General
Introduction
“Tegelijkertijd zijn in de maalstroom van alledag onrust en onbehagen kenmerken van deze tijd.”
(Koning Willem-Alexander, 2016, Troonrede)

“Het gevoel van onbehagen zit hem in “blijft Nederland wel Nederland”? […] We zitten wel met dertig jaar mislukt integratiebeleid.”
(Mark Rutte, 2016)

“Nederland is een ziek land geworden.”
(Geert Wilders, 2016)

“Politicians prospered – but the jobs left, and the factories closed. […] Mothers and children trapped in poverty in our inner cities; rusted-out factories scattered like tombstones across the landscape of our nation; an education system, flush with cash, but which leaves our young and beautiful students deprived of all knowledge; and the crime and gangs and drugs that have stolen too many lives and robbed our country of so much unrealized potential. This American carnage stops right here and stops right now.”
(Donald Trump, 2017, Inaugural address)

“De vernedering en verarming die ons land heeft ondergaan kan je niet alleen verklaren door de slechte mensen en misdadigers die ons regeerden. Het probleem is het model zelf van het land, een model waarin de staat tegen de belangen van de samenleving ingaat, waarbij een minderheid zijn bankrekeningen vult, terwijl de meerderheid moet toekijken op de corruptie die onze instellingen leegrooft.”
(Pablo Iglesias, 2015)
Unrest and discontent are the defining features of our age. In recent years, a sense of doom and gloom about the state of society has loomed large in many countries around the world. People express grave concerns about the state of their nation: There are problems with the economy, immigration, the quality of health care systems, with political elites being corrupt or neglectful of the interests of “common people”. And underlying these many specific perceived problems and impending catastrophes, there seems to be a tacit discontent with society as a whole. At the heart of a broad spectrum of woes, there appears to be a collective belief that society is in an advanced state of decline. The quotes at the beginning of this introduction illustrate this: They describe a country that is ill, or rotten to its core. Moreover, they present these maladies as if they are facts, things we all know to be true.

In 2016, this collective sense of discontent with the state of society appears to have influenced major political developments. In the United States (US), the presidential election campaign of Donald Trump embraced the idea that American society is in decline. In the United Kingdom (UK), the vote for Britain to leave the European Union appears to have been influenced not just by antipathies against EU membership, but also by a deep discontent with the state of the UK itself (Swales, 2016). Populist parties Partij voor de Vrijheid (Freedom Party; PVV) in the Netherlands and Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany; AfD) in Germany have seen high and rising levels of electoral support for their messages that their respective countries are “ill” and facing grave problems. Thus, it seems that many people think that their country is doing badly – and that this collective discontent with society might have important consequences.

This PhD thesis attempts to enhance our understanding of the phenomenon of societal discontent. When I began thinking about this in 2010 (already before my PhD, as a master’s student), the phenomenon of societal discontent was very visible in the Netherlands, but less so in other countries. Research at that time showed that the Dutch were very content about their personal lives, but at the same time very pessimistic about the state of their country (Bijl, Boelhouwer, Cloin, & Pommer, 2011). The discrepancy was so puzzling that the then director of the Netherlands Institute for Social Research (Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, SCP), Paul Schnabel, called the Dutch population “resistant to reality” (Schnabel, 2012, p.17). Many commentators, then and since, gave their personal interpretations of societal discontent. However, we felt (and feel) that they are missing something important in their analyses. The primary concern of most commentators and scholars seems to be to explain why people expressed high levels of discontent with society. While this question is understandable and important,
we argue that one should first ask: what is societal discontent? It appears to be a vague, tacit, collective phenomenon; one that was ill-captured by existing concepts and measurement instruments in the social psychological literature and in other social sciences. In this dissertation, we propose that societal discontent has characteristics that make it seem to be something like a Zeitgeist.

Zeitgeist is, of course, a quite vague and nebulous concept. In this case we feel that that is entirely appropriate, since societal discontent too has something intangible: Citizens in society seem to share a tacit understanding that society is in a bad state. The discussions about various specific problems that are supposed to plague society appear to be grounded in a general understanding that society is in a bad state. This underlying assumption is not often explicitly discussed and therefore cannot easily be questioned. Moreover, when we began our research we did not find any research instruments in the literature that captured it satisfactorily. We therefore decided that in order to gain insight in this phenomenon (its incidence, antecedents, and consequences), we first needed to develop a method to study it.

The aim of this dissertation is thus twofold. First, we aim to develop a conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent, and a scale we can use to measure it. As explained below, we conceptualized societal discontent as an aspect of the Zeitgeist. The operationalization we developed on the basis of this is a general factor we call Z. We developed a Z-scale, which can be used to measure societal discontent within and across countries. Second, we aim to use our theory and method to study societal discontent itself: to gain insight in what it is as a social psychological phenomenon, and explore its antecedents and consequences.

In the present Chapter, we will introduce our conceptualization of societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist and provide context to the research presented in the empirical chapters (Chapters 2-5). First, we will present an analysis of the phenomenon of societal discontent, in which we identify the aspects that we think are important for understanding and conceptualizing this phenomenon. We propose that Zeitgeist is a useful concept in this matter; therefore, we will provide some context on the origins and current use of the concept of Zeitgeist itself. As a prelude to Chapter 2, we will subsequently introduce our conceptualization of societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist. In addition, we will discuss alternative ways in which societal discontent has been studied since the start of this research project. This Chapter ends with an overview of the research that will be presented in the empirical chapters (Chapters 2-5) of this dissertation.
Societal Discontent in the Netherlands

At the time of writing, concerns with collective societal discontent have become widespread and receive international attention. The 2016 World Economic Outlook report of the International Monetary Fund for example identified “economic anxiety”, “resentment of cross-border migration” and a “nationalist sentiment” as major concerns for worldwide economic development (International Monetary Fund, 2016). In countries such as the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Spain, and Italy, but also for example Brazil and Chile, this collective societal discontent seems to be expressed in people’s votes in elections and referendums, through public discussion and opinion, or in protest movements. Chapter 4 will provide a more detailed discussion of societal discontent across different countries. But as noted before, this was not the case when we started thinking about societal discontent in 2010 or at the start of this PhD research in 2012. At that time, societal discontent was a phenomenon that puzzled us and other researchers in the Netherlands. Despite high levels of personal well-being and a high objective quality of life, a majority of the Dutch population appeared to have become convinced that society was in a sorry state (see e.g. Bijl et al., 2011). A broadly shared sense of doom and gloom about society dominated Dutch public opinion for years. This paradoxical situation inspired the current research and informed our thinking about the phenomenon of societal discontent; we will therefore discuss it in more detail below.

