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

Steenvoorden, E.H.

Publication date
2016
Document Version
Final published version

CHAPTER 4
Expressions of societal unease and societal pessimism

4.1 The negative sentiment about society in people's own words

In the previous chapters, I presented conceptualizations of societal unease and societal pessimism, which found support in quantitative analyses. What remains unclear from the use of quantitative data is how such attitudes take shape in people's reflections. Especially since societal unease and societal pessimism are not established concepts, it is important to pay attention to how these concepts take shape. This increases our understanding of the nature of these concepts. To this end, I let respondents take the floor in this Chapter and analyze qualitative data on what they have to say about how their country is doing.

Previous qualitative research in the Netherlands about views on society has revealed not only that people are indeed negative and pessimistic about society, but also that there is considerable consistency in the themes that are raised. Studies of The Netherlands Institute for Social Research (scp) and forum show that citizens are the most worried about issues such as how citizens treat each other, politics, the government and the eu, (polarization about) immigration and integration, the economy, increasing costs and income inequality, health care and education, environment and energy, criminality and low sentences (Steenvoorden, 2009; De Gruijter et al., 2010; Van Houwelingen, 2011; Dekker, Den Ridder, & Van Houwelingen, 2013).

Continuing this line of research, I use the same open-ended survey question as the scp studies about why people in the Netherlands believe that their country is heading in the wrong direction. The new and specific focus here is on what these open answers tell us about the nature of societal pessimism and societal unease. I use societal unease and societal pessimism interchangeably here, not only because Chapter 2 argues that societal unease is how societal pessimism takes shape in contemporary developed liberal democracies such as the Netherlands, but also because Chapter 3 shows that societal unease and societal pessimism are extremely highly correlated. First, I explore which issues people mention in 2012 and pay attention not only to how they mention

those issues but also the emotions that they reveal. Next, I examine whether there are differences in the views of the country between people who are societally pessimistic and a subgroup of those people, namely, the group with the highest score on the scale of societal unease from the previous chapter. Third, I investigate how and to what extent the five elements of societal unease (distrust of human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability) are mentioned as people reflect on Dutch society. Fourth, I explore the reverse group, namely, societal optimists, to examine their reasons for optimism. Do they use inverse or merely different arguments than the societal pessimists? Finally, I conclude by reflecting on what the results tell us about the nature of societal unease and societal pessimism.

This chapter is not a test of the theoretical model in Chapter 2; instead, it is an exploration of the issues raised and how people raise them. To measure the extent to which issues are part of one dimension, this type of qualitative analysis is unsuitable because one cannot examine this by coding answers. Furthermore, I do not think that everything that respondents mention as a reason that their country is heading in the wrong direction is theoretically societal pessimism or societal unease, not only because there needs to be a certain overlap in issues, but also because it is likely that sentiments related to societal pessimism are also mentioned. Moreover, to the extent that societal unease and societal pessimism are latent attitudes, people do not necessarily contemplate them in a concrete manner, let alone elaborate on them explicitly. In contrast, issues that are part of societal unease and societal pessimism could very well not be mentioned because they are not salient or more abstract, even though expressed arguments may nevertheless be based on them.

4.2   Data and Method

Data: explanations of why the country is heading in the wrong direction

In the quarterly Dutch survey called the Citizens Outlooks Barometer (COB), the one but final question is whether people think the Netherlands is heading in the right or the wrong direction (used in the previous chapter as an indicator of societal pessimism). This is followed by an open-ended question that asks for an explanation of the previous answer. In this chapter, I use the answers to that open-ended question of the COB survey of January 2012, which is the same survey that I used to construct a scale of societal unease in the previous chapter. This enables me to directly compare the level of unease to the explanations given on the societal pessimism item. The COB questionnaires can be completed either online or in writing, although about 75% usually choose the online

version. For this open-ended question, the response is not limited in space: if they wish, people can give very long answers; up to 2500 characters (which is about 500 words). In this chapter, I refer to people who think the country is heading in the wrong direction as societal pessimists, and those who choose the right direction as societal optimists.

The use of this explanation of a question on societal pessimism is preferable to the use of an explanation about societal unease, even if such an explanation did exist. Because I proposed societal pessimism as a universal conceptualization of the negative sentiment about society, unbounded in time or place, asking people to elaborate on a societally pessimistic stance avoids delimiting the issues that they can introduce. A second reason to use such a broad explanation of societal pessimism is that a direct question about societal unease is not possible, because it is theorized to reflect a variety of issues that could never be combined into one question. In addition, to ask people about their level of societal unease directly would not work, because there is no scientific or social consensus about the definition of that concept.

Table 4.1 shows the percentage of people who think their country is heading in either the right or the wrong direction. A majority (67%) is societally pessimistic and chooses the wrong direction, of which a quarter (17%) is very negative, choosing 'clearly the wrong direction'. Only 19% think that the country is heading in the right direction, and just 1% clearly think that the country is heading in the right direction, whereas 12% answer 'I don't know'.[1] Table 4.1 also indicates that societal pessimists more often respond to the open-ended question, (73% and 71% versus 58% and 46% among the optimists) and give longer answers. This could indicate that people feel either that a negative standpoint requires more explanation or that it is easier to argue why thing are going wrong. The patterns in Table 4.1 are typical of this open-ended question and are described in studies of the scp that use this open-ended question (e.g. Dekker & Steenvoorden, 2008; Dekker, Van der Meer, & Steenvoorden, 2008; Steenvoorden, 2009; Dekker, Den Ridder, & De Goede, 2010; Van Houwelingen, 2011).

1   This is a considerable percentage. Offering a neutral answer option reduces the size of this group; moreover, it decreases the number of optimists more than the number of pessimists (Van der Meer, Dekker, & Steenvoorden, 2009).

Table 4.1   Do you think things are heading in the wrong or in the right direction in the Netherlands?

	Answer (%)	Explanation[a] (%)	Length (in characters)
clearly the wrong direction	17	73	319
more the wrong direction	50	71	238
more the right direction	19	58	190
clearly the right direction	1	46	74
I don't know	12		

a The open-ended explanation question is only asked to people who do not answer 'I don't know'

To be able to explore the extent to which the people who score highest on the scale of societal unease (of the previous chapter) give different answers and show a deeper concern than the other societal pessimists, I differentiate the most societally uneasy people by taking one standard deviation above the mean of the societal unease scale (16%). Table 4.2 presents the answers of the most societally uneasy, which are (as could be expected) very pessimistic. Ninety-two percent of that group thinks the country is going in the wrong direction. Only 2% (i.e., 2 respondents) disagree.[2] The most uneasy answer the open-ended question slightly more often – and give answers that are somewhat longer – than the societally pessimistic group. Below, I compare the societal pessimists to this subgroup, the most societally uneasy. I like to stress that societal unease is not more extreme than societal pessimism; however, I took an extreme group of people with societal unease to examine the reasoning of that specific subgroup.

Table 4.2   The most societally uneasy on the direction the Netherlands is heading

	Answer (%)	Explanation[a] (%)	Length (in characters)
clearly the wrong direction	49	70	362
more the wrong direction	43	78	232
more the right direction	2	100	123
clearly the right direction	0		
I don't know	6		

a The open-ended explanation question is only asked to people who do not answer 'I don't know'

2   I looked up the arguments of these two respondents. One elaborates this positive stance by pointing to negative developments, a tendency that we will see later in this chapter is common among societal optimists. The other thinks the Netherlands is not doing badly but that it could do much better and that we (especially Parliament) should work harder.

