



# Exploring the Role of Blame and Gratitude in Societal Discontent

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### **Abstract**

Recent polls indicate a prevalent sense of societal discontent across the world, with 77% of Dutch people in particular identifying we are headed in the wrong direction as a society. Building on past research which linked media narratives to this discontent, this study investigates the role of gratitude and blame in influencing societal discontent, and the potential mediating role of a new construct, Alienation in Society. In a one-factor experimental design with three conditions (Gratitude, Blame, and Neutral), 231 participants on Prolific Academic were assessed both pre and post-experiment. Participants in the gratitude and blame groups completed exercises adapted from existing gratitude journaling. Regression analysis indicated that gratitude exercises significantly reduced levels of discontent while blame showed a borderline insignificant increase. Mediation analysis suggests that Alienation in Society is related to Societal Discontent by the nature of this relationship is not fully understood. Qualitative analysis explored how society is constructed with a notably more social orientation. This research pioneers in manipulating societal discontent, paving the way for future investigations into the intricacies of societal discontent the role of affective experiences like gratitude.

*Keywords:* societal discontent, gratitude, blame, feeling heard, societal disconnection

### **Societal Discontent, Gratitude, and Blame**

When asked to think about the state of our society and its direction, some 77% of Dutch people think we are headed in the wrong direction according to a recent IPSOS poll (*What Worries the World*, 2023). This is a sharp indication of the collective mood within Dutch society. Various approaches have emerged within the social sciences to explore how such collective perceptions might impact society. Researchers like Steenvoorden, 2014 and Teymoori et al., 2016 have focused on specific constructs like anomie or societal characteristics like individualization to relate this perception with the breakdown of societal functioning. Other research has taken a more general approach whereby this phenomenon is understood as a general and collective tacit feeling of discontent with society (Van der Bles, 2015). Simply put, a majority share a perception that society is doing ‘bad’ and going in a negative direction. By avoiding being specific at the cost of generalizability, various political responses to discontent across the globe (e.g., Podemos in Spain or the Brexit movement in the UK) can be explained in a unified account. Indeed, research has highlighted that this feeling of societal discontent is present within 28 countries (Van der Bles et al., 2017), with justification for such discontent varying by country but collective discontent appearing ever-present. This would suggest there is a pervasive feeling present within the studied societies, not specifically due to any particular combination of elements like inequality or other social issues.

#### **The Consequences of Societal Discontent**

Societal discontent can be traced across many contentious contemporary developments. Globally, discontent with UK society was linked to support for Brexit (Swales, 2016). Societal discontent was also linked to support for Donald Trump in the 2016 US elections (Gellerson et al., 2021). With regards to the Netherlands specifically, the rhetoric of

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Caroline Van der Plas and the recent rise of the *BoerBurgerBeweging* party is framed around connecting with this discontent in society. Moreover, societal discontent has also been linked to extremism on both sides of the political spectrum in the Netherlands (Van der Bles et al., 2018). In general, discontent has been linked to preferring authoritarian leaders (Sprong et al., 2019), political extremism (Ionescu et al., 2021), political participation (Praprotnik & Perlot, 2020), and populism party support (Giebler et al., 2020). This link between discontent with society and populism has been further elucidated with the idea people support populism as they believe leaders will ‘care’ and ‘hope’ that their perceived struggles will be addressed (Gellerson et al., 2021). Taking an overview on this research, societal discontent is implicated in actions which abrade the consensus-based fabric of society on a fundamental level. The polarizing nature of these political changes where societal discontent has been evidenced are defining challenges of our time. In sum, it appears that societal discontent is an important phenomenon to study in order to understand contemporary mobilization.

While evidently present and detrimental, we still do not know how to influence societal discontent and its predictors are poorly understood. The most substantive link has been previous field research in the Netherlands whereby societal discontent was associated with media consumption (Van der Bles, 2018). When considering how the state of society is judged, the information available to make this judgement is largely provided by the media. Moreover, topical news items like the state of the economy, housing, etc. are a source of content for interpersonal interaction and reflection. Therefore, one could argue the media is an intrinsic part of evaluating how society is doing and whether it is bad or not. Following on from this, an unpublished experimental study was conducted. Media consumption was operationalised through a constructed annual news recap video whereby the video was pessimistic about the state of the Netherlands and its direction. Alternately, a contrasting video with a more optimistic tone and music was employed, however the study proved

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unsuccessful in manipulating societal discontent. Even when considering other conceptualisations of societal discontent within the social sciences, there has been no effective manipulation of this phenomena outside of virtual societies. Notably, polarization within society has been shown to predict the related concepts of collective angst and economic pessimism following the Covid-19 pandemic (Crimston et al., 2022). This could be understood as a collective fear and worry about the state of society and could there is an element of perceived (dis)unity embedded in or enabling our societal concerns. Yet still, our understanding of this topic is poor.

