Societal discontent
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General Discussion
This dissertation examines a phenomenon that has become increasingly common in many countries in recent years: a deep-seated collective discontent with the state of society. When we started this research, there were no concepts or measurement instruments available in the social psychological literature that we believed fully captured this vague yet consequential phenomenon. We proposed a new conceptualization of societal discontent, based on the assumption that it is an aspect of the Zeitgeist: a collectively shared, tacit, generalized negative perception of the state of society. The aim of this dissertation was twofold. First, based on our proposed conceptualization, we developed an operationalization of societal discontent as a latent general factor Z. This method also led to the development of a scale to measure Z (Chapter 2). We assessed the validity of this Z-scale for use in research in various countries and developed an international Z-scale that could be used to compare societal discontent across countries (Chapters 2 and 4).

Second, we aimed to gain insight into the phenomenon of societal discontent itself. Specifically, we studied its consequences for people's interpretation and attribution of news about society (Chapter 2) and for voting for extreme right- and left-wing political parties (Chapter 3). We investigated education level and media use as potential antecedents of societal discontent (Chapter 3) as well as the influence of micro-level communication processes on the development of collective discontent over time, albeit discontent with a different kind of society (a scientific discipline; Chapter 5). We also studied the incidence of societal discontent across countries and conducted preliminary analyses of the relationship of societal discontent with indicators of country-level welfare (Chapter 4).

The present chapter will first provide an overview of the main findings of this dissertation. Subsequently, we will discuss the theoretical implications of this work and its practical implications for society. We will also address several limitations of the present research and provide suggestions for future research.

**Overview of Findings and Conclusions**

Across all studies\(^1\), we found support for our operationalization of a Zeitgeist of societal discontent as a latent general factor Z. Results from both exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA and CFA) consistently provided evidence for one latent factor Z, underlying and predicting people's scores on collective-level judgments. Furthermore, CFA results consistently showed that this latent factor Z explained a substantial amount of variance (on average) in people's responses to societal issues. Together, these results validate our approach of societal

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\(^1\) Specifically, all studies in Chapters 2, 3, and 4; Chapter 5 used a different measure to assess collective discontent.
discontent as a latent, generalized negative perception of the state of society and our operationalization as general factor Z.

Moreover, we consistently found high correlations between collective-level judgments of very different societal issues and the general factor Z. This implies that when we make collective-level judgments about us and how our society is doing, these are not just judgments of specific issues made independently of each other. People collectively might have specific discontents about certain issues, such as immigration or the economy, but these are likely to be tied up with other issues as well as an underlying generalized discontent with society as a whole. It is not just the economy people worry about; it is the economy, immigration, crime, and faltering social norms and values all rolled into one.

Furthermore, we found a consistent discrepancy between levels of collective societal discontent and personal discontent across these studies. In our research conducted in the Netherlands, for example, this discrepancy was quite stable across different years and samples. On average, people estimated that the average Dutch person had encountered societal problems on 6.45 days (Study 2.1), 5.71 days (Chapter 3), and 6.98 days (Chapter 4) out of the last 30 days. At the same time, people indicated that they themselves had encountered societal problems on average on 1.98 days (Study 2.1), 1.68 days (Chapter 3), and 3.50 days (Chapter 4). We interpret this as confirmation of the existence of societal discontent and as support for our approach: These results demonstrated that people on average were more negative about collective life in society than about their personal lives, which is in line with what we expected to find in the Dutch situation.

Chapter 2

The key finding in Chapter 2 is that we found support for our proposed conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent. In addition, this research presented several other interesting findings. In this Chapter, we also investigated personal-level judgments in detail, in order to validate the qualitative difference between collective-level and personal-level perceptions. As expected, factor analyses showed that there were multiple factors underlying personal-level judgments of the societal issues. This supports our hypothesis that there is no general factor explaining people’s perceptions of their personal life in society, but rather that these perceptions might be clustered according to various domains of life.

We developed two types of scales in this research to measure a Zeitgeist of societal discontent: a relatively conventional evaluative-statements measure (statements such as “Corruption is a problem in society” on a 7-point Likert scale) and a prevalence-estimates measure.
In this measure, which we further refer to as the Z-scale, people were 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. Based on our findings in Chapter 2, we concluded that this prevalence-estimates measure or Z-scale is the method we prefer to use to measure societal discontent as Z.

