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# A General Discontent Disentangled: A Conceptual and Empirical Framework for Societal Unease

**Eefje H. Steenvoorden**

**Abstract**  Surveys show discontent with society to be prevalent among the general public across western societies. However, this undercurrent, here called societal unease, has received little scientific attention. This article has four aims. First, it proposes a conceptual model of societal unease by integrating a broad range of interdisciplinary literature. Second, it tests this conceptual model empirically with survey data from the Netherlands. Confirmatory factor analyses confirm a latent dimension of societal unease behind attitudes about five aspects of society. Third, it shows societal unease to be highly related to societal pessimism, moderately to anomia and weakly to happiness. Finally, it explores the association of societal unease with various demographic, attitudinal and behavior characteristics.

**Keywords**  Societal unease · Anomia · Happiness · Political power · Social cohesion · Welfare state · Risk society

## 1 Introduction

There seems to be a consensus in many western countries that things are changing for the worse. The West is called 'the continent of fear' (Moïsi 2009) or 'pessimism' (Mahbubani 2008) and survey results show a pessimism about society among the majority of citizens in many European countries (European Commission 2012), as well as in the US (Gallup 2012). Furthermore, this discontent with society is characterized in the public debate in Western Europe with local terms to describe the same phenomenon, like 'malaise' in France and the UK, 'Unbehagen' in Germany and 'maatschappelijk onbehagen' in the Netherlands and Belgium. In this article, discontent with society is called societal unease.

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As societal unease is likely to have implications on various attitudes and behavior, for instance apathy, political engagement, and civic participation, it is important to examine how it should be measured and how it relates to established concepts.

Yet, what constitutes this societal unease remains unclear, both theoretically and empirically. Its very existence, nature and spread are shrouded in mystery. Several authors have signalized a discrepancy between personal happiness and discontent or pessimism about society and argue that this public pessimism deserves more attention (Eckersley 2000, 2013; Kroll and Delhey 2013). While entire bookshelves have been written on societal changes in previous decades, most accounts study very specific attitudes and do not make claims about the general outlook on society. Some studies do offer a comprehensive, overarching perspective on troubling developments in society, such as *The Risk Society* (Beck 1992), *The Malaise of Modernity* (Taylor 1991), *Liquid Modernity* (Bauman 2000), and *Culture of Fear* (Furedi 2002 [1997]). These influential contributions are insightful diagnoses which point to processes that might inspire societal unease. Yet, they do not discuss how those processes affect individual attitudes about society. Without a conceptual and empirical framework of the nature of societal unease, it is impossible to measure it, let alone investigate its pervasiveness, causes and consequences.

Thus the questions remain what societal unease is and how it should be measured. I propose that societal unease is a multifaceted latent attitude which is constituted by concerns about unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society.

The objectives of this article are fourfold. First, it proposes a new definition and conceptual model of societal unease. The proposed five elements of the conceptual model are described in detail. Second, it examines whether this conceptualization holds empirically with CFA analyses. Third, it investigates the relationship between societal unease and societal pessimism, anomia and happiness. Fourth, it explores which demographic, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics relate to societal unease.

## 2 Conceptualization of Societal Unease

### 2.1 Definition of Societal Unease

Before describing societal unease substantially, is useful to clarify the nature of the concept in general terms. I propose to define societal unease as:

> A latent concern among citizens in contemporary western countries about the precarious state of society, which is constituted by perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society: Distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community and socioeconomic vulnerability.

This definition shows that societal unease is seen here 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 in the definition are discussed at length in Sect. 3.

First, I choose the term *unease* to capture the vagueness and lack of direction of the emotions it points to, as well as a low intensity of those emotions (Scherer 2005). Unlike fear, unease does not reflect distress. Uneasy people are expected to be concerned but not deeply troubled by the state of society. The term unease also suits the lack of a clear object,

**Table 1** Object and subject and subject of concerns (example between brackets)

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

as there is not a particular social problem or process that evokes unease, but rather a range of issues.

Second, societal unease is constituted by *concerns*. This implies that the accuracy of those concerns is beyond the scope of the conceptualization of societal unease. In line with the famous Thomas Theorem "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences", societal unease is constituted by perceptions, and their accuracy is not taken into account here.

The addition *among citizens* indicates that only societal unease among individuals is meant here, not possible signs of societal unease in for instance the political or public debate. This is summarized in Table 1, which sets out the possible objects and subjects of concerns: what are the concerns about (problems of individuals or problems of society) and who is experiencing these problems (individuals or society). Theoretically, societal unease can be found in both cell B and D of Table 1. Cell B reflects concerns experienced by individuals (subject) about their society (object), whereas cell D represents debates in the media and politics about societal issues. Although political and media debates are likely to be both related and of influence to individual citizens, those processes are beyond the scope of this study. Here only cell B is considered. This distinguishes this study from literature which focuses on analyzing the object only, the problems in and of society, (Taylor 1991; Bauman 2000) and not the subject, the perception thereof.

Fourth, societal unease is restricted to individual concerns about *aspects of society*, and does not reflect personal problems. This is what distinguishes cell B from cell A in Table 1. This distinction is also made by Mills (1971 [1959]), who differentiates between "the personal troubles of milieu", where milieu points to the personal sphere, and "public issues of social structure", which are problems of individuals resulting from macro developments in society. Individuals can experience all kinds of problems, but when these stem from the social structure, they should be seen as a public issue. For example, unemployment and divorce are individual matters, but major levels of unemployment or high divorce rates are public issues. What does this mean for societal unease? Public issues are seen as aspects of society and thus eligible to consider whether they constitute societal unease, whereas personal issues are not.