One could speculate that societal discontent in the Netherlands might have started around the turn of the century. Its core elements are exemplified by the controversial politician Pim Fortuyn, whose discourse centered around the discontents of “the man in the street” with “the mess created by the purple governments” (several governments led by the Labour party (PVDA), who were in power from 1994-2002, see e.g., Fortuyn, 2002). Fortuyn’s analysis of Dutch society was that of a country in deep peril, either besieged on all fronts by dangers and decline, or already corrupted and rotten. He proclaimed to identify deep problems in security and justice, healthcare, the education system, the incredibility of public administration, and above all immigration and a purported Islamization of society. Fortuyn’s concerns appear to reflect the concerns of many Dutch people a decade later: People feared immigration, supported protectionist policies, were concerned about individualism and anticipated future societal decline (Dekker, den Ridder, & Schnabel, 2012). From 2008 onwards, when the Netherlands Institute for Social Research for the first time included this question in their national surveys, a surprisingly stable amount of approximately two-thirds of Dutch citizens continued to think that things in society are moving in the wrong direction (Bijl et al., 2011; Dekker, de Blok, & de Hart, 2016; Dekker et al., 2012). Societal discontent appears to manifest itself in many im-
important parts of Dutch society: in politics and by politicians, in public debates, in mass media. It therefore seems appropriate to characterize contemporary Dutch society as pessimistic or discontented.

While this sense of pessimism or discontent about society was relatively stable over the past decade, the issues that appeared most central or pivotal to this discontent seem to have fluctuated considerably. A few examples of such dominant issues in the Dutch public debate are, in chronological order with rough time estimates:

• The integration of immigrants in Dutch society, also referred to as the “multicultural drama” or “the collapse of the multicultural society” (dominant approximately 2000 – 2008: see e.g. Scheffer, 2000);

• Concern about the general coarsening of manners, the apparent lack of respect for others and the corruption of our norms and values (approximately 2002-2004/6, during the governments of prime minister Balkenende, e.g. Van der Brink, 2004);

• Dutch economy, the impact of the global financial crisis, the recession, and unemployment (2008 – 2015/2016, from the start of the global financial crisis until full economic recovery);

• Crime and safety, with a call for more police presence (“more blue in the streets”; e.g., important in the time around election campaigns in 2012);

• The perceived loss of Dutch values and traditions, and discrimination and racism in society (“Zwarte Piet”-discussion, 2013 onwards, when United Nations-advisor Verene Shepherd sparked discussion by directly linking this cultural tradition to discrimination, racism, and slavery);

• Immigration and refugees, with the arrival of refugees fleeing Syria (among other countries) during the European refugee crisis (e.g., September 2015 onwards, when a photo of a three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned of the Turkish coast caused collective awareness of the issues, and many (Syrian) refugees started to reach the Netherlands).

From 2008 onwards, the SCP asked people in a quarterly survey what they thought were the most important problems in the Netherlands (Dekker et al., 2016). Their results confirm these trends: For example, of the five categories of issues the SCP identified, immigration is in fourth or fifth position of the “national sense of problems” from 2008 onwards, until in 2015 people start identifying it as the most important problem in society (first position). Similarly, between 2009-2011 problems with the health- and elderly care systems are in fifth position, while in 2014 and 2015 they are on the top of the list. In sum, it seems that a large part of the Dutch population was consistently dissatisfied with the state of society, but the reasons why appeared to have fluctuated wildly. We suggest that societal discontent appears not to be strongly connected to just one particular issue, or set of issues, but to be a more general notion
Paradoxically, this societal discontent did not correspond to the objective state of the country as can be inferred from international comparisons. Pim Fortuyn’s book about “the ravages” of the reigning government appeared in 2002 after a period of an economic boom (Fortuyn, 2002). Before and during the global financial crisis, the per-capita GDP of the Dutch was among the highest in the world, poverty rates were among the lowest, unemployment was low compared to other countries, wealth was divided relatively equally, crime levels were low, education quality was high, etcetera (see e.g. Bijl et al., 2011). The SCP’s objective quality-of-life-index (a composite of objective indicators of health, housing, participation in society, etc.) has shown a 6% increase between 1999 and 2010, indicating high and rising quality of life in Dutch society (Bijl et al., 2011). Even more paradoxically, the discontent that Dutch people feel with society is not reflected in their personal lives. People report high levels of personal well-being: For example, in 2011, 82% of Dutch people state to be happy, and 80% are positive about their own financial situation (Bijl et al., 2011). The Dutch rewarded their satisfaction with life on average a 7.8 out of 10: one of the highest levels in Europe (Schnabel, 2012). These high levels of personal well-being have been very stable too: In 2015, 87% of Dutch people reported to be happy with their lives (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2016). There seems to be a paradox: A high and increasing level of personal contentment coincides with growing collective discontent (Dekker et al., 2012).

An interesting observation here is that in the Netherlands, as well as in for example Belgium, the onset of societal discontent occurred well before the global financial crisis and economic recession that started in 2008. It seems to exist relatively independently from the country’s objective (economic) circumstances. Another interesting observation is that this sense of doom and gloom is not universal, and can change over time. In 2012, Denmark was an example of a country that in social and economic respect was very similar to the Netherlands, yet its citizens were very positively disposed towards their society (Schnabel, 2012). And despite the current feeling of gloom, the Netherlands has known times of optimism about society: the (early) 1990s are often characterized as such (e.g., in a documentary by Andere Tijden, 2014), or the years post World War II (e.g., in (historical) analyses of post-war optimism; Van Asselt, Faas, Van der Molen, & Veenman, 2010). Collective discontent with society does not even seem to be constrained to modern-day society. For example, a historical study of the Dutch Golden Age (Schama, 1987) suggests that in those times of relatively high levels of prosperity, there were periodic bouts of collective discontent, too. These were fueled, according to Schama, by the sinfulness of wealth itself: pamphlets, sermons and discourse converged on a shared assumption that the new-found riches would eventually incur the wrath of God. At the time,
the signs that God would unleash plagues on the Dutch were not worldly everyday indicators of trade, crime or the war effort. Instead, the foreboding was the beaching of large numbers of whales on the Dutch shores (an event that happened rarely enough for it to be seen as an exceptionally strong signal).

In sum, when we started this research, we sought to study the sense of doom and gloom that many people in the Netherlands felt about society and that had been recognized as societal discontent. This societal discontent appeared to manifest itself as a tacit assumption that society was doing badly. Although the issues that were most pivotal to this sense of discontent varied, this tacit assumption behind it seemed to remain relatively stable over the last 15 years. However, we speculated that it could change, because the Netherlands has known more optimistic times as well.

We also observed that societal discontent seemed to be collectively shared rather than a personal opinion, and in fact quite independent from how Dutch people perceived their personal life. It also seemed to be rather disconnected from the objective state of the country, as inferred from for example international comparisons or long-term trends. At the same time though, the fears and discontents in Dutch society are very real to people, and may have real consequences for public policy, or voting behavior (e.g., see Chapter 3). Thus, we propose that societal discontent is a collectively shared, tacit, generalized perception of the state of society. To us it seems a Zeitgeist-like phenomenon: A discourse all members of society have access to, because it is an aspect of our shared understanding of how things are. We therefore set out to explore whether the concept of Zeitgeist could be useful in developing a conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent.