In Chapter 2, the consequences of a Zeitgeist of societal discontent were also investigated: We found that societal discontent measured as Z influenced the impromptu interpretation of news headlines and stories about society. A more pessimistic Z-score 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. This suggests that a Zeitgeist of societal discontent can influence individual-level outcomes: It biases how people respond to news and new information about society.

**Chapter 3**

In Chapter 3, we report a field study during the 2015 Dutch Provincial Council elections to study consequences of collective discontent with society for voting behavior. We expected and showed that a Zeitgeist of societal discontent predicted voting for extreme right- and left-wing political parties, compared to mainstream political parties. In contrast, personal discontent did not predict voting for extreme parties. Thus, we argue that we offer a complementary approach to existing (attitudinal) explanations of voting for extreme parties: Our research suggests that it is important to not only take into account issue-specific explanation, but also the generalized, latent, collective discontent with society as a predictor of voting for extreme parties.

In addition, we examined two factors that we expected to be associated with within-country variation in pessimism of Zeitgeist-perceptions: education level and media use. We found that people who more frequently used tabloid-style media and people with lower education levels had more negative Zeitgeist-perceptions. Personal discontent was not associated with media use or education level. These results suggest that there are subgroups in society (for which education level and media use serve as proxies in the Netherlands) that have slightly different shared perceptions of the state of society. In line with for example cultivation analysis (Arendt, 2010; Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Morgan & Shanahan, 2010), we propose that within such “echo chambers” or “filter bubbles”, people are exposed to common and recurrent (frames of) messages about the world that influence their (collective-level) perceptions of their society and the world around them.
Chapter 4

In Chapter 4, we broadened the horizon of our research and examined societal discontent as an international phenomenon. The main focus of this research was to develop an international Z-scale and establish measurement invariance, in order to validly measure and compare Zeitgeist across different countries. We conducted a survey study among university students in 28 countries around the world (although sometimes sample size was small, see Chapter 4). The (prevalence estimates) Z-scale was included in this survey and contained 25 societal issues at the start of scale development. First, we showed that in order to best measure societal discontent in one specific country, we should select a subset of approximately 10 items of this original list to create a nation-specific scale that was slightly different for each country. Subsequently, we developed an international Z-scale and tested whether this scale was measurement invariant and thus measured the same construct in the same way across different countries. The international Z-scale consisted of six items (unemployment, corruption or fraud, discrimination, income inequality, injustice, and lack of respect) and was measurement invariant across countries; therefore, we could compare societal discontent (Z) across the countries in our sample.

Because we could compare Z across countries, we investigated and established divergent and convergent validity of Z by examining correlations between Z and other relevant psychological constructs in our study. Furthermore, we conducted preliminary analyses of the relationship between Z and indicators of country-level welfare that serve as examples of questions that could be addressed in future research. In these preliminary analyses, we found that although there was an association between objective country-level welfare (economic performance, income inequality, and objective social and economic living conditions) and societal discontent, it was not very strong. Notably, countries with objectively good living conditions had highly variant levels of societal discontent. Although further validation of the international Z-scale is important, we conclude based 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-dynamic processes underlying the existence and change of collective discontent, as another form of exploring its antecedents. We conducted a longitudinal field study in the context of collective discontent with the state of a scientific community, that is the perceived crisis in the discipline social psychology. Over the course of a two-week summer school, we investigated the effects of both informal interpersonal com-
munications between the participating PhD-students (using social network analyses) and of more formal and collective communications within the five workshop-streams. Although we expected that both types of social interaction would influence people's collective-level pessimism about the field, 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.

**Theoretical Implications**

**The Emergent Literature on Societal Discontent**

First and foremost, our research contributes to a better understanding of the phenomenon of societal discontent. When we started this research, a clear conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent were missing from the social psychological literature and other social sciences. The main theoretical contribution of this research was thus to have developed a conceptualization and operationalization of societal discontent. Our conceptualization is based on the insight that societal discontent could be an aspect of Zeitgeist. This means that societal discontent is a negative evaluation of the state of society that is collective, generalized, and tacit:

- **Collective discontent** means that the source of dissatisfaction is not one’s personal life or personal problems. Rather, the source of dissatisfaction lies in the belief that citizens in general (or the average person) experience problems or issues. In addition, it means that the dissatisfaction with society shared among citizens: it concerns the problems that we perceive society to have.