If our collective discontent is with society and contrasts with personal contentment (Van der Bles, 2017), then it is reasonable to assume its antecedents also manifest on a societal level. Building upon the association between media and societal discontent, the media directly shapes the narrative, discourse, and even blame around societal developments. This is integral when societal level threats like war can promote unity but also disunity. For example, if society is perceived to be doing badly, blame can be undeservedly placed on certain groups in the form of scapegoating (Bursztyn et al., 2022) with potentially deadly consequences. This was seen during the Covid-19 pandemic whereby lower status groups like students and minorities were blamed for disease spread to maintain the higher status of groups like politicians (Bouguettaya et al., 2022). Even though blame requires warrant, the desire to maintain positive ingroup distinctiveness can be so strange that warrant may be manufactured or created instead (Dixon et al., 2020). As a result, blame can be placed upon certain other groups in order to maintain ingroup status even if the blamed group is not the cause of the problem. This undue blame can lead to disunity within a superordinate group like a community when a structural response is required (Jetten et al., 2020). This could also explain previous links between societal discontent and attitudes towards migrants (Gootjes et al., 2021). While migrants may be blamed for the sense of decline and state of society, getting

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rid of this group would not eliminate crime, inequality, etc. As such, our moral propensity for blame becomes maladaptive and divisive as we engage in behavior which will not resolve the perceived threat. This lack of resolution could very well lead to maintaining or increasing levels of societal discontent (H1: engaging in blame behaviour will increase levels of discontent).

While blame may increase levels of discontent, it is a worthy endeavor to try decrease it. When examining existing research around individual discontent within positive psychology, gratitude is a popular construct and facilitator for contentment. Much like blame, gratitude can be considered a moral based behaviour or virtue (Gulliford & Morgan, 2021). Gratitude also has been established to increase satisfaction on an individual level (Emmons and McCullough 2003). It is also an intrinsically other-oriented emotion (McCullough et al., 2001). Gratitude can also be understood not only as a state or trait but also as a *practice* (Harbaugh & Vasey, 2014) whereby gratitude can be fostered through routine actions or behavior. Gratitude is also not limited to specific people or connections as it can also be felt for many things like nature, life, and even objects (Allen, 2018). Moreover, gratitude has been repeatedly shown to decrease body dissatisfaction on an individual level within clinical psychology studies (Fuller-Tyszkiewicz et al., 2019). Gratitude practice has also been implicated within the field of organizational psychology to foster greater satisfaction within the organization studied (Di Fabio, 2017). Gratitude has also been demonstrated to exist on a collective level as a group emotion (Smith, Seger et al. 2007). Given that gratitude can be cultivated for more abstract benefactors as well as a collective organization, gratitude could potentially be cultivated for the more abstract collective that is society. Gratitude has also consistently been implicated with satisfaction across many facets. Moreover, I believe this could be useful on a societal level due to the idea that gratitude allows us to ‘find-remind-bind’ (Algoe, 2012). That is, gratitude has been suggested to allow individuals to identify or

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*find* reciprocal-altruistic relationships and establish groups norms which *remind* and *bind* to fuel upward spirals of mutually responsive behaviour. That is, gratitude might also impact intergroup relations within society as well as interpersonal relations. Therefore, I suggest that *gratitude could be cultivated as a collective emotion to diminish feelings of dissatisfaction or discontent with society* (H2).

Across this essay, there is an underlying theme of unity and disunity. At its heart, society can be seen as a superordinate group based on a numerous interrelated and connected groups. Our premise behind blame and gratitude as ‘other’ oriented feelings could also be understood to encourage connection or disconnection from society. That is, gratitude can serve to ‘find-remind-bind’ as per Algoe, 2012 while blame can result in scapegoating or exclusion of groups within society. Moreover, a specific manifestations of disunity – polarization – has been implicated in predicting closely related variables to societal discontent. Taking this together, we have an underlying idea that societal discontent could be mediated by a disunity apparent within society or between society and one’s own group. For example, people with a lower education level feel they do not play a meaningful role in society and feeling comparatively less valued (Van Noord et al., 2019). This would explain the link between education level and societal discontent. Alongside this, the link between support for populism and the idea that these politicians will ‘care’ and ‘hope’ for their struggles would be addressed. Moreover, this seems to touch on a broader phenomenon of feeling heard within society. There is a newly emerging concept of feeling 'collectively heard' whereby one's groups in society problems are recognized and 'understood by an authority, that is approachable and clearly communicates reasons for decisions that impact the group in question' (MA thesis Roos 2022). In sum, the lack of one’s group feeling heard or valued in society could be implicated in societal discontent.



## The Present Study

One experiment will be conducted to explore the relationship between gratitude, blame, and societal discontent. Participants will engage in either gratitude or blame behaviour for two weeks. There will also be a control condition whereby participants are not instructed to engage in any behaviour. As perceived (dis)unity between societal groups seems to be implicated across blame, gratitude, and discontent, a new scale around ‘societal disconnection’ will be utilised as a mediator.

**H1:** The blame exercise will increase levels of discontent, in comparison with the control condition.

**H2:** Alienation in Society will mediate the relationship between blame and societal discontent.

**H3:** The gratitude exercise will decrease feelings of societal discontent, in comparison with the control condition.

## Method

### Sample Size Rationale

Power analysis was conducted using GPower for a Hierarchical Linear Regression with an effect size = 15, alpha = .05, power = .95, number of predictors = 7. This resulted in a minimum of suggested sample size of 160. In line with convention around scale construction, 200 was seen as the base number for testing construct reliability. Therefore, we increased the sample size to 231 to account for attrition.

## **Participants**

A total of 231 participants participated in the study on Prolific Academic. Due to attrition and data loss, 93 were valid for quantitative analysis ( $M_{\text{age}} = 38.72$ ,  $SD = 15.14$ ). There were still 204 qualitative entries valid for analysis (96 blame exercises and 111 gratitude exercises). The gender of the valid sample was predominantly masculine with 60.20% listing their gender as ‘man’, 34% as ‘woman’, and 3.20% as ‘non-binary/other’.