Zeitgeist

The Philosophical Origin of the Concept

The first question then is: What exactly is Zeitgeist? According to the Oxford Dictionary, Zeitgeist is the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time. We suggest that societal discontent could be seen as part of the Zeitgeist in the Netherlands in the past decade: The defining mood of these times with respect to the state of society as a whole could be said to be pessimistic. Although this definition of Zeitgeist carries elements of a psychological experience of people (“mood”, “ideas and beliefs”), it is not clear how this would translate to a psychological phenomenon. In this section, we will give an overview of the origin and meaning of the concept of Zeitgeist and discuss its relationship to social psychology.
The concept of Zeitgeist has its origins in philosophy: It has been pioneered by the late 18th century German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. With the word ‘Zeitgeist’, Herder referred to the spirit or temper of an age. In the context of his thoughts on the philosophy of history, Herder argued that in order for historians to correctly evaluate an event in the past, they must try to think and feel as was thought and felt in that past event; in other words, historians had to “enter” that Zeitgeist. Furthermore, he regarded time as a progressive force defining history, and the spirit of a time as a crucial factor in determining the chances of an idea to progress in a certain age. For example, Luther’s Reformation succeeded because the time was ripe for it, not because of Luther’s words or actions. If the time had not been ripe for it, it would not have succeeded (Barnard, 2003).

It would appear that in contemporary social psychological terms, Herder’s initial notion of Zeitgeist has some vague resonance with the notion of culture and the influence that it has on those people within a certain culture who have never been exposed to another one: a socially shared way of thinking that one is unaware of, yet continually influenced by in an ill-definable sense. But at the same time, it appears that in its first formulation by Herder, Zeitgeist was conceived of so broadly that it is hard to pin down its meaning; let alone begin defining it in a way that would lend itself to some form of useful operationalization.

In the context of his thoughts on humanity, Herder began to define the concept of Zeitgeist more specifically as “the dominant opinion of manners, customs, thought, and tendency of an age” (Schmidt, 1956, p. 409). Furthermore, Zeitgeist was specified as a concept of which the content could differ between nations and situations, as it adapts to “their needs, inclinations, and insights” (Schmidt, 1956, p. 410). Moreover, Herder thought a single idea or event was able to change the way of thinking of a society (Schmidt, 1956). This reflects a view of the concept of Zeitgeist which has considerable overlap with the contemporary and popular idea of what Zeitgeist is. It suggests that Zeitgeist is the collectively held view of the collective, in a certain identifiable group of people (i.e., a nation) at a given time; although in Herder’s definition it remains unclear whether Zeitgeist is a descriptive concept or can also be seen as a psychological process.

Another prominent philosopher who used and expanded the concept of Zeitgeist was Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. In the early 19th century, Hegel adapted Zeitgeist as a concept in his philosophy of history. Hegel argued that history should be seen as the progressive development of the Geist (translated as mind or spirit, which is a form of a rational higher being) towards a desired end state (i.e., completed development). During this development through time, the Geist changes ‘shape’; by looking back in time and identifying the ‘shape’ of a certain age, one can identify the Geist (spirit) of that time, that is, the Zeitgeist. Hegel envisioned the
Geist (and therefore the Zeitgeist) as metaphysical and as directing history, not merely as a description of humanity or a society at a certain time (Laan, 1988).

Hegel's conceptualization of Zeitgeist differs remarkably from Herder's initial definition and from the contemporary concept. Regarding Zeitgeist as part of his concept “Geist” gives Zeitgeist in accordance with “Geist” a metaphysical connotation: Here, Zeitgeist is the “Geist”, in the sense of rational higher being, identified in a certain time. Hegel's concept of Zeitgeist therefore lacks the sense of a collective cognition that we find in Herder's work: a collective's view of the dominant tendency and opinions of that collective in a period of time. What does remain of Hegel's conceptualization of Zeitgeist in contemporary lay understandings is the directive force that people acknowledge, mostly in hindsight, can be exerted by the spirit of the times (e.g. the Zeitgeist of the 1960s).

Indeed, this appears to be one of the most common contemporary popular usages of Zeitgeist: to talk about the main characteristics or dominant mood of a bygone era, such as the Roaring 1920s or the Flower Power 1960s. Alternatively, in present-day society sometimes people, books, films, or television series are said to capture or represent the current Zeitgeist. For example, the first seasons of the acclaimed television series “Girls” by Lena Dunham (2012 – 2017) were often described as “Zeitgeist-capturing” or “Zeitgeist-seizing” in the media. Another example is writer Dave Eggers, whose books such as “The Circle” got similar acclaim in critiques. However within social psychology, or the social sciences more generally, the concept of Zeitgeist has received little attention. There are a few exceptions: Zeitgeist has been studied in the context of political science research on populism in Western Europe, social psychological research on minority influence, and social psychological research on parent-child value similarity and transmission. Examining how Zeitgeist was defined and operationalized in these studies will be informative in developing a social psychological conceptualization of Zeitgeist. Therefore, we will now critically reflect on the use of the concept of Zeitgeist in these three lines of research.

Zeitgeist in the Social Sciences

Zeitgeist and populism in Western Europe. Within political science research on populism, Mudde (2004) made an analysis of contemporary populism and argued that previous explanations of and reactions to populism are seriously flawed. He argued that populism should not be considered a feature of particular parties or subgroups any more: In Western European politics, populist discourse has become mainstream. Thus, Mudde (2004) argued, the current populist trends should not be particularized or isolated, but should instead be seen as general characteristics of the Zeitgeist itself.
In some sense, this proposition is compatible with our own suggestion that something might be gained by studying this notion of Zeitgeist more closely. But beyond this overarching agreement, the particulars of Mudde’s (2004) approach are quite different. Mudde’s primary assertion is that populism has two components: (a) an ideology that society is separated into ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite’, and (b) the idea that politics should be an expression of the will of the people. The secondary assertion is that populism has become “mainstream”. By equating Zeitgeist with the mainstream embrace of these notions, he seems to use the concept of Zeitgeist as a broadly defined “spirit of the times”, in line with popular usage of the term. But beyond this generic assumption, the concept of Zeitgeist plays no role in Mudde’s (2004) analysis: He does not define the concept of Zeitgeist explicitly, nor does he provide any pointers to what would be indicators of this Zeitgeist in public discourse, nor does he give any suggestions what its psychological underpinnings could be.