- **Generalized discontent** means that the object of dissatisfaction is the society as a whole. Dissatisfaction with particular aspects of society and with particular societal issues is (at least in part) inferred from this general discontent.

- **Tacit discontent** means that this dissatisfaction with society as a whole is an implicit sense of dissatisfaction underlying other perceptions or judgments about society. It is assumed to be shared knowledge or common ground in communication; and not necessarily feature much explicitly in people’s conversations.

In addition, we made a methodological contribution to the emergent literature about societal discontent and other collective-level perceptions: We proposed and validated a novel
operationalization and measure of collective societal discontent that fits our conceptualization. The innovation of our operationalization lies in two aspects of our approach. First, we operationalize societal discontent as a latent general factor Z: We focus on the shared underlying discontent, instead of dissatisfactions with specific issues. This way we propose to capture collective discontent with society as the generalized and tacit belief about society as a whole. Second, we assess beliefs about perceptions of the average person in society, the “average Joe”, instead of self-reported experiences or personal beliefs. By asking people to think about the experiences of a generalized average citizen in society, we aim to capture their (collective-level) beliefs about how society is doing in general, for people on average, which we assume to be collectively shared. Putting these two aspects together, this approach gives us an approximation of what “the people” think about “society as a whole” (albeit by relying on an aggregation of personal beliefs about what the people think about society). Although this approximation is not to be confused with the reality of what the people think about society as a whole, it is certainly a major improvement over earlier approaches that tended to rely on aggregation of individual opinions about particular issues. The demonstration that this operationalization is reliable and valid leads us to conclude that we have contributed a new understanding of the phenomenon societal discontent itself.

While the concept of Zeitgeist is inherently vague, the Z-scale that we designed to measure it was concrete: We asked people about the experiences of average person on a scale from 0 to 30 days, representing the amount of days out of the last month. We see this scale as an innovative approach because it allows for a direct comparison between personal-level judgments and collective-level judgments of the same items. Since personal- and collective-level judgments are qualitatively different judgments that are based on different types of information and comparison standards (see Chapter 2, and Postmes et al., 1999), it is possible that a “5” or “somewhat agree” on a 1-7 likert-scale means something different for personal-level judgments than for collective-level judgments, particularly in the context of societal issues or problems. However, a day is the same unit of time for me as for the average person (at least within the same culture), which means that the scale will be interpreted in the same way when an individual indicates their own experiences or the perceived experiences of the average person. Therefore, we can be (reasonably) confident that the differences we found in our research between personal and collective perceptions of societal issues are due to actual differences between the perceived collective experience in society and the average of personal experiences, and cannot be attributed to different interpretations of the scale.

Since we started our research, other researchers have also developed conceptualizations that are relevant to the study of societal discontent (see Chapter 1 for a review; Steenvoorden,
Our approach differs from these other conceptualizations in two key respects, which have been outlined above. First, we approach societal discontent as a collective-level phenomenon, instead of a personal opinion (cf. Steenvoorden, 2016). Second, we focus on the shared underlying discontent (operationalized as general factor Z), instead of dissatisfactions with specific societal issues or dimensions (cf. Steenvoorden, 2016; Teymoori et al., 2016). These specific dimensions may be useful to understanding the sources of societal discontent at a specific place and at specific time (e.g., the Netherlands at present; Steenvoorden, 2016). By focusing on the general factor, instead of the specific dimensions or issues that are predicted by this general factor at a certain place and time, we argue that we have developed a versatile and generalizable method of measuring collective discontent with society that should be able to be adapted to other places and times. As Chapter 4 showed, we have established that we could develop an international Z-scale with this methodology that can be used to assess societal discontent across different countries.

The Psychology of the Collective

In addition to contributing directly to knowledge about societal discontent, this research extends the social psychological literature on collective perceptions and judgments. Through our findings, we have gained more insight in the psychology of the collective. One of the foundations of the present work is social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978), which describes the collective or the group not as just an external situational variable, but also as a psychological experience. It introduces the interpersonal-intergroup continuum: people sometimes think, act, and feel in terms of their personal identity, and sometimes they think, act, and feel in terms of a social identity, as member of a group. Research comparing judgments of personal circumstances with judgments of the group, the person-group discrepancy, has shown that these judgments are based in different levels of self (personal vs. social identities) and likewise influenced by different motivations (Postmes et al., 1999). Even though the general notion that there is a distinction between personal-level and collective (or group)-level perceptions is well established in social psychology, it appears that most research attention has been focused on studying personal-level perceptions and relatively little on studying collective-level perceptions. In other words, we know more about the factors that influence what I think about myself, than about those that influence what we think about us.

