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### Societal pessimism: A study of its conceptualization, causes, correlates and consequences

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# CHAPTER 2

## A theoretical disentangling of the concern about society<sup>1</sup>

### 2.1 Introduction

Although bookshelves have been written about the presumed deterioration of (parts of) society, attention for a concern about the state of society has been remarkably scarce. It has only rarely been treated as a concept on itself, (Elchardus & Smits, 2002; 2007; Raad voor Maatschappelijke Ontwikkeling, 2013; Dekker, Van Noije, & Den Ridder, 2013), and its conceptualization has not yet been conducted in a satisfactory manner. Therefore, this chapter aims to conceptualize this attitude. To this end, I distinguish two concepts: societal unease and societal pessimism. Societal unease reflects the concern about society in contemporary developed liberal democracies, whereas societal pessimism is not bounded to a place or time. After describing the literature study that preceded the theoretical propositions of this chapter, I define societal unease and societal pessimism and reflect on similar definitions in the literature. The main part of this chapter presents a conceptual framework of societal unease, composed of five elements, which I describe at length in section 2.4. In section 2.5, I differentiate societal unease and societal pessimism from attitudes about one's personal situation, such as resentment and insecurity of status. In 2.6, I present a theoretical model, which shows my theoretical expectations about this book's most important concepts. Finally, I discuss the similarities and differences between societal unease and societal pessimism on the one hand and established social concepts such as anomie, anomia, alienation and fear on the other.

1 A summary of both this Chapter and Chapter 3 has been published in the following article: Steenvoorden, E.H. (2015) A General Discontent Disentangled: A Conceptual and Empirical Framework for Societal Unease. *Social Indicators Research*, 124(1): 85-110.

## 2.2 Literature study

This section clarifies how I developed the definitions, conceptualizations and theoretical model presented in this chapter. At the start of this study, there was not a clear idea of what societal unease or societal pessimism was, nor a stream of literature to build on. I started by reading a large number of (mainly) theoretical contributions on problematic developments in contemporary society. The only condition for studies to be included in this literature study was that they discussed negative developments. After all, I was looking for literature that could shed light on why people are concerned about society. After reading a large number of studies, I came to a point at which I noticed that I did not encounter new arguments. At this point, I wrote all of the central claims I had read and conclusions or propositions that I deemed important on small cards. Of some authors I included multiple claims, of others only one. Next, I tried to sort all of the claims into meaningful and coherent categories. This resulted in a conceptual model in which societal unease is composed of several processes in society, all of which are unmanageable and add to a sense of collective powerlessness. Another commonality of claims included in the model of societal unease is that they all indicate relatively abstract processes, not concrete problems. In section 2.3, I devote additional attention to the demarcation of societal unease. Various claims did not fit in the model of societal unease, because they reflect the state of individuals or how individuals view themselves or their social position. Nevertheless, I thought it was important to address those claims because they seemed related to a negative societal view. For that reason, I summarized these personal issues in the concepts of resentment and insecurity of status.

Since that first conceptual model of societal unease, I have reviewed both the model and the definitions in this chapter many times and have discussed and presented them to other scholars on many occasions. These conversations and the feedback that I received have resulted in both adjustments and the inclusion of other literature in later stages, leading to the definitions and conceptual model that I present here. Together with the development of societal unease, the idea of a more universally applicable concept resulted in the definition of societal pessimism.

## 2.3 Defining societal unease and societal pessimism

### Definition of societal unease

I propose to define societal unease as following:

*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*

Societal unease is thus explicitly defined as a complex of concerns about specific processes in society. To clarify the implications and demarcations of this definition, I discuss it in detail below. The five aspects of societal unease in the definition are discussed at length in section 2.4.

First, the term *unease* captures the vagueness and lack of direction of the sentiment that it identifies, along with the low intensity of that sentiment (Scherer, 2005). Unlike fear, unease does not reflect distress. Uneasy people are expected to be concerned about but not deeply troubled by the state of society. The terms *unease* and *latent* indicate the lack of a clear object. There is no particular social problem or process that evokes unease, but rather a range of issues.

Second, societal unease consists of *concerns*, which implies that the accuracy of those concerns is beyond the scope of the conceptualization of societal unease. Consistent with the famous Thomas Theorem “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences”, societal unease is composed of perceptions whose accuracy is not considered here. Instead, the extent to which societal unease is rooted in real developments is a standalone question, which I study in Chapter 5. The term *concerns* also differentiates societal unease from the public mood as proposed by Rahn et al., who point to the emotions – i.e., the “diffuse affective state” (1996: 29) – that people have toward their political community, not their attitudes.

The addition of the phrase “*among citizens*” indicates that only societal unease among individuals is meant here, not possible signs of societal unease in, e.g., the political or public debate. This differentiation is summarized in Table 2.1, which lists the possible objects and subjects of concerns: what are the concerns about (individuals’ or society’s problems) and who is experiencing these problems (individuals or society). Theoretically, societal unease can be found in cells B and D of Table 2.1. Cell B reflects concerns experienced by individuals (subject) about their society (object), whereas cell D represents aggregate trends in public opinion, such as what Stimson described as the

public mood, namely, aggregate trends in individuals' policy preferences (1991). Cell D also includes media and political debates about societal issues. Although such debates are likely to be both related to and have an influence on individual citizens, those processes are beyond the scope of this study. Here, only cell B is considered.

**Table 2.1** Object and subject of concerns (examples in brackets)

	Object of concerns (what is the concern about)	
Subject of concerns (who is concerned)	A Individual   <i>Individual</i> (row with partner)	B Individual   <i>Society</i> (integration of immigrants)
	C Society   <i>Individual</i> (serial killer)	D Society   <i>Society</i> (polarization of debate)

The focus on citizens' perceptions distinguishes this study from literature that focuses on analyzing the object only (i.e., problems in and of society) and not the subject (i.e., the perception thereof). An example of such literature is the *Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor, 1991), which addresses "three features of our contemporary society that people experience as a loss or decline" (1991:1). Although two of those features overlap with elements of societal unease, namely, individualization (decline of community) and the primacy of instrumental reason (distrust of human capability), the manner in which these features of society shape citizens' attitudes toward that society is not discussed. Similarly, Bauman describes the liquidity of our ties and context in current society that results from changing conditions (Bauman, 2000). Notwithstanding their contributions, these studies do not discuss individuals' perceptions of these processes.