Rooduijn (2013) made it the aim of his PhD thesis to empirically examine Mudde’s (2004) claim. Rooduijn (2013) argued that in order to speak of a populist Zeitgeist, populism must also have become mainstream in other realms than political parties, which is why he also studies mass media and public opinion (which is defined as political satisfaction, operationalized as satisfaction with the way democracy works). Rooduijn proposed that a populist Zeitgeist would be the result of a “spiral of populism”: Populist parties increase the degree of populism within mainstream parties, and increase the degree of populism in public debates in mass media, which in turn both increase political dissatisfaction, which increases the electoral success of populist parties. Thus, if populism would have permeated the whole electoral process this way, one could speak of a populist Zeitgeist. The research in his PhD thesis showed only partial support for these relationships. For example, the success of populist parties did not increase the degree of populism in the messages of mainstream parties (Rooduijn, 2013; Rooduijn, de Lange, & van der Brug, 2014). Rooduijn (2013) concludes that although the success of populist parties has impacted upon various important parts of the electoral process, given that there is no uninterrupted spiral of populism, Western Europe is not witnessing a populist Zeitgeist in the sense of “spirit of the times”.

Our interpretation of Rooduijn’s (2013) argument is that one could speak of a populist Zeitgeist if populism is expressed in the same way across multiple domains of politics or the electoral process, or society. This hints at the possibility that these multiple expressions originate in some sort of collectively shared awareness of a set of shared ideas or opinions. But Rooduijn’s (2013) primary concern (like that of Mudde, 2004) lies in the understanding of populist expressions and its relation to satisfaction with democracy. The Zeitgeist itself, which these different expressions of populism are supposed to stem from, does not really come into focus.
in this research. In sum, although this work shares our starting assumption that Zeitgeist may be relevant to explaining current political developments, a clear conceptualization of Zeitgeist is missing.

**Zeitgeist and minority influence.** The first line of research in social psychology that (to our knowledge) did to some extent aim to study, define, and measure (the impact of) Zeitgeist was research on the influence a minority could have in changing attitudes or judgments of a majority of people. Following Asch’s (1951) influential work on conformity and the social influence of a majority on a minority, Moscovici and colleagues (Moscovici, Lage, & Naffrechoux, 1969) reversed the paradigm and showed that a consistent minority can exert substantial influence on a majority as well. In this research, Moscovici and colleagues showed that when a minority (two confederates on four naïve participants) consistently judged blue screens (only varying in luminance) in a visual perception task as green, 32% of the naïve participants stated at least once to have seen a green screen. Moscovici and colleagues (Moscovici, 1976; Moscovici & Faucheux, 1972) subsequently developed a two-step model of minority influence, in which minority members first have to challenge the majority norm before providing a consistent alternative norm, while adopting a behavioral style indicating consistency. Moscovici’s theory of minority influence inspired various researchers to investigate the validity of this framework, especially the importance of consistency, and qualify it in several different ways (Maass & Clark, 1984).

Paicheler (1976, 1977) extended the research on minority influence with studies investigating the effect of the normative climate in society on attitude change in group situations. Maass, Clark, and Haberkorn (1982) referred in subsequent research to this normative climate as Zeitgeist. Paicheler (1976) argued that the degree of influence of a minority is determined by the ‘fit’ of the minority position with the norms evolving in the normative context of society. This research showed that a consistent minority arguing for a position in line with the Zeitgeist (feminist) effectively influenced a majority, while a consistent minority arguing against the Zeitgeist (anti-feminist) caused the negotiation to fail or a bipolarization of majority attitudes. Similarly, Maass and colleagues (1982) found that minorities exerted more influence over majorities when arguing for attitudes in line with the evolving Zeitgeist (pro-abortion) than against it (anti-death penalty). This Zeitgeist explanation of minority influence has later been critiqued by Perez, Papastamou, and Mugny (1995). Perez and colleagues argued that the causal relationship between minority influence and Zeitgeist might well be reversed, and that a favorable Zeitgeist only affects overt minority influence, without being able to account for indirect or unconscious effects of minority influence.

Interestingly, in this line of research the concept of Zeitgeist has hardly been defined for-
mally. In the studies by Paicheler (1976, 1977) and Maass and colleagues (1982) described above, Zeitgeist is seen as the normative context of society in which the study is held, and the focus lies on the evolution of those norms in a certain direction (for example, pro-feminism). Perez and colleagues defined Zeitgeist simply as “mood of the time” (Perez et al., 1995, p. 703). However, in these studies Zeitgeist seems to be conceptualized as a ‘given’, a social fact, without being operationalized or measured. Clark and Maass (1988) also attempted to measure the perception of the liberal Zeitgeist, focusing very specifically on the issue of gay rights, by assessing whether participants thought that “the attitudes toward gay rights were becoming more favorable in contemporary American society [...], or more unfavorable [...], or whether they were undecided” (R. D. Clark & Maass, 1988, p. 351). Although Clark and Maass (1988) found no influence of the perception of Zeitgeist in their studies and although there are no indications that this kind of measure validly taps into the underlying construct, the measure they developed illustrates concretely how one could begin to assess this nebulous concept.

**Zeitgeist and parent-child value similarity.** Lastly, in a very different literature touching on both social psychology and sociology, the concept of Zeitgeist has been more clearly defined and operationalized in a line of research on intrafamilial value transmission and value similarity. Boehnke, Hadjar, and Baier (2007) described Zeitgeist as one of three sources of value similarity between children and their parents. Besides transmission of parents’ attitudes and values on their children, and vice versa the adaptation of parents to their children’s values, value similarity between parents and their children can also originate from them being similarly influenced by the social context of their lives. Therefore, Boehnke (2001; 2007) proposed Zeitgeist as an important context variable for value similarity, defining Zeitgeist as “the modal current value climate of a society” (Boehnke et al., 2007, p. 779). Boehnke and colleagues (2007) suggested that Zeitgeist could be a valuable concept in research on value similarity, because through its measurable influence on individual value preferences, it could affect parent-child value similarity. According to Boehnke and colleagues, Zeitgeist or the perceived modal value preferences of a certain society at a certain time can empirically be assumed a constant. However, individuals may perceive the Zeitgeist to be dynamic and may accept the Zeitgeist to various degrees (Boehnke et al., 2007).

Boehnke (2001) investigated the influence of Zeitgeist (that is, the modal current value climate) on value transmission processes of values as defined by Schwartz (1992). This study showed that the general influence of Zeitgeist on parent-child value transmission was as strong as the influence of the mother on value transmission, and stronger than the influence of the father. Moreover, Boehnke and colleagues (2007) found in their study concerning parent-child value similarity of hierarchical self-interest values a weak direct general influence
of Zeitgeist on the children’s values. Additionally, they found that the relative position of a family in reference to the Zeitgeist strongly affected intergenerational similarity on hierarchical self-interest. The Zeitgeist or (modal) societal context in which people live can therefore be seen as a source of influence on the transmission and the similarity of values of parents and their children (Boehnke, 2001; Boehnke et al., 2007).