The present research shows, however, that collective-level perceptions deserve more attention. They can have an important influence on people's thinking and behavior: They predict voting for extreme political parties (Chapter 3) and influence people's interpretation of new information about society (Chapter 2). Our findings and arguments are in line with
Miller and Prentice’s (1994) argument based on a review of the literature on pluralistic ignorance: The psychology of the individual and the psychology of the collective are distinct and both crucial in order to fully understand the self and human behavior. The phenomenon of pluralistic ignorance, wherein individuals misjudge the collective norm as representing the private attitudes of group members and misperceive their own relationship to the group (e.g., as themselves being deviant when in fact they are not), demonstrates that people are perfectly capable of perceiving a collective norm. This collective norm influences how they feel, think and behave in a situation. The collective norm may not correspond to the aggregate or common personal belief or norm in a group however; this is why, for example, the perceived collective norm of students can be more pro-alcohol than the average private opinion of those students (Prentice & Miller, 1993). As Miller and Prentice (1994) argued, pluralistic ignorance shows that a distinction between a collective norm and the aggregate of personal beliefs is valid and necessary. Based on the present research, we likewise argue that in order to fully understand current developments in society, we need to distinguish a collective-level global perception of society from personal-level evaluations of society, and that it is necessary to study this collective level in its own right.

While this research is still quite rare compared to research on the personal level, in recent years several researchers have started studying collective-level perceptions in different domains within (social) psychology. For example, as discussed in Chapter 2, in cross-national and cross-cultural research there has been a systematic investigation of perceived collective-level characteristics of a culture or nation (e.g., national personality characteristics, cultural values such as perceived collectivism), which showed that these can be independent from aggregate personal-level characteristics (actual aggregate levels of collectivism; McCrae & Terracciano, 2006; Wan et al., 2007; Zou et al., 2009). Chiu and colleagues (2010) refer to these collective-level perceptions of cultural values as intersubjective judgments. In research on climate change risk perceptions, Van der Linden (2015) proposed and showed that perceptions of personal-level risks and societal-level risks are distinct types of perceptions, with different psychological antecedents. Teymoori and colleagues (2016) developed a scale to measure collective-level perceptions of anomie, which refers to a situation of societal crisis in which there is a breakdown of social fabric and/or of leadership. Our research extends this literature to the domain of collective perceptions of society as a whole and the issues or problems that society might face; specifically, a collective perception of societal discontent.

Behavioral and attitudinal domains for which these collective perceptions are likely to be particularly important are political psychology or political science. The reason is that politics is a domain that principally focuses on the collective, as it concerns society as a whole
or groups of people in society. As discussed in Chapter 3, within political science and psychology the idea that societal- or collective-level perceptions are important is not necessarily new: Research has demonstrated the importance of sociotropic concerns (about the state of the country’s economy) compared to egotropic concerns (about one’s personal economic situation) for voting behavior (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1981; Killian, Schoen, & Dusso, 2008; Singer & Carlin, 2013; Duch, 2009). Our research (Chapter 3) showed that collective perceptions of the state of society as a whole predicted voting for extreme political parties. We complement the existing literature on voting for extreme parties: This literature has mainly examined the importance of individual attitudes, showing for example that anti-immigrant attitudes explain voting for extreme right-wing parties (Cornelis & Van Hiel, 2015; Cutts, Ford, & Goodwin, 2011; Ford & Goodwin, 2010; Green, Sarrasin, Baur, & Fasel, 2016; Ivarsflaten, 2008; Lubbers, Gijsberts, & Scheepers, 2002; Oesch, 2008; Rydgren, 2008). We propose that the understanding of political behavior such as voting or policy support may benefit from including collective-level perceptions, such as a Zeitgeist of societal discontent, in future research. Likewise, we speculate that research studying perceptions and behaviors connected to climate change, which is a collective problem, may benefit from taking collective-level perceptions into account. Van der Linden (2015) already showed that in case of risk perceptions, personal and societal risk perceptions are distinct. We propose that future research might examine the extent to which whether we think climate change is a serious problem might motivate individual perceptions and behavior.

