supported by the conception of Swedes as being less shy, more able to communicate (cf. Daun 1996:41). On the other hand – as was noted above – some people think that Finns “say what they mean”, thereby expressing their feelings easily.

Politeness. A great majority of the subjects (56%) thought that Swedes express more politeness than Finns, whereas 15% hold the opposite opinion. There is a stereotype in Finland that Swedes are particularly “urbanised” and “bourgeois”. Such a conception implies some stress on politeness, a behaviour that has its sociological roots in encounters between strangers (in urban settings) and in an aristocratic heritage. Etiquette and formal dinner parties, for example, are rare in Finland (Laine-Sveiby 1984:35). On the other hand, Finns – as a matter of fact – are more conservative in terms of titles and addressing one another (*op. cit.*: 13–16), in some contrast to the Swedish “informality” (e.g. the so called Du-reform in the 1960s, the ending of the equivalence to the German Sie-title).

Talkativeness. Most subjects (59%) thought that Swedes are more talkative, only 12% hold the opposite opinion. This is a strong stereotype among the subjects (which corresponds to the reverse stereotype among Swedes of Finns). It has to be emphasised that talkativeness is not generally perceived as a positive personality trait in Finland, especially not concerning males. “A real man” should not be too verbally active, since such behaviour is associated with femininity. The particular ability among Swedes to communicate is also touched upon by Allardt (1975) in his Nordic survey. Another aspect is that Finns are significantly more talkative among one another, where they feel socially certain, not in the company of Swedes (Laine-Sveiby 1984:44).

Concluding remarks

The answers given to the questions about Finns and Swedes are expressions of stereotypes. National stereotypes seem to be based on (I) generalisations of the individual’s own observations and impressions, (II) hearsay, i.e. stereotypes presented by others, including media, and (III) individually held values and cultural norms. This partly accounts for the variation in answers, including those who answered “no difference”. In other words, we should consider that people possess different experiences, that people are objected to other peoples’ commentaries, and that people maintain different values.

Studies of traits, values and behaviour patterns among Finns and Swedes exhibit a significant coherence with prevailing national stereotypes in this particular. This coherence might be accounted for (a) by the facts that these particular subjects lived in Sweden since many years, and generally (b) by the geographical proximity between the two countries, and (c) by the close historical contacts between Finland and Sweden. Consequently, stereotypes of Swedes are to a great extent based on personal experiences – less on hearsay.

Stereotyping influenced by individual values and cultural norms implies “wishful thinking”, i.e. to judge oneself particularly positively. This might be labelled as the one side of national prejudices; the other side is the ethnocentric proneness to judge the other negatively. However, not all self-stereotypes are “wishful thinking”. Most subjects, for example, thought that self-respect primarily is a characteristic for Swedes – consequently indicating a negative self-stereotype among the Finnish respondents.

Notes

1. The following verse, ascribed to Adolf Ivar Arwidsson, has been given status as the Finnish nationalistic slogan par preference.

“We are not Swedes,
Russians we don’t want to become,
so let us stay Finnish.”

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