Boehnke and colleagues succeeded in clearly defining and operationalizing the concept of Zeitgeist in their studies. However, we argue that this definition ignores important knowledge about people’s perceptions and beliefs from social psychological and social cognition research: People are not very good at accurately perceiving the average personal belief of a large group of individuals (an aggregate attitude); rather, they have a perception of what the group thinks (a collective attitude). This is demonstrated by for example research on the Better-Than-Average and comparative optimism effects (see Chapter 2) and the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, which we will discuss next. We argue that a social psychological definition of Zeitgeist should take this distinction between the collective (what we think) and the aggregate (what many I’s think) into account. Boehnke and colleagues’ definition of the Zeitgeist as the modal or aggregate value in a given society at a given time ignores this distinction, and we would argue is therefore less suitable.

The Collective, the Aggregate, and the Personal

We propose that Zeitgeist, the spirit of the times for a loosely connected group of people in a specific place and time, can be seen as a jointly perceived social reality. The content of this social reality is based on cultural or historic aspects of a group or society. We propose that this Zeitgeist or shared social reality contains tacit assumptions and perceptions of who we are and want to be as a group or society, and how we are doing. Thus, Zeitgeist can be seen as more apparent in social reality than in individual cognition; it reflects what we think about us. Societal discontent seems to similarly exist as a collective phenomenon: a shared perception within Dutch society that society is doing badly. We argue that for a social psychological conceptualization of Zeitgeist, such collective perceptions are important.

So, what do we know about collective perceptions? In psychology, we can differentiate between four types of social judgements that people make. Psychological research tends to devote most attention to studying what I think about myself, some attention to what I think about us, only little to what we think about me (e.g. Hofstee, 1994), and only very little attention to what we think about us. The first kind of judgement, what I think about myself, is a personal-level judgement: it concerns both the individual as the perceive and the individual
or his/her life as the object. The last kind of judgment, what we think about us, is a true collective-level judgment: it reflects what members of a group consensually perceive their group or their group’s life to be. This is psychologically different from the aggregate perception in a group: the average of what many I’s think about themselves. In Chapter 2, we will reflect on the relationship between personal and collective (or aggregate)-level judgments by reviewing literature on the Better-Than-Average and comparative optimism effects. A phenomenon that can provide insight in the distinction between collective and aggregate judgments is pluralistic ignorance.

First described by Allport (1924; D. Katz & Allport, 1931), pluralistic ignorance refers to instances in which individual group members publicly display behavior that is not in line with their private attitudes, because of systematic errors that they make in their perceptions and judgments of the social norms of other group members, and of their relation to those group members (Miller & Prentice, 1994). The typical example of a situation in which pluralistic ignorance occurs concerns college students and alcohol use (Prentice & Miller, 1993). As Prentice and Miller (1993) found, college students on Princeton campus thought that the average other student was more comfortable with the social norms about drinking alcohol on campus than they themselves were. Thus, while the students publicly did not reject these norms, they privately had doubts about them, and they misperceived others as not having these doubts. Furthermore, the individual students distorted their relation to the average other student as well: they believed themselves to be a deviant. Thus, pluralistic ignorance reflects what I think about us, and how I can (mis)perceive our social norms and my relation to them.

Pluralistic ignorance has important consequences; not only for how individuals perceive themselves, but also for how individuals perceive the group or collective. In cases of pluralistic ignorance, individuals misperceive the social or collective norm as representing the private attitudes of their fellow group members. Therefore, Miller and Prentice (1994) argued that the phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance validates and necessitates the psychological distinction between the collective and the aggregate. To be able to speak of pluralistic ignorance, one has to distinguish between the attitude of a group, reflecting a social norm or social identity, and the average attitude of the members of a group, reflecting personal norms or identities.

An important side note, however, is that neither the collective-aggregate discrepancy perse, nor an individual perceiving only the collective attitude instead of the aggregate should be classified as an “error”. While Miller and Prentice (1994) recognized that a collective-aggregate distinction complicates what is defined as “misperceiving” social norms, they nevertheless characterize pluralistic ignorance as an error in individual cognition. One could argue however that individuals seem to be able to accurately perceive the collective attitude of a
group; but that in certain situations it seems complicated to perceive the aggregate attitude of the group members, or for the collective attitude to reflect the aggregate attitude.

From this research on pluralistic ignorance, we can conclude that individuals are capable of perceiving a collective social attitude, which does not necessarily reflect the aggregate social attitude. This distinction is important when considering the concept of Zeitgeist: we argue that Zeitgeist, defined historically as “the dominant opinion of manners, customs, thought, and tendency of an age” (Herder as described in Schmidt, 1956, p. 409), is about the perceived collective opinion and tendency, not about the aggregate. Zeitgeist is thus represented in minds of individual group members as our thoughts about us.

A Social Psychological Conceptualization of Zeitgeist

Thus, based on the philosophical background of the concept Zeitgeist, the way it has been conceptualized before in research within the social sciences, and based on prior social psychological research about collective perceptions, we propose a social psychological conceptualization of Zeitgeist. Taking as a starting point Herder’s original definition of Zeitgeist as “the dominant opinion of manners, customs, thought, and tendency of an age”, we propose that the concept of Zeitgeist indeed encompasses the collective values, attitudes, norms, manners, ideas, and thoughts of a society at a certain time. This also could be broadly described as the general tendency of the times in a society. This general tendency, or accumulation of collective cognitions, can be considered a jointly perceived social reality: Zeitgeist is a social reality shared by a collective group of people (that is, a society), of which the content is based on cultural aspects of that society.

Another way of framing this is that Zeitgeist encompasses the collective cognitions that are part of the “common ground” of a community or society: the common knowledge, beliefs, and assumptions that people assume exists between themselves and other ingroup members (H. H. Clark & Marshall, 1981; H. H. Clark, Schreuder, & Buttrick, 1983). This common ground forms the basis for social interactions among members of the group, yet often remains implicit within these interactions. For example, when people talk about men and women, the stereotypes attached to these categories (e.g., the idea that “men are from mars and women are from venus”) are assumed to be common knowledge, even for those who do not personally subscribe to these stereotypes.

Thus, Zeitgeist involves the shared common knowledge and collective cognitions that exist as a tacit collective tendency. From research on pluralistic ignorance, we know that people are reasonably accurate in perceiving the collective tendency; although the collective and ag-
aggregate tendency (norm, value, etc.) are not necessarily similar. For the concept of Zeitgeist, the discrepancy between the collective and the aggregate could generally be conceived as a means to assessing the valence of the Zeitgeist: whether the collective tendency or view of the state of society is more optimistic, or more pessimistic.

Prior research in social psychology using the concept of Zeitgeist has been scarce. However, the three lines of research in which Zeitgeist has been adopted as an empirical concept have used remarkably different conceptualizations of Zeitgeist than what we are inclined to propose after this review of philosophical and (cognitive) psychological literature. On the one hand, Zeitgeist has been used as a variable reflecting the normative context in which the studies were held; but the content and meaning of the Zeitgeist were imposed by the researchers themselves (Maass et al., 1982; Mudde, 2004; Paicheler, 1976, 1977; Rooduijn, 2013). On the other, Zeitgeist was clearly defined (and measured) as “the modal current value climate of a society” (Boehnke et al., 2007, p. 779); but therefore lacking the distinction between the aggregate and the collective, which we argue is very important in the conceptualization of Zeitgeist.