However, the term public issues here deviates from Mills' work in two fundamental ways. First, public issues can only be part of societal unease to the extent they point to general developments in society. For instance, unemployment is a public issue, but worries about one's own (possible) unemployment is not, as the focus is oneself, not society at large. This is different from Mills conceptualization, as he pushes for the contrary, namely for individuals to recognize the social structure as a cause of their personal situation (which capability he calls 'sociological imagination'). Naturally, being unemployment makes you probably more likely to be worried about unemployment in society, but the point to be made here is that concerns about the latter are to be conceptually differentiated from the former. Second, the category of public issues is broader defined here than in Mills' work, because it
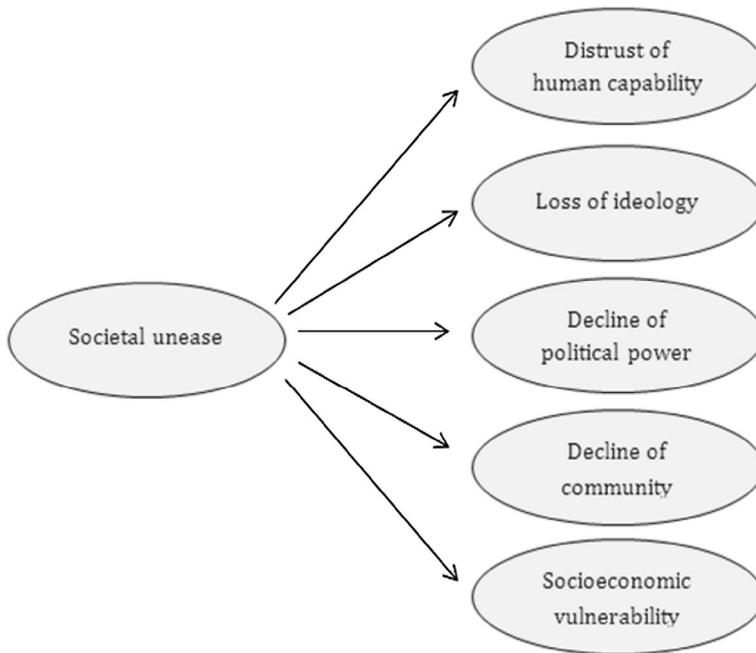
**Fig. 1** Conceptual model of societal unease

also includes problematic developments in society which 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 level of society are qualified to constitute societal unease.

The restriction to *aspects of society* also means that societal unease is an attitude and not an individual (psychological) state. This demarcation implies that personal experiences such as anomia, (which I elaborate on in paragraph 2.4) and individual problems which are seen by some authors as the outcome or consequence of social developments typical for our era, such as depression, burn-out or ADHD are not defined as part of societal unease. This distinguishes societal unease from other studies, where individual psychological problems are investigated as manifestations of something similar to societal unease (Wilkinson 2001; Ehrenberg 2010). Concerns about their presence could theoretically be part of societal unease, but not the presence of these conditions as such.

Finally, besides the demarcation to public issues, societal unease is about the *unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects* of society. That means societal unease is not a catch-all term relating to all public issues, but instead to five fundamental public issues, which seem unmanageable, and contribute to a collective powerlessness or lack of direction. I turn to the rationale for the selection of these five processes in the next paragraph.

2.2 Conceptual Model of Societal Unease

The definition of societal unease speaks of an unmanageable deterioration of five aspects of society, and the conceptual model which follows from this is shown in Fig. 1. Section 3

describes these elements at length. The selection of these five aspects of society results from a literature study which aimed at distilling the common themes in contributions about general, broad and contemporary social processes.[1] The only condition for literature to be included was a negative outlook on developments in society at the center of the argument, as societal unease points to deterioration. The common themes or worries that could be distilled from the resulting selection of literature are the five elements that I conceptualize in Sect. 3 and propose to constitute societal unease.

One may wonder why certain problems in society are not part of this model. Besides the sense of unmanageability and collective powerlessness, the elements of societal unease all relate to *fundamental* aspects of society, instead of isolated problems. They can be characterized by an undirected concern, instead of a concrete discontent. Dissatisfaction with politicians, irritations about immigrants, not feeling safe in certain areas of your neighborhood, all are examples of more directed discontent. Societal unease is seen here as a more vague but also more fundamental. Various concrete attitudes and types of behavior may follow from societal unease. It is suggested that xenophobia, feelings of a lack of safety and distrust in politics are projections of our deeper anxiety (Bauman 2006). However, before examining its consequences, I focus here on the conceptualization and measurement of societal unease.

A second question to be answered concerns the scope of societal unease in time and space. As the definition shows, societal unease reflects concerns in and about contemporary western society, because it aims to conceptualize current discontent with society. That is not to say that people in other eras and/or continents cannot be concerned about their society. However, being pessimistic about your society is assumed here to be something conceptually different from societal unease.

## 2.3 Definition of Societal Pessimism

The definition of societal unease specifies that people are concerned about the state of society because of five aspects of their society. However, it is possible that people are concerned about their society for different reasons. This is more likely when we would investigate the attitude towards society of people in developing countries or in previous periods in history. Therefore, it is of importance to compare societal unease with a more general and unspecified societal pessimism. Societal pessimism as I propose it here does not refer to specific aspects of society, but merely the gut feeling that society is in decline. It is different from general pessimism which points to an inclination to expect worse things in general and expect not to succeed in what one tries to accomplish (Beck et al. 1974; Carver et al. 2010; Forgeard and Seligman 2012). The definition of societal pessimism reads:

A sentiment among citizens that their society is in decline.

Conceptually societal unease is different from societal pessimism, as the latter is an undirected and therefore broader and timeless expectation about the future of society, compared to the former, which is constituted by concerns about five specific aspects of current society. Moreover, societal pessimism is a rather *affective evaluation* about society,

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[1] This literature study has seen several stages. I started by summarizing the arguments in the literature in short statements. I then classified these claims into coherent categories, called elements of societal unease. The final model resulted from several rounds of reviewing these categories, and incorporating additional literature.

whereas unease is the commonality between *cognitive evaluations* of specific aspects of society.

Just like societal unease, societal pessimism is not a well-developed concept. Only a few studies talk about this kind of pessimism, which use similar definitions. 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). Mills uses the term uneasiness (1971 [1959]) to refer to "the beat feeling that all is somehow not right" (ibid: 11), meaning there is an awareness of a threat but not a notion about what is being threatened. Mills does not clarify whether 'all' that is not right relates to your own life or society at large. Elchardus and Smits use a lack of well-being about being part of society (2007). This is similar to social actualization, which is one of the five dimensions of social well-being as proposed by Keyes (1998; Keyes and Shapiro 2004) and studied by others (Gallagher et al. 2009; Huppert et al. 2009). Social well-being reflects "the appraisal of one's circumstance and functioning in society" (Keyes 1998: 122).[2] 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.

## 2.4 Societal Unease Versus Anomie and Anomia

A large literature focuses on two concepts that are similar to societal unease, namely anomie and anomia (anomie among individuals), which are also related to negative societal changes. It can therefore be expected that societal unease is related to these concepts. However, societal unease is conceptually different from both anomie and anomia. The differences are shortly discussed here, although this does imply making general statements about a comprehensive literature. Anomie refers to the social structure of society, with two classic authors describing it in somewhat different ways. Durkheim points to a lack of regulation in society due to rapid social change, 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, the legitimate means to those goals are not attainable for all, which causes deviant, illegitimate behavior to reach the cultural defined goals. As the social structure is difficult to measure, anomie is often operationalized by the hypothesized outcomes, such as suicide or homicide rates (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997; Savolainen 2000; Pridemore and Kim 2006). Anomie it is different from societal unease as it a characteristic of society and not an evaluation of society by its citizens.