Fourth, societal unease is restricted to individual concerns about *aspects of society* that we can call 'sociotropic' concerns (Kinder & Kiewiet, 1979)<sup>2</sup> and does not reflect personal problems (egotropic concerns). This restriction distinguishes cell B from cell A in Table 2.1. Although it is easy to identify egotropic concerns, sociotropic concerns are less clear. Here, I am informed by the work of Mills, who differentiates among "the personal troubles of milieu", personal problems, and "public issues of social structure" (Mills, 1971 [1959]: 8), which denote individuals' problems that result from macro developments in society. Individuals can experience all kinds of problems, but when those problems stem from the social structure, they should be seen as a public issue. For example, unemployment and divorce are individual matters, but high levels of unemployment or divorce rates are public issues. What does this mean for societal

<sup>2</sup> Kinder and Kiewiet (1979) use the term 'sociotropic' to refer to voting motivations inspired by the collectivity, in contrast to 'pocketbook' voting, which is based on one's personal (financial) situation.

unease? Public issues are seen as aspects of society and thus are eligible to consider as elements of societal unease, whereas personal issues are not.

However, the term public issues used here deviates from Mills' work in two fundamental ways. First, public issues can only be part of societal unease to the extent that they identify societal developments. For instance, unemployment is a public issue, but worries about one's own (possible) unemployment are not, because the focus is oneself, not society. This is different from Mills' conceptualization, because he pushes for the contrary, namely, for individuals to recognize the social structure as a cause of their personal situation (he calls this capability 'sociological imagination') (Mills, 1971 [1959]). Naturally, being unemployed is likely to make one more worried about unemployment in society, but the point I want to make here is that we should conceptually differentiate concerns about social problems (sociotropic concerns) from concerns about personal problems (egotropic concerns). Second, the category of public issues is more broadly defined here than in Mills' work because it also includes problematic developments in society that are not (often) experienced by individuals but can certainly be a source of concern, such as climate change, the functioning of politics or the risks of nuclear power plants. Thus, both societal trends in individual problems and problems at the societal level are qualified as constituents of societal unease.

The restriction to *aspects of society* also means that societal unease is an attitude, not an individual psychological state. This demarcation implies that personal experiences such as anomia (which I discuss in paragraph 2.7) and individual problems (such as depression, burnout and ADHD), that some authors see as the outcome or consequence of social developments typical of our era, are not defined as part of societal unease. This distinguishes societal unease from other studies, in which individual psychological problems are investigated as manifestations of something similar to societal unease (Wilkinson, 2001; Ehrenberg, 2010). Concerns about the presence of such problems could theoretically be part of societal unease but not the presence of these conditions as such.

Fifth, in addition to the demarcation of public issues, societal unease relates to the *unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects* of society. That means that societal unease is not a catch-all term related to all public issues; instead, it involves five fundamental public issues that seem unmanageable and contribute to a collective powerlessness.

Finally, and relatedly, these five aspects of society, which I discuss in section 2.4, are characteristic of contemporary developed liberal democracies. They relate to issues such as technological advancement, the sovereignty and political power of the nation state, and the retrenchment of advanced welfare-state arrangements; all of these issues

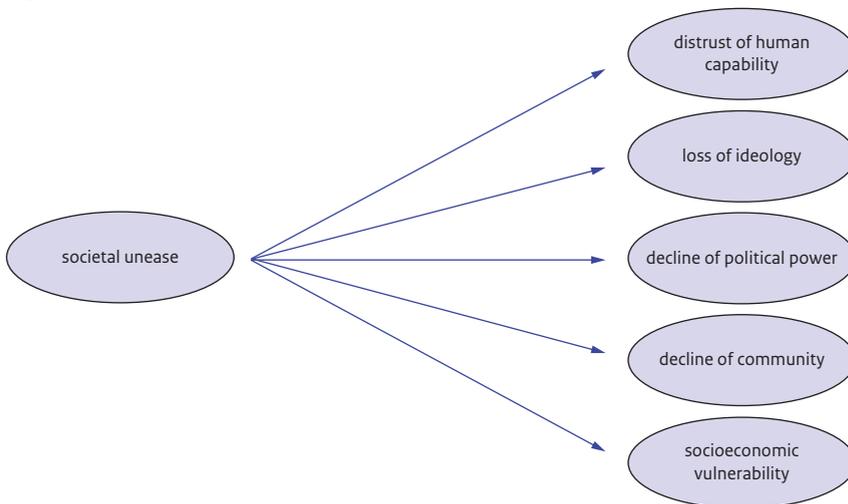
are typical of contemporary, economically developed, liberal democracies. In practice, this means that the definition of societal unease predominantly applies to Western countries, such as European countries, the us, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This is not surprising, because my aim was to conceptualize the concern about society in current Western countries. This is not to say that societal unease does not exist in other countries; instead, it means that I am agonistic about whether societal unease travels beyond contemporary developed liberal democracies.

### Conceptual model of societal unease

The definition of societal unease refers to an unmanageable deterioration of five aspects of society; the conceptual model that follows from this definition is shown in Figure 2.1. Section 2.4 describes these elements at length.

One may wonder why certain societal problems are not part of this model. The sense of unmanageability and collective powerlessness is a requisite, but also do all elements of societal unease relate to *fundamental* aspects of society instead of to isolated, concrete problems. They can be characterized as undirected concerns instead of concrete discontents. Dissatisfaction with politicians, irritation with immigrants, and feeling unsafe in one's neighborhood are all examples of more directed discontent. Societal unease is seen here as not only more vague but also more fundamental. Various concrete attitudes and types of behavior may follow from societal unease. Several scholars suggest that xenophobia, feelings of a lack of safety and distrust in politics are projections of our deeper anxieties (Boutellier, 2002; Bauman, 2006).

**Figure 2.1** Conceptual model of societal unease



## Definition of societal pessimism

The definition of societal unease refers to five concerns about the state that are predominantly found in contemporary developed liberal democracies, that is, in Western countries. However, it is possible that people have been concerned about their society other places or times, e.g., in developing countries or in previous historical periods. Indeed, authors from previous eras do express concern about where society is heading. Examples are concern about a loss of social norms (Ibn Khaldūn, Abd Ar Rahman bin Muhammed, 1967 [1377]) or a range of concurrent transitions in society in which “everything that is solid melts into air” (Marx & Engels, 1987 [1848]). Therefore, a concern about society can also be defined without specifying what that concern is about. Societal pessimism as I propose it here merely refers to the gut feeling that society is in decline. The definition of societal pessimism is as follows:

*A concern among citizens that their society is in decline*

Societal pessimism differs from general or personal pessimism, which has received attention as a trait that has both psychological and physical disadvantages. Pessimism in that sense points to an inclination to expect not only the worst in general but also not to succeed in what one attempts to accomplish, in contrast to optimists, who see the glass as half full (e.g. Beck et al., 1974; Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010; Forgeard & Seligman, 2012).

