

# Societal pessimism in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands

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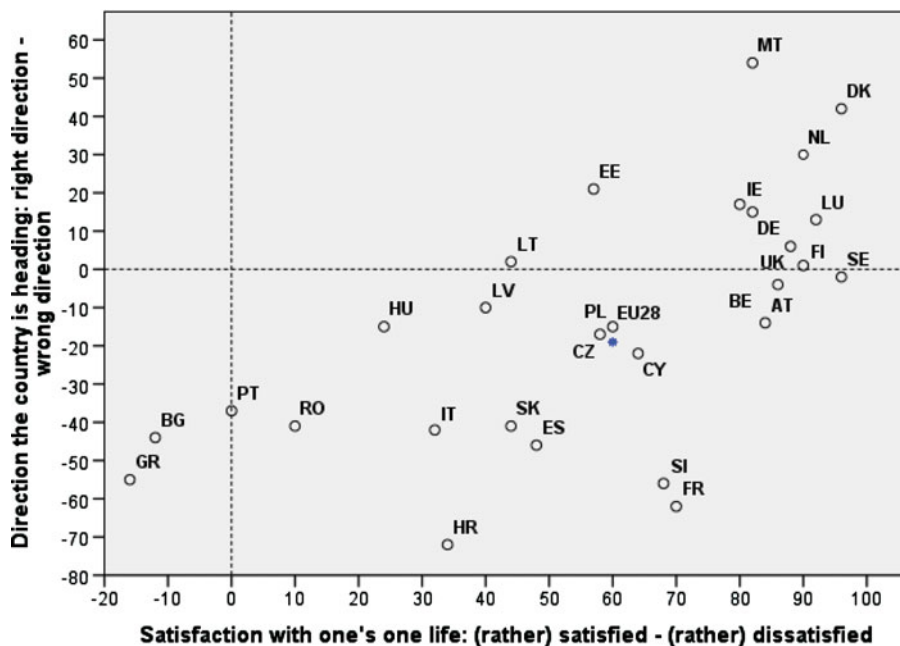
## **Abstract**

This paper starts out with a theoretical argument, based on panel data, that public mood in general and societal pessimism in particular should be measured from an explicitly temporal perspective. Next, based on a survey among more than 200 Japanese students and a wide array of existing (longitudinal) data sources in three different languages and covering several decades it is shown that public mood in three quite different countries – first and foremost Japan, but also the United States and The Netherlands – is quite apprehensive. In all these three countries societal pessimism can be observed during the past quarter century. Finally, utilizing a MDSD approach a few possible tentative explanations for this observed pessimism are sought.

## **1. Societal pessimism**

In quite a lot of countries, especially Western countries, the public appears to be apprehensive about the future. Europe is ‘in decline’, Japan has already finished its second so-called ‘lost decade’, and for many the ‘American dream’ is slowly but surely fading away. This ‘cultural pessimism’ (Bennett, 2001; Verbrugge, 2004) has, of course, already been discussed by a great number of writers and scholars (Bauman, 2013; Beck, 1992; Taylor, 1991), although they have often used somewhat different terminology – such as societal uneasiness, discontent, or pessimism – to describe what is essentially the same phenomenon. Societal pessimism has been defined as ‘A sentiment among citizens that their society is in decline’ (Steenvoorden, 2015). While in many countries people are rather pessimistic about the future of their country and the wellbeing of future generations – in seven out of eight European countries surveyed more than two-thirds of the public are dissatisfied about the direction their country is heading<sup>1</sup> – people are at the same time, overall, satisfied with their own lives. This well-known paradox (Eckersley, 2000; Eckersley, 2013; Kroll and Delhey, 2013) is illustrated in Figure 1.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pewglobal.org/2013/05/13/chapter-1-dispirited-over-national-conditions/>



**Figure 1.** Satisfaction with own life and the direction the country is heading, population of 15 years and older, 2014, balance of positive and negative opinions (%)

Source: Eurobarometer 81.4 ([http://www.gesis.org/index.php?id=10324&tx\\_eurobarometer\\_pi1\[vol\]=10324&tx\\_eurobarometer\\_pi1\[pos1\]=192](http://www.gesis.org/index.php?id=10324&tx_eurobarometer_pi1[vol]=10324&tx_eurobarometer_pi1[pos1]=192)).