**Conceptualizing Societal Discontent as an Aspect of Zeitgeist**

Having developed a social psychological conceptualization of Zeitgeist, the question is how this should be related to societal discontent. Following our line of reasoning thus far, **we propose that societal discontent should be conceptualized as an aspect of Zeitgeist: a collectively shared, tacit, generalized, negative perception of the state of society.** It reflects a part of what people perceive to be the social reality in a society: The general tendency among the people about society is pessimistic. In other words, our common knowledge about the state of society is that it is in a sorry state. Societal discontent then is a collective perception that we, our society as a whole, are doing badly.

Following this conceptualization of societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist, we propose that we can develop an operationalization of societal discontent for use in social psychological research. Developing this operationalization and accompanying measures is the main aim of Chapter 2. As explained in more detail in that chapter, we believe that the Zeitgeist of societal discontent can be operationalized as a general factor Z. The idea is that individuals have impressions about the extent to which people, in general, are positive or negative about society. These tacit and general perceptions of how society as a whole is doing (in some sense a “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” to society as a whole) influence or color the specific perceptions that people have of individual societal issues. So, when judging how often the average Dutch person encounters problems concerning crime and safety, one relevant source of infor-
mation is this general factor Z: If one's impression is that across the board, the Netherlands as a whole is doing badly, then one would infer that on this particular issue (as well as a range of other issues) the average Dutch person must encounter a lot of problems.

Statistically, this approach can be compared with the G-factor in intelligence research. Here, G is an underlying “general intelligence” factor that predicts performance on particular cognitive ability or intelligence tests (Jensen, 1986; Spearman, 1904). Important in this research is the assumption that there is such a latent concept as general intelligence or IQ, which predicts or influences people’s performance on various different tests of cognitive ability – and that intelligence is not just the score on the few tests used to measure it. Similarly in our approach, further outlined and tested in Chapter 2, Z is an underlying “general societal (dis)content” factor that predicts particular collective-level societal discontents and satisfactions. We further hypothesize that in contrast, personal judgements about societal issues in one’s personal life would not be predicted by a general factor but would cluster together in clusters according to different domains of life (e.g., work, social relations, etc.).

**Relevant Alternative Concepts**

While at the start of this research in 2010 there were no concepts or measurement instruments available in the literature that seemed to apply directly to the phenomenon of societal discontent, since then several other conceptualizations have been developed alongside our work that intend to capture societal discontent or similar phenomena. We will now discuss two important alternative concepts and their relationship to our work.

**Societal pessimism and societal unease**

In 2016, Steenvoorden published her PhD dissertation on the study of societal pessimism and societal unease, conducted in part at the Netherlands Institute for Social Research. Steenvoorden (2016) introduced these two concepts in order to study societal discontent in the Netherlands and other Western countries. The starting point of this research was to develop a conceptualization of societal unease, which Steenvoorden defined as “a latent concern among citizens about the precarious state of society, which is composed of the perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society: distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability” (2016, p. 35). These five concerns are seen as characteristics of contemporary Western liberal democracies, which is why societal unease is proposed to apply mainly to Western countries at present. Steenvoorden recognized that it is possible for people to be concerned
about society in other times or places; therefore, she introduced a universal concept: societal pessimism, defined as “a concern among citizens that their society is in decline” (2016, p. 39). Societal unease is then defined as a subtype of societal pessimism in the specific situation of contemporary Western countries.

Steenvoorden’s (2016) research has developed in parallel to our research and shares the same focus: to develop a way to understand the societal phenomenon of discontent, pessimism, or unease that is apparent in countries such as the Netherlands at the moment. While Steenvoorden’s (2016) approach is similar to ours, there are also several important differences. First, the primary concept in her approach is societal unease, which is clearly defined (see above) and grounded in a theoretical basis. However, this definition contains both elements of what kind of concept it is (“a latent concern among citizens”) as well as a detailed account of what this concept is about, that is its content (the “five fundamental aspects of society”). On the one hand, an advantage of this approach is that defining the content of the concept societal unease provides clear directions for answers to the question why people might experience societal unease (e.g., it might be because they experience a loss of ideology). On the other hand, a disadvantage is that it restricts to concept to a very specific situation, to which all of those concerns apply (i.e., the Netherlands at present, and possibly other Western liberal democracies). This invites questions about the generalizability of the concept, both in terms of place and time. For example, in the US one of the primary discontents among people who voted for Trump appeared to be a different type of concern: outrage at and disgust with a corrupt political and financial elite that had “stolen our country”. It seems not so much a decline of political power that people are concerned with, but the fact that powerful politicians seem to have neglected the common people. In addition, Trump’s supporters seem to fully trust his capability to solve the country’s problems and make America great again; which does not seem to fit easily with a supposed distrust of human capability. The implication is that Steenvoorden’s (2016) list of five fundamental concerns might fit the contemporary Dutch situation well, but might not exactly fit with concerns elsewhere.

Steenvoorden (2016) proposed to solve this issue by introducing a second concept: societal pessimism. Societal pessimism is a more broadly defined concept (see above), and argued to be therefore applicable across situations and times. Yet within this definition, the focus is specifically on a sense of decline, or a concern about the future of society; which to us is still restrictive. While we would argue that this sense of (future) decline is indeed important, we would at the same time argue that the core concern of people who express societal pessimism is (also) with the present state of society: with the acute problems of a bankrupt and rotten society. To illustrate this with an example, Pim Fortuyn (2002) did not entitle his book about
societal woes in the Netherlands “The future ravages of the purple government”. As the focus of Steenvoorden’s (2016) research appears to be on societal unease, societal pessimism is less clearly conceptualized; it is unclear to what kind of content (or concerns) it would apply and relate for example.

Similarly, societal pessimism is operationalized through a selection of items that already existed in (inter)national survey studies (European Social Survey and Eurobarometer): three items that concern a) whether the country is heading in the right or wrong direction; b) that considering the state of things, it is difficult to be hopeful about the future of the world; and c) whether for most people, life is getting worse instead of better (see Steenvoorden, 2016). While these items appear related to the concept of societal pessimism, it is less clear to what extent they would (as single items, or in combination) fully capture this concept. For example, we would argue that hope about the future of the world is not the same as societal discontent (a general negative perception of the state of one’s society). The election of Donald Trump and the uncertainty about his stance and future actions regarding, for example, climate change seem to influence some people’s hope for the future of the world, regardless of their perceptions about their own countries. The advantage of existing measures in international longitudinal survey studies is that one has access to data from various countries and across time to answer important research questions. Nonetheless, we argue that as long as the conceptualization and operationalization of such a vague concept as societal discontent are not clear, we cannot be certain whether we have actually measured it with these existing items.