Societal pessimism differs from societal unease: societal pessimism is an undirected expectation about the future of society, which theoretically can be found in all types of societies in all phases in history, whereas societal unease consists of concerns about five specific aspects of contemporary developed liberal democracies. Conceptually, therefore, societal unease is an expression of current-day societal pessimism. However, the descriptions of collective powerlessness and unmanageable deterioration that I used for societal unease also describe societal pessimism. It is this perception of decline of (aspects of) society for which no clear solutions can be found that is at the heart of societal pessimism, just as in the case of societal unease.

## Similar definitions of unease or malaise

A limited number of studies have a subject similar to societal unease or societal pessimism. This section discusses the similarities and differences between the definitions proposed here and those of other scholars.

First, two authors point to malaise or discontent as a feature of society and thus differ from the definitions of societal unease and societal pessimism because they do not conceptualize this malaise or discontent as an individual attitude. In *The Malaise*

of *Modernity*, Taylor discusses “three features of our contemporary society that people experience as a loss or decline” (1991:1). These three features are a loss of meaning (i.e., moral standards), a primacy of instrumental reason, and a loss of freedom. The first and the third features overlap with the decline of community and distrust of human capability, respectively, which are described later in this chapter. However, Taylor’s book focuses on the theorization of these processes in society and not citizens’ perception of them.

Ehrenberg (2010) speaks of a ‘Society of Discontent’, which stems mainly from individualism. Similar to Bauman (2007), the shift of responsibilities from the collectivity to the individual is Ehrenberg’s main concern. Social bonds are weakening and the individual is becoming overburdened with responsibilities and challenges. In contrast to societal unease and societal pessimism as defined here, Ehrenberg presents individual psychological problems as evidence of malaise but does not refer to this malaise as an individual attitude.

A second group of authors does describe an individual attitude about society. Mills uses the term *uneasiness* (1971 [1959]) to refer to “the beat feeling that all is somehow not right” (ibid: 11). He describes *uneasiness* as one of four individual states that are defined by values and threats. ‘Well-being’ is the situation in which people cherish some values and do not feel any threat to them, ‘crisis’ occurs when cherished values are threatened, ‘indifference’ occurs when people are neither aware of any values nor threats and ‘uneasiness’ is an unawareness of cherished values combined with an awareness of threat. Although Mills’ definition is not very specific, it has a similarity to societal unease and societal pessimism, which also refer to a latent, vague concern. However, a sense of threat seems to point more to anxiety than my definitions of societal unease and societal pessimism.

Bennett proposes the concept *cultural pessimism*, which is “the conviction that the culture of a nation, a civilization or of humanity itself is in an irreversible process of decline” (Bennett, 2001). He posits four narratives of decline that add up to a narrative of decline about our ‘whole way of life’, which is the reason for the term *cultural pessimism*. The four narratives are called environmental, moral (the persistence of war, genocide, torture), intellectual (science and art) and political (social and political consequences of the new capitalism). The first and the fourth show an overlap with the elements of societal unease proposed here (because they relate to risks of technology and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability). The second and third seem like intellectual concerns and are less likely to be a concern of the general public.

The work of Elchardus and Smits shows a great deal of similarity to societal unease as defined here because they also argue that multiple processes in society comprise a general concern about society. They do not discuss societal unease so much theoretically; instead, they conduct an empirical study in Flanders of the interrelatedness of various

social attitudes and define societal unease as a lack of well-being [about being part of] society (2007: 104) or a negative feeling about one's own society or the course of events in one's own society (Elchardus, 2008: 12). They use different measures of societal unease, i.e., either a combination of personal pessimism and feelings of unsafety (2002), or (on the basis of interviews) a lack of safety, threats to social security in a globalizing world, a change from a homogenous to a multicultural society, and a loss of interpersonal relationships and agreement about shared values constitute societal unease (Elchardus & Smits, 2007). This is similar to the conceptualization of societal unease employed here, namely, especially to the elements of decline of community and socioeconomic vulnerability. Elchardus & Smits' definition is also employed in the study of Dekker et al. (2013), with the addition of a sense of powerlessness and fatalism or defeatism. This resembles the unmanageability that dominates the definitions proposed here; however, Dekker et al. (2013) seem to point to individual powerlessness, while here collective powerlessness is meant.

Furthermore, societal pessimism is very similar to both optimism as used by Uslaner (2002) and social actualization as proposed by (Keyes, 1998). Uslaner argues that generalized social trust – i.e., trust in other people – is shaped by feelings of optimism and control. He views optimism as a multifaceted phenomenon, namely, “a view that the future will be better than the past and the belief that we can control our environment so as to make it better. The other elements of optimism are a sense of personal well-being and a supportive community” (Uslaner, 2002: 81). This concept clearly overlaps with societal pessimism, which is exactly the opposite, namely, the view that society will not be better, but worse, and that we cannot control this process. However, the personal wellbeing and social trust aspects that Uslaner includes in optimism are different from societal pessimism. Another difference between the use of optimism by Uslaner and societal pessimism, is that he does not distinguish between the personal and societal aspects of it.

Social actualization is one of the five dimensions of social well-being proposed by Keyes (Keyes, 1998; Keyes & Shapiro, 2004) and studied by others (Gallagher, Lopez, & Preacher, 2009; Huppert et al., 2009). Social well-being reflects “the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society” (Keyes, 1998: 122).<sup>3</sup> Social actualization is the “evaluation of the potential and trajectory of society. This is the belief in the evolution of society and the sense that society has potential which is being realized through its institutions and citizens” (Keyes, 1998: 122). It can be interpreted as the opposite of societal pessimism, as societal optimism.

3 Its dimensions reflect evaluations of one's relationships, contribution to and understanding of society (social integration, social contribution, social coherence) and the perceptions of human nature and societal progress (i.e., social acceptance and social actualization).