## **Research Design and Procedure**

A one factor experimental design (3 levels: Gratitude, Blame, and Neutral) was utilised with repeated measures of the dependent variable (Societal Discontent). That is, societal discontent will be measured before the experiment and after the experiment. Participants completed a short intake questionnaire consisting of informed consent, demographic information, as well as scales to pre-measure societal discontent and alienation in society. Random assignment allocated participants to either the neutral, gratitude group, or blame condition. In the control condition, participants did not exercise except the measurement scales.

Participants in the gratitude and blame groups will complete a gratitude or blame exercise in which they complete worksheets, modelled after Emmonse & McCullough (2003). Valid data was collected for Day 1 and Day 14. After this two-week period, participants will complete a scale measuring societal discontent and alienation in society. Following this, they will be debriefed and given the opportunity to ask questions.

To manipulate, we adapted the gratitude intervention from Emmonse & McCullough (2003) to our purposes. The original gratitude prompt from Emmonse & McCullough was:

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“There are many things in our lives, both large and small, that we might be grateful about. Think back over the past week and write down on the lines below up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for.

We adapted this as follows:

“There are many things in our society, both large and small, that are positive and that make us feel grateful to someone or something. Think back over the past week and write down on the lines below up to **three or five things in our society that are positive**. If possible, write down **who or what in our society you are grateful to for each of these.**”

Inspired by this exploration of gratitude, we also developed a similar manipulation to explore whether participants blame someone or something for societal faults or problems:

There are many **things** in our society, both large and small, that we might be threatened by or that **cause problems**. Think back over the past **month** and write down on the lines below up to three or **five problems in society** and **who in our society is responsible for each problem**.

## Measures

### *Societal Discontent*

Societal discontent was measured using two subscales which have been demonstrated to tap into aspects of societal discontent (Van der Bles et al., 2015; Grootjes et al., 2021).

Four items concerned *Negative Emotions* around the current state of society and its future on Day 14. Each item was answered with a 7–point Likert response (1 – not at all, 7 – very much). An example item is ‘I feel concerned when I think about the future of society’.

Another aspect, *Societal Pessimism* (Steenworden, 2015), was measuring using a single item,

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‘Which direction is Dutch society going in according to you?’, which was answered on 7-point scale (1 – the wrong direction, 4 – stays the same, 7 – the right direction on both Day 1 and Day 14. This item was also reverse coded with higher levels reflecting greater pessimism.

### *Alienation in Society*

Alienation in Society was measured using a newly constructed scale that was partially adapted from existing measures and built in consultation with expertise within the Social Psychology department at the University of Groningen. The five Items in the *Felt Understanding* subscale were adapted from ‘Feeling Heard’ (Roos et al., 2021) and Felt Understanding (Livingstone et al., 2020). This scale includes items like ‘I feel they care what people like me have to say’. In addition to this, *Misrecognition* was another six-item subscale which was drawn from unpublished research within the BSS faculty. An example item is ‘The value of what people like me do is recognized by society’.

## Results

### Qualitative Analyses

Within the open ended blame or gratitude exercises, we had two primary interests. Firstly, what positives or negatives did participants focus on? Secondly, who did they attribute these positives or negatives to? To engage with these questions, a content analysis was conducted in Atlas.ti. First, I familiarised myself with the data by reading entries to gain an initial understanding of recurrent topics in both conditions. After this initial reading, codes were developed inductively by identifying and labelling recurrent themes in the gratitude exercises and then the blame exercise. As more entries were analysed, these codes were grouped into larger themes and eight primary themes emerged in both the gratitude and blame condition. Finally, entries were once analysed for any errors or omissions in coding. After

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this, a similar process for attribution was carried out. The occurrence of focus and attribution are displayed in Table 1 below.

**Table 1**

*Themes used to code the gratitude or blame exercises on focus and attribution*

Code		% Occurrence	
		Blame	Gratitude
<i>Focus</i>			
Moral Values		24.32%*	44.79%*
Shared Norms		36.95%	41.67%
Accessibility		45.05%	37.5%
(In)Effective			
Bureaucracy		30.63%*	14.58%*
Diversity & Inclusion		47.75%*	18.75%*
Technology		12.61%	11.46%
Nature		25.23%	13.54%
Infrastructure		6.31%	14.58%
<i>Attribution</i>			
Social Connections	Friends, family, neighbours, colleagues	4.5%*	21.88%*
We	We, us, our	6.31%*	19.79%*

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Healthcare System	Healthcare system, nurses, doctors	2.7%*	19.97%*
General	People, in general, in society, civilians, consumers, everyone	19.82%	14.58%
Government	Government, municipality, coalition, VVD, politics	42.34%*	11.46%*
Public Transport System	Trains, train conductors	2.7%	6.25%
Justice System	People who stand up for justice, justice system, the law	3.60%	4.17%
Corporation	Supermarkets, social media companies, employers, ProRail	18.02%*	3.13%*
Minorities / Specific Social Groups	LGBT+, migrants, refugees, farmers, soccer hooligans, old people on mobility scooters	9.91%	3.13%
Media	Media, journalists, newspaper	10.81%	2.08%
Rich & Powerful	Landlords, rich, powerful	4.50%	0
Foreign Aggressors	Dictators, Putin, Russia	2.7%	0

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*Note: N = 96 for gratitude and N = 111 for blame. Each theme and attribution is not mutually exclusive therefore percentages will not add up to 100%. Asterisk (\*) indicates significant difference as indicated by a Chi-Squared test of association.*

When analysing what participants identified as a positive or negative in society, there was a striking consistency across conditions. In both conditions, the same set of themes were

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present. Each theme is outlined with quotes to show how these themes were viewed and constructed within this analysis.