Method: inductive and deductive content analysis

The methodological literature distinguishes various types of content analysis, and I clarify here which type of content analysis I performed. A first distinction can be made between a quantitative content analysis, which deductively examines the occurrence of certain terms, and a qualitative, ethnographic analysis, which is an iterative process in which categorization takes place inductively based on the data, and there is no intent to obtain a representative sample (Bryman, 2008). This latter, qualitative type of analysis is called conventional content analysis by Hsieh and Shannon (2005), who further distinguish between directed and summative content analyses, which are more deductive because they use theoretical, predefined coding schemes. The summative method furthermore focuses on latent, underlying meanings, or the relevance of context to the terms used.

My analysis combines the content analyses differentiated above. On the one hand, I used a deductive strategy, in line with the quantitative and directed method, by mapping the references to the five elements of societal unease and resentment in a large, representative sample of 1,137 respondents that I want to use to draw conclusions about the Dutch population. On the other hand, I inductively coded all of the other text that did not refer to elements of societal unease or resentment. Here, I did not use any predefined codes; instead, I let the text determine the names of the codes. The coding was an iterative process in which I constantly reviewed the choice of codes and their meaning, using memos to keep track of my decisions. During the coding, some codes have been merged, whereas others have been separated. Additionally, I performed various rounds of coding to check whether adjusted codes were used consistently throughout the data.

The resulting codes reflect the data, which means both that some codes are very similar and that codes may show overlap. For instance, the codes 'nature and culture' and 'healthcare and education' show that these issues are often mentioned together. Some codes reflect that more or less the same issue is described differently, such as 'poverty' which for example includes the popularity of free food distribution places [voedselbank], and 'budget cuts hit poor', which discusses how the poor are affected most by the budget cuts.

For the content analysis, I used Atlas.ti (version 7). The respondents' answers are the unit of analysis, not words or sentences. This enabled me to look for overlap of themes and the issues mentioned per respondent. When I show the respondents' text, I present their answers in their entirety, even though only words or sentences may be relevant to the argument at hand. This not only matches the method of coding but also provides a good impression of the data. I underlined the parts of the answer that are relevant to

my argument when showing that answer. The selected answers form a representative selection of the answers that were assigned the relevant code. Because some terms are difficult to translate, in some cases I mention the Dutch words between [straight brackets]. Because I think no English translation can fully capture the original Dutch text, I show them both when presenting full answers.

4.3   Why is the Netherlands heading in the wrong direction?

The explanations about why the country is heading in the wrong direction vary widely in their length, tone, and character, along with the issues that are mentioned. Before discussing these differences, and differentiating the answers of the societally pessimistic and the subgroup of those who are the most societally uneasy, I would first like to point to four general findings.

What is very clear from the answers is that they reflect societal issues. Exceptional cases (pointing how hard it is to find a job at an older age or that 'our children cannot buy a house') prove this rule. Another general observation is that people do not tend to nuance their answer that their country is heading in the wrong direction. Without a neutral option, it would not be surprising if some respondents say that they also observe positive tendencies, but that does not occur. People argue their pessimistic stance with firm discontent, without reservation or nuance.

Third, respondents often mention a range of diverse issues. Although some stick to a single problem, many describe a range of issues. Often, it seems that these diverse issues are all related in the respondent's view. For instances, people discuss their ever-decreasing salary, the rising cost of living, high-placed people [hoge heren] (i.e., directors, governors, and managers), who earn too much, and politicians who do not keep their promises. It seems that diverse issues are not separate problems but instead are all parts of a chain of issues that one can discusses from one to the other. This linking of issues seems very natural and contrasts with researchers' usual practice of studying attitudes separately.

Fourth, many answers describe processes of decline or deterioration. Although this may not be surprising because the question also relates to a process, namely, whether things are *going* in the right or wrong direction, it is still worth mentioning because it is exactly this process of deterioration that is at the core of both societal pessimism and societal unease. I find that this is mostly the case when respondents discuss two elements of societal unease, namely, decline of community and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability. I come back to this point below.

Turning to the differences, there is a large variation in the length of the answers, and that is closely related to the character of the writing. Whereas some people write

problems down in single terms or describe them very briefly and in a staccato-like fashion, others use entire sentences to describe more or less the same thing. Most often, the latter group is more nuanced and seems less discontented. Below, I present three different styles of answers. The first is very short, merely listing problems, whereas the second is more descriptive, showing concern but not severe discontent, and the third answer does show deep discontent and indignation.

"Too much poverty, the high cost of healthcare, too much unemployment, too much aggression".

"Te veel armoede, te hoge zorgkosten, te veel werkloosheid, te veel agressie".

"With the PVV in the cabinet, the wrong example is set for how we should treat each other. The environment gets not enough attention, for example, we have 130 kph roads. Most youngsters cannot rent or buy a house, which makes them subtenants who rent illegally and expensively. Young people who have just graduated cannot find jobs. After saving the banks, nothing has changed. Still, bonuses are paid for poor performance."

"Met de PVV in de regering wordt een verkeerd voorbeeld gegeven over hoe men met elkaar omgaat. Er wordt veel te weinig rekening gehouden met het milieu. Door b.v. 130 km wegen. De meeste jonge mensen kunnen geen woning huren of kopen waardoor ze illegaal en te duur moeten onderhuren. Jonge afgestudeerden kunnen geen werk vinden. Na het redden van de banken is er niets veranderd. Er worden nog steeds bonussen uitgekeerd na wanprestaties".

"The perverse legislation. The scandalous treatment of people's property (pension funds speculating with people's money). The greedy politics of managers. Admitting too many allochthone people in the Netherlands, which decreases employment and payment for the Dutch. (Allochthones and Poles currently work for Polish-level salaries by being self-employed in the Netherlands, which makes them cheap laborers.) They drive in cars with foreign plates, do not pay road tax and refuse to pay fines because they cannot be collected."

"De kromheid van regelgeving. De schandaligheid van omgaan met andermans bezit (speculeren door pensioenfondsen met geld van het volk), de graaipolitiek van hogerhand, het teveel toelaten van allochtonen in Nederland waardoor werk en lonen/ beloningen niet meer voor Nederlanders is (allochtonen-polen momenteel werken op Poolse lonen beloningen door zelfstandige te worden en dus onder Nederlandse normen waardoor ze als krachten zeer goedkoop zijn). Rijden in auto met buitenlands kenteken, betalen geen houderschapsbelasting verrotten het bekeuringen te betalen, is toch niet te innen".