## 2.4 Elements of societal unease

### Distrust of human capability

The first element of societal unease points to concerns about the limitations of policies and technological innovations with respect to making improvements. Both the growing awareness of the downsides of technological progress, and our inability to oversee and overcome all types of dangers, result in a notion of limited human capability. This contributes to a sense of collective powerlessness and takes shape in irritations about human failure. Below, two perspectives related to this notion of limited human capability are discussed.

The first perspective argues that the idea of progress, present since the Enlightenment, is eroding. The belief that characterized the 1950s and 1960s, i.e., “we could completely control our economic, social and political surroundings” (Samuelson, 1995: xvi), has faded away. We have become disillusioned because we had expected today’s problems to be solved by now. The promise of improvement has been replaced by the awareness that fear cannot be defeated permanently and that dangers will continue to threaten us (Bauman, 2006). This awareness is accompanied by a negative attitude toward human capability: “Deeds that were once described as great achievements are today dismissed as destructive. This mood is very much linked to the end-of-the-twentieth-century culture, which regards human creation as at best a mixed blessing and at worst wholly dangerous” (Furedi, 2002 [1997]: 28). This is apparent in our heightened sensitivity to human failure. When a tsunami strikes, there is anger about the failure of the warning system, in case of flood the government failed in water management. Freud already stated that compared to dangers that result from the superiority of nature and the feebleness of our own bodies, dangers that result from human failure are the most difficult to overcome (Freud, 1961 [1929]).

A second perspective on the loss of trust in human capability can be found in the literature on the ‘world risk society’, a term derived from Beck’s influential work, *The Risk Society* (1992). This book states that we have entered a new phase in history, from industrial modernity to reflexive modernity. This era can be characterized by the production of a new type of risk that adds to the intolerance of human failure. The new risks are the (latent) side effects of industrial and scientific innovations: “hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself” (Beck, 1992: 21). The new risks have three characteristics: 1) delocalization, causes and consequences that are omnipresent, not geographically limited; 2) incalculableness, i.e., with consequences that are both hypothetical and incalculable; and 3) non-compensable, i.e., dangers that are irreversible (Beck, 2006). Examples of new risks include nuclear waste, climate

change, terrorist attacks and global financial crises. These new risks are typically invisible, which is why they stimulate speculation. Beck states that these risks cause anxiety and fear among citizens, but does not indicate how these fears take shape.

A critical question that is often raised is whether the hazards that we currently face are indeed more threatening than they used to be, or whether we are just more sensitive to their presence (Taylor-Gooby & Zinn, 2006; Zinn, 2008). Some authors claim that we are preoccupied by very unlikely risks while we neglect real dangers (Glassner, 1999; Furedi, 2002 [1997]). It is not rare bacteria, but car accidents that should worry us. However, in this study I am interested in citizens' perceptions of risks, not the accuracy of those perceptions.

### Loss of ideology

The second element of societal unease is the loss of ideology, which deprives us of both a sense of direction about where we are heading, and a perspective on a better society. This lack of direction contributes to a sense of unmanageability. Following Heywood's definition, ideology is seen as threefold and includes an account of the existing order, a vision of what a good society or a desired future would look like and a way to achieve that (Heywood, 2003). Several scholars signal the absence of ideology, or utopia, pointing to the loss of a perspective on a better world (Samuelson, 1995; Jacoby, 1999; Heywood, 2003; Bauman, 2007; Judt, 2010). Ideology and utopia as mentioned here can be seen as secular alternatives to generate perspectives and goals for both individuals and collectivities. Often a comparison is drawn between current times and the 1950s to 1970s (Samuelson, 1995; Jacoby, 1999; Judt, 2010), or between postmodern and modern times (Bauman, 2007), to argue that we currently lack the ideals of previous historical periods.

Because ideas about what a profoundly better society would look like and how we are planning to get there become outdated, we are deprived of the promise of improvement. The future will only be a replica of today or worse. With the welfare state becoming the dominant model, both left and right are solely concerned with pragmatic politics; they lack distinct ideologies. There-is-no-alternative (TINA) is the new consensus (Furedi, 2002 [1997]: 181).

An alternative view is to consider a lack of ideology as itself an ideology. Heywood states that any claim about the end of ideology is itself ideological, because it is an attempt to portray one set of ideas as superior. The 'end of ideology' declared by Daniel Bell in 1960 and the 'End of History' declared by Fukuyama in 1989 both rendered ideology redundant by pointing to the emergence of a broad ideological consensus (Heywood, 2003). Additionally, postmodernism claims grand scale theories are outdated while

globalism, which promotes a capitalist economy and liberal democratic values, also undermines (other) political ideologies (ibid). According to this line of reasoning, a loss of ideology would only underline the dominance of one particular ideology: that of TINA, which unlike other ideologies, makes no promise of improvement.

### Decline of political power

The third element of societal unease points to the diminishing possibility of changing things for the better because our tool to do that, the national government, has less of an ability to do so. This perception creates a sense of collective powerlessness and unmanageability, because our representatives are not in the driver's seat. The literature shows several reasons for decreased political power: 1) depoliticization; 2) a transfer of political power from the national to supranational level; and 3) globalization of the economy and the growing power of multinationals.

Depoliticization refers to the process of decreasing responsibility and accountability of political actors in decision-making with respect to public issues (Burnham, 2001; Buller & Flinders, 2005; Hay, 2007). Depoliticization essentially declares issues as non-political, either because they are seen as technical issues that should be left in the hands of experts, or because the market is the best place to guarantee efficiency, in which case privatization and liberalization are the chosen paths. Depending on the issue, the new decision-making body is either a public body, for example, a central bank or an installed commission (in the case of monetary policy), or the market (e.g., public transportation). Either way, depoliticization implies that the power to address those public issues is increasingly found outside the political realm. Therefore, it is argued that through depoliticization, national governments make themselves redundant (Hay, 2007; Bauman, 2007; Judt, 2010). "Politics has gone into early retirement" (Furedi, 2002 [1997]: 181) by labeling problems as beyond (political) control. In many instances, this attitude also implies that public issues are left to consumers, that is, individual citizens, to solve (Hay, 2007). Bauman calls this the individualization of responsibility (Bauman, 2007). From the quality of food to healthcare insurance, individuals are left to find solutions to collective problems.