Anomia describes the mental state of individuals in an anomic society, but the precise conception of this mental state differs in the literature. DeGrazia argues 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), while 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, of which three

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[2] Its dimensions reflect evaluations of one's relationship, contribution and understanding of society (social integration, social contribution, social coherence) and on the other hand the perceptions of human nature and progress of society (social acceptance and social actualization).

"tend to manifest in aberrant or criminal behavior" (Smith and Bohm 2008: 3).[3] A current day definition of anomia combining the Durkheimian and Mertonian concepts is "a loss of cognitive orientation and confidence to act" (Legge et al. 2008: 252). In line with the variation in meaning, anomia's operationalization is also diverse. Most of the time, some kind of uncertainty, confusion or anxiety is measured, such as uncertainty about oneself, confusion about which kind of behavior is to be judged as illegal, or an inability to understand the world.[4] Some operationalizations of anomia are more similar to societal unease than others, such as when they take shape in attitudes towards the lack of consensus on right and wrong in society or complexity of the world. Despite these variations, anomia conceptually always relates to the mental state of the individual. This distinguishes anomia from societal unease, which instead reflects the perception people have of the state of society.

## 3 Elements of Societal Unease[5]

### 3.1 Distrust of Human Capability

The first element of societal unease points to concerns about the limitations of policies and technological innovations to make improvements. 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. In the following, two perspectives related to this notion of limited human capability are sketched.

The first perspective argues that the idea of progress, present since the Enlightenment, is eroding. The belief that characterizes the 1950s and 1960s, "we could completely control our economic, social and political surroundings" (Samuelson 1995: XVI), has faded away. We have become disillusioned as the problems we face today were expected 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 keep threatening us (Bauman 2006). This awareness is accompanied by a negative attitude towards 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 shows in 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

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[3] The other two reactions are to still adhere to the culturally prescribed means, with or without adhering to the goals.

[4] Srole's scale of anomia has been very influential (Srole 1956), and inspired many similar scales [see Seeman's overview (1991)]. These scales tend to be very broad, measuring, psychological wellbeing and are a mix of questions about locus of control, general unhappiness and efficacy. Most contemporary research on anomia can be divided in measuring either inclination to question rule of law and showing illegal or criminal behavior (Burkatzki 2008; Zhao and Cao 2010) or a general uncertainty, confusion or lack of comprehensibility (Thorlindsson and Bernburg 2004; Legge et al. 2008; Bjarnason 2009).

[5] In this section, the theoretical contributions which point to the five elements of societal unease are described. In many instances, a critique of that literature could have been included, questioning the arguments with or without empirical underpinning. Yet, these nuances are beyond the scope of this article as we are interested in concerns about society, not the reality of these concerns.

superiority of nature and the feebleness of our own bodies, dangers as a consequence of 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 which is derived from the influential work of Beck, *The Risk Society* (Beck 1992). This book states that we have entered a new phase in history, from the industrial modernity to the reflexive modernity. This era can be characterized by the production of a new type of risks, which also add 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 can be characterized by three features: (1) de-localization, causes and consequences are not geographically limited but omnipresent; (2) incalculableness, consequences are hypothetical and incalculable; (3) non-compensability, new risks dangers are irreversible (Beck 2006). Examples of new risks are nuclear waste, climate change, terrorist attacks or global financial crises. Typical about these new risks is also their invisibility, which stimulates these risks to be to the subject of speculation and discussion. Beck states that these risks cause anxiety and fear among citizens.

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

### 3.2 Loss of Ideology

The second element of societal unease is the loss of ideology, which deprives us of a sense of direction about where we are heading. This lack of direction contributes to a sense of unmanageability. Following Heywood's definition, ideology is seen as threefold, including an account of the existing order, a vision of what a good society or a desired future would look like and a way to reach 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 a perspective and a goal for both individuals and collectivities. Often the comparison is drawn between current times and the 1950s–1970s (Samuelson 1995; Jacoby 1999; Judt 2010), or postmodern times and modern ones (Bauman 2007), to argue that current times lack the ideals of previous periods.

As ideas about what a profoundly better society would look like, and about how we are planning to get there are becoming outdated, we are deprived of a 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 only concerned with pragmatic politics, and lack distinct ideologies. Instead, There-is-no-alternative (TINA) is the new consensus (Furedi 2002 [1997]: 181).

An alternative view is to consider a lack of ideology as ideology. Heywood states that any claim about the end of ideology is itself ideological, as it is an attempt to portray one set of ideas as superior. The 'end of ideology', declared by Daniel Bell in 1960, or the 'End of History' statement of Fukuyama in 1989, both rendered ideology redundant by pointing to the emergence of a broad ideological consensus (Heywood 2003). In a similar vein,

postmodernism claims grand scale theories are outdated while globalism, promoting a capitalist economy and liberal-democratic values, also undermines (other) political ideologies (ibid). In this line of reasoning, a loss of ideology would therefore only underline the dominance of one particular ideology, that of TINA. In contrast to other ideologies, it does not give us a promise of improvement.

### 3.3 Decline of Political Power

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

Depoliticization refers to the process of decreasing responsibility and accountability of political actors in decision-making with regard to public issues (Burnham 2001; Buller and Flinders 2005; Hay 2007). Depoliticization essentially declares issues as non-political, either because they are seen as technical issues, which 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 (public transportation). Either way, depoliticization implies that the power to deal with 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 out of (political) control. In many instances it 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, the individual is left to find a solution 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) which is often critically evaluated by citizens (Hooghe and Marks 2005). A final cause of loss of political power is globalization (Hay 2007). This process increases the power of non-democratic organizations like multinationals (Barber 2003), and increases interdependency between nation states, giving rise to problems transcending national boundaries (Scharpf 2000).

### 3.4 Decline of Community

The fourth aspect of societal unease in Fig. 1 is decline of community, which points to the perceived decline of shared norms, values and goals within the nation. This process takes place outside the political realm, and is therefore hard to control or influence.

Many authors pay attention to advancing individualization, 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 about social cohesion, the internal connectedness of a social system (Chan et al. 2006). But instead of social cohesion, which is often conceptualized a as condition of society, not individual perceptions (Bollen and Hoyle 1990), decline of community points to 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.

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. Individualization on the contrary deprives us of that connection. Moral aloneness or loss of community deprives the individual of both a higher goal in life than oneself, which induces narcissistic motives and attitudes, and direction or guidance for a route to follow.