Most European countries fall into the lower right quadrant: citizens are, overall, satisfied with their own lives but worried about the direction their country is heading. It is only in a minority of European countries that those who believe their country is heading in the right direction outnumber those who believe this not to be true; the most positive being the Maltese.

This article has three main objectives. First, utilizing a wide array of (original language) data sources, a longitudinal and comparative empirical description will be provided with regard to (developments in) societal pessimism in three Western countries: Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands. Second, it will be argued, from a methodological point of view, that societal pessimism should be measured using explicitly *temporally* formulated questions. Third, a few tentative explanations will be given for the developments in societal pessimism and the remarkable discrepancy between individual optimism and societal pessimism that is observed in all the investigated countries.

The literature with regard to public mood in general and societal pessimism in particular is new and still developing (Steenvoorden, 2015). Using many different data sources, this article tries to provide the empirical basis that can be used to

develop a sound conceptual framework. Theoretical reflections will therefore be limited. Databases such as EBSCO, Google Scholar, and JSTOR have of course been searched using terms such as ‘public mood’ and ‘societal pessimism’, but the results have been quite limited. Therefore, the literature review and conceptual framework to be found in this article will, unfortunately, necessarily have to be relatively weak and underdeveloped at this stage.

We will look at how the Japanese, Americans, and Dutch perceive the future in general. Are they hopeful? Or do they fear that the ‘best years’ have already passed and that a gloomy future is all that is left? In this paper, we will investigate this general ‘fear for the future’ based on a most different systems design (MDSD) (Faure, 1994) comparing public opinion on this matter in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands. Does a general ‘fear for the future’ exist in these three countries? What can longitudinal data tell us about the history of this anxiety? And what (fundamental) causes can perhaps explain this ‘future fear’? And do we observe ‘future fear’ in three countries as (culturally) different as Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands?

Research into subjective wellbeing (happiness) is overwhelmingly focused on what could be called ‘general wellbeing’ or ‘global life satisfaction’ (Kahneman and Krueger, 2006). Instead of asking how well off one is in different areas of one’s life (such as health, relationships, financially), respondents are usually asked something akin to the following question: ‘All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole these days?’

Similarly, as far as hope for (or fear of) the future is concerned, it is important to measure exactly such a ‘general feeling’ when measuring ‘societal pessimism’. A general evaluation that can be measured for example with questions such as ‘All things considered, how hopeful are you about the future of your country [the country that you are living in]?’ or ‘Generally speaking, do you believe your country is heading in the right or wrong direction?’. Just as with ‘general subjective wellbeing’, the person answering such a question will have to vector in many aspects that are important for the future of his country (such as the state of the economy, national security, social cohesion, good governance, the environment). An important difference of course is that while ‘subjective wellbeing’ focuses on the present and the individual himself, what we may call ‘societal expectation’ or ‘general mood of the country’ asks a respondent to evaluate the future of the society in which he is living.

Contrary to ‘subjective well-being’, an established research community investigating public hope and fear with regard to the general future of a country does not exist (yet). Questions measuring this (important) aspect of public opinion unfortunately are not included in international surveys such as the International Social Survey Program (ISSP) or the World Values Survey (WVS). Therefore, in this paper, survey questions from different Japanese, American, and Dutch surveys have been brought together especially for this purpose. Inevitably, of course, this means that survey questions – if only because of differences in translations – and the survey methodology used do not exactly correspond.