The answers above show that the tone that respondents use varies. Some plainly mention issues, others seem concerned, and still others show a deep discontent and indignation. A small group of respondents stand out because of the severity of their discontent and the emotionality that speaks through the words. This made me distinguish a code for anger. I coded text as angry when people used subjective connotations with adverbs such as scandalous, sick and tired. Other reasons to code answers as angry were the use of capital letters and multiple question or exclamation marks. The subjects of anger are diverse, including (members of) the cabinet, the government, the governing elite (managers, directors, and public officials such as mayors), and immigrants and lawbreakers (criminals, people on benefits). This anger about the state of society underlines that people can emotional about their society. This is in line with the "diffuse affective state" that Rahn et al. call the public mood, which refers to people's emotions toward their political community (1996: 29). Below, I show some answers that I coded as angry (capital letters in original text; as explained above, underlining refers to the text coded as angry):

'Politicians cannot be trusted. In my opinion, most politicians are only members of Parliament to look after themselves instead of REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE. They promise the world, but in the end, they do not DELIVER ANYTHING. THEY PROMISE EVERYTHING AND DO NOTHING; THAT IS WHAT POLITICIANS ENJOY".

"De politiek is over het algemeen niet te vertrouwen. Naar mijn mening zitten de meeste politici in de tweede kamer er alleen maar voor zichzelf in plaats van als VOLKSVERTEGENWOORDIGER. Ze beloven van alles, maar als het er op aankomt geven ze NIET THUIS. VEEL BELOVEN EN WEINIG GEVEN DOET EEN POLITICUS IN VREUGDE LEVEN".

"The euro crisis: the euro is pushed down our throats and now the Netherlands is eager to help the Greeks, and we are the ones to pay the price for that corrupt bunch".

"Euro crisis, die euro is gewoon onze strot in gedouwd en nu moet Nederland weer een haantje de voorste zijn om die Grieken te helpen en wij maar betalen voor dat corrupte zooitje."

These emotions are also important in differentiating between societal pessimists and the most uneasy. The second group is more often angry and indignant. Even when their tone is not angry, it is certainly a few shades darker. More generally, we can say that the very uneasy stand out as more discontented, more frustrated, and more

fatalistic, as if they no longer expect things to turn around. This is in line with what we would expect of the group that is most uneasy.

Both the emotions and the issues raised are coded. In Table 4.3, I show the occurrences of the most important codes. In many cases, these codes represent various, more detailed codes merged into one. For an overview of the more detailed codes and their frequency, see Appendix Table B1. The top of Table 4.3 contains the theoretical concepts: the elements of societal unease and resentment. Below that, the inductively coded issues are presented. Table 4.3 also differentiates between the societal pessimists and the very uneasy. The societal pessimists constitute a large group of 663, only 105 of whom are included in the "most uneasy" group. Although the percentages sometimes reflect only a few people, it is interesting not only to review which issues are raised often but also to compare the patterns among the pessimists and most uneasy.

Table 4.3 Issues raised by the societal pessimists and the most societally uneasy[a]

	Societal pessimists[b]	Most societally uneasy[c]
Theoretical model:		
distrust in human capability	0	0
loss of ideology	3	4
decline of political power	5	10
decline of community	20	24
increasing socioeconomic vulnerability	16	18
resentment	3	8
Inductive codes:[d]		
politics	22	24
economic crisis and austerity measures	24	28
poverty and income inequality	18	27
EU and foreign affairs	9	12
immigration problems	8	11
anti-immigration sentiments	2	3
criminality and safety	12	19
nature and culture	3	2
pension	3	2
healthcare and education	3	2
anger	4	8

a   These are not mutually exclusive codes because 1) the large majority of respondents raise multiple issues and 2) terms often refer to multiple issues at once. For instance, criminal immigrants are codes both in criminality and in immigration problems. If people point to poverty and write that it will increase because of retrenched social policies, their answer is coded as both poverty and increasing socioeconomic vulnerability.
b   N= 663
c   N=105 of the 663
d   Appendix Table B1 shows the detailed codes that are merged into these larger categories.

If we first consider the theoretical elements of societal unease, we can see large differences among them in the extent to which they are expressed in the descriptions of the negative state of the country. Decline of community and increasing societal economic vulnerability are referred to by 20% and 16%, respectively, whereas decline of political power (5%), loss of ideology (3%) and resentment (3%) are clearly mentioned less often. Distrust in human capability (0%) is only referenced by two societally pessimistic respondents. These results mean that although the elements of societal unease have commonalities, as shown in Chapter 3, some play a more dominant role than others in the perception of citizens.

The most uneasy refer more often to the elements of societal unease, which is to be expected because they score high on societal unease as a result of their high scores on items on these five elements. Most notably, they more often point to decline of political power (10% versus 5%). In line with my previous remarks about the deeper discontent and darker tone among the most uneasy, they also show more resentment (8% versus 3%) and anger (8% versus 4%).

Among the issues that are not in the theoretical model and coded inductively, six major themes can be differentiated: politics (22%), economic crisis (24%), poverty (24%), Europe (9%), immigration (8+2%) and criminality and safety (11%). If we compare the most uneasy group and the pessimists, it is clear that the most uneasy score higher on all of the issues in Table 4.3. The most notable differences can be found in the categories poverty (27% versus 18%) and criminality and safety (19% versus 12%). Moreover, in Table B1 of Appendix B, all of the issues are mentioned more by the most uneasy, except for Wilders, the PVV and populism. These results indicate that the most uneasy seem to fit a political profile that is both socioeconomically left and culturally right.

I further investigated the mean number of codes that are applicable to the answers of the societally pessimistic and the most uneasy. These numbers cannot be seen as hard facts, because the number of codes per respondent depends on both the detailing of the coding and the overlap between codes, but it is an indication of the diversity of the answers. For Table 4.3, which uses a small number of broad codes, the mean number of codes per respondent is 1.8 for the societal pessimists and 2.5 for the most uneasy. If we look at the coding of Appendix Table B1, we see results of 2.6 and 3.4 for these groups. This means that it is safe to conclude that the most uneasy are not only more negative and more often angry and resentful but also identify more problems in Dutch society.

The observation that people mention multiple issues is in line with the assumption that societal unease and societal pessimism are broad, latent attitudes. It also indicates

that societal pessimism is related to many other attitudes. This diversity of issues can be seen as an indication that societal pessimism is a superficial attitude that points in multiple directions. However, this observation is contradicted by the firmness of the discontent and the relatedness of the way issues are discussed, as I described above.

If we review all of the codes together (both theoretical and inductive codes), eight main themes dominate the arguments about why the Netherlands is heading in the wrong direction: politics, decline of community, socioeconomic vulnerability, poverty and income inequality, the economic crisis, immigration and integration, criminality and safety and the EU and foreign affairs. These themes are highly similar to those found in other studies (conducted between 2008-2013) of arguments about why Dutch society is heading in the wrong direction (e.g. Steenvoorden, 2009; Van Houwelingen, 2011; Dekker, Den Ridder, & Van Houwelingen, 2013). Below, I discuss each of these themes in turn. Because the societal pessimists and the most uneasy do not differ with respect to the issues raised but instead with respect to the extent of negativity and the diversity of issues raised, I do not distinguish between these two groups in this part. Describing these issues separately does not indicate that people do not combine them; on the contrary, they do so all the time, and there are many linkages between these themes.

Politics is discussed in many ways. People describe politicians as incompetent, indecisive, and eager to search for one-liners that make the headlines, instead of unfolding a vision for the country. They are portrayed as happy to follow EU leaders, instead of prioritizing the country's needs. In addition, the current government and its policy decisions are criticized. A lack of sensitivity to what the general public wants and a lack of possibilities for citizens to be heard in political matters are also dominant themes that are mentioned with more indignation than the   political issues. A somewhat oppositional view comes from people who are mostly concerned about politics because of the influence of the Populist Radical Right: Wilders' performances, the PPV party and the size of its electorate, populism as a trend, and the minority government that is supported by the PVV.