**Moral Values.** Moral values like care, harm, justice, liberty, and respect were frequently listed by participants as a negative when broken but a positive when upheld in a way that resonated with participants. Moreover, moral values were attributed to people in general. For example, moral values were identified as a positive by participants:

*“People are polite towards each other. [...] There is freedom for one to express their views”*

However, moral values were seen as a negative when they were violated:

*“In general, people have no respect for each other; in traffic people seem to only care about themselves”*

**Shared Norms.** When norms were shared, they emerged as both a positive and a negative. This varied from behaviour like wearing shoes indoors to more general values within Dutch society. For example, participants in the gratitude condition often embedded certain behaviour or values as shared norms with a sense of ‘our’ or ‘we’;

*“Our society is overall inclusive, honest, open, adaptive, modern”*

*“[...] the way we react to the warmer weather. [...]”*

Even participants who identified themselves as an outsider by referring to ‘the Dutch’ felt the norms within society were a positive as long as the participant shared them;

*“I appreciate the fact the Dutch like doing volunteer work. I’ve been doing it for the first time this year, inspired by the Dutch and it makes my life better.”*

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In contrast, norms become a negative with no sense of 'us' or 'we' when participants do not share the norms prevalent in society. Instead, these norms are attributed to a distant other like the rich and powerful;

"inequality, environmental destruction, sentiments of hate. most of this is caused by the rich and powerful"

**Accessibility.** Another theme which presented across both conditions was the availability of things participants felt they needed or desired. When things were inaccessible, this negative thing was attributed to the government. For example:

*"healthcare (too expensive and not inclusive enough - system that is made by government and insurance companies) [...] high prices (companies/banks/government/EU"*

Yet when available, these same issues become simple positives in society when accessible:

*"safety, income, home"*

**(In)Effective Bureaucracy.** Whether bureaucracy was effective or not was a theme within both conditions. However, this theme was more associated with the blame exercise and often attributed to the government:

*"Increased living costs, housing shortage, student debt. Last two are due to slow and bad decision making by the government"*

Yet when effective, bureaucracy becomes a positive in society:



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*"The plants and flowers the municipality planted. That a friend in trouble was assigned social housing. That public transport is pretty great over here, thanks to the NS and our government."*

**Diversity & Inclusion.** Diversity and inclusion was evident much more as a negative than a positive by participants. Within this overarching theme, there was a distinct focus on the mere presence of minorities as a negative;

*"Abundance of immigrants, government – [...] - Old people on mobility scooters, city council."*

Yet participants more frequently cited the lack of inclusion for minorities as a negative instead of the presence of minorities. This challenge of inclusion also extended beyond minorities to people in general. For example:

*"not enough shelters for refugees (government), [...] not enough housing options for everyone"*

Diversity was also seen as a simple positive by a small number of participants;

*"The diversity of our society 2. The general acceptance of the lgbt [...]"*

**Technology.** Technology was listed in both conditions to a similar frequency. There were two subthemes identified. Firstly, technology was frequently tied to being divisive through the internet and social media:

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*"Polarisation, which the internet and media facilitate by how they present things. Racism/conspiracy theories, which go hand in hand, which is again made worse by the ability of likeminded people to gather and find each other on the internet"*

However, technology could also be seen as a positive when it was unifying:

*"[...], I'm thankful for the advancements in technology that have brought us closer together, allowing us to connect with loved ones and share moments even when physically apart."*

**Nature.** Similarly, nature was an emergent theme as a both a positive and a negative. Climate change could be seen as a prominent subtheme in both a positive and negative frame:

*"Excess use of fossil fuels in cars and homes. [...] Continued use of single use plastic, especially in food packaging is the fault of both consumers and corporations."*

*"The conversation about climate change is becoming increasingly visible and apparent, which is a good thing and very important"*

**Infrastructure.** Infrastructure was another theme prevalent when people identified positives and negatives in society. When seen as a positive, infrastructure was briefly listed by participants:

*"We have good infrastructure. [...]"*

However, when infrastructure was in a bad state, it was seen as a negative:

*"[...] poor transport network"*

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From our analysis, it becomes evident that gratitude entries were more associated with moral values than the blame entries. Furthermore, the positive things listed in the gratitude exercise are more related to social connections, the healthcare system, and ‘we’ or ‘us’ by participants. Conversely, entries from the blame exercise were associated with a focus on challenges posed by ineffective bureaucracy and issues related to diversity and inclusion. The negative things in the blame exercise were associated more with the government, corporations, the media. Additionally, although to a lesser degree, the media and the rich were also more associated with the blame exercise over the gratitude exercise. It is clear that participants focused on the same themes as both a positive or a negative depending on the condition. Between the two conditions, a larger set of differences occurred in attribution.

### **Exploratory Factor Analysis**

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 11-item Alienation in Society scale using principle component analysis. Based on the Kaiser criterion (eigenvalues  $> 1$ ) and inspection of the scree plot, two factors were retained for rotation. A varimax rotation was performed using SPSS Version 28. The two-factor solution explained 67% of the variance.

Factor 1 consisted of the five items from the Felt Understanding subscale with loadings above .79, explaining 48.24% of the variance, and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .91, suggesting excellent internal consistency. Factor 3 consisted of six items from the Misrecognition subscale with loadings above .64, explaining 18.74% of the variance, and had a Cronbach’s alpha of .87.