**Table 1.** Satisfaction with one's own society among Japanese, Americans, and the Dutch (%)

	1995 agree	1995 disagree	2003 agree	2003 disagree	2013 agree	2013 disagree
<b>I would rather be a citizen of [country] than of any other country in the world</b>						
Japan	89	4	83	9	86	3
United States	91	3	90	3	– <sup>b</sup>	– <sup>b</sup>
The Netherlands	50	19	45	25	55	13
<b>Generally speaking, [country] is a better country than most other countries</b>						
Japan	84	5	76	7	85	3
United States	81	6	79	6	– <sup>b</sup>	– <sup>b</sup>
The Netherlands	46	27	43	25	51	15

Notes: <sup>a</sup> ISSP (1995, 2003, 2013) (<http://www.gesis.org/issp/modules/issp-modules-by-year/>).

<sup>b</sup> At the moment of writing the US data for 2013 is not yet (publicly) available.

## 2. Public mood in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands

### *Compared to other countries*

Before turning our eye to the past and future, we will first look at the present. How satisfied are the Japanese, Americans, and Dutch with their societies *at this moment*?

In general, in all three countries considerably more people agree than disagree when asked if they would rather be a citizen of their own country than any other country in the world or if their own country is better than most other countries (table 1). Americans are the most proud and satisfied. Only 3% of all Americans would rather be a citizen of another country, while 90% would not want to change their citizenship. Japanese are almost as proud and satisfied with their country. The Dutch on the other hand are far less content with their own country compared with the Americans<sup>2</sup> and Japanese.<sup>3</sup> But, still, also in The Netherlands those who are satisfied are at least twice or even thrice as numerous as those who are not.

<sup>2</sup> One explanation may be that in The Netherlands nationalism and even patriotism is rather frowned upon, and while American and Japanese schoolchildren are taught in school to take a sense of pride in their country, the Dutch even lack a tradition like Independence Day which celebrates the founding of their country.

<sup>3</sup> In 2014, 76% of the Japanese population for example agreed that it is necessary to teach schoolchildren to be patriotic, [http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h25/h25-shakai/3\\_chosahyo.html](http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h25/h25-shakai/3_chosahyo.html). Without a doubt, this figure would be much lower in The Netherlands.

Finally, these figures appear to be rather stable through time. Even the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble in 1991 was not able to reduce the satisfaction Japanese have with their own country *when compared to other countries*. However, when we look at the general public mood from a temporal instead of a spatial perspective we see a dramatically different picture, and since the public mood in a country is, as we will see, more dependent on ‘how things are going’ in one’s own country instead of how well other countries are performing compared to one’s own country, the focus in the remainder of this article will be on the temporal perspective. With this focus, a contribution is also made to the research agenda as recently proposed by Steenvoorden (2015) who stresses the importance of looking at the development of societal uneasiness *over time*.

#### *Compared to the past or projected into the future*

Interestingly, when asked to make a judgement about the general state of affairs in their country, *as compared to the past or projected into the future*, the Japanese, Americans, and Dutch all suddenly become quite pessimistic. Unfortunately, as far as we know, an international survey covering all these three countries including ‘public mood’ questions from a ‘temporal perspective’ does not exist. Therefore, we collected, translated, and analysed various recent national surveys among the general adult population<sup>4</sup> that do include these kinds of questions (Table 2). Of course, the surveys themselves differ as to sample size, and, more importantly, also as far as the exact wording of the survey questions are concerned. Each general public mood question however had to have some ‘temporal’ element, explicitly or implicitly, to be included in our analysis. For example, by asking the respondent to imagine how his country will be doing *in the future* (Japan), how well things *are going* (United States), or by asking if the country is *heading in the right or wrong direction* (The Netherlands).