A second factor of importance in the loss of political power is the EU. European countries increasingly transfer their national power to the supranational level, resulting in less sovereignty and power at the national level (Wallace, 1999), a situation that citizens often evaluate critically (Hooghe & Marks, 2005). A final cause of the loss of political power is globalization (Hay, 2007). This process increases the power of non-democratic organizations such as multinationals (Barber, 2003), and increases interdependency between nation states, giving rise to problems that transcend national boundaries (Scharpf, 2000).

## Decline of community

The fourth aspect of societal unease in Figure 2.1 is the decline of community, which points to the perceived decline of shared norms, values and solidarity within a nation. This process takes place outside the political realm and therefore, it is difficult to control or influence.

Many authors discuss the issue of advancing individualization, which is argued to result in a loss of community, or solidarity (e.g. Etzioni, 1993; Putnam, 2000). The decline of community also fits into the literature on social cohesion; the internal connectedness of a social system (e.g. Chan, To, & Chan, 2006). However, instead of social cohesion, which is often conceptualized as a condition of society, not individual perceptions (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990), decline of community points to a perceived decline of social cohesion. Connections with fellow citizens and common norms, values and goals are not self-evident but seem in need of maintenance. Examples are concerns about a lack of decency and aggressiveness in daily interpersonal contact with unknown fellow citizens (Steenvoorden, 2009; Steenvoorden, Schyns, & Van der Meer, 2009; Van Stokkum, 2010).

A central feature of the decline of community is ‘moral aloneness’. Moral aloneness, introduced by Fromm, is not loneliness but a “lack of relatedness to values, symbols, patterns” (Fromm, 1960 [1942]: 15). One needs a sense of relatedness, of belonging to a community, either through religion, ideology or nationalism, for meaning, guidance and direction in life. Conversely, individualization deprives us of that connection. Moral aloneness or loss of community deprives the individual of not only a higher goal in life than oneself, which induces narcissistic motives and attitudes, but also of direction or guidance for which route to follow.

This line of reasoning is also found in other contributions. Verbrugge (2004) stresses that without religion, we have only our own interest to consider, not the common interest. Personal freedom and experiences are becoming more important than the collectivity. Furthermore, it is becoming more difficult to identify people with whom we share our moral values, as in the case of a religious community (ibid). Similarly, Taylor speaks of the ‘malaise of modernity’, which among other things deprives us of “something worth dying for” (Taylor, 1991: 4).

This is exactly what De Tocqueville feared would happen. To him, political equality without religion is a trap. Equality, despite its benefits, has the dangerous propensity to isolate people from one another. It concentrates “every man’s attention upon himself; and it lays open the soul to an inordinate love of material gratification” (Tocqueville, 1998 [1840]: 183). Religion inspires the opposite principles, because it places the object of man’s desires both above and beyond the self. Therefore, it is vital for men to preserve religion as conditions become increasingly equal (ibid).

One of the consequences of a lack of community is concern about incivility and aggressiveness in interpersonal contact with unknown fellow citizens (Kearns & Forrest, 2000). There is less of a need to consider the norms of the community when we doubt whether a random fellow citizen is part of our community or when the rules of that community are no longer clear.

The lack of a normative structure in society can eventually result in anomie (Durkheim, 1951 [1897]). The perception of a decline of community does not tell us whether this is actually taking place, but it can be seen as part of a process that can ultimately lead to anomie, a point at which not only the sense of community but also a consensus on legal versus illegal is gone. I reflect on the difference between societal unease and anomie in section 2.7.

### Increasing socioeconomic vulnerability

By socioeconomic vulnerability, I mean the perceived increasing instability of citizens' socioeconomic position. This does not refer to an individual's own vulnerability but instead to a societal development. First, the promise of upward socioeconomic mobility, which became a dominant political goal after World War II, has faded, along with the expectation that our children will rise in socioeconomic terms. Instead, parents who climbed the social ladder now face uncertainty about their own future and that of their children. The acquired socioeconomic position is no longer guaranteed, and socioeconomic guarantees are becoming less evident (Samuelson, 1995). Ehrenreich calls this sentiment the 'fear of falling' (1989). She describes this fear as typical for the middle class, which did not accumulate capital and depends on its knowledge and skills to protect its socioeconomic position. In contrast to capital, these assets can neither be put into savings nor passed to the next generation, thus rendering the middle class position vulnerable.

Globalization is another source of increasing socioeconomic vulnerability. Here a different social group is thought to be at risk: the 'losers of globalization' (Kriesi et al., 2006), also referred to as the 'losers of modernity' (Betz, 1998), who are the low-educated, working-class employees who are most vulnerable to the globalization of the economy and the changing labor market.

A third cause of rising socioeconomic vulnerability is the retrenchment of social services. Since the 1980s and 1990s, reforming the welfare state has been one of the most important political goals (Pierson, 1998; Korpi, 2003). Increasingly, individuals have to manage setbacks and disabilities on their own. Bauman describes this as a shift from security to safety, from social services to surveillance cameras, from collective to individual responsibility to addressing life's adversities. Governments tend to focus

on issues of safety because it is no longer possible to provide extensive social security (Bauman, 2006; 2007). Ehrenberg points to the same trend, namely, a shift from equality of protection to equality of opportunity: no minimal result is guaranteed, only a minimal chance (2010).

## 2.5 Personal insecurities

The elements of societal unease describe societal processes or aspects that constitute a concern about society. However, the literature discussing these problematic aspects of contemporary society often also points to more individually oriented concerns. Although personal problems or concerns do not fit into societal unease, these personal concerns are very much related to the elements of unease. Therefore, I discuss two concepts to summarize and understand these egotropic concerns: resentment and insecurity of status. These concepts reflect concerns about one's own societal position or status, not that of society itself. These concerns can be placed in cell A of Table 2.1. It is useful to discuss them here for several reasons. First, this discussion adds to the literature overview on the societal changes currently taking place and my attempt to conceptualize the resulting perceptions among citizens that accompany these changes. Second, it further clarifies what I explicitly reject to be part of societal unease. Third, I expect these two perceptions of one's own position to be related to societal unease. To examine that relationship, we need a conceptualization of both resentment and insecurity of status, to which I turn now.