### **Table 2.**

*Results From a Factor Analysis of the Alienation in Society Scale*

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Societal Alienation item	Factor loading	
	1	2
Factor 1: Felt Understanding		
1. I feel they care about what people like me have to say. (R)	.84	
2. I feel they listen to what people like me are saying. (R)	.87	
3. I feel they understand the points of view of people like myself. (R)	.86	
4. I feel they understand what people like myself experience. (R)	.83	
5. I feel they understand what life of people like myself looks like. (R)	.8	
Factor 2: Misrecognition		
6. I think people like me are excluded in society.		.86
7. I think society thinks positively about people like me. (R)		.78
8. People like me are treated with respect in society. (R)		.78
9. People like me are treated unfairly in society.		.74
10. I think the value of what people like me do is recognised in society. (R)		.71
11. I think people like me are viewed negatively in society		.64

*Note. N = 231 from Day 1 of the study. Factor loadings below .25 are excluded. Reverse-scored items are denoted with an (R)*

### **Confirmatory Factor Analysis**

To validate the underlying structure of Societal Discontent, a Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was conducted using JASP 0.17.3. The hypothesized model consisted of 1 factor; Societal Discontent. As Day 1 only included 2 items to measure Societal Discontent, the 5 items from Day 14 were chosen to avoid a just-identified model with 0 degrees of freedom.

The CFA results indicated an acceptable fit to the data:  $\chi^2(df = 5) = 2.382$ ,  $p = 0.794$ ; Comparative Fit Index (CFI) = 1.000; Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI) = 1.020; Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) = 0.000 [95% CI: 0.000, 0.093]; RMSEA p-value = 0.862; and Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) = 0.012. Moreover, All items loaded significantly onto the single factor. The standardized factor loadings ranged from 0.825 to 1.308. The internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory, with a Cronbach's alpha of .89. In sum, the results of this confirmatory factor analysis indicate that the included items measure the same construct.

### **Exploring the Effect of Condition on Societal Discontent**

In order to test if condition had an effect on the level of societal discontent after the intervention i.e. Day 14, a hierarchical linear regression was conducted with Societal Discontent at Day 14 as the dependent variable. Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure that this statistical approach would not be biased by violations of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Two dummy code variables were created in order to compare gratitude and blame to the neutral condition. In Model 1, the control variables (age, gender, education level, and religiosity) and Societal Discontent at Day 1 were entered into the model. In Model 2, the gratitude dummy variable and the blame dummy variable were entered into the model.

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Overall, the results showed that the first model was significant  $F(5, 87) = 15.67, p < .001, R^2 = .47$ . Only Societal Discontent at Day 1 was significantly associated with Societal Discontent at Day 14 ( $B = .46, t = 8.25, p < .001$ ). The second model ( $F(2, 85) = 10.05, p < .001, R^2 = .57$ ) which included a dummy variable for the blame condition ( $B = .39, t = 1.85, p = .07$ ) and gratitude condition ( $B = -.64, t = -2.76, p = .007$ ) showed improvement over Model 1 ( $\Delta R^2 = .10$ ). When interpreting the magnitude of effect, the gratitude condition caused a decrease of .64 scale points in societal discontent. This is evidence in support of the hypothesis that the gratitude exercise will decrease levels of societal discontent in comparison to the control condition (H3). The blame exercise resulted in a .39 scale points increase in societal discontent. This trend did not reach but approached statistical significance ( $p = .07$ ). Therefore, we cannot reject our hypothesis that the blame exercise will increase levels of societal discontent (H1).

In sum, the control variables and initial level of societal discontent explain 47% of the variance. When the experimental conditions (blame and gratitude) were included as dummy variables, the model accounted for 57% of the variance. After comparing the effect of blame and gratitude, gratitude is the significant predictor within this final model while blame is borderline insignificant in explaining the variance.

### **Mediation Analysis**

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine the role of Alienation in Society at Day 14 as a mediator in the relationship between Gratitude and SD at Day 14. The analysis controlled for age, education, gender, and religiosity. The PROCESS macro for SPSS was used with a bootstrapping method to test this simple mediation model.

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Gratitude did not significantly predict Alienation ( $B = -.02$ ,  $t(87) = -.08$ ,  $p = .94$ ).

Alienation was significantly associated with SD at Day 14, controlling for Gratitude ( $B = .52$ ,  $t(86) = 4.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The indirect effect of Gratitude on SD at Day 14 through Alienation was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples. This indirect effect was not significant ( $B = -.01$ ,  $BootSE = .14$ ,  $BootLLCI = -.25$ ,  $BootULCI = .32$ ), indicating that Alienation did not significantly mediate the relationship between Gratitude and SD at Day 14.

Gratitude was not a significant predictor of SD at Day 14 ( $B = -.12$ ,  $t(86) = -.47$ ,  $p = .64$ ) even when controlling for Alienation. This provides no support for our hypothesis that Alienation could mediate the relationship between Gratitude and SD at Day 14. This means that we cannot support the hypothesis i.e. that the effect of gratitude on societal discontent could be mediated by Alienation in Society. (H4)

Regarding the control variables, education ( $B = .05$ ,  $p = .62$ ), gender ( $B = .13$ ,  $p = .55$ ), and religiosity ( $B = .04$ ,  $p = .43$ ) were not significantly associated with SD at Day 14. Age was significantly associated with SD at Day 14 ( $B = .02$ ,  $p = .02$ ).