Some people might ask: Why does this matter? Mostly, we believe that this is important because the global international developments in this age force us to reconsider our stance on collective phenomena. It has often been said that the late 19th and early 20th century were “the age of the crowd” (e.g. Moscovici, 1985). Until quite recently, it appeared that the late 20th century heralded the age of the liberal and rational individual (Fukuyama, 1989). This global political development was neatly reflected in psychology, where a cognitive revolution has increasingly embraced the idea that human behavior is the product of individual minds or even individual brains. But if, in international political developments, we see the recurrence of mass movements and political ideologies that had been considered long gone, it is time to reconsider this stance: We believe that a better understanding of psychology of the collective is required in order to understand current political events, such as the election of Donald Trump as President of U.S., the Brexit vote for the U.K. to leave the EU, and the rise of extreme parties in many countries in Europe. At present, psychology (and, we would suggest, sociology, political science and economics) is poorly equipped to understand the social psychological underpinnings of these phenomena. We argue that we need to better understand the psychology
of the collective in order to fully understand the psychology and behavior of individuals, as well as the major political developments of this age.

**The Discrepancy between Personal- and Collective Discontent**

In the present research, we found a consistent discrepancy between levels of personal discontent and levels of collective discontent. An important question then is: Why do we find this discrepancy, how can we explain it? In Chapter 2, we reviewed the social psychological literature on self-other comparative judgments. There are several well-known effects that can happen when people compare themselves to others: People generally think they are better than the average other person in terms of skill or characteristics such as driving (i.e., better-than-average effect; Alicke & Govorun, 2005) and they are generally more optimistic about their risk of something bad happening to them compared to others, such as a car accident (comparative optimism effect, Weinstein, 1980). Research has also shown that people may think they are worse than others when the behavior is difficult (Moore & Small, 2007). These effects are generally explained as cognitive biases and/or motivational biases focused on judgments about the self: For example, we have more information about positive behavior of ourselves than about others and we are motivated to have a positive view of ourselves (Brown, 2012; Chambers & Windschitl, 2004).

In this literature, it is less clear how judgments about others are formed. The focus tends to be on explaining biased judgments about the self. The methodological choices made in this literature consequently are geared to answering questions about bias in the direct comparison between the person and the average, in particular focusing on the biased perceptions of self (e.g., “How honest are you, compared to the average student?”; Chambers & Windschitl, 2004). This methodological choice, which is understandable if one is interested in biases in self-perception, ultimately means that this literature is relatively silent about the processes by which people make judgments about others or about the collective (“How honest is the average student?”). One underlying assumption in this field seems to be that we have more knowledge about ourselves than about others (Fiedler, 2014). However, while people tend to know less about concrete others than they do about themselves, at the same time there are many examples of situations in which people believe they can form good judgments of others in a more global sense. Socially shared stereotypes about people belonging to different (out) groups are a prime example. Research on a different type of self-other comparison, that is the personal-group discrepancy, might provide more insight about these judgments of others in a more global sense. Postmes and colleagues (1999) showed that judgments of the self are qualitatively different from judgments about the group: they are based in different levels of self
(personal vs. social identities) and likewise influenced by different motivations.

In line with this research (Postmes et al., 1999), we argue that the differences we found between levels of personal discontent and collective discontent reflect two qualitatively different psychological constructs, that we can compare because of the way we designed our measure. The present findings show that personal- and collective discontent predict different outcomes. For example, Chapter 3 demonstrated that whereas collective discontent predicted voting for extreme parties, personal discontent did not. Although results were not conclusive across all studies, in some studies we found that personal- and collective discontent were related to different psychological constructs: Chapter 3 found that whereas collective discontent was associated with use of tabloid-style and commercial media and education level, personal discontent was not. Whereas cognitive and motivational processes undoubtedly have some influence on the way people construct their answers to our questions (about their personal life), we believe these processes are not sufficient to explain the consistent discrepancy between personal and collective discontent in our research. Instead of seeing them as some kind of error or bias, we propose that this discrepancy shows that collective discontent and collective perceptions of society are interesting and important in their own right, and should be an object of further study in themselves.