This line of reasoning is also found in other contributions. Verbrugge stresses that without religion, we do not have a common interest but only our own interest to consider (2004). Personal freedom and experiences are becoming more important than the collectivity. Furthermore, it is harder to identify which others we share our moral values with, as in the case of a religious community (Verbrugge 2004). 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 a dogmatic religion is a trap. Equality, despite its benefits, has the dangerous propensity of isolating 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, as it places the object of man's desires above and beyond oneself. Therefore, it is vital for men to preserve religion as conditions become more 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 and 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.

As already discussed in Sect. 2.4, a 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 is can be seen as part of a process which can lead to anomie in the end, a point where not only the sense of community, but also a consensus on legal versus illegal is gone.

## 3.5 Socioeconomic Vulnerability

With socioeconomic vulnerability I mean the perceived rising instability of socioeconomic positions. It does not point to one's own vulnerability, but witnessing a societal development. First, the promise of upward socioeconomic mobility, which became a dominant political goal after the Second World War, has faded. And so has 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. Ehrenreich has called 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 cannot be put into savings nor passed on to the next generation. This renders the middle class position vulnerable.

Globalization is another source which increases socioeconomic vulnerability. Here a different social group is thought to be at risk, the 'losers of globalization' (Kriesi et al. 2006). Betz introduced the phrase 'losers of modernity', referring to low educated and working class employees, who cannot adapt to a changing labor market because of their specific skills (Betz 1998).

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 main political goals (Pierson 1998; Korpi 2003). Increasingly, individuals have to deal with setbacks and disabilities on their own. Bauman argues this to be a shift from security to safety, from social services to surveillance cameras, from collective to individual responsibility to deal with the adversaries of life. Governments tend to focus more on issues of safety because providing extensive social security is no longer a possibility (Bauman 2006, 2007). Ehrenberg points to the same trend, namely a shift from equality of protection to equality of opportunity: not a minimal result but a minimal chance is guaranteed (2010).

## 4 Hypotheses

Societal unease, a latent concern among citizens that fundamental aspects of society are unmanageably deteriorating, is argued to be constituted by concerns about the five aspects of society outlined above. To confirm this conceptualization empirically, items that measure concerns about these five aspects should show a commonality, which indicates the presence of a latent factor behind those attitudes. The first hypothesis to be tested here therefore reads: *Concerns about the distrust of human capability, the loss of ideology, the decline of political power, the decline of community, and socioeconomic vulnerability constitute a latent attitude which can be labeled societal unease* (H1).

Sect. 2.3 stated that societal pessimism is a sentiment that one's society is in decline. If people are pessimistic about their society because of the processes that constitute societal unease, the two will be strongly related. Assuming societal unease captures the most important reasons to be pessimistic about society, it is likely that societal unease and societal pessimism will show high similarity: *Societal unease is strongly related to societal pessimism* (H2).

Moreover, research suggests that concerns about the state of society are empirically different from happiness or life satisfaction (Eckersley 2000, 2013). This leads to the third hypothesis: *Societal unease is weakly related to happiness* (H3).

Furthermore, it is hypothesized in Sect. 2.4 that societal unease is conceptually different from anomie or anomia. Yet these are similar concepts, as they reflect a deterioration of society. Therefore societal unease is likely to be related to anomia. As Keyes found a moderate correlation (0.50) between anomia and societal actualization (the opposite from societal pessimism), it is expected that the relationship between societal unease and anomia is moderate as well (Keyes 1998). *Societal unease is moderately related to anomia* (H4).

To provide more insight into which people are uneasy about society, regression analyses explore which demographic, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics relate to societal unease.

## 5 Data, Operationalization and Method

### 5.1 Data

To test the conceptualization of societal unease, every element must be represented by one or several indicators. All international surveys tend to focus on specific themes, and as far as we know none of them includes attitudes on all aspects of societal unease satisfactorily. Therefore, several items were developed and added to the Citizens Outlook Barometer (COB), a survey covering a wide range of social and political attitudes. This survey has been conducted in the Netherlands quarterly since 2008 among a sample of a representative panel, generated by random digit dialing. Respondents do not receive payment for filling in the questionnaire nor for being in the panel. Each quarter, a random sample of panel members is invited by telephone to participate, resulting in about 1,000 respondents for each survey (people can be approached again only after 2 years). Potential respondents can choose between an internet and a postal questionnaire. The new questions were added to the COB survey for January 2012, which was completed by 1,137 respondents.

Although societal unease is assumed to be a characteristic of western countries in general, The Netherlands is an interesting case study. It ranks 9th in the IMF ranking of GDP per capita,[6] the 7th on the Human Development Index of the UN[7] and 14th on the world database of happiness.[8] If a general negative attitude on the state of society can be revealed in the Netherlands, it is likely to be present in other western countries as well. Furthermore, the Dutch are found to be very content with their private life, e.g. health, neighborhood, job or financial situation (Steenvoorden 2009). These high levels of happiness enable us to distinguish between contentment with personal life and public context.

### 5.2 Operationalizations

The operationalization of the five elements of societal unease is presented in Table 2, as well as the items on societal pessimism. While some items have been used in several surveys, the majority are new and developed for the measurement of societal unease. *Distrust in human capability*, conceptualized as declining confidence in the human capability to improve our conditions, is measured with two new items: one on the human ability to solve problems and one on the risks of technological innovation. *Loss of ideology*, a loss of a perspective on a world significantly better than the current one and a way to reach that different world, is operationalized as absence of vision among political parties. *Decline of political power*, a diminishing possibility of the national government to change things for the better, is measured by asking whether Dutch politics has handed over too much power to Europe and whether Dutch politics has leverage in matters important to citizens. *Decline of community*, perceived decline of cohesion within the nation, is measured by two existing items. One item measures solidarity, namely to what extent it is 'every man for himself'. A second indicator reflects the perception of interpersonal respect. *Socioeconomic vulnerability*, the instability of people's socioeconomic position, is operationalized with one existing item about attention to people who are less well-off. This is rather a measure of the consequential idea that society should protect those in a weak socioeconomic position,

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[6] World Economic Outlook database URL: www.imf.org.

[7] This ranking is based on life expectancy, literacy rate, educational level and standard of living. URL: hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/.

[8] URL: worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/index.html.