### Resentment

The perception of not getting what you deserve, or unjustly having less than others, is what I call resentment. Because it refers to one's own position in society, it is not an element of societal unease. This attitude has received scholarly attention under a range of labels. Blaming society for one's perceived failure to succeed is a central element of both relative deprivation and resentment as defined in the literature. Relative deprivation "is the result of a social comparison which implies that the person making the comparison is not receiving valued resources to which he or she feels entitled" (Grant & Brown, 1995: 195-196). It implies both a perception that an expectation has been violated (the cognitive component) and feelings of injustice, discontent or even outrage about this violation (the affective component). The social comparison can either be made between oneself and other individuals, or between one's own social group and other groups. The former is known as individual or egoistic relative deprivation, the

latter as collective relative deprivation (Grant & Brown, 1995; Van der Bos, Loseman, & Doosje, 2009).

Resentment is similar to relative deprivation, but it seems to be more of a state of mind; it is possible that the affective component is even more important than in the case of relative deprivation. Barbalet (2001) describes resentment as an emotion, namely, the feeling that others gained an unfair advantage. It also relates to a perception of injustice (Meltzer & Musolf, 2002; Webber, 2007). Rawls takes this one step further and thinks of resentment as a consequence of unequal abilities to obtain political power (Rawls, 1971). Meltzer and Musolf provide a good overview of studies on resentment and ressentiment and discuss the differences between these concepts (Meltzer & Musolf, 2002). They argue that resentment is a reaction to affronts or assaults upon one's self. When resentment becomes a prolonged state and is accompanied by a sense of powerlessness to act on the situation, they speak of ressentiment. In their view, both Nietzsche and Scheler describe ressentiment as a characteristic of social groups (i.e., the ordinary people or the bourgeoisie), which stems from discontent with their resources. Both resentment and ressentiment share "a sense of being denied what we believe is our just due" (Meltzer & Musolf, 2002: 245).

Resentment seems to be a likely sentiment among the so-called losers of globalization, who witness employment and upward mobilization evaporating through a displacement of employment and a retrenchment of the welfare state (Betz, 1998; Kriesi et al., 2008). Resentment is also a likely sentiment resulting from the 'entitlements' as described by Samuelson, namely, the entitlement to or guarantee of certain things, such as "secure jobs, rising living standards, enlightened corporations, generous government, high-quality health care, racial harmony, a clean environment, safe cities, satisfying work and personal fulfillment" (Samuelson, 1995: 4). Samuelson argues this entitlement to be the general expectation of Americans, and it comes close to the description of the American dream, or rather, the American fantasy. When these entitlements are not delivered, they create resentment. Finally, it should be noted that resentment is connected with all elements of societal unease except for decline of community. The loss of the promise of progress and the lack of a vision which includes resentful citizens, the lack of political power to deliver entitlements and rising socioeconomic vulnerability, all are connected to resentment.

### Insecurity of status

Insecurity of status reflects insecurities about one's identity and social position. These are the consequences of individualization for the individual. To my knowledge, it has not been explicitly proposed in previous studies as such. Because people are increasingly

able to choose among identities and create their own combinations of identification in a search for recognition and respect, this can also increase insecurity. A lack of certainty about one's own social position in times during which 'anything is possible' enhances insecurity of social position. From this, it follows that insecurity of status is related to the decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability.

Many authors claim there is increasing pressure on the individual to develop their own identities. Different terms are used to describe a similar process, such as reflexive identity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1992), liquid identity (Bauman, 2000) and insecurity of identity (Boutellier, 2002). All of these terms refer to the decreasing importance of social structures and the resulting decreasing influence of those structures on our identity. This necessitates individuals to create their own identity: the questions 'who am I', 'what is important to me', and 'what is my goal in life', constitute a burden typical of our era.

The need to do things oneself, to make the choices and create an identity, results in a narcissistic attitude, an 'every man for himself' culture. This is not to be confused with egoism because it is a necessary focus on the self, not the neglect of others because we do not care (Fromm, 1960 [1942]; Boutellier, 2002; Van Stokkum, 2010). However, this 'identity in the making' does need others for recognition. Taylor states that the search for authenticity and 'self-realization' and the call for recognition of our identity are typical of our times (1991). This need for recognition, which we can also call respect, is not self-evident. The need for respect is thought to be the reason for both short-temperedness and increasing indecency between people (Boutellier 2002; Van Stokkum 2010).

Bauman argues that the overload of freedom typical of our era gives rise to insecurity (1997). He argues that we have exchanged security for freedom, and he contrasts our postmodern society with that of Freud, with flourishing security but a lack of freedom. In *Civilization and its discontents* (Freud, 1961 [1929]), Freud describes discontent that stems from a culture that allows too little freedom, thus restraining individuals' instincts. Strong cultural norms offer clarity in terms of identity and expectations but bind individuals in terms of their wishes and conduct. Currently, we have exchanged our security for freedom, resulting in insecurity (Bauman, 1997). Boutellier agrees with Bauman and argues this insecurity is the main cause for 'het algemene onbehagen', or general unease (Boutellier, 2002). In this study, however, insecurity is seen as reflecting one's personal identity and social context, and therefore, it is not an aspect of societal unease.

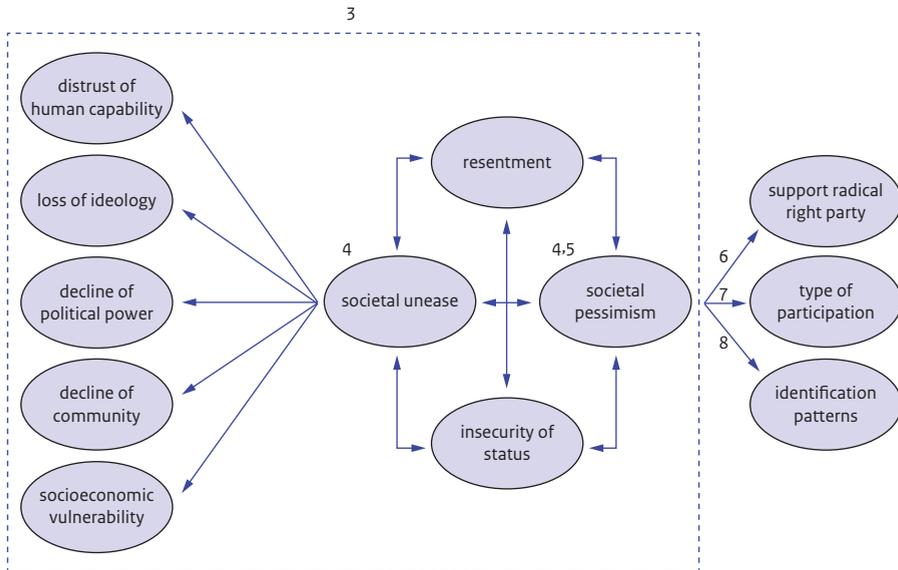
As highlighted above, insecurity of status also reflects insecurity about one's social position. This includes not only one's position in terms of identity and belonging to