Decline of community also has a prominent place in the answers. A lack of solidarity, respect for others, and norms and values are discussed. In addition, increasing egoism, self-interest, and aggression in traffic are often mentioned. Various links are made, such as to aggression that results in violence toward medical staff (which is coded as criminality), the need to be self-centered in difficult financial times, and politicians who do not set a good example. In descriptions of a decline of community, a sense of nostalgia is sometimes present, with people saying, although only implicitly, that in

previous times, people did look after each other and did show respect to one another, or to teachers or the police.

Socioeconomic vulnerability, poverty and income inequality are described in terms that are a bit more personal than the other issues. Respondents do not tell personal stories, but their answers describe problems that are more often a part of their daily lives. For instance, people point to increasing costs of living and decreasing salaries. People wonder where politicians think they can make more cuts. Respondents think that the popularity of and need for free food distribution centers [voedselbanken] and the fact that so many people live below the minimum income, is a shame to the country. It is also used as an argument against providing for Third World countries or European countries such as Greece. 'First provide for the poor in our own country', is the message. Respondents have also concerns about the accessibility of higher education (and worry that in the future, only children from well-off families will be able to attend university), about healthcare for the elderly, about how mothers can continue their careers with child-care costs rising, and about how the sick and disabled should manage with less facilities. The retrenchment of social policies is seen as a big mistake, and this trend is sometimes seen as a decline toward American standards. It is here that I found the clearest references to previous, better times, when our welfare state was a point of pride and still provided for people in need.

Next to worries about the poor or about Average Joe [Jan Modaal] or austerity measures which the employed have to provide, there is indignation about the salaries at the top, especially with respect to non-profit organizations but also with respect to the financial sector and its bonuses. This is part of a broader discontent about the elite – i.e., managers, directors and politicians – who, it is argued, do not care about employees but think only of themselves and favor the rich.

The economic crisis and austerity measures are an important theme, although the respondents write about this topic in a manner that is more descriptive and less emotional and indignant. This is a clear problem, but it is relatively new compared to the other issues and not any particular person's fault. When consequences of the crisis are mentioned, such as unemployment, austerity measures, healthcare, education, benefits, and rising costs, people more often seem frustrated, and they link these problems to the political failure to address them. For a variety of reasons, the austerity measures are often called improper. People judge them as too strong, too weak, focused on the wrong policies, too though for the poorest, too soft on the rich. Again, there seems to be an oppositional camp, so to speak, which believes that the state of the economy deserves less attention and that policies' humanity and people's well-being should be the main focus.

The EU is mentioned in relation to the introduction of the euro, the transfer of political influence and power to the EU, the transfer of money to other European countries, and how the EU (does not) fight the economic crisis. In addition, the influx of Poles, Romanians and Bulgarians and the resulting increase in unemployment and criminality are identified. As this list shows, there are also numerous links to other themes.

When respondents write about immigration and integration problems, they only refer to Eastern Europeans as a specific group. Other nationalities or ethnic minorities are not specifically mentioned. This could either mean that Eastern Europeans cause most discontent and concern or that is seems less acceptable to complain about e.g. citizens with an Moroccan or Turkish background. People often say that there are too many foreigners who do not adjust, that they feel like foreigners in their own country. Notably, the Islam and Muslims are very rarely mentioned. Some are angry that foreigners are better taken care of than they are, which relates to resentment. There is also a small, opposing group that refer to a negative, harsh climate and policies towards immigrants.

Immigration is regularly linked to criminality, it is proposed that we should take the passports of criminal immigrants and send them back to their own countries. Some point to a rise in criminality, which they believe is caused by Eastern Europeans. More generally, people think that there is too much criminality and that lack of safety is a big problem. Violence towards ambulance staff and conductors worries people. The police are too soft and their lack of resolute measures does not enforce respect. Sentences should be tougher and longer, and lawbreakers are dealt with in a manner that is far too soft. A small group is angry that in prison, people are better provided for than those who work hard for a living.

4.4   The presence of the five elements of societal unease

Below, I show how the elements of societal unease and resentment are referred to in the explanations of why the Netherlands is heading in the wrong direction.

Distrust of human capability

This first element, which relates to the limitations of innovation and policies to improve our conditions, and the latent negative side effects of technology, is virtually non-existent in the answers. Only two respondents refer to this element; the second respondent does so only very indirectly.

"The risks of technological progress are underestimated. The political agreement to place masts all over the Netherlands is shocking. The diversity of radiation is incredibly large and the intensity is growing at an alarming pace, causing serious diseases among many citizens".

"De risico's van technologische vooruitgang worden onderschat. De goedkeuring van de politiek voor het plaatsen van zendmasten door heel Nederland is verbijsterend. De kakofonie van straling is onvoorstelbaar groot en de intensiteit hiervan neemt schrikbarend toe met als gevolg, ernstige lichamelijke klachten voor veel burgers".

"No respect for superiors. Medical staff is besieged. Financial situation of the elderly is worsening and so is healthcare. Miscommunication often leads to mistakes being made. Too many institutions, bureaucracy".

"Geen respect voor meerderen. Hulpverleners worden belaagd. Financiële situatie voor ouderen, wordt moeilijker en ook de zorg. Door miscommunicatie gaat er nog al eens iets fout. Te veel instanties, bureaucratie".

Loss of ideology

The loss of ideology, which deprives us of both a sense of direction where we are heading and a perspective on a better society, is expressed more often: 3% of responses relate to this subject in one of two ways. The first approach discusses the lack of (long term) vision in politics:

"There is absolutely no vision of the future. Without investigating the causes of excess, budget cuts are made on important policies like a chicken with its head cut off. The only concern is to keep the accounts adding up. Furthermore, austerity measures will raise costs in the future. If the government had started this year by raising the pension age one month per year, they wouldn't have to cut on the pensions at all. Now, costly bureaucratic measures need to be taken to spare people on small pensions".

"Er is absoluut geen visie voor de toekomst. Zonder naar oorzaken van overschrijdingen te kijken wordt er als een kip zonder kop `bezuinigd` op juist belangrijke zaken. Als op dit moment het huishoudboekje maar klopt. Bovendien zullen de genomen bezuinigingsmaatregelen in de toekomst vaak hogere uitgaven veroorzaken. Als de regering dit jaar begonnen was met de pensioengerechtigde leeftijd ieder jaar met een maand te verhogen was het korten op pensioenen helemaal niet nodig geweest. Nu moeten er weer geldverslindende bureaucratische maatregelen genomen worden om de kleine pensioenen te ontzien".

"As I indicated, there is less solidarity and more individuality. Politics gives a bad, if not the worst example of norms and values. There is neither a clear structure nor a vision of the future. There is a great deal of fiddling around and waiting to see how things are going to evolve. Just like managers: if things are going well, they are the man; if things are going downhill, they disappear and don't care how those they leave behind are affected".

"Zoals aangeven wordt het steeds individueler, geen saamhorigheid. Politiek geeft verkeerde, zo niet slechte voorbeeld wat normen en waarden betreft. Een duidelijke structuur ontbreekt, evenals een visie voor de toekomst. We modderen maar wat aan en zien wel wat het wordt. Net als managers: gaat de lijn omhoog, dan zijn ze de bink; wanneer het slechter gaat druipen ze af zonder zich zorgen te maken over de achterblijvers".

