Understanding collective discontent: A social psychological approach to measuring Zeitgeist

Anne Marthe van der Bles
Tom Postmes
& Rob Meijer

University of Groningen
I

Concrete experiences, personal comparisons

my life

Can be independent

we

Shared reality, group-based cognition and emotions, norms

society

Can be independent
Our approach:

Zeitgeist = a collective global evaluation of the state of society
C-level

Z

Crime
Immigration
Employment
Recession
Inequality
Etc.

Collective level
Personal level
C-level: “Violence is a national problem in the U.S.”

P-level: “I regularly encounter violent behavior in the streets.”
Three studies

- **Study 1: 176 Dutch students**
  - $M_{age} = 21.13$; age range: 17-50 years; 126 women/50 men

- **Study 2: 255 Dutch general public (panel data)**
  - $M_{age} = 49.5$; age range: 18-80 years; 109 women/146 men

- **Study 3: 287 Americans, general public (mTurk)**
  - $M_{age} = 34.7$; age range: 18-82 years; 167 women/120 men
Results:
More negative about collective life

Study 1 - mean difference: $F(1,165) = 261.47, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .61$

Results: Factor analyses show support for Z
Results: 
**Predictive validity**

"Crime in the Netherlands strongly increased in 2011" 

\[ Z \rightarrow \begin{align*} 
\text{Personal Factor 1} & \rightarrow -.03 \\
\text{Personal Factor 2} & \rightarrow .05 
\end{align*} \]

\[ R^2 = .41, F(3, 244) = 56.17, p < .001 \]

Summary

- More negative about collective life
- General support for Z
- Z predicted interpretation of news
Future research

- Country-level differences
- Discussion
- Media & education
- Voting
- News
• Cross-national study: 28 countries

In collaboration with Jolanda Jetten, Tom Postmes, Ali Teymoori, et al.
• Research during last election in the Netherlands (March 2015)

In collaboration with Tom Postmes, Babet Kanis, Simon Otjes
- Zeitgeist in Social Psychology
- Discussions in a social network

In collaboration with Felicity Turner & Tom Postmes
Thank you for your attention

Contact: a.m.van.der.bles@rug.nl