social networks or social group but also one's socioeconomic position. Increased social mobility creates not only opportunities but also the possibility of social degradation. The fear of falling (Ehrenreich, 1989), already touched upon in section 2.4, is one of the concerns that exemplify this insecurity. It is different from resentment about one's position because in the former case, the insecurity results from greater social (identifying and socioeconomic) mobility, not the relatively (low) position held. In addition to degradation, ample possibilities for social mobility mean that both success and failure are individualized, thus implying that failure is a person's own fault (Bauman, 2008). Thus, we are not only more likely than before to be concerned about our position, but possible degradation is also harder to swallow because the individual is to blame. In Freud's society, one could not climb the ladder, but that also prevents falling from it.

## 2.6 Theoretical model

Many concepts have been proposed in this chapter. Figure 2.2 clarifies their interrelationships. Societal unease is composed, as in Figure 2.1, of five elements. Because I theorize that societal pessimism is content free, it is not related to the elements of societal unease. I expect societal unease, societal pessimism, resentment and insecurity of status to all be related. Furthermore, I view them as equals in terms of causality: none of them is a cause or a consequence of the others. On the right side of Figure 2.2, I have included what I theorize and examine in later chapters to be consequences or correlates of societal pessimism: support for Populist Radical Right parties, types of participation and identification patterns. The bold numbers refer to the chapters in which I do so.

This figure is not a reflection of all possible theoretical relationships but only shows those that I examine in this book. Because of data limitations, I examine societal pessimism in Chapters 5-8; however, I expect the same relationships to exist with respect to societal unease. Moreover, more attitudes or types of behavior can be expected to relate to societal unease and societal pessimism. In line with several scholars who state that xenophobia, feelings of a lack of safety and distrust in politics are projections of our deeper anxiety (e.g. Boutellier, 2002; Elchardus & Smits, 2002; Bauman, 2006; Elchardus, 2008), I expect that societal unease and societal pessimism are likely to be projected onto such concrete concerns or discontents.

**Figure 2.2** This book's theoretical model

## 2.7 Comparison of societal unease and similar concepts

Some concepts are similar to societal unease and societal pessimism. Therefore, I will discuss the similarities and differences between societal unease and societal pessimism, versus anomie, anomia, alienation and fear.

### Anomie, anomia and alienation

A large literature focuses on three concepts that are similar to societal unease and societal pessimism – namely, anomie, anomia (anomie among individuals), and alienation – that are also related to negative societal changes. However, societal unease and societal pessimism are conceptually different from these concepts. The differences are briefly discussed here, although this does imply making general statements about a comprehensive literature.

Anomie refers to a society's social structure, with two classic authors describing it in somewhat different ways. Durkheim points to a lack of regulation in society caused by rapid social changes, resulting in unlimited expectations and normlessness about what is possible to reach and what is just, leading to suicide in extreme cases (Durkheim, 1951 [1897]). Merton's anomie results from inequality of opportunities in society (1938). Although clear cultural norms exist about which goals to strive for, legitimate means to those goals are not available to everybody, which causes people

to engage in deviant, illegitimate behavior to reach these culturally defined goals. Because the social structure is difficult to measure, anomie is often operationalized by the hypothesized outcomes, such as suicide or homicide rates (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1997; Savolainen, 2000; Pridemore & Kim, 2006). Anomie is different from societal unease and societal pessimism because it is a characteristic of society, not an evaluation of society by its citizens.

Anomia describes the mental state of individuals in an anomic society, but the precise conceptualization of this mental state differs in the literature. DeGrazia argues that Durkheim describes an anomic state of individuals as “a painful uneasiness or anxiety, a feeling of separation from group standards, a feeling of pointlessness or that no certain goals exist” (Dean, 1961: 754), whereas Lukes describes anomic individuals as disillusioned, agitated, and disgusted with life, possibly leading to suicide or homicide (Lukes, 1967). Interpreting Merton’s view, anomie induces five possible reactions among individuals, three of which “tend to manifest in aberrant or criminal behavior” (Smith & Bohm, 2008: 3)<sup>4</sup>. A definition of anomia that combines the Durkheimian and Mertonian concepts is “a loss of cognitive orientation and confidence to act” (Legge, Davidov, & Schmidt, 2008: 252).

In line with the variation in meaning, anomia’s operationalization is also diverse. Most of the time, some type of uncertainty, confusion or anxiety is measured, such as uncertainty about oneself, confusion about which types of behavior are illegal, or an inability to understand the world. Srole’s scale of anomia has been very influential (Srole, 1956) and inspired many similar scales (see Seeman’s overview (1991)). These scales, which measure psychological well-being, tend to be very broad and contain a mix of questions about locus of control, general unhappiness and efficacy. Most contemporary research on anomia measures either the inclination to question the rule of law and confusion about which types of behavior are judged as illegal (Burkatzki, 2008; Zhao & Cao, 2010), or a general uncertainty or inability to understand the world (Thorlindsson & Bernburg, 2004; Legge, Davidov, & Schmidt, 2008; Bjarnason, 2009). Some operationalizations of anomia are more similar to societal unease than others, such as when they take shape in attitudes toward the lack of consensus about right and wrong in society or complexity of the world.

Despite these variations, anomia conceptually always relates to one’s personal state. This distinguishes anomia from societal unease and societal pessimism, which reflect people’s perceptions of the state of society. The concepts of resentment and insecurity

4 The other two reactions are to continue to adhere to culturally prescribed means, with or without adhering to culturally prescribed goals.

of status bear much more similarity to anomia because they are about personal insecurities, not a person's attitude towards society. However, those two concepts focus on personal social and socioeconomic status and feelings of resentment, in contrast to confusion about right and wrong or lack of comprehensibility.