Table 2 illustrates that viewed from a temporal instead of spatial perspective (Table 1) the public mood in all three countries is reversed completely: those who are fearful of the future outnumber those who do not. If we limit ourselves to the most recent figures, and keeping in mind that the survey questions are of course not exactly the same, the Americans and Japanese appear to be somewhat more apprehensive about the future than the Dutch. More important however is the observation that in all three, in many aspects quite different, countries, people are, *at the same time*, satisfied with their own country from a spatial perspective but dissatisfied from a temporal perspective. We could summarize this sentiment as follows: ‘We are heading in the wrong direction but we are still fine compared to most other countries.’

What does this imply for survey questions that ask respondents to make a judgement about society in general without implying a spatial or temporal perspective? We could assume, considering the results in Tables 1 and 2, that the results will depend strongly on whether a respondent chooses to interpret such a ‘neutral’ question from

<sup>4</sup> With one exception, the surveys were conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Health and Welfare among young persons (aged 15–39).

**Table 2.** *Hope and fear for the future among Japanese, Americans, and the Dutch*

Country, source, year and sample population	<i>n</i>	Survey question	% hopeful	% fearful	% neutral
<b>Japan</b>					
Cabinet Office, 2014, Japanese aged 20 years or older <sup>a</sup>	1,826	Is the future for Japan, 50 years from now, bright or dark?	7	60	33
Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2013, young Japanese aged 15–39 <sup>b</sup>	3,133	Has Japan a bright future?	19	45	36
<b>United States</b>					
Gallup, 2014, Americans aged 18 years or older <sup>c</sup>	1,028	In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time?	25	74	1
Pew Research, 2013, Americans aged 18 years or older <sup>d</sup>	2,003	All in all, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in this country today?	21	75	3
<b>The Netherlands</b>					
The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, Dutch aged 18 years or older <sup>e</sup>	1,093	Considering everything, do you believe that The Netherlands is heading in the right or wrong direction?	35	55	11
The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, Dutch aged 18 years or older <sup>f</sup>	2,952	We would finally like to know how you believe, everything considered, things are going in The Netherlands. Considering everything, do you believe that The Netherlands is heading in the right or wrong direction?	34	58	8

Notes: <sup>a</sup> <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-shourai/gairyaku.pdf>, first question.

<sup>b</sup> <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/file/04-Houdouhappyou-12605000-Seisakutoukatsukan-Seisakuhyoukakanshitsu/0000022200.pdf>, p. 7.

<sup>c</sup> <http://www.gallup.com/poll/169295/satisfaction-direction-remains.aspx>.

<sup>d</sup> <http://www.people-press.org/files/legacy-pdf/12-3-2013%20APW%20VI.pdf>.

<sup>e</sup> [http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2014/Burgerperspectieven\\_2014\\_4](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2014/Burgerperspectieven_2014_4).

<sup>f</sup> [http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2014/Verschil\\_in\\_Nederland](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2014/Verschil_in_Nederland).

a temporal or spatial perspective. For both Japan and The Netherlands, we discovered national surveys that include a public mood question with regard to society in general that has been formulated (respectively in Japanese and Dutch) in a neutral manner (Table 3).

When asked a neutral question both in Japan and The Netherlands more people are satisfied than dissatisfied with society. Why? Maybe most Dutch and Japanese implicitly compare their societies with other societies instead of comparing their own society with its past when answering these neutral questions (hypothesis 1). That could explain the observed satisfaction since both Japanese and Dutch are quite happy to live in their respective countries *compared to other countries* (Table 1). Another explanation may be that while both the Dutch and Japanese do have the impression that, in general, society is heading in the wrong direction, and therefore satisfaction is indeed somewhat declining, they are, everything considered, *still satisfied* with contemporary society (hypothesis 2). Finally, it is also possible that people are lowering their expectations and are getting 'used' to a society that is gradually declining (hypothesis 3).

We tested these different hypotheses using Dutch panel data. Respondents in this panel were asked over a number of years to rate Dutch society for which the neutral question in Table 3 was used. The same respondents were also asked if in their opinion Dutch society in general had declined during the past year. We can therefore compare each respondent's rating of Dutch society (on a scale from 1 to 10) at the beginning of the year with their rating given at the end of the year to assess whether or not Dutch society is doing better or worse now compared to 12 months ago.