The second way in which the loss of ideology can be traced in the responses is the tendency in politics to make ad hoc decisions and adopt policies without a thorough analysis of the implications, that is, without a well-considered plan or vision.

"The government is not strong enough: it only makes policy measures afterwards and does not seem to think ahead. Addressing abuses (financial, top executives) does not seem to happen. Research is ordered and then …? Consequences. It is scandalous what is happening with the demolition of nature for the benefit of, for example, several asphalt strips. Aggressiveness is increasing (e.g., football, is this still a game?)".

"Regering is niet sterk genoeg, neemt beleidsmaatregelen achteraf en lijkt niet vooruit te denken. Het aanpakken van misstanden (financiële, topbestuurders) lijkt niet te gebeuren. Onderzoek vindt plaats en dan? Consequenties. Schandalig wat er gebeurt met het wegvagen van natuur voor bijvoorbeeld meerdere asfaltstroken. De agressiviteit wordt steeds groter onder elkaar (voetbal bijvoorbeeld, is dit nog wel een spel?)".

"There is not a clear vision. Where do we want to be at the end of 2012?"

"Er is geen duidelijke koers. Waar willen we staan eind 2012?".

Decline of political power

The third element of societal unease is also present in the answers. The three processes that are suggested in Chapter 2 to drive the decline of political power – depoliticization,

transfer of power to the EU, and globalization of the economy – are all present, although depoliticization is referred to indirectly, by pointing to privatization and liberalization. Excessive influence by Europe or the EU is discussed most of these three, in which case the Netherlands is qualified as too dependent and/or not determined in negotiations. Sometimes, people literally mention (Dutch) 'politics', 'the cabinet', or (Prime Minister) 'Rutte', but many times, they do not.

> "We are bullied by the EU".
>> "We worden veel te veel geringeloord door de E.U."

> "Neither Dutch politicians nor Dutch citizens know which path we should take. Furthermore, often the EU decides differently. The Netherlands is too controlled by European politics. Being a small country, we do not have a say, although that is denied".
>> "Nederlandse politiek, maar ook de burgers (samenleving) weten niet wat de juiste weg is. Bovendien wordt te vaak door Europa anders beslist. Nederland wordt te veel geregeerd door de Europese politiek. En als klein land hebben we weinig te vertellen, hoewel 't tegendeel wordt beweerd".

A few people discuss the globalizing economy and the power of financial markets as a problem:

> "By considering the financial markets, we increasingly lose control, and that is not in the citizens' interest".
>> "Door de oren te laten hangen naar de financiële markten raken wij steeds meer de controle, die goed is voor de burgers in ons land, kwijt".

Privatization and liberalization are not often described, but when they are mentioned, it is in a very negative manner. We should not have gone down that road, is the message. People relate these processes to problems in public transportation, healthcare, and the energy market. They think that rising costs and high bonuses at the top of these (semi)private organizations are caused by privatization and liberalization. Sometimes they also point to a decline in quality.

> "The entitlements that employees gained over time, such as pensions and childcare, are decreasing. Privatization is said to increase competition and to lower the prices or at least keep them from rising. The opposite is happening: look at health care

and public transportation. Therefore, we need to stop privatization and place many services back under governmental supervision (the old healthcare system, public transportation, etc.)".

"De rechten die de werknemers in de loop der tijden hebben opgebouwd, worden steeds meer uitgekleed, zoals pensioen, AOW, kinderopvang. De marktwerking zou ervoor zorgen dat er meer concurrentie komt, waardoor het in ieder geval niet duurder of slechter zou worden. Het tegengestelde is hier echter het geval, zie de zorg, openbaar vervoer. Marktwerking zo veel mogelijk dus weer afschaffen en veel meer weer taken naar overheid (goede oude ziekenfonds, goed openbaar vervoer e.d.)".

"More intolerance, the government does not control utilities, which now have introduced bonuses. Too little attention is paid to climate-saving activities".

"Meer intolerantie, nutsbedrijven hebben te weinig overheidstoezicht, bonussysteem bij nutsbedrijven. Te weinig aandacht voor milieubesparende activiteiten".

Decline of community

The disappearance of common norms, values, and solidarity between people is what the fourth element of societal unease is about. Table 4.3 shows that many people (20%) refer to this element, in a wide variety of ways. As I wrote above, people seem to make an implicit comparison to previous times without specification. They imply that things used to be better, people used to respect each other and show solidarity, but that those days are now (becoming) lost. I distinguished a few ways in which the respondents mention the decline of community. One of them is to mention egoism, a lack of solidarity, ['ikke, ikke, ikke'], every man for himself, and the tendency to focus only on rights, not duties.

"Things are in decline in the Netherlands, there is too much of an attitude and boldness among the youth. People are not willing to help each other anymore, they think only about themselves. Garbage is thrown on the street, however also municipalities mess up. Look abroad, they do succeed in keeping things clean, aside from the Dutch, who are embarrassing. Parks are kept neat, and cleanliness prevents people from making a mess. Maybe there are more actions taken to stop people from littering. Unlike the Dutch, drivers stop at pedestrian crossings in Germany and Austria, they make an emergency stop if needed. It is all about mentality".

"Nederland glijdt af; houding en mondigheid jeugd (en oudere)is te ver doorgeschoten, men is bijna niet meer bereid elkaar te helpen, het is een ikke-ikke en de rest kan..., afval wordt maar op straat gegooid, maar ook de gemeenten maken er een potje van, kijk maar eens in het buitenland daar lukt het wel om het netjes te houden,

afgezien van die NL-ders waar je je voor schamen moet. Ook de groenvoorzieningen zijn keurig onderhouden en waar het netjes is, nodigt het ook uit om het netjes te laten blijven en misschien wordt er daar iets meer opgetreden tegen vervuiling op straat. Stoppen voor een zebrapad, denk dat in NL maar niet, in Duitsland en Oostenrijk maken ze bijna een noodstop voor je. Zou er daar regelmatig bekeurd worden of zo? Ach de mentaliteit hè".

"I think the mentality in the country is becoming more of an 'I' mentality. This is bad for the country. We should be willing to help each other and to pay more attention to each other".

"Ik heb het idee dat de mentaliteit in het land steeds meer de `ik` mentaliteit wordt. Dit is slecht voor Nederland. Iets meer voor elkaar over hebben en rekening met elkaar houden zou veel beter zijn".

A second theme of decline of community is a lack of respect, norms and values. Although this generally is not further clarified, when people do clarify it, they say that the problem is especially bad among youth, or on the streets and in traffic. People always identify unfamiliar people as disrespectful: they do not say this about friends or acquaintances. This issue is also mentioned in relation to authorities that are not respected.

"Nobody trusts one another anymore. Trust is the most important thing in an economy. Nobody addresses people anymore about their behavior. There is no respect for caretakers. Very sad!".

"Niemand vertrouwt elkaar meer. Vertrouwen is het belangrijkste wat je nodig hebt in een economie. Niemand kan elkaar meer aanspreken op gedrag. Er is geen respect meer voor hulpverleners. Heel triest allemaal!!!".