Alienation is similar to anomia and differs in the same ways from societal unease and societal pessimism, resentment and insecurity of status. Introduced by Marx, alienation was originally primarily related to circumstances of labor. The production process and product alienate the worker from himself and restrain him from becoming his full self (Lukes, 1967).<sup>5</sup> More generally, alienation is the consequence of certain social and historic structures, such as capitalism in the works of Marx and Fromm or bureaucracy in the works of Weber. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the concept received a great deal of attention, and many interpretations of alienation have emerged in both sociology and psychology. Since then, the concept seems to have become unfashionable (Yuill, 2011). Seeman, one of the leading scholars on alienation in its heyday, proposed a typology in which he distinguishes five (1959), and in his later work, six, types of alienation (1975; 1983). Political alienation or powerlessness is the most frequently used and elaborated type of alienation. The other types are meaninglessness, normlessness, self-estrangement, social isolation and cultural estrangement. In general, alienation differs from societal unease and societal pessimism in the same way as anomia, as it focuses on individual experiences that result from the social structure. Political alienation is most similar, but reflects individual powerlessness, whereas societal unease and societal pessimism reflect collective powerlessness. Meaninglessness, social isolation and normlessness are very similar to the measures of anomia; indeed, they could be seen as three types of anomia. They differ from resentment and insecurity of status in the same way as anomia does.

## Fear

The sentiment of fear can be described as powerlessness “caused by incapacity to deal with danger or threat” (Barbalet, 2001: 149). In many studies, the label fear is applied to characterize the general sentiment of contemporary society. The sentiments described using the label fear all reflect a feeling of lack of control, indicating that this type of fear is very similar to societal unease and societal pessimism, although I argue the latter

5 Lukes (1967) describes Marx's four types of alienated labor: 1) the relationship between the worker and the product of his labor, which dominates him and distances him from his inner life; 2) the relationship between the worker and the act of production, which is not part of his nature, does not fulfill him and induces a feeling of misery; 3) alienation of man from his own body, mental and human life; and 4) the alienation of man from other men.

two reflect *collective* powerlessness. Accounts of societal changes and fear are integrated in the conceptual model of societal unease, which also underlines the similarity of these concepts. For the sake of completeness, I briefly discuss the literature on fear in contemporary society, and the differences to societal unease and societal pessimism.

Moïsi (2009) calls the West – i.e., Europe and the USA – the continent of fear, whereas Asia is the continent of hope, and the Middle East is dominated by a culture of humiliation. This Western fear is “a reaction to the events and feelings taking place elsewhere” (2009: 90). It is a defensive reflex, inspired by developments such as growing economies elsewhere, economic stagnation in the West, and a lack of control over the future and especially, one’s own destiny. The West is no longer in power, so to speak. Similarly, in his book *Liquid Fear* (2006), Bauman describes the greater sensitivity to threats of unmanageable dangers such as natural or environmental disasters or terrorist attacks. These fears are the result of the discrepancy between the high expectations about human capability and the disappointing progress made in preventing disasters.

A slightly different view of fear is proposed by Glassner (1999) and Furedi (2002 [1997]). Both use the title *Culture of Fear* for their books, both of which discuss a growing fear of unlikely events and a preoccupation with diminishing risks among people in Western countries. Compared to Moïsi and Bauman, who focus on dangers and developments on the national scale, Glassner’s work focuses more on individual fears, such as fear of strangers, of illnesses, rare bacteria or abuse, whereas Furedi seems to combine national and individual fears. Furedi goes one step further when he characterizes the current culture with the ‘precautionary principle’: “the evaluation of everything from the perspective of safety” (2002 [1997]: 4). “The perception of being at risk expresses a pervasive mood in society; one that influences action in general.” (2002 [1997]: 20).

Thus, fear is very similar to societal unease and societal pessimism; it differs mainly with respect to the nature of the sentiment. First, fear suggests a higher level of anxiety than unease or pessimism. Therefore, unease and pessimism differ from fear in the theorized emotional state of the people to whom they apply. Second, fear is generally more directed in nature, with a clear object that we are fearing (Wilkinson, 1999), whereas societal unease and societal pessimism are more diffuse and vague as to what the pessimism or unease is about. On the one hand, some of the dangers discussed in the fear literature clearly differ from processes that are theorized here to constitute societal unease, such as the preoccupation with disorders, resistant bacteria, or nuclear waste. On the other hand, the term fear is sometimes used interchangeably with insecurity, disorientation and fragility, e.g., by Moïsi (2009) and Bauman (2006).

In those cases, societal unease or societal pessimism actually seem to be better labels for the sentiment at hand.

## 2.8 Summary

In this chapter, I proposed societal unease and societal pessimism as two conceptualizations of the concern about society. Societal unease reflects the concern about the state of society in contemporary developed liberal democracies, whereas societal pessimism is a concern about the decline of society, which is not conceptually specified either in its object or in its time or place of occurrence. Thus, conceptually, societal unease is a specification of current-day societal pessimism. I have proposed a definition of societal unease as a latent concern, which consists of the perceived 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. These five elements form the conceptual model of societal unease, which I designed based on a literature study.

I also discussed two types of concepts that I expect to be related to a concern about the state of society, namely, resentment (the perception of not getting what you deserve, or unjustly having less than others) and insecurity of status (insecurities about identity and a lack of certainty about one's own social position). Furthermore, I presented a theoretical model that shows not only the interrelatedness of societal unease, societal pessimism, resentment and insecurity of status but also the expectation that societal pessimism is related to Populist Radical Right voting, the type of participation in which people engage in and multiple identification. More generally, I expect societal unease and societal pessimism to be projected onto concerns or discontents that are more concrete, such as xenophobia or feelings of unsafety.

Furthermore, I discussed the similarities and differences between societal unease and societal pessimism on the one hand, and the established concepts of anomie, anomia, alienation and fear on the other. Societal unease and societal pessimism, which are individual perceptions of the state of society, differ from anomie because the latter is a characteristic of the structure of society; they differ from anomia and alienation because the latter two concepts relate to the individual (mental) state; and they differ from fear because that is a more aggravated state, although the use of this term in the literature is actually very similar to societal unease and societal pessimism.

In the following chapters, I will continue by conducting an empirical examination of the nature of societal unease and societal pessimism. In Chapter 3, I test the theoretical assumptions of this chapter, most importantly the empirical validity of societal unease and societal pessimism, and their relation to other concepts and characteristics.

In Chapter 4, I further explore the nature of societal pessimism and societal unease by performing a content analysis of an open-ended Dutch survey question about why people think their country is heading in the wrong direction.