**Table 3.**

Variable / Effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>	
						<i>Interval</i>	
Gratitude -> Alienation	-.02	.22	-.08	.94	.02	-.46	.43
Gratitude -> SD at Day							
14	-.12	.26	-.47	.64		-.64	.39
Gratitude -> SD at Day							
14 -> Alienation	-.01	.14				-.25	.32
Age -> SD at Day 14	.02	.01	2.34	.02		.00	.04

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Gender -> SD at Day 14	.13	.21	.60	.55	-.29	.55
Education -> SD at Day						
14	.05	.09	.50	.62	-.14	.23
Religiosity -> SD at						
Day 14	.04	.06	.79	.43	-.07	.15
<hr/>						
<i>Effects</i>						
<hr/>						
Direct	-.12	.26	-.47	.64	-.64	.39
Indirect	-.01	.14			-.25	.32
Total	-.13	.28	-.46	.65	-.69	.43
<hr/>						

Based on 5000 bootstrap samples

Blame did not significantly predict Alienation ( $B = .38$ ,  $t(87) = 1.78$ ,  $p = .08$ ).

Alienation was significantly associated with SD at Day 14, controlling for Blame ( $B = .49$ ,  $t(86) = 3.88$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The indirect effect of Blame on SD at Day 14 through Alienation was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples. This indirect effect was significant ( $B = 0.18$ ,  $BootSE = .11$ ,  $BootLLCI = .00$ ,  $BootULCI = .41$ ), While the indirect effect is marginal and not conventionally significant, the confidence intervals suggest a possible mediation effect that approaches significance.

Blame was not a significant predictor of SD at Day 14 ( $B = 0.32$ ,  $t(86) = 1.28$ ,  $p = .20$ ) even when controlling for Alienation. The total effect of Blame on SD at Day 14, without considering the mediation, was not significant ( $B = 0.51$ ,  $t(87) = 1.89$ ,  $p = .06$ ).

Regarding the control variables, only age was significant in predicting SD at Day 14 ( $B = 0.02$ ,  $p = .01$ ), while gender ( $B = 0.13$ ,  $p = 0.55$ ), education ( $B = 0.03$ ,  $p = .78$ ), and religiosity ( $B = 0.04$ ,  $p = .49$ ) were not.



**Table 4. Mediation Analysis (N = 93)**

Variable / Effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>95% Confidence</i>	
						<i>Interval</i>	
Blame -> Alienation	.38	.21	1.78	.08	.05	-.04	.80
Blame -> SD at Day 14	.32	.25	1.28	.20	.23	-.18	.82
Blame -> SD at Day 14 -> Alienation	.18	.11				.00	.41
Age -> SD at Day 14	.02	.01	2.51	.01		.00	.04
Gender -> SD at Day 14	.13	.21	.60	.55		-.29	.54
Education -> SD at Day 14	.03	.09	.27	.78		-.16	.21
Religiosity -> SD at Day 14	.04	.05	.70	.49		-.07	.15
<i>Effects</i>							
Direct	.32	.25	1.28	.20		-.18	.82
Indirect	.18	.11				.00	.41
Total	.51	.27	1.89	.06		-.03	1.04

Based on 5000 bootstrap samples

### Exploratory Analysis

A mediation analysis was conducted to examine the role of Alienation in Society as a mediator in the relationship between Societal Discontent (SD) at Day 1 and Day 14. The analysis controlled for age, education, gender, and religiosity. The PROCESS macro for SPSS was used with a bootstrapping method to test this simple mediation model.

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SD at Day 1 significantly predicted Alienation in Society at Day 14 ( $b = .12$ ,  $t(87) = 2.16$ ,  $p = .03$ ). Alienation in Society at Day 14 was significantly associated with SD at Day 14, controlling for SD at Day 1 ( $b = .34$ ,  $t(86) = 3.52$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

The indirect effect of SD at Day 1 on SD at Day 14 through Alienation in Society at Day 14 was tested using a bootstrap estimation approach with 5000 samples. This indirect effect was not significant ( $b = .04$ ,  $\text{BootSE} = .03$ ,  $\text{BootLLCI} = .00$ ,  $\text{BootULCI} = .11$ ), indicating that Alienation in Society did not significantly mediate the relationship between SD at Day 1 and Day 14. Once again, while the indirect effect is marginal and not conventionally significant, the confidence intervals suggest a possible mediation effect that approaches significance.

In line with this, SD at Day 1 was still a significant predictor of Societal Discontent at Day 14 ( $b = .42$ ,  $t(86) = 7.75$ ,  $p < .001$ ) even when controlling for Alienation in Society. This provides weak evidence that Alienation in Society mediates the relationship between Societal discontent at Day 1 and Day 14.

Regarding the control variables, age ( $b = .01$ ,  $p = .10$ ), education ( $b = .03$ ,  $p = .65$ ), gender ( $b = .27$ ,  $p = .10$ ), and religiosity ( $b = .01$ ,  $p = .73$ ) were not significantly associated with Societal Discontent at Day 14.

Table 2.

*Mediation Analysis (N = 93)*

Variable / Effect	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>95% Confidence Interval</i>	
						<i>Interval</i>	
SD Day 1 -> Alienation	0.12	0.06	2.16	0.03	0.07	0.01	0.24

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SD Day 1 -> SD Day 14	0.42	0.05	7.75	< .001	0.54	0.31	0.52
SD Day 1 -> SD Day 14 -> Alienation	0.04	0.03				-0.01	0.11
Age -> SD Day 14	0.01	0.01	1.66	0.10		-0.00	0.02
Gender -> SD Day 14	0.27	0.16	1.65	0.10		-0.05	0.59
Education -> SD Day 14	0.03	0.07	0.45	0.65		-0.11	0.17
Religiosity -> SD Day 14	0.01	0.04	0.34	0.73		-0.07	0.10
<hr/> <i>Effects</i> <hr/>							
Direct	0.42	0.05	7.75	< .001		0.31	0.52
Indirect	0.04	0.03				-0.01	0.11
Total	0.46	0.06	8.25	< .001		.35	.57