**Table 2** Variables in the analyses by concept

| Element | Operationalization (with variable no.) | Distribution (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | DK |
| Distrust in human capability | 1 As a society we are improving our ability to solve big problems | 18 | 43 | 33 | | 6 |
| | 2 The risks of technological innovation are underestimated | 17 | 32 | 43 | | 8 |
| Loss of ideology | 3 Dutch politics lacks a vision where the country should be heading | 11 | 27 | 56 | | 6 |
| Decrease of political power | 4 Dutch politics has handed over too much power to Europe | 18 | 30 | 45 | | 8 |
| | 5 Dutch politics has a decreasing say in matters important to citizens | 24 | 33 | 33 | | 10 |
| Decline of community | 6 The respect with which people in our country treat each other is decreasing | 7 | 19 | 73 | | 1 |
| | 7 The 'every man for himself' mentality grows | 4 | 14 | 80 | | 2 |
| Socioeconomic vulnerability | 8 In our country there is not enough attention to people who are less well-off | 19 | 22 | 57 | | 2 |
| Pessimism | 9 Considering the state of things, it is difficult to be hopeful about the future of the world | 20 | 27 | 50 | | 2 |
| | 10 Do you consider The Netherlands to be heading in the wrong or in the right direction?[a] | 1 | 19 | 50 | 17 | 67 |

*Source*: Citizen's Outlook Barometer (COB) 2012-1

Items are recoded to a 1–3 scale

Listwise deletion is used for missing values. 'I don't know' is treated as missing value

[a] This item is measured on a 1–4 scale from clearly the wrong direction to clearly the right direction, without a middle position. Therefore this item is used with its original scale

rather than an increase in the likelihood of people ending up in that position. However, it does relate to one of the central reasons for rising vulnerability, namely the retrenchment of the welfare state. Therefore, it is considered a useful operationalization. *Societal pessimism* is operationalized by an item about the direction the country is heading and an indicator about the future of the world, which is also used to measure social actualization (Keyes 1998; Keyes and Shapiro 2004).[9]

All indicators used are Likert scale statements respondents can agree with on a scale from 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree), with 2 and 4 as somewhat (dis)agree and 3 as the neutral option. The don't know option is available, but these answers are treated as missing values. Only respondents who do not have a missing value on any item are included in the analysis. All items have been coded in the same direction, on a 1–3 scale, where 1 reflects a low and 3 a high level of discontent or concern.[10]

There are many other variables considered in the explorative analyses, of which the exact item wordings and scales can be found in the appendix. The two most important of these are the items on happiness and anomia. Happiness is measured with an item how

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[9] Another item which is very similar to indicators used for social actualization "for most people, life is getting worse" is not included, because this hints to socioeconomic decline, and here the goal is to measure societal pessimism as broad and undirected as possible.

[10] This scale reduction is of importance because the 1 category often represents only a very small percentage of the respondents, and cannot be analysed as such. Merging category 1 and 2 is therefore necessary. To secure symmetry, also categories 4 and 5 are merged.

happy people consider themselves. Anomia is operationalized with an item about how insecure people are about what is right and what is wrong. Scales are recoded to 1–3 as described above when examining the fit of alternative items in the societal unease scale for items in Table 5. All items in the explorative regression analyses are recoded in dummy variables (Table 7).

## 5.3 Method and Measurement Model

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is used to examine whether the selected indicators measure a single latent concept, which indicates the presence of societal unease. Alternative types of analysis are not suitable for various reasons. Reliability analysis and principal component analysis (PCA) assume items to be parallel, i.e. having the same frequency distribution and variances (Van Schuur 2003), which is not the case here. In contrast to PCA and EFA (exploratory factor analysis), with CFA the indicators do not necessary load on all indicators, resulting in more parsimonious and deductive modeling (Brown 2006). Furthermore, with CFA one can distinguish between first and second order dimensions. Mokken analysis is not suitable because it assumes a hierarchy between the attitudes. Both the CFA analyses and subsequent explorative regression analyses are performed using Mplus 6 (Muthén and Muthén 1998–2010). The CFA is performed with the WLSMV estimator, which is developed for CFA with categorical data and a special feature of Mplus.

A latent factor behind the items on the five elements of societal unease can take shape in two ways empirically. If the eight items that correspond to the five elements of unease all load on a single factor, this would indicate they all measure the same concept to some extent. If, instead, the items of the five elements relate to five different factors, but these factors themselves load on a single factor, societal unease is a latent factor shared by the five elements. In the former scenario, there would be a first order model of societal unease, in the second case it is a second order model. These two scenarios result in two possible measurement models shown in Fig. 2a, b.

Figure 2a shows the measurement model of societal unease as a first order factor, measured by the eight selected items on the five elements of societal unease. To measure societal unease as a second order factor we would ideally measure all elements of societal unease as factors (latent concepts), and measure societal unease as a second order factor behind them. This turns out to be possible for only two elements, decline of political power and decline of community, for which we have two items each with sufficient correlation of
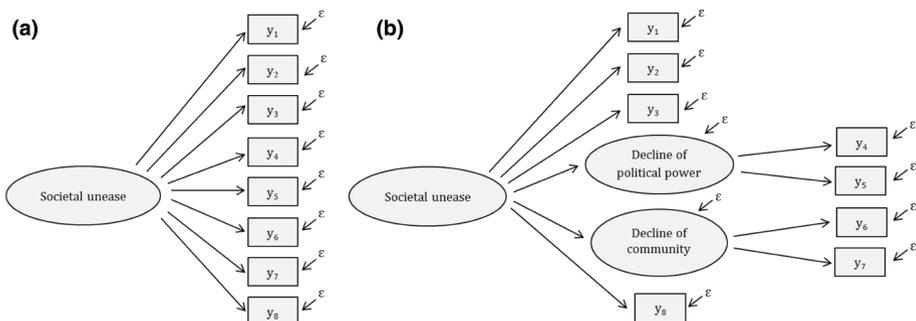


Fig. 2 **a** First order measurement model **b** second order measurement model

0.477 and 0.380 respectively. The correlation between the two items on distrust in human capability is only 0.105, therefore these are included in the model as two single indicators (Fig. 2b). The elements which are measured with only one item are no longer latent concepts, which leaves us with only two elements of societal unease measured as latents.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Testing the Theoretical Model of Societal Unease

Table 3 presents the results of the first order CFA: model 1. The upper part of the table shows the various goodness-of-fit indices, while the lower part displays the standardized loadings of the individual items. Generally, a RMSEA of <0.05 is regarded as a good fit, while <0.08 is seen as mediocre fit. CFI and TFI >0.95 are generally seen as indicators of good fit (Brown 2006; Kline 2010; Byrne 2012). Model 1 shows poor fit, as the RMSEA is 0.101 and the CFI and TLI are far below the critical 0.95. It can be concluded that the first order measurement model of societal unease does not fit the data and indicates that a factor of societal unease does not exist as a first order factor.