"People treat each other less respectfully. Many people are short-tempered and immediately being to fight. There is a great deal to be done by politicians, who keep saying that they will respond in a manner that is severe. However, nothing happens because judges are too soft in the Netherlands. Spare the rod and spoil the child".

"Mensen worden al respectlozer tegen elkaar. Velen hebben een kort lontje en slaan er gelijk op los. Heel wat te doen voor de politiek, die steeds schreeuwen we pakken het harder aan. Maar er gebeurt niets omdat de rechters in Nederland veel te mild zijn. Zachte heelmeesters maken stinkende wonden".

Some answers are very short and need some more interpretation. For example, terms such as intolerance, 'verruwing' and 'verhuftering', which can be translated as a (total) lack of common decency, are used very generally. Some respondents think the Dutch are intolerant, whereas others use these terms in relation to politicians who set the wrong example.

> "I witness a lack of decency and a retrenchment of the welfare state".
>> "Ik zie verhuftering plaatsvinden en afbrokkeling van de verzorgingsstaat".

> "Ongoing polarization and lack of decency."
>> "Verdergaande polarisatie en gebrek aan tolerantie".

> "The lack of decency is growing and they cannot address it properly. In economic terms, they take the wrong austerity measures by introducing high taxes and austerity measures that primarily hit the "Average Joe'".
>> "In Nederland slaat de verhuftering toe en men kan dit niet op de juiste manier aanpakken. Economisch probeert men op een verkeerde manier geld te bezuinigen vooral door hoge belastingen en bezuinigingen voor de 'gewone' man".

Terms that need still more interpretation are hardening and individualization. Sometimes these are clarified, when people discuss them in terms of either loss of norms and values or respect, in which case I coded them as decline of community. In other instances, however, they are linked to retrenchment of social policies, in which case they point to increasing socioeconomic vulnerability, the fifth element of societal unease.

> "Too much negative attention to immigration policies, too little attention to safety. Individualism and a larger divide between rich and poor".
>> "Te veel (negatieve) aandacht voor asiel- en integratiebeleid, te weinig aandacht voor veiligheid, te veel individualisme en een grotere tweedeling in de samenleving tussen arm en rijk".

> "Society is becoming tougher, austerity measures are taken in the wrong places, there is weak political leadership (not only in the national government but also at the regional and municipal levels)".
>> "De samenleving wordt harder, bezuinigingen op verkeerde gebieden, matige politieke leiding (niet alleen op regeringsniveau maar ook op landelijk, provincie en stedelijk niveau)".

Finally, aggression is often mentioned with other aspects of decline of community, such as lack of respect or common decency. Regularly, aggression is also described with respect to more violent incidents, such as those involving football hooligans and violence towards medical staff. There seems to be a sliding scale from a lack of decency toward/aggression, hostility and then violence. It is not always easy to determine whether the respondents mean a decline of community or increasing violence, which can also be seen as criminality and is also coded as such.

"The Netherlands is too densely populated, which causes aggression: people drive each other crazy and get short-tempered. The large number of ethnicities in the Netherlands does not make it easier to trust each other and get along. The Netherlands is in a recession, we are going downhill; too many entitlements have been taken away, and many people are short on money, which affects their mental condition and mood".

"Nederland is overbevolkt, wat agressie veroorzaakt; de mensen worden gek van elkaar en daardoor worden de `lontjes korter`; het enorme aantal verschillende nationaliteiten in Nederland helpt niet om het nog leuk en vertrouwd te hebben met elkaar; Nederland zit in een recessie, we glijden steeds harder naar beneden; er worden teveel vangnetten afgebroken; te veel mensen kunnen maar nauwelijks de eindjes aan elkaar knopen, wat hun geestelijke gezondheid en hun humeur niet ten goede komt".

"Budget cuts are made in the wrong places, such as health care and education. Additionally, I hear more and more about people losing their jobs: young, highly educated people like myself. Aggression and violence seem to increase and that scares me. And people are becoming less tolerant towards each other".

"Er lijkt bezuinigd te worden op de verkeerde dingen, zoals zorg en onderwijs. Ook hoor ik steeds meer mensen die werkloos worden, jonge hoog opgeleide mensen, zelf ben ik hier ook één van. Agressie en geweld lijken toe te nemen en daar schrik ik wel eens van. En mensen worden minder tolerant naar elkaar toe".

Increasing socioeconomic vulnerability

The fifth element of societal unease is also often mentioned in arguments about why the Netherlands is heading in the wrong direction (16%). Again, we see a large variety of ways in which people discuss this. Furthermore, there seems to be a notion that things were once a lot better, although when that was is never specified. However, 'we' used to have a very good welfare system, one to be proud of, which is now deteriorating. Often,

respondents complain about the retrenchment of social policies, which they believe are heading toward American (that is, low) standards: you have to take care of yourself.

"Everything is getting more expensive, there is more retrenchment on social welfare, everything is becoming less for more".

"Steeds duurder en steeds meer verslechtering van sociale zekerheid, alles en dan ook alles wordt heel langzaam minder en duurder".

"We used to be proud of our healthcare system in the Netherlands, but that is no longer the case, it has changed into an almost American system: no money, no care. This is just one of the things we were proud of. I am not even talking about the euro, which is forced on us without a referendum. Look at Switzerland: they did not do the wrong thing by not adopting the euro, but politicians and big companies are the ones calling the shots in the Netherlands. They make a profit, they need to double the profit the next year, and where do we make budget cuts?????".

"In Nederland waren we trots op ons ziektekosten beleid en daar is weinig van over het is bijna het Amerikaanse systeem geworden, geen geld geen zorg, kortom dit is maar een van de dingen waar we trots op waren, en dan heb ik het nog niet eens over de Euro die ons door de strot is gedrukt zonder referendum, kijk ik naar Zwitserland zou ik toch zeggen dat zij er niet verkeerd aan hebben gedaan om niet mee te doen, maar ja politiek en grote bedrijven hebben het voor het zeggen hier in Nederland, als er het ene jaar winst wordt gemaakt dan moet het volgende jaar dubbel winst worden gemaakt en dan korten we op?????".

A different way of articulating increasing socioeconomic vulnerability relates to decreasing support or consideration for weaker groups, i.e., the sick and disabled.

"Less social policies, less attention to the environment, less consideration for the weak in society".

"Minder voorzieningen, minder oog voor de natuur, minder oog voor de zwakken in de samenleving".

"It is clearly going in the wrong direction because money and the economy are leading. Everything is expressed in money, whereas the human aspects are neglected, such as people with a different philosophy of life (anthroposophy, homeopathy, religion); in addition, poor, ill, vulnerable, and old people are cast aside and stigmatized. Only the smooth, highly educated and well-paid people who are able to keep up with new technologies matter. Policies are based on that group of people. Others have to take

care of themselves with small incomes. The environment, sustainable growth and a more peaceful way of life are not considered. More attention to those things and more means-tested contributions would be a good start".