Based on 5000 bootstrap samples

### Discussion

This project has yielded numerous interesting findings. One such finding is that gratitude exercises appear to cause a measurable change in societal discontent. This is the first time that societal discontent has been experimentally manipulated. While past efforts have focused on manipulating salience, this experiment utilised a self-persuasion exercise in combination with an affective experience, gratitude, to lower levels of societal discontent. This exercise resulted in a small effect size. However, considering that this was a brief intervention over a two-week period, the magnitude of change was substantial. Previous research has suggested this construct to be relatively stable and unamenable to change over a short period (van der

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Bes, 2017). As a novel approach, this experiment provides preliminary evidence of how a conventionally individual construct can be applied to shift collective perceptions.

Another interesting finding is the marginal effect demonstrated when analysing whether blame exercise predicts societal discontent. There is not significant evidence that the blame exercise causes a change in societal discontent. Owing to the small sample size, this was an underpowered study. If the sample size were larger, this effect could have reached significance with adequate power. Similarly, adequate power would allow the alternative hypothesis to be effectively rejected in favour of the null hypothesis. Rather than fixating on the p-value, we consider this weak evidence that blame behaviour can influence levels of societal discontent. Moreover, this study was conducted in a society where discontent is high, and has been high for many years. There is a distinct possibility that this context provides a ceiling effect if blame behaviour is already high. That is, the effect of a brief blame exercise is negligible compared to a widespread societal norm. While there is no direct evidence of this, we once again refer to the fact that media consumption has been associated with levels of societal discontent (van der Bles, 2018). To mimic the language of our manipulation, the media solely deals with predominantly negative things in society and who is responsible for them. In sum, the neutral condition could be an inadequate comparison if blame behaviour is embedded in societal norms.

When considering Alienation in Society, the mediation results and exploratory analysis indicated that alienation in society is related to societal discontent. However, this is the first time that Alienation in Society has been measured. That is, the disconnection of one's group from the broader societal group has not been studied in this manner. While the Feeling Heard scale was established as an individual measurement, this project made the first steps towards measuring this construct at the group level. This novel approach proved fruitful, with scales displaying excellent reliability and neatly loaded onto two distinct factors comprising

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the initial subscales. Yet these scales are invalidated and the mediation findings are not strong effects. We would instead suggest that our analysis highlights a relationship between Alienation in Society and Societal Discontent within this dataset. While this paper does not clearly elucidate this relationship, the groundwork has been provided to begin understanding how Alienation in Society might be related to collective phenomena such as societal discontent.

The qualitative element of this study allows us to see what participants identify as positive or negative in society and who they attribute these things to. By doing so, we can understand how participants construct their sense of society and the state it is in. Moreover, the findings are the result of methodological triangulations which has been lacking in the field of social psychology (Ellemers, 2013). One major finding was that the participants focused on the same themes under both the experimental conditions. This is consistent with past research showing that there is no specific factor or negative theme in society that fuels discontent (van der Bles, 2017 & Gootjes, 2023). However, this study breaks new ground by identifying that participants do not focus on a specific theme as a positive.

Contrasts between the two conditions can largely be seen in the pattern of attributions. In the gratitude condition, there was inherent social focus. Participants identified positive connections in general and implicated themselves within this society with significantly greater use of 'we' and 'us' in comparison to the blame condition. Similarly, the health care system is equally relevant as an attribute. This is yet another positive connection embodied with an innate sense of 'care'. Even material elements such as technology were framed in their social context by allowing greater connection. Positives have also been attributed to people in general and broader societies, reflecting shared norms and moral values. In line with established theory, gratitude exercises have caused participants to identify positive connections with society (Algoe, 2012). Gratitude exercises led participants to feel less

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discontent because they constructed a society that was not only more positive but also featured a variety of positive relationships alongside shared norms and moral values. This society was one in which participants felt apart of and expressed that with a significantly greater use of 'we' and 'our' in comparison to the blame condition.

However, under the blame condition, a different sense of society was constructed. The blame condition led participants to detail a society that is characterised by differences and divisions where things go wrong and the fundamental institutions of that society, such as the government, media, and corporations are deemed to be the cause of such wrongs. Ineffective bureaucracy and the challenges of diversity and inclusion feature more prominently in the blame exercises. People also identify that they do not share norms and values with society. Many things are inaccessible to participants and others in society, furthering their sense of discontent. Given the power of the government to shape society through policy and legislation, it is not surprising that negative things in society are attributed to the government over other entities. Our analysis of these exercises offers a fresh perspective on how divergent factors fuel societal discontent. Through a collective affective experience, such as blame or gratitude, various factors can become embedded as a collective perception.

### **Limitations**

To interpret the findings of this study, it is important to weigh them, along with their limitations. First, the high rate of attrition led to a small sample size and resulted in a lack of power. This is a limitation when interpreting our quantitative findings. While qualitative analysis can triangulate our quantitative findings, the lack of power is still a fundamental shortcoming of this project. Further research with adequate power should be conducted to replicate the findings of the present study. Moreover, this study employed gratitude and blame in a novel manner. In doing so, there is the risk that we do not correctly understand

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what we have manipulated. Similarly, Alienation in Society is a new scale, and we may not be able to measure or fully understand this construct correctly. Hence, future research should establish the validity of the independent variable as well as the mediator. While this study did not rely on university students, it is still a WEIRD sample, and while often repeated, it is never a less significant shortcoming of social psychology research when it is based on a minority within the global population. This directly challenges the generalisability and applicability of the findings.