Table 4 presents the results of the second order CFA (model 2), which clearly performs better than model 1. The RMSEA is below 0.05 and the CFI and TFI also pass the cutoff value of 0.95.[11] Both factors, decline of political power and decline of community, as well

**Table 3** First order CFA model of societal unease

|  | Model 1 |
| --- | --- |
| $\chi 2$ | 210.851 |
| P | 0.0000 |
| RMSEA | 0.101 |
| CI RMSEA | 0.089–0.0113 |
| CFI | 0.873 |
| TFI | 0.823 |
| *Loadings societal unease* | |
| 1 (Society can solve problems) | 0.413 |
| 2 (Risks of technology) | 0.477 |
| 3 (Vision of political parties) | 0.590 |
| 4 (Power to EU) | 0.668 |
| 5 (No power over important matters) | 0.653 |
| 6 (Decreasing respect) | 0.599 |
| 7 (Every men for himself) | 0.607 |
| 8 (Support for disadvantaged) | 0.492 |
| N | 938 |

The CFA is performed with the WLSMV estimator. The model is overidentified. All measurement error is assumed to be unrelated

Only standardized loadings are displayed. All unstandardized loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$

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[11] There are two modification indices above 10, namely 10,5 and 11,4, but as these are theoretically meaningless and low (Byrne 2012: 87), this also indicates a good model.

**Table 4** Second order CFA model of societal unease

|                                         | Model 2     |
| --------------------------------------- | ----------- |
| $\chi 2$                                | 56.847      |
| P                                       | 0.0000      |
| RMSEA                                   | 0.048       |
| CI RMSEA                                | 0.034–0.062 |
| CFI                                     | 0.974       |
| TFI                                     | 0.960       |
| *Loadings*                              |             |
| Decline of political power              |             |
| 4 (Power to EU)                         | 0.782       |
| 5 (No power over important matters)     | 0.761       |
| Decline of community                    |             |
| 6 (Decreasing respect)                  | 0.756       |
| 7 (Every men for himself)               | 0.751       |
| Societal unease                         |             |
| 1 (Society can solve problems)          | 0.452       |
| 2 (Risks of technology)                 | 0.514       |
| 3 (Vision of political parties)         | 0.659       |
| Decreasing political power              | 0.652       |
| Decline of community                    | 0.720       |
| 8 (Support for disadvantaged)           | 0.539       |
| N                                       | 938         |

The CFA is performed with the WLSMV estimator. The model is overidentified. All measurement error is assumed to be unrelated

Only standardized loadings are displayed. All unstandardized loadings are significant at $p < 0.001$

as indicators 1, 2, 3 and 8 prove to have reasonable loadings, ranging from 0.452 to 0.720. Therefore model 4 supports hypothesis 1, as all five elements are found to be part of a latent factor societal unease.

The only indicator below 0.5 is indicator 1 (ability of society to solve problems). Without this item, the model improves further to an RMSEA of 0.033 and a CFI and TLI of 0.991 and 0.984 respectively. However, because leaving out item 1 means a violation of the conceptual model, and considering model 2 works fine, retaining the item is to be preferred.

It is assumed in hypothesis 1 that societal unease is a latent attitude about five aspects of society, not a general view about society. This hypothesis should be rejected if indicators about other public issues fit into the scale of societal unease. Therefore, model 2 (from Table 4) has been extended with various indicators consecutively, covering a diverse range of attitudes: anomia, immigrants, sentences, government responsibilities, income differences, EU membership and the character of the country. The results are presented in Table 5. All indicators weaken the model. The RMSEA increases from 0.048 to minimum 0.069 and maximum 0.096. This means that all indicators weaken the model of societal unease from a good fit (below 0.05) to a weak (0.05–0.08) or bad fit (>0.08). This strengthens hypothesis 1, as it proves societal unease is not a general view about society,

**Table 5** Possible model extensions of societal unease

| Indicator | RMSEA |
|---|---|
| There are so many opinions on right and wrong that sometime one does not know where one stands (anomia) | 0.069 |
| People in our country should show more responsibility and rely less on social security | 0.070 |
| The difference between the poor and the rich in the Netherlands has become too big | 0.075[a] |
| Sentences in the Netherlands are generally too lenient | 0.079 |
| The Netherlands would be a more appealing country if there lived less immigrants | 0.087 |
| The replacement of the gulden by the euro is a bad thing | 0.088 |
| The Netherlands is losing too much of its character through immigration and open borders | 0.094 |
| The Dutch membership of the EU is a good thing | 0.096 |

All items have the same original scale (1–5) as the societal unease items, and are rescaled here 1–3

[a] Including this item in the model in a factor with item 8 lowers the RMSEA to 0.050, i.e. a well-functioning model. However, the meaning of the latent socioeconomic vulnerability would change to growing socioeconomic inequality, and this operationalization does not fit the conceptual model

incorporating all aspects of society, but a latent attitude about the unmanageable deterioration of the five theorized aspects.

### 6.2 Correlations Between Societal Unease, Societal Pessimism, Happiness and Anomia

To examine the relationship of societal unease with societal pessimism, happiness and anomia, I calculated bivariate correlations. Table 6 shows that the correlation between societal unease and societal pessimism is very high (0.994).[12,13] It can be concluded that these two measure the same phenomenon. Apparently societal pessimism is the same as the latent concern of societal unease. This is remarkable, as societal unease is a multifaceted attitude, measured with eight quite distinct items, whereas societal pessimism is operationalized with two very general items about the direction of society and the world. This finding supports hypothesis 2. Furthermore, it means the five aspects which constitute societal unease also constitute societal pessimism, and that there are no important other aspects of society contributing to societal pessimism beyond those five. Thus, we have a much better understanding of societal pessimism in the Netherlands, as we now know it refers to the five aspects of society proposed in this article to constitute societal unease.

The correlation between societal unease and happiness is −0.226 (and the correlation between societal pessimism and happiness is very similar: −0.332). This weak and negative correlation supports hypothesis 3. A negative view about society is indeed not strongly related to happiness. This indicates that private contentment and public contentment are two distinct phenomena.

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[12] As societal pessimism is measured with two items, it is not an identified factor on itself and therefore the loadings cannot be examined without correlation to another indicator. In the model with societal unease, the loadings of the two items are similar ("future of the world" 0.662 and "direction country" 0.769).

[13] If the indicator "for most people life is getting worse" (see footnote 7) is added to the factor of societal pessimism, the correlation still reaches 0.90. This means that indeed, this indicator is less broad, and probably taps more in a socioeconomic side of societal pessimism than the other two items, but as 0.9 is still very high, this would not change the conclusion regarding hypothesis 2.