"Het gaat duidelijk de verkeerde kant op, omdat er te veel gereageerd en geregeerd wordt vanuit het geld en de economie. Alles wordt uitgedrukt in geld. Er is te weinig ruimte voor de mens met al haar aspecten; andere levensbeschouwingen (antroposofie, homeopathie, geloofsovertuigingen), arme, zieke, kwetsbare, beperkte oude mensen worden aan de kant gezet en gestigmatiseerd. Alleen de snelle, hoogopgeleide en goedverdienende en in de snelheid en ICT meekomende mensen tellen nog echt mee. Daar wordt beleid voor gemaakt; de rest moet maar zien dat hij het redt, met zijn geringe inkomen. Natuur en milieu, duurzaamheid en een rustiger, behapbaar tempo van leven krijgen nauwelijks aandacht. Meer aandacht daarvoor en veel bijdragen naar draagkracht zou al een goede stap in de goede richting zijn".

In addition, more concrete measures are mentioned, such as the rising cost of healthcare, specifically care and transport facilities for the disabled, mental care, special education, and dental care; student allowances [studiefinanciering]; social workplaces [sociale werkplaatsen]; and the new policy of a personal healthcare budget [PGB].

"The poor are becoming poorer while the rich are getting richer, which means that the gap is becoming too big, and unnoticed poverty is also widespread. There are many things unclear in the tax system. Childcare and education benefits are cut, which means that the children of the average Joe will no longer be able to get an education and people who depend on 2 salaries cannot afford to have children anymore because childcare is too expensive".

"De armen worden steeds armer en de rijken rijker waardoor de kloof te groot word en de stille armoede is ook erg groot. Er is ook veel onduidelijkheid in het belastingsysteem. Kinderopvang en studiefinanciering zijn er straks niet meer waardoor de kinderen van de gewone burger straks niet meer kan studeren en mensen die afhankelijk zijn van 2 inkomens kunnen straks niet meer eens kinderen krijgen daar de kinderopvang te duur wordt".

"Too many budget cuts to education, childcare and healthcare. It is not right that you can only rent when you earn less than 34.000 euros per year".

"Er wordt teveel bezuinigd op onderwijs, kinderopvang en PGB's. Het is niet goed dat je pas kan huren wanneer je minder dan 34.000 euro per jaar verdient".

Resentment

In Chapter 2, I described resentment as a mixture of the perception that you are not getting what you deserve and the perception that you unjustly have less than others. As follows form Table 4.3, resentment is not often expressed (3%), which is not surprising as the question is on the societal situation, whereas resentment is more personal. That said, an exploration of how resentment is articulated in the answers about the country taking the wrong turn can provide insight in that attitude. In the answers that I coded as resentment, people express feelings that they are not recognized in a political or an economic sense. Expressions of resentment can be summarized as me and my needs are not considered, whereas those of others are, politicians do not listen to me, do not serve my interest, whereas they do so for others. These "others" are most often immigrants or foreigners but can also include the elite (the managers, directors and politicians), criminals or people on benefits, who are said to receive better treatment then the respondents themselves. I differentiate resentment from the general notion that politicians are not listening to the people (coded as part of politics, see Appendix Table B1) because here people compare themselves to another group that unjustly does receive political attention. Nevertheless, both could be seen as expressions of a low external political efficacy.

Coding resentment is not at all straightforward, because I do not want to code all accusations of other groups having privileges as such. For instance, directors' salaries and bonuses are often mentioned but can easily be seen as social problems or policy stances, just as money spent on Third World countries. I only coded resentment in instances in which people either made a direct comparison between other groups and their own group (or themselves) or argue about getting what should be theirs, for example, complaining that the rich, immigrants, criminals, and people on benefits [uitkeringstrekkers] receive advantages, while 'we' get less.

"I think they do not consider the consequences of decisions. Things are forced. Abuse of power?? And I am afraid that will happen more often. Additionally, I feel that the government's attention to minorities is growing while they forget the Dutch—who have always worked hard and paid taxes and therefore paid the salaries of the politicians and the like—with all of the current austerity measures".

"Er wordt volgens mij niet nagedacht over de consequenties van besluiten. Er wordt van alles doorgedramd. Machtsmisbruik?? En ik ben bang dat dat steeds vaker zal gaan gebeuren. Verder heb ik het gevoel dat de regering zich steeds drukker maakt om de minderheidsgroeperingen maar dat de Nederlanders die altijd hard hebben gewerkt en de belastingen hebben betaald, het eigenlijke salaris van onze politici en dergelijke figuren, vergeten worden, zie nu alle bezuinigingen".

"The subsidy for gymnastics at elementary schools is cut, 24-hour workdays or being available is required, there is no time to relax, as a criminal you have more rights than the victim, if the cabinet stops or dissolves they get benefits and we don't get anything, there are taxes on taxes, as a foreigner you are entitled to everything— houses, money, double passports, double holidays. Money is going to good causes, why does it only go to 5% to the people. There is the 95% food from our own soil, that should be sold here. More attention should be paid to the environment. The 'I' culture should stop".

"Gekort op subsidie gym basisschool gekort op subsidie zwemmen basisschool 24 uur per dag werken of beschikbaar zijn, als boef heb je meer rechten als het slachtoffer als het kabinet stopt of uit elkaar valt krijgen ze wachtgeld, wij krijgen niets belasting op waterschap ed moet daar ook voor worden gebruikt als buitenlander heb je meer recht op alles, huis, geld, dubbel paspoort, dubbele feestdagen geld goede doelen, waarom 5% maar bij de mensen, waar blijft die 95% voedsel van eigen bodem hier verkopen meer groen, meer aan milieu doen de 1K cultuur moet weg".

"A badly functioning cabinet does not increase hope for the future. As an ordinary, middle-aged, hardworking citizen you receive few benefits. The rich people are getting more benefits. It is frustrating to see that people around you can afford anything while we have to work hard for it. Fortunately, we are very happy with what we got and how we live! More people should feel that way!".

"Een slecht kabinet geeft weinig vertrouwen voor de toekomst. Als gewone, middelbare, hartwerkende burger zijn er weinig voordelen. Voor de rijke mensen zien we steeds meer voordelen... Het is heel frustrerend hoe mensen op je heen alles maar kunnen terwijl wij er zo hard voor moeten werken! Gelukkig zijn wij heel gelukkig met wat we hebben en hoe we leven! Zouden meer mensen dat maar is doen!".

4.5   Arguments of the optimists: why is the country heading in the right direction?

So far, I have focused my attention on societal pessimists' arguments. However, there are also people who disagree with that negative perception and believe that the Netherlands is moving in the right direction. In this section, I explore how they argue this standpoint and explore whether they use outright inverse or simply different arguments compared to the societal pessimists.

Table 4.1 has indicated that societal optimists give shorter answers. Table 4.4 shows what their answers address. Almost one-quarter believe that the measures taken by the cabinet are both promising and correct.

"Politicians are working hard to have everything go well. Many different issues are discussed, which is a good thing for different opinions in society. However, now and then I think politics is losing its focus. Things can and should be better. However, we are on the right track".

"De politiek werkt er hard aan om alles in goede banen te laten verlopen. Veel verschillende soorten vraagstukken komen aan bod, wat goed is voor de verdeling van meningen in de samenleving. Maar af en toe denk ik dat de politiek zijn focus verliest. Het kan beter en het moet beter. Maar we zijn goed op weg."

"Many things are taken care of that are tough but that will benefit the country in the long run".

"Er worden op dit moment zaken geregeld die nu moeilijk zijn, maar het land op termijn gezonder maken."