First, we will compare the results of the neutrally and temporally formulated questions. The results are quite interesting (Table 4). From 2008 until 2010, when asked, the Dutch consistently gave their society an average grade of 6.2. At the same time, however, about ten times as many Dutch citizens believed that, during the past year, society had worsened instead of improved. Hypothesis 2 is disproved because even though the Dutch on average do believe that society is worsening, the average 'grade' given to society is not getting any lower.

Therefore, the results of the temporally and neutrally formulated public mood questions do not seem to match. How is this possible? Our panel data fortunately give us an answer.

Because consistently (far) more respondents gave society by the end of the year a higher grade while at the same time answering that when looking back on last year Dutch society had overall declined than the other way around a difference between the results of 'neutrally' formulated public mood questions and temporally formulated 'backward looking' questions emerged. In other words, public mood questions in a retrospective temporal format ('looking back on last year') do not provide us with the same trends as questions formulated in a more neutral format asking respondents whether or not they are satisfied with society. This could be either because respondents, when giving grades or expressing their satisfaction, compare their society with other societies which, they may perceive, may very well also be worsening (hypothesis 1).

**Table 3.** Satisfaction with 'society' among Japanese and Dutch

Country, source, year, and sample population	<i>n</i>	Survey question	% satisfied	% dissatisfied	% neutral
<b>Japan</b>					
Cabinet Office, 2014, Japanese aged 20 years or older <sup>a</sup>	6,186	As far as current society in general is considered, are you satisfied or dissatisfied? <sup>b</sup>	61	39	1
<b>The Netherlands</b>					
The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, Dutch aged 18 years or older <sup>b</sup>	1,093	Could you tell us how satisfied you are with Dutch society? <sup>d</sup>	80	18	7

Notes: <sup>a</sup> [http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h25/h25-shakai/3\\_chosahyo.html](http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h25/h25-shakai/3_chosahyo.html).

<sup>b</sup>In Japanese: あなたは、現在の社会に全体として満足していますか。それとも、満足していませんか。

<sup>c</sup>[http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle\\_publicaties/Publicaties\\_2014/Burgerperspectieven\\_2014\\_4](http://www.scp.nl/Publicaties/Alle_publicaties/Publicaties_2014/Burgerperspectieven_2014_4).

<sup>d</sup>In Dutch: Kunt u aangeven hoe tevreden u bent met de Nederlandse samenleving?



**Table 4.** Temporal ('compared to last year') and neutral ('1–10 score') perspective with regard to Dutch society in general

	2008	2009	2010
Has society, when looking back on the past 12 months, improved, worsened or has it stayed the same?			
improved (%)	5	4	6
worsened (%)	43	45	44
stayed the same (%)	50	48	48
Could you tell us how satisfied you are with Dutch society? (yearly average grade)	6.2	6.2	6.2

Source: COB 2008–2010 ([https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu\\_onderzoek\\_burgerperspectieven\\_COB](https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu_onderzoek_burgerperspectieven_COB)).

**Table 5.** Temporal ('compared to last year') versus neutral ('1–10 score') perspective with regard to society in general (%)

		Looking back on last year	Score given by the end of the year minus score given at the beginning of the year				
			≤ -2	-1	0	1	2 ≥
Evaluation of Dutch society in general (n=1,899)	(much) worse	4 <sup>a</sup>	9	18	9	5	
	same	2	9	23	11	4	
	(much) better	1	1	2	1	1	

Note: <sup>a</sup> Reading example: 4% graded 'Dutch society' at the end of the year at least two points lower than at the beginning of the year and at the same time believed that society, looking back on last year, is (much) worse at the end compared to the beginning of that year.