**Table 6** Correlations between societal unease, societal pessimism, happiness and anomia

|                    | Societal unease | Societal pessimism | Happiness |
|--------------------|:---------------:|:------------------:|:---------:|
| Societal pessimism | 0.994           |                    |           |
| Happiness          | −0.226          | −0.332             |           |
| Anomia             | 0.542           | 0.428              | −0.109    |

Pearson's r or polychoric correlations with happiness and anomia. As polychoric correlations are calculated for the relationship with happiness and anomia, these two items are used in their original scale (1–5 instead of 1–3), as this is the optimal scale for these type of correlations

Anomia and societal unease show a correlation of 0.542, which is considerable, and very similar to the finding of Keyes (1998). It is just above 0.50 and can therefore be called a moderate correlation. This supports hypothesis 4, and implies that societal unease and anomia share a common ground, people who are uneasy about society are also more likely to be anomic. This calls for more research into the factors that affect both societal unease and anomia. Yet, this finding also shows a clear empirical difference between those two concepts, which underlines the theoretical assumptions made.

6.3 Who are Uneasy?

Having established a scale of societal unease enables us to explore which citizens are more likely to be uneasy. To this end, several sets of OLS multivariate regressions have been performed on the factor of societal unease (as in model 2, Table 4). However, no assumptions are made with regard to causality, the regression analyses are only used to examine the relationship of societal unease with demographic characteristics, attitudes and types of behavior. To simplify comparisons between independent variables, they are dichotomized. Appendix Table 8 shows the item wordings and their original scales.[14] The results are presented in Table 7. Model 1 includes the standard demographic characteristics: educational level, gender, age and income level. It shows that educational level has a negative effect on societal unease: the low educated are significantly more uneasy, and higher educated less uneasy, than the medium group. Young people (aged 18–34) are less uneasy than older groups and people with a low income level have a greater chance of being uneasy about society. There is no significant difference between men and women.

In model 2, four variables on individual psychological well-being are included: happiness, anomia, social isolation and locus of control. Of these four, only anomia and locus of control are significantly related to societal unease, with similar coefficients (0.337 and 0.309). In model 3, two types of feeling safe are related to unease, which are both significant. However, the effect of not feeling safe on the street is twice as large as not feeling safe to express one's opinion. Model 4 shows that societal unease is negatively related to volunteering, while not related to supporting people outside your household.

Model 5 includes seven items on policy issues. Only negativity about the presence of immigrants fails to show a significant relationship with societal unease. The coefficients of people relying on welfare, sentences being too lenient and membership of the EU rather small (0.096–0.148), while opinions about the country losing its character, and the introduction of the euro show larger effects, and the item with biggest coefficient refers to

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[14] Age, gender and income level are shown as the original categories in Table 7 and therefore not included in Appendix Table 8.

**Table 7** Multiple OLS regression analyses of societal unease with demographic, attitudinal and behavioral characteristics

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | | Model 7 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) |
| Education low (ref = medium) | 0.181 | (0.063) | 0.132 | (0.064) | 0.160 | (0.064) | 0.174 | (0.063) | ns | | 0.129 | (0.064) | ns | |
| Education high | −0.176 | (0.058) | −0.135 | (0.060) | −0.174 | (0.058) | −0.164 | (0.058) | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Age 18–34 (ref = 35–54) | −0.213 | (0.067) | −0.220 | (0.067) | −0.236 | (0.067) | −0.213 | (0.067) | −0.127 | (0.057) | −0.186 | (0.066) | −0.147 | (0.063) |
| Age 55+ | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Gender | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Income low (ref = modal) | 0.122 | (0.060) | ns | | ns | | 0.128 | (0.060) | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Income high | −0.131 | (0.065) | ns | | ns | | −0.135 | (0.065) | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Income unknown | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | | ns | |
| Happy | | | ns | | | | | | | | | | ns | |
| Anomia | | | 0.337 | (0.055) | | | | | | | | | 0.170 | 0.049 |
| Feels isolated | | | ns | | | | | | | | | | ns | |
| No control over things that happen | | | 0.309 | (0.069) | | | | | | | | | 0.145 | 0.063 |
| Not safe on the street | | | | | 0.282 | (0.082) | | | | | | | ns | |
| Not safe to express opinion | | | | | 0.139 | (0.053) | | | | | | | ns | |
| Does volunteering | | | | | | | −0.139 | 0.048 | | | | | ns | |
| Supports people outside household | | | | | | | ns | | | | | | ns | |
| People should rely less on welfare | | | | | | | | | −0.096 | (0.031) | | | −0.098 | (0.037) |
| Difference rich and poor too big | | | | | | | | | 0.437 | (0.063) | | | 0.407 | (0.069) |
| Sentences too lenient | | | | | | | | | 0.148 | (0.053) | | | ns | |
| Less immigrants would be appealing | | | | | | | | | ns | | | | ns | |
| Introducing the euro a bad thing | | | | | | | | | 0.326 | (0.057) | | | 0.265 | (0.060) |

**Table 7** continued

| | Model 1 | | Model 2 | | Model 3 | | Model 4 | | Model 5 | | Model 6 | | Model 7 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) | b | (se) |
| Country is losing its character | | | | | | | | | 0.266 | (0.061) | | | 0.171 | (0.065) |
| Membership EU good thing | | | | | | | | | −0.112 | (0.031) | | | −0.161 | (0.038) |
| Confidence in personal financial situation | | | | | | | | | | | −0.172 | (0.067) | ns | |
| Confidence in national economy | | | | | | | | | | | −0.322 | (0.061) | −0.149 | (0.054) |
| Trust in parliament | | | | | | | | | | | −0.359 | (0.060) | −0.217 | (0.053) |
| Politics too complicated for me | | | | | | | | | | | ns | | ns | |
| People like me have no influence | | | | | | | | | | | 0.311 | (0.058) | 0.152 | (0.053) |
| Adjusted $R^2$ (N) | 0.135 (938) | | 0.276 (915) | | 0.182 (906) | | 0.148 (938) | | 0.546 (905) | | 0.472 (903) | | 0.676 (836) | |

All presented unstandardized regression coefficients are significant at minimal $p < 0.05$ (two sided), ns means 'not significant'

income differences being too big (0.437). Model 6 shows a significant relationship between societal unease and both political trust and external political efficacy, while internal efficacy is not significant. The economic attitudes, confidence in one's personal financial situation and the national economy, are also significant. Yet, the effect of the national economy is almost twice as large, which fits the idea about societal unease as primarily reflecting the perception of the state of society, rather than one's own situation.

In model 7, including all variables, many indicators remain significant: being 34 or younger, being anomic, not having control over one's life, thinking that people should not rely less on welfare, that income differences are too big, that the euro is a bad thing, that the country is losing its character, that the EU membership is not a good thing, showing a low confidence in the economy and trust in parliament, and a low level of external political efficacy.