So, if we treat both personal- and collective discontent as distinct and qualitatively different psychological constructs, how should we interpret the discrepancy between them? We suggest that this discrepancy conveys information: It shows that the collective perception of the state of society is more negative or pessimistic than one would expect based on the aggregate of people’s personal experiences with problems in society. This qualifies the societal discontent itself: In Chapter 3, which presents the most recently collected data in a general population sample, people estimated that the average person would encounter societal problems more than 3.3 times as often as they themselves reported to encounter problems on average (5.71 vs. 1.68 days per month, respectively).

**Implications for Society**

**Reality in “Post-Truth” Times**

Aside from theoretical implications, our findings may also have wider implications for society. We believe this research provides some clarification of what reality is for people in times of “fact-free” or more recently “post-truth” politics, fake news and alternative facts. Our research demonstrates that people do not necessarily anchor their views about the state of affairs in society in the factual experiences of their daily lives. This means that it is possible for
people who suffer from societal problems such as unemployment or discrimination to have a rosy view of society as a whole as essentially benevolent and fair (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Lerner, 1980); but it is equally possible for people who are objectively well off to believe that society as a whole is in dire straits. Reality can thus be seen as comprised of different layers: There is the reality of well-being in people's daily life (the quality of life that is inferred from concrete experiences within one's personal life and neighborhood) and there is the shared social reality of well-being of “the people” in society as a whole (the quality of life that is inferred from what “we” all know to be true about society). This second social reality is one we collectively construct as a group of people through various forms of communication (e.g., through conversations, public debates, the media). Regardless of whether collective perceptions within this shared social reality are based on personal-level experiences and “facts” or not, they are real in their consequences. For example, when newspapers reported that there was a large demonstration in a small rural village in the North-East of the Netherlands against the refugees in the local asylum seeker center, the newspaper reports about this event seemed to take it as confirmation of the collective perception that “the Dutch people”, especially in smaller rural towns, do not want refugees to enter and stay in the country (Thijssen, 2016). However, this reporting seemed to have been based on misperceptions and misconceptions of the local situation: Most demonstrators were from a far-right movement and did not live in the town itself, and many people who do live in the town in fact think that helping refugees is a good thing and organized pro-asylum protests and actions which did not get covered in national media (Kuper, 2017).

So in the case of societal discontent, what is the relationship between these two levels of reality, and which one is more “real” or realistic? The current research is not well suited to give a definitive answer to this question, since this was not its focus. Future research should investigate in more detail psychological processes (that could be cognitive or motivational) and sources of information that inform and potentially bias perceptions and judgments of societal problems at personal and collective level. We can speculate, however. In the Netherlands, it seems that the collective perceptions of the state of society have been “unrealistically” pessimistic: In our findings the aggregates of personal-level scores were more in line with national statistics where they exist (e.g., for crime levels) than collective perceptions, which were unrealistically high. In addition, both subjective and objective quality of life for a large majority of people in the Netherlands was and remains high (Bijl et al., 2011, 2015), which translates to the average person in the Netherlands having a high quality of life. For our Z-scale, this means that we would expect that the average estimate of people's personal experiences with or concerns about societal problems in their daily lives would be low, which
is also what we found (e.g., Chapter 3: 1.68 days out of the last 30). If collective perceptions of the state of society were a direct translation of the average of personal experiences, than we would expect to find a similar estimate for the average person is society; instead we found estimates that were a lot higher (i.e., more than 3.3 times the personal-level estimate: 5.71 days). Yet it would be too simplistic to assume that this societal discontent is not real: First, as we have shown in Chapter 3 and by the famous Thomas Dictum, when a subset of society has high levels of societal discontent, this can be real in its consequences. Second, there can be real collective-level problems that fuel collective discontent with society. It seems that rather than societal discontent being a “fact free” perception of society, the perceptions we have of society might drive the facts we want to see.

Within a collectively shared social reality, certain things can become unquestionable truths that drive or influence other views and the interpretation of information. For example, for the past few years many politicians of extreme parties have advocated strongly against “the elite”, as the elite allegedly ignored the concerns of “the people”. With this message now being an established view in many societies, people can talk about the elite without explaining who the elite actually is/are – as it does not need further explanation in most conversations to be understood. Yet as a concrete group of people one could hold accountable for something, who “the elite” are has become increasingly unclear: Are they the established politicians of mainstream parties, the (ultra)-rich in society, all people with university degrees, people who identify with the political left, and/or people who enjoy high culture? And what about leaders of extreme parties that campaign against the elite, who are themselves (ultra-)rich (e.g., Donald Trump, Nigel Farage) or established politicians (e.g., Geert Wilders)? In the Netherlands, for a while the elite was usually qualified as “the left-wing elite of the Amsterdam canals” (linkse grachtengordel elite), but that qualification has gradually disappeared. With “the elite” (as opposed to “the people”) being more representative of an idea than of a concrete group of people, “the elite” seems to become more of a stereotype. This collectively shared stereotype might be influenced by collective societal discontent, as an entity to put blame on. Collective discontent, not personal discontent, could then be the engine of alternative facts: It could fuel believe in abstract “truths” that have become disconnected from any concrete personal-level reality.