Of these two concepts, societal pessimism seems to be most closely related to our conceptualization of societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist. Steenvoorden (2016) seems to have focused in her conceptualization of societal unease and societal pessimism on determining which components or elements are crucial to the phenomenon of societal unease/pessimism in contemporary Western societies such as the Netherlands. Our approach differs in the sense that we focus on the general, latent factor behind these specific elements: we aimed to conceptualize precisely this vague and fuzzy latent concept. We aimed to develop our conceptualization and operationalization in a way that transcends the current situation in one specific country, such as the Netherlands. However, that does not diminish the importance of the analysis of which elements might feed into a general discontent or pessimism about the state of Dutch society at present.

One last difference to discuss between these approaches concerns the conceptualization of what kind of concept it is, in Steenvoorden’s (2016) work “a latent concern among citizens”. Important to note here is that she conceptualizes societal unease and societal pessimism as about individual (i.e. personal) perceptions of society. Steenvoorden recognizes that there are
also aggregate-level perceptions that might influence societal pessimism, but focuses on individual-level perceptions in her work. Steenvoorden (2016) does argue that societal unease/pessimism regards sociotropic issues (societal issues, e.g. levels of unemployment in society) and not egotropic issues (personal-level issues, e.g. whether I am unemployed) as the object of concerns. However, as we argued above, we regard the psychological distinction between personal, aggregate, and collective perceptions as an important foundation for the conceptualization of societal discontent and pessimism – in our view, societal discontent regards collectively shared perceptions, not private opinions.

Anomie
Another concept that is relevant to our present work is anomie. The sociological concept of anomie has been used to describe the state of societies that undergo various kinds of crises (economic, political, social) or major structural changes; for example, Bulgaria in 1989 when the economy had collapsed and the political system had trouble to cope (e.g. Genov, 1998). Recently, Teymoori and colleagues (2016) have proposed a new conceptualization and operationalization of anomie. Previously, anomie has been conceptualized either as a state of society, for example characterized by the breakdown of social regulation (Durkheim, 1897), or as a state of mind, for example characterized by feelings of distance or isolation from society (C. S. Fischer, 1973) or as a tendency to reject social norms (Bjarnason, 2009). Teymoori and colleagues (2016) suggest that this conceptualization and its operationalization have as a disadvantage that they confounded the state of anomie with the consequences of this state (e.g., they measure suicide rates in a society or an individuals’ self-reported loneliness, see Teymoori et al., 2016 for a review). In their research, Teymoori and colleagues propose to conceptualize anomie as a perception of the state of society, specifically the perception that a society has become disintegrated (i.e., there is a breakdown of social fabric) and dis-regulated (i.e., there is a breakdown of political leadership).

Teymoori and colleagues (2016) share a similar approach to ours in conceptualizing anomie: They too conceptualize it as a collective perception of the state of society, which is shared and constructed within a community of individuals. They also argue that it is these collective perceptions that are important for anomie to arise, rather than the objective triggers for anomie themselves (e.g. rapid societal changes, economic crisis, war or civil conflict, etc.). This is similar to our analysis that societal discontent seems to exist relatively independently of the objective circumstances in a country. However, as a concept anomie is different from societal discontent: It appears to capture a different type of societal phenomenon. Whereas societal discontent aims to capture a vague sense of negativity of the state of the country, anomie aims
to describe a more intense negative situation of a perceived crisis or breakdown of society.

In addition, whereas societal discontent concerns a tacit understanding that society as a whole is doing badly (but not necessarily more specific), anomie is conceptualized and operationalized as a construct with two central dimensions: the breakdown of social fabric and the breakdown of political leadership. Again, we argue that restricting the conceptualization of a phenomenon that concerns society as a whole to a predetermined set of dimensions (in this case two) has disadvantages. For example, take a recent case of a country in crisis: Greece. From 2010 onwards, Greece faced a major economic and financial crisis that had a large impact on Greek society. The financial crisis led to political turmoil, as well as rising levels of unemployment and changes in many policies that directly affected the daily life of many people. The origin of this crisis was not so much a breakdown of political leadership or social fabric (while both could be seen as consequences), but the financial and economic situation of the country in combination with international developments. A conceptualization of anomie along just two dimensions would not be able to sufficiently capture this economic aspect of the crisis perceptions. We argue that our approach, in which we focus on the general latent factor underlying various aspects of society, is at an advantage when the interest is to conceptualize phenomena that concern society as a whole.

**Dissertation Overview**

Based on our analysis outlined above, we propose to conceptualize the phenomenon of societal discontent as an aspect of the Zeitgeist: a collectively shared, tacit, generalized, negative perception of the state of society. Since this is quite a complex definition, we have summarized our reasoning in Table 1. This table provides an overview of the characteristics of the phenomenon of societal discontent that we have observed and inferred, the characteristics of the Zeitgeist based on the theoretical analysis, and the characteristics of our measure of societal discontent, Z.

The aim of the research presented in this dissertation is twofold. First, we aim to develop an operationalization of our conceptualization of societal discontent as a general factor Z, and a scale we can use to measure it (Chapter 2). We aim to assess the validity of this Z-scale in different countries, and develop a Z-scale that can be used to compare societal discontent across countries (Chapters 2 & 4). Second, we aim to gain insight into the phenomenon of societal discontent itself: its incidence, antecedents, and consequences (Chapters 2-5).²

² Note that the empirical chapters (Chapters 2-5) have been written as individual papers, of which two have been accepted for publication (Chapter 2: Van der Bles, Postmes, & Meijer, 2015; and Chapter 3: Van der Bles, Postmes, LeKander-Kanis, & Otjes, 2017),
one paper is under review (Chapter 5) and one is in preparation (Chapter 4). Therefore, these chapters contain some overlap in terms of theoretical reasoning and explanation of methodology.

### Table 1.1

*Important Characteristics of the Phenomenon Societal Discontent, the Concept Zeitgeist, and the Operationalization Z*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of societal discontent (observed and inferred)</th>
<th>Zeitgeist (theory)</th>
<th>Z (as measured)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very loosely based on personal discontents, focused on characteristics of society at large</td>
<td>Collective sentiment (instead of aggregate or personal)</td>
<td>Collective (instead of personal)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encompassing many societal issues, not just one concrete problem</td>
<td>General tendency</td>
<td>General factor Z, underlying/predicting answers to specific societal issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tacit, in the sense that discussions about discontent tend to focus on specific issues and incidents, not on the underlying assumption</td>
<td>Social reality</td>
<td>Latent construct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manifests across societal domains, e.g. politics, media, norms, conversations</td>
<td>Manifests through values, attitudes, norms, manners, ideas, and thought</td>
<td>Broad range of societal topics and issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can change over time and place, in long cycles</td>
<td>Specific to time and place (= a loosely connected group of people, e.g. a society)</td>
<td>Specific to time and place (= a connected group of people)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 2

In Chapter 2, we further outline and develop our conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent as an aspect of Zeitgeist. In this chapter, we aim to develop a Z-scale and seek to validate our approach. We designed two types of scales to measure societal discontent as general factor Z: a prevalence-estimates measure and an evaluative-statements measure. Three survey studies assessed the validity of this operationalization and the utility of these scales.