## 7 Conclusions

To enhance our understanding of discontent with society in western countries, this article proposes a new conceptualization of societal unease. This conceptualization is the result of a close inspection of the literature about the current state of society, and echoes the recurrent themes among a wide range of authors. Societal unease is defined as a latent concern among citizens about the precarious state of society, which is constituted by perceived unmanageable deterioration of five fundamental aspects of society, namely distrust in human capability, loss of ideology, decline of political power, decline of community, and socioeconomic vulnerability. These concerns are based on perceptions of the state of society and can but need not to reflect real problems.

Empirical analyses validate this conceptualization in a second order CFA model, showing societal unease to be a latent dimension behind attitudes about these five aspects of society. The fact that these attitudes share a common latent attitude, about the unmanageable deterioration of society, is a new empirical finding. What is more, further analyses show this latent attitude is not a garbage can of negativity about society in which all societal discontent fits, as items about immigrants, the loss of the country's character or the introduction of the euro for example do not fit into the scale.

Moreover, societal unease correlates very high with societal pessimism, measured as the country and the world going in the wrong direction. This is informative as it means that currently in the Netherlands, societal pessimism can be translated directly as societal unease, thus as the commonality of attitudes about deterioration of the five theorized aspects of society. This means that there are no other important aspects of society that also feed societal pessimism. As empirical research on societal pessimism is just as limited, this furthers our understanding of societal pessimism. More research is needed to examine whether both the conceptual model of societal unease, as well as its relationship with societal pessimism, can be replicated in other western countries.

Additionally, societal unease is weakly correlated to happiness. This proves not only that personal happiness is clearly distinct from societal unease, but also that high levels of private contentment are not to be mistaken for public contentment, which is in line with previous research (Eckersley 2000, 2013). It indicates that the way you feel about your society is indeed something worth researching on its own (Kroll and Delhey 2013).

This is also supported by the explorative regression analyses, which show that many demographic characteristics as well as psychological, social, political and economic attitudes are related to societal unease. Further research is needed to provide more insight into

both possible causes and consequences of societal unease. In terms of consequences, the extent to which societal unease bears explanatory power with regard to understanding social behavior, such as civic participation or voting behavior, is worth attention. The extent to which societal unease is itself an ideology expressed by for instance political parties is also a future path of investigation.

In terms of causes, the effect of personality is an interesting path for further research. As Table 7 shows, there is considerable influence of socioeconomic factors on societal unease, contraindicating a particularly strong influence of personality traits. However, research does show effects of both general optimism or pessimism and (big 5) personality traits on political attitudes and behavior (Uslaner 2002; Mondak and Halperin 2008). Future research should pay attention to the relationship between such personality traits and both societal unease and societal pessimism. Especially general pessimism is interesting, to examine to what extent pessimism in the usual sense of the word is related to societal pessimism.

The final important finding is that anomia and societal unease are moderately correlated, which confirms the theoretical assumption that these are related yet different concepts. Anomia reflects the mental state of the individual, while societal unease is a concern about the state of society. The finding that anomic people are more often uneasy indicates that they share some common cause(s). Although we could possibly interpret this common ground as anomie, that would not give us much more clarity, as anomie has been operationalized in quite distinct ways in the literature (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997; Thorlindsson and Bjarnason 1998; Thorlindsson and Bernburg 2004; Pridemore and Kim 2006; Legge et al. 2008).

Instead, looking at the literature we see overlap between likely causes of societal unease and anomia, such as the level of privatization and retrenchment of welfare state provisions (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997; Bernberg 2002; Burkatzki 2008) and these are important to consider in further research on the causes of societal unease and its relationship with anomia. Other contextual factors which relate to the elements of societal unease and which should be considered in explaining societal unease in further research are the level of technological development, the degree of similarity in the profiles of political parties, the influence of the EU, and the transfer of employment abroad.

In addition to cross-national variation, the development of societal unease over time should be investigated. This is necessary to examine not only whether societal unease is specific to our era, but also to determine the stability of this attitude. The economic crisis can be interesting in this respect, as many theoretical contributions referred to here are pre-crisis, so to speak, but the data used are post-crisis. Can we indeed find high levels of societal unease already before the crisis? And has the economic crisis increased societal unease? And so it seems that this article raises more questions than it answers, which indicates that the attitude of citizens towards their society is a fruitful subject for further research.

**Appendix**

**Table 8** Description of independent variables in Table 7

| Variable | Exact item wording |
| --- | --- |
| Happy | To what extent do you consider yourself a happy person?[a] |
| Anomia | There are so many opinions on right and wrong that sometime one does not know where one stands[a] |
| Educational level | Low: pre-vocational secondary education (VMBO) Medium: vocational degree (HAVO, VWO, MBO) High: professional or university degree (HBO, WO) |
| Feels isolated | I feel isolated from other people[a] |
| No control over things that happen | I have little control over what happens to me[a] |
| Not safe on the street | To what extent do you feel safe to be out and about on the street?[b] |
| Not safe to express opinion | To what extent do you feel safe to express your opinion openly[b] |
| Does volunteering | How many hours a week do you engage in volunteering[c] |
| Supports people outside household | How many hours a week do you provide help to people outside your household?[c] |
| People should rely less on welfare | People in our country should rely less on welfare and be more self-reliant[a] |
| Difference rich and poor too big | The difference between rich and poor has become too big in the Netherlands[a] |
| Sentences too lenient | Sentences in the Netherlands are in general too lenient[a] |
| less immigrants would be appealing | The Netherlands would be a more appealing country if there lived less immigrants[a] |
| Introducing the euro a bad thing | It is a bad thing that the gulden has been replaced by the euro[a] |
| Country is losing its character | Because of immigration and open borders the Netherlands is in danger of losing its character[a] |
| Membership EU good thing | The Dutch membership of the EU is a good thing[a] |
| Confidence in personal financial situation | How confident are you in your personal financial situation?[d] |
| Confidence in national economy | How confident are you in the Dutch economy?[d] |
| Trust in parliament | How much do you trust the national parliament at this moment?[d] |
| Politics too complicated for me | National politics is often too complicated for me to understand[a] |
| People like me have no influence | People like me have no influence on what the government does[a] |

Don't know answers are treated as missing values and list wise deleted in the regression analyses

[a] The original scale is 1–5, (fully disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, fully agree). The answers 1 thru 3 are coded as 0, 4 and 5 as 1

[b] The original scale is 1–5, (never, rarely, sometimes, often, always). The answers 1 thru 3 are coded as 0, 4 and 5 as 1

[c] The original scale is 1–40 h with the extra option "not at all". The latter is treated as 0, any hours is treated as 1

[d] The original scale 1–10. The answers 1 thru 5 are coded as 0, 6 thru 10 as 1

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