**Societal Subgroups in Times of Polarization**

The present research, specifically Chapter 3, suggests that society consists of different interpretative communities: Subgroups that have (slightly) different views about what society is and how it is doing. In other words, these subgroups might differ in the content of
their collectively shared social reality. Our findings showed that the use of particular types of media, the more commercial and tabloid-style media sources, and lower education levels were associated with more pessimistic collective perceptions about society. We propose that media use and education level are both indicators of interpretative communities in society, because media use represents a recurrent type of frame and messages about society that people are exposed to and education level represents the group of people one is most likely to be in contact with in Dutch society. Recognizing the existence of such subgroups is important in light of the perceived increase in polarization of views in society: It is not that views per se might become more extreme, but that the collective social reality in which people’s collective-level views are grounded might also differ.

However, it is important to note that these interpretative communities are not neatly demarcated groups. “Membership” of interpretative communities might be relatively fluid (one could read multiple news sources for example) and might not be strongly connected to personal-level circumstances. In fact, we would caution against too much subtyping these groups: For example, not all people who think society is in dire straits and who vote for extreme parties are “angry white working-class men” (see also Bovens, Dekker, & Tiemijer, 2014). In the 2016 US presidential elections, 53% of white female voters voted for Donald Trump, while footage of him boasting of sexual harassment sparked outrage during his campaign (Rogers, 2016). Trying to demarcate these groups using individual characteristics can obscure more important factors or processes underlying the differences. Again, we stress the distinction between personal discontent and collective discontent: We argue and found that it is the collective-level perception, not personal-level experiences, that best predicts what people believe and what they vote. The implication is that it is the Zeitgeist of societal discontent that is largely responsible for the remarkable societal changes we are witnessing, not one specific social group or class.

**Implications for Policy Makers**

The present research has several implications for those who are involved in organizing society, such as policy makers. We recommend that it is important to recognize two types of distinctions: First, the distinction between personal- and collective discontent with society; second, the distinction between general societal discontent and discontent with particular societal issues (e.g., immigration, crime, health care). According to our perspective, clearly and consistently distinguishing between these levels of discontent and these types of discontent would help to minimize two potential problems. On the one hand, there is the risk that collec-
tive-level general discontent is used to promote specific political agendas. This could for example happen when general discontent is attributed to one specific issue, such as immigration or refugees entering one’s country. Anecdotally, we suggest that this might be one way to view what made the Leave-campaign successful in the Brexit-referendum (in which the UK voted to leave the EU): A general discontent with the state of society seems to have been “hijacked” and used for support to leave the EU. Similarly, we speculate that Donald Trump used a collective discontent with the state of society, which frequently featured in his campaign speeches, to win support in the US presidential elections; even though beyond a promise of change, it did not become clear what concrete (policy) plans he had to realize this change and what it would look like exactly. On the other hand, there is the risk that people or politicians might use general societal discontent to obscure legitimate concerns about society that people may have. This is equally problematic, since it could hinder important and positive societal change. Both these risky strategies could potentially further fuel societal discontent and polarization within society.

We suggest that one way to counteract these problems is to differentiate clearly and consistently between personal- and collective discontent and between general discontent and specific issues in discourse, policy analysis, and research. We recommend being particularly mindful of these distinctions in communication: To listen carefully to what people actually say and to be careful in interpreting what they might mean. When people say that they believe the Netherlands is doing badly, or that society is suffering massively from immigration, this does not (necessarily) mean that they themselves face societal problems in their lives. This implies that addressing or solving societal problems in people’s daily lives might not change their views about society as a whole. Likewise, when people have negative views about a refugee center planned in their neighborhood, this does not (necessarily) mean they see immigration as a problem for society; their negative views might have much more to do with the decision-making process and their voice in it, for example. We believe that there is much to gain in understanding and ultimately alleviating collective societal discontent by being more mindful of these distinctions in discussions and conversations with people about society and about their lives.