Table 4.4   Issues raised by the societal optimists[ab]

	%
proper measures are taken	23
the crisis is almost over	7
a step back in terms of welfare is good for us	6
we are not doing so badly	10
we are doing better than in other countries	9
we have a good welfare state	1
we should be positive	8
that is how I feel about it	2
other	36
things that are not going well	24

a These are not mutually exclusive codes because some societal optimists refer to more than one issue.
b N= 136

Some societal optimists appear to consider only the economic crisis and conclude that the crisis is in retreat (7%); alternatively, they believe that the economic crisis is a good thing because it either increases the focus on things other than money or brings people closer (6%). Some think that we are not doing so badly (10%) but do not clarify whether they mean compared to previous times or other countries. The latter comparison is sometimes explicitly made (9%), whereas 1% are optimistic about society because of the Dutch welfare state. Following are some examples:

"Many austerity measures are taken. This is hard on everybody but if we don't do anything, things will become worse. So I think that these are difficult times but that it will be worth it in the long run."

> "Er gaat veel bezuinigd worden. Dit is niet goed voor portemonnee maar als we niet bezuinigen wordt het alleen maar slechter. Dus ik denk dat we nu eerst door een moeilijke tijd gaan maar dat dit zich uiteindelijk terug betaalt."

> "All things considered, I don't think we have reason to complain".
>> "Al met al vind ik dat we niet echt reden hebben om te klagen".

> "We are taking a step backwards, but that does not mean that we are doing badly. We still have a high standard of living compared to the rest of the world and social policies for the poor".
>> "We doen met z'n allen een stap terug echter dat betekent niet dat het per definitie slecht met ons gaat. We hebben nog altijd een gemiddelde levensstandaard in de wereld die heel erg hoog is, voor minima een goed sociaal vangnet."

Some societal optimists refer to their state of mind and believe that we should remain positive (8%). Some cannot explain their positive standpoint rationally and say that their views are based on their feelings (2%), but we also find this among the pessimists, 2% of whom make this argument (see Table B1 of Appendix B). Thirty-six percent are coded as other, which includes a very diverse range of argumentation, of which I provide some examples:

> "I have trust in the youth, both native and allochthone".
>> "Vertrouwen in de jeugd, zowel autochtoon als allochtoon."

> "I believe in the goodness of people. The cabinet will not deliberately worsen the situation".
>> "Ik geloof toch in het goede van de mens. Het kabinet zal het ons niet willens en wetens slechter doen hebben."

> "It is going in the right direction but often with errors!".
>> "Het gaat wel naar de goede richting maar vaak met veel dwalingen!"

Finally, a substantial portion of the societal optimists (24%) refers to negative developments instead of positive ones. Apparently, these people cannot think of positive things, or change their minds when thinking things through. This tendency has also been noticed in previous studies (e.g. Dekker, Den Ridder, & De Goede, 2010). Therefore, we cannot really see these people as societal optimists.

If we consider all of the categories in Table 4.4, only one-third of all societal optimists point to trends opposite to those noted by the societal pessimists, namely,

governmental measures, the economic crisis, or the welfare state. Other arguments do not necessarily contradict those of the societal pessimists but instead focus on different things. This indicates that most of the societal optimists do not disagree with societal pessimists; rather, they focus on aspects different from those focused on by societal pessimists when answering the question about where their country is heading.

4.6   Conclusion and discussion

This chapter explored qualitative data on the negative view about Dutch society, with the aim to further the insight into the nature of societal pessimism and societal unease. To this end, I investigated expressions of societal pessimism, namely, through an open-ended survey question about why people think the Netherlands is heading in the wrong direction (which is an indicator of societal pessimism). I coded which issues people raise and reflected on how they do so, the extent to which there are differences between societal pessimists and a subgroup of them who is most uneasy (those who score very high on the scale of societal unease from the last chapter), how and the extent to which the elements of societal unease are expressed, and the arguments of societal optimists.

In my definition of societal unease set forth Chapter 2, I made several propositions about the nature of this concept (and that of societal pessimism, which is the same in nature but universally applicable). Comparing the definition in section 2.3 to the outcomes of this chapter tells us whether the assumptions about the nature of the negative sentiment about society have support. Three aspects of that definition are relevant here to review. First, I proposed societal unease to be about *societal* issues, that is, sociotropic concerns. The results of this chapter underline this, because the respondents do not relate to their personal problems but instead describe the societal context. Notwithstanding the fact that personal experiences probably influence the perception of the societal context, societal pessimism is indeed a concern about society. Second, unease is defined as a *latent* concern, and the term *unease* points to a sentiment that is vague and lacks a clear object. The results supports these propositions as well. The fact that respondents mention various issues and often describe these issues as interlinked, indicates a broad, vague attitude about society overall. The differences in the saliency of the five elements of societal unease shows they are not all top-of-mind issues. The fact that they share a commonality, as theorized and empirically supported in previous chapters, is not a connection made by respondents themselves; instead, it is an unconscious, latent association. Third, I also chose the word *unease* in the definition to indicate a low-intensity attitude. Unlike anxiety and fear, unease does not point to a high level of distress. The results in this chapter show some ambiguity about this assumption. On the one hand, the large group of societal pessimists uses a firmly negative but not deeply worried argumentation, which fits this assumption.

On the other hand, the subgroup of societal pessimists who are the most uneasy are often angry and indignant and therefore, they do seem more emotional than the term unease would suggest. These emotions are in line with the idea of Rahn et al. (1996) about citizens' emotions about their political community, i.e., public mood. However, because this is the most extreme group, these people are likely to show higher levels of concern, and their argumentation on the state of society is also more emotional because they are more often resentful. Therefore, the use of the word unease does seem to fit the negative view of society that is the focus of this book.

Among the societal pessimists, the subgroup of the most societally uneasy stands out in several ways. First, these people's tone is very distinct; they show a deeper concern, their answers shows more negativity. This also follows from the higher number of answers that reflect angriness and resentment in this group. They also perceive more problems, and more often mention criminality and safety, along with poverty and income inequality. This latter result suggests that the most societally uneasy are especially concerned with socioeconomically leftwing and culturally rightwing issues, just like I found in the previous chapter. This is a group that is not well-represented politically (Van der Brug & Van Spanje, 2009). I further investigate this issue in Chapter 6, in which I examine the influence of societal pessimism on Populist Radical Right voting.

When explaining why the country is heading in the right direction, only one-third of the societal optimists use arguments that oppose those of the societal pessimists. The others argue their stance using different arguments, e.g., either that the situation in the Netherlands is still acceptable or that it is better than elsewhere. One-quarter discuss what is not going well. This pattern is not mirrored among the societal pessimists; they do not point to positive developments.

A next step in this line of research is to analyze the relationship between the view of society and the view of the media. Several authors argue that societal pessimism is caused by the media (McKenzie, 1997; Whitman, 1998). Examining the resemblance of how issues are discussed in the media and by citizens in a longitudinal study might offer insight into whether the media pick up certain issues and their framing or instead cause issues to be more salient and determine how such issues are discussed.

This chapter is the last one on the conceptualization of the concern about the state of society. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 have offered some clarification on the nature of this concern by discussing how we can define, operationalize and measure it, along with how it is expressed by citizens. The next step is to understand its roots. Why are we concerned about society? It is to that question I turn next.