Sources: COB (2008|1, 2009|1, and 2010|1) as well as the three panel studies at the end of each year. ([https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu\\_onderzoek\\_burgerperspectieven\\_COB](https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu_onderzoek_burgerperspectieven_COB))

There is, therefore, no need to give a lower grade. They may also gradually 'get used' to a worsening society (hypothesis 3). Of course, it could also be a combination of these two factors. We know for example that the difference between the outcomes in [Figure 1](#) (Dutch appearing to be mostly positive about the direction their society is heading) and [Table 4](#) (Dutch appearing to be mostly negative about the direction their society is heading) is at least partly caused by the fact that the Eurobarometer invites respondents to compare The Netherlands to other EU countries (spatial perspective) while the public mood question in the Coordination of Benefits (COB) questionnaire has an exclusively temporal perspective (hypothesis 1) and does not invite respondents to compare The Netherlands with other European countries (Dekker and Den Ridder, 2014).

We will not pursue this issue much further. However, we would like to note that we have approached (by telephone) some of the Dutch panel study respondents and asked them to explain why the grades they have given Dutch society in general do not seem to correspond with their own evaluation looking back on last year. Almost all respondents, when confronted with this contradiction, chose and gave priority to the answer they had given to the ‘looking back on last year question’ rather than the trend that emerged from the more neutrally formulated ‘grade questions’ at the beginning and end of the year. This seems to indicate that if we want to measure whether or not the public believes that society is going in the right or wrong direction, it is better to use questions formulated from an explicitly ‘temporal perspective’ instead of constructing *post hoc* a trend using questions in a ‘neutral format’. Not only are temporal questions more easy to interpret (the point of reference after all is included in the question itself and therefore a certainty), respondents themselves also see the answers given to these kind of questions as being closer to their actual opinion and feelings than the (usually rather flat) line that emerges when the dots of how satisfied people are with society are connected to form a trend.

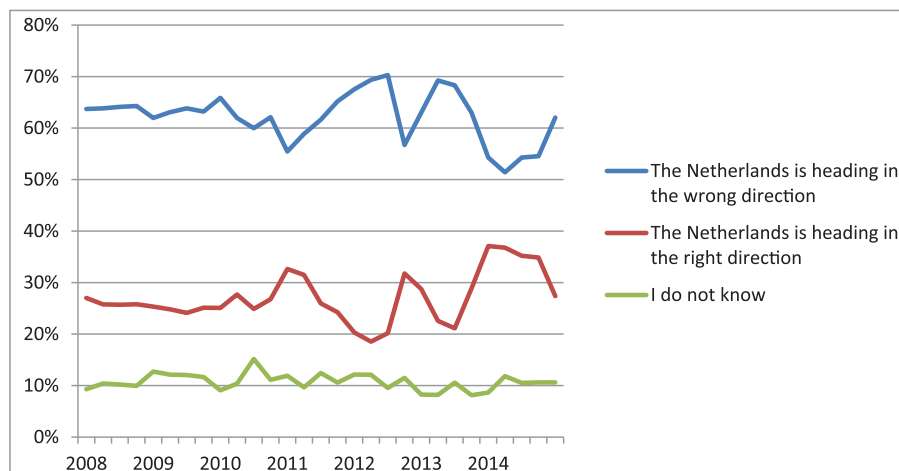
Therefore, in the second part of this paper public mood trends in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands will be constructed using survey questions that are explicitly formulated from such a temporal perspective. Finally, the second important conclusion that can be drawn from [Table 4](#) is that questions formulated from a neutral and therefore ‘present tense’ perspective will give us trendlines that present us with a too optimistic perception of the public mood because they can easily be interpreted as indicating that the public mood with regard to society is rather stable while at the same time people in fact do believe that ‘society is heading in the wrong direction’. This mistake for example has been made by Schmeets and Te Riele ([2014](#)). They claim that trust has not declined but has actually increased in The Netherlands during the past decades. However, this temporal claim is based on survey questions that are formulated in a neutral, present tense perspective, while, as we have seen, backward-looking questions do not only provide us with a different picture but also with a representation of reality that at least respondents themselves recognize as being more representative of their own opinion.