In similar vein, not only discourse and analysis, but policy itself should also be careful not to confuse these different levels and types of discontent. We suggest that policy should be targeted either at the level of experiences in personal life and the neighborhood, or at the collective level; but not to mix these levels. Although it is arguably easier to make policy on specific issues, it is important to recognize the influence of general discontent in people’s collective-level discontent with particular issues and the ways in which collective-level issues
are related to each other. Our findings demonstrated that personal- and collective-level discontents are influenced by or related to different psychological constructs, which suggests that trying to alleviate these discontents asks for different processes or approaches. Further research is however necessary in order to uncover more about these processes. The most important recommendation is to take both personal and collective discontent seriously: They both have important consequences for society.

**Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research**

The present research has several limitations, which in turn open up interesting and important questions for future research. First, we would like to point out that one aspect of our approach that we view as a strength, its inherent vagueness, also has a disadvantage. We operationalized societal discontent (Zeitgeist) as a general factor Z, predicting people's collective-level perceptions of specific societal issues. Therefore, we measure Z with a scale that consists of a number of specific societal issues. Theoretically, we assume that Z would influence people's collective-level perception of any societal issue: If there is a discontent with society as a whole, this would lead to discontent with or a more negative perception of any of its parts. At the start of this research, we constructed a list of societal issues that pertained to specific societies (e.g., the Netherlands, the U.S.) at that moment in time. The international research in Chapter 4 showed that, as expected, the best way (i.e., list of societal issues) to measure Z within one society differed slightly from country to country. Although we believe we have constructed a list of societal issues of which a core is likely to fit many (Western) societies at present for within-country research, and we have constructed an international Z-scale for between-country comparative research, the Z-scale will require re-specification for different situations and different times in future research. This might provide challenges for conventional understandings of reliability and validity of measurements instruments and for comparing results across research in different times and countries, but we believe advantages of our approach outweigh this potential disadvantage.

Furthermore, the present research has focused mainly on gaining a better understanding of societal discontent; yet a Zeitgeist of societal content or optimism should (at least theoretically) be able to exist as well. Because of our focus on societal discontent, we preferred to work with the measure that would best be able to assess this – however, the absence of discontent might not be the measure of societal optimism. The Z-scale cannot and does not assess variation in the extent to which people are optimistic or happy about various aspects of society; it can merely detect “0” or “not a problem”. In Chapter 2, we developed a second measure
of Zeitgeist that might be more suitable for studying societal optimism, which also included positively phrased items/aspects of society (e.g., social cohesion). We think collective optimism about society would be an interesting avenue for future research – and hope to soon be able to find a society (and/or time) that lends itself for studying this.

Finally, an important question for future research is: How does societal discontent arise, and change? In the present research, time has been a limitation to addressing this question: we would speculate that rising and falling societal (dis)content might be a process of years or decades more than months. In Chapter 5, we took a first step by exploring how micro-dynamic processes of communication might change Zeitgeist over time in a small-scale setting. The results suggested that conversations in a collective setting could influence the Zeitgeist-beliefs about the state of the discipline of social psychology. The results of Chapter 3 showed that use of specific (tabloid-style and more commercial) media sources, a form of collective communication at societal level, was related to the negativity of people's Zeitgeist perceptions. One suggestion for future research would be to investigate how these and other forms of collective-level communication, such as Twitter or Facebook, might influence collective perceptions of societal discontent.

Conclusion

To conclude, our research aimed to answer the question of what societal discontent is: A question that we believe is crucial in order to fully understand this societal phenomenon. We propose that societal discontent is an aspect of the Zeitgeist: It is a collective, generalized, and tacit negative perception of the state of society as a whole. The main academic contribution of our work is that we designed a novel theoretical and methodological approach to studying societal discontent. Our results so far have been consistent with this approach, implying that we seem to have found a way to measure this vague sense of doom and gloom about the state of society; but also open up questions for future research. The main societal contribution that we hope to make is a better understanding of one of the major driving forces of this political era. If we ask the question how it is possible for people who have wealth, freedom, democracy, and happiness to nevertheless believe that their country is rotten to the core, the answer lies not with income inequality or immigrants or any other political fad: It is the sentiments of the collective that deserve our careful attention.