Chapter 2 is the foundation of the research in this dissertation: it establishes the conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent as Z, and presents a method to measure it. The results first of all showed that personal and collective judgments of societal issues differed strongly: Both in the Netherlands and the US, people were more negative about collective life in society than about their personal lives, indicating the presence of societal discontent. Across these three studies we found support that our hypothesized latent factor Z predicted collective perceptions of society. In addition, Study 2.2 and Study 2.3 provided first evidence of the potential consequences of a Zeitgeist of societal discontent: Z influenced the impromptu interpretation of information about society. A more negative Z increased the likelihood of perceiving (false) pessimistic news headlines about the country as true, and predicted whether responsibility for negative events in sensationalist news stories (e.g. “ambulance personnel attacked by bystanders”) was attributed to society in general.

Based on the results of Chapter 2, we concluded that the prevalence estimates measure would be our preferred method to assess Z. In this measure, which we further refer to as the Z-scale, people are asked to estimate how many out of the last 30 days the average person in their country (“the average Joe”) would have encountered problems with or was concerned about each of the societal issues provided in a list, for example crime, unemployment, discrimination, or corruption. Having established how we could study and measure societal discontent as Z, we continued our research to explore antecedents and consequences of societal discontent.

Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, we studied a potential consequence of a Zeitgeist of societal discontent: an increase in votes for extreme political parties. Voting for extreme right-wing or left-wing parties can be a form of protest to express discontent (for example, with the political elite) and a way to potentially achieve drastic change in society. We therefore hypothesized that Z would predict voting for extreme political parties. To test this prediction, we conducted a field study during the Dutch Provincial Council elections that were held in March 2015. In the Nether-
lands, there are both an extreme right-wing and an extreme left-wing party with political and historical significance in society: the Partij voor de Vrijheid or Freedom Party (PVV) and Socialistische Partij or Socialist Party (SP) respectively. In support of our prediction, the results showed people with more pessimistic Z-perceptions were more likely to have voted for either the PVV or SP, compared to the other mainstream political parties. In contrast, personal discontent did not predict voting for these extreme parties. A Zeitgeist of societal discontent thus seems to have important consequences for societies: it influences the electoral success of political parties.

In addition, we also explored two factors that we thought would influence variation in societal discontent within a country: media use and education level. We noticed in our findings of the research presented in Chapter 2, that there was considerable variation in people's responses on our Z measures. While the majority of people in our samples were more negative about collective life than about their personal lives, some people were slightly more negative and others were very much more negative. We speculated that this variation might be associated with various subgroups in society: that within a society, there might be various “interpretative communities” that have slightly different views of what society is and how it is doing, or who share a slightly different social reality. We proposed that education level and media use could be proxies for such interpretative communities, and set out to investigate whether these factors were associated with variation in Z. In line with predictions, our results showed that people with lower education levels and people who used more tabloid-style media had more pessimistic Z-perceptions. These findings are consistent with the hypothesis that membership of specific subcultural groups and communication processes may play a role in shaping collective discontent. Thus, Chapter 3 provides further validation of the Z scale, shows that a Zeitgeist of societal discontent has consequences for voting behaviour, and presents an indication of its origins.

Chapter 4

At the start of this project, our focus was mostly on societal discontent in the Netherlands and the phenomenon did not seem to receive much attention in other countries; but global developments soon caught up. It became apparent to us that in order to gain a better understanding of societal discontent, it would be important to be able to measure and compare it in other countries as well. After the initial successful generalization of our operationalization and measure from the Netherlands to the US in Chapter 2, we set out to develop an international Z scale and assess its validity and reliability for use in cross-national research. Chapter 4 describes this effort.
We conducted a survey study among university students in 28 countries across the world (although not all samples were large enough to use in all of the analyses we conducted; see Chapter 4). The prevalence estimates Z scale was included in this survey, and contained 25 societal issues at the start of scale development. The results of our analyses showed that in order to best measure societal discontent in one specific country, we could select a subset of approximately 10 items of this original list to create a nation-specific scale. These nation-specific scales contained a unique subset of items for different nations, although there was also a lot of overlap between the items that featured in these scales between nations. Subsequently, we aimed to develop a scale that we could use to measure societal discontent validly across all countries in our study: that is, a scale that measures the same construct in the same way across countries. We developed a six-item international Z-scale and established that it was measurement invariant; therefore, we could compare societal discontent/Z across the countries in our sample.

Because we could validly compare Z across countries, we could investigate and establish divergent and convergent validity of Z by examining correlations between Z and other relevant psychological constructs in our study. Furthermore, we provide some preliminary analyses of the relationship between Z and indicators of country-level welfare as examples of questions that could be addressed in future research. Thus, although further validation of the scale is important, we conclude based on the research presented in Chapter 4 that the international Z-scale can be used to study the incidence, antecedents, and consequences of societal discontent in international comparisons in future research.

Chapter 5

In Chapter 5, we aimed to study the micro-dynamics of collective discontent. In order to do this however, we changed context: In this research, we did not investigate a collective sense of doom and gloom with the state of a country, but a collective sense of doom and gloom with the state of a scientific community. Since 2011, a series of incidents (cases of scientific fraud, the non-replication of landmark studies) have triggered a collective discussion about whether the discipline of social psychology is in crisis. Concerns about our research methods and results were and are widely debated. And although these incidents and debates gave rise to many positive developments, the Zeitgeist of our discipline seemed to be decidedly pessimistic.

In order to explore the effect that debates and discussions could have on changing the Zeitgeist of collective pessimism over time, we conducted a field study during the 2014 Summer School of the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP). One of the five workshop-streams in this two-week programme was specifically dedicated to discussing episte-
mology and methods in social psychology, while the other four workshops were focused on specific subfields of social psychology. We therefore expected that there would be variation in the extent to which summer school participants would discuss the state of the discipline during the summer school.

Thus, this study investigated the effects of more formal and collective communication within workshops and of informal interpersonal communication on the development collective pessimism. We conducted a longitudinal field study with three waves, in which we measured the perceived level of discussion about the state of the field in each workshop. We also collected information on people's social and discussion networks to use in social network analyses. Although we expected that both types of social interaction would influence people's perceptions of the Zeitgeist of collective pessimism, the results showed that only formal discussions in workshops influenced Zeitgeist. In workshops in which the state of the field was perceived to have been discussed frequently, Zeitgeist-perceptions became more optimistic. The findings in this study provide a first indication of the micro-level mechanism underlying a collective-level perception: our interpretation is that social interaction with a clear “collective” component is most influential to change beliefs about what “we” think.