### **Future Directions**

When considering future research, the priority lies in addressing the limitations of this study through well-designed replication efforts. It would be advantageous to replicate this in a different societal context whereby societal discontent is lower and society is non-WEIRD. By following these recommendations, the findings of these studies can be replicated while addressing our concerns over societal norms around blame behaviour potentially contaminating the control condition. Furthermore, the generalisability of these findings can be tested.

On the topic of other contexts, this research could be applied in the field of organisation psychology around large organisations, such as businesses and universities. When research in social psychology is beginning to concern itself with the idea of 'high reliability organisations' (Haslam et al., 2022), reducing the level of discontent in an organisation that is deemed to be going in a bad direction could be beneficial and consequential to establish an organisation that functions effectively. Alongside this, further evidence for the role of gratitude or blame could be collected briefly by measuring the level of gratitude or blame towards an institution and testing if that level of gratitude/blame is predictive of discontent.

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As a concept, the Alienation in Society scale should be studied further to gain a greater understanding of what it is and how it relates to other psychological phenomena. This can be achieved through the standard process of establishing discriminant and convergent validity. Concepts such as individual alienation, perceived discrimination, perceived social support, social inclusion/exclusion, and solidarity can provide a basis for establishing such validities. In turn, the predictive validity of the scales could also be studied.

Finally, the affective experiences that forge and maintain society are understudied. Our findings shed light on how gratitude enables the emergence of a sense of 'we' ness. That is, gratitude allowed participants to identify their connections to society in a way that the blame condition did not. With 'we'-ness considered integral to the survival of interpersonal relationships (Cruwys et al., 2022), this is quite a consequential development on the collective level. Further research should explore this relationship further and consider other affective experiences, such as closely related awe.

## **Conclusions**

This research offers new insights into the dynamics of societal discontent, exploring the potential of gratitude and blame exercises to alter levels of societal discontent. Moreover, pioneering steps have been made in understanding the construct 'Alienation in Society'. The findings suggest that introducing gratitude can indeed mitigate societal discontent, even in short durations. While the blame exercises did not reach significance, they approached it. It is plausible that the already high baseline of blame behaviour in society may have influenced this outcome.



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Equally informative is the qualitative exploration of participants' perceptions of society, which emphasises the social focus in the gratitude condition and the contrasting division-focused narrative in the blame condition. These findings underscore the pivotal role that affective experiences play in shaping societal perceptions.

Yet, while these findings are substantial, it is critical to approach them with caution due to the inherent limitations of the study. The high attrition rate leading to an underpowered study and the utilisation of a WEIRD sample limits the generalisability of the results. Additionally, the novelty of some constructs, such as Alienation in Society, necessitates further validation in subsequent research.

In reflection, the implications of this research are relevant and applicable. Organisations, including businesses and universities, might harness the insights from this study to foster environments with reduced discontent, possibly enhancing overall productivity and cohesion. Moreover, the study laid down a foundation for further research into the impact of affective experiences on society and a more nuanced understanding of Alienation in Society. Future endeavours should prioritise replication in alternative contexts and explore the integration of affective experiences in relation to society itself, which remains a relatively under-researched area.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards:**

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This research involves human participants. All procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the University of Groningen BSS Faculty ethics committee.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data and Online Supplementary Materials will be made available alongside this manuscript in the University of Groningen's online repository. As well as that, it will be made available on the OSF.

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## Appendix A

### Manipulation

#### *Gratitude*

“There are many things in our society, both large and small, that are positive and that make us feel grateful to someone or something. Think back over the past week and write down on the

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lines below up to **three or five things in our society that are positive**. If possible, write down **who or what in our society you are grateful to for each of these.**”

*Blame*

“There are many things in our society, both large and small, that we might be threatened by or that cause problems. Think back over the past week and write down on the lines below up to **three or five problems in society**. If possible, think about and write down **who in our society is responsible for each problem.**”

**Appendix B****Measures***Societal Discontent***Societal Pessimism**

1. Which direction is Dutch society going according to you?  
(1- the wrong direction, 4 – stays the same, 7 – the right direction)

**Negative Emotions**

1. I feel shocked about the way things are going in society.
  2. I feel concerned when I think about the future of society.
  3. I am frustrated because society is not as it should be.
  4. I am afraid that things will go wrong in society.
- (7point scale, 1 – not at all, 7 – a lot)



## DISCONTENT, GRATITUDE, AND BLAME

***Alienation in Society.***

The next questions are about how you and people like you feel about power institutions in society.

For example, when I think about the most powerful institutions in society (the government, the justice system, the media, corporations, and universities)

**Perceived Understanding**

1. I feel they care about what people like me have to say.
2. I feel they listen to what people like me are saying.
3. I feel they understand the points of view of people like myself.
4. I feel they understand what people like me experience.
5. I feel they understand what life of people like me looks like

(7-point scale, 1- not at all, 7 – a lot)

The following questions are about how you and people like you are seen and treated in society.

**Misrecognition**

1. I think people like me are excluded in society.
2. I think society thinks positively about people like me.
3. People like me are treated with respect in society.
4. People like me are treated unfairly in society.
5. I think the value of what people like me do is recognised in society.
6. I think people like me are viewed negatively in society

(7-point scale, 1- not at all, 7 – a lot)

***Religiosity***

Regardless of whether you belong to a particular religion, how religious would you say you are?

(10-point scale, 1- not at all religious, 10 – very religious)