### **3. We are heading in the wrong direction**

How has the public mood been developing, from a temporal perspective, in three developed and wealthy but otherwise quite different countries over recent decades? Unfortunately, as far as we know, no international survey data are available that measure the public mood from a temporal perspective in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands. We will therefore have to use national data published in the local language to inform us about the development of the public mood in these three countries.

#### *The Netherlands*

Since 2008, The Netherlands Institute for Social Research has been monitoring public opinion in The Netherlands on a quarterly basis among 1,000 plus respondents



**Figure 2.** Public mood in The Netherlands (2008–14)

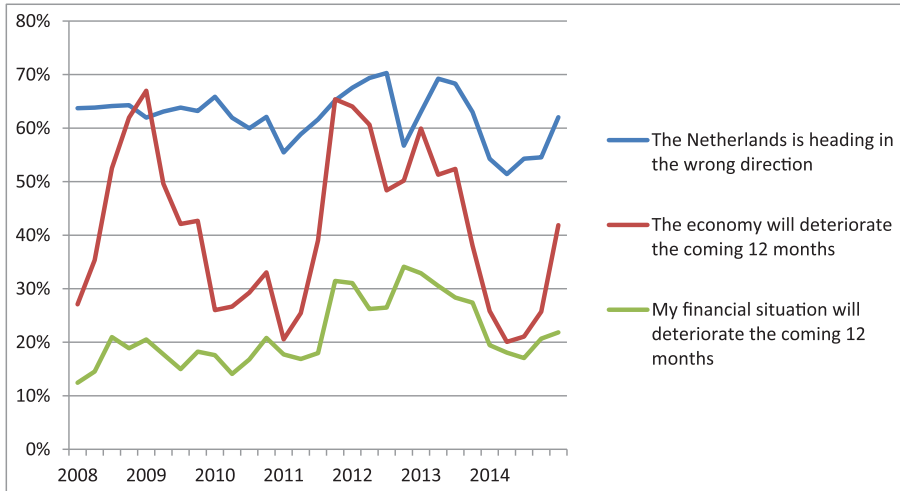
Source: COB (2008–2014,  $n=30,812$ ) ([https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu\\_onderzoek\\_burgerperspectieven\\_COB](https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Continu_onderzoek_burgerperspectieven_COB)).

aged 18 years or older. The questionnaire ends by first asking if, considering everything, Dutch society is heading in the right or wrong direction.<sup>5</sup> Respondents can choose between five answers: ‘(clearly) in the right direction’, ‘(clearly) in the wrong direction’, and ‘I do not know’. The final question is an open one, which asks respondents to explain why they believe Dutch society to be moving in the right or wrong direction. The public mood is quite pessimistic in The Netherlands for the whole period for which data are available (Figure 2). During these six years, a majority of the Dutch population is continuously convinced that Dutch society is heading in the wrong direction. The second observation to be made is that public mood in The Netherlands is remarkably stable: from 2008 until 2014 between 50% and 70% of the Dutch population indicate that ‘society is heading in the wrong direction’.

Economic expectations, on the other hand (Figure 3), are far more volatile. At the beginning of 2009, the public mood with regard to the economy was at its lowest: 67% believed the economy would get worse, while only two years later only 21% of the Dutch population was pessimistic with regard to the economy. In other words, the ‘economic mood’ in The Netherlands is far more volatile than the public mood in general.

As can be expected, there is a considerable correlation between the economic and public mood (0.64). Economic expectations therefore do influence the public mood in The Netherlands but only marginally. During 2011, economic expectations worsened from 21% of the Dutch believing the economy would deteriorate at the beginning of the year to 65% being pessimistic about the economy by the end of 2011. However, during

<sup>5</sup> In Dutch: ‘Vindt u dat het over het algemeen de verkeerde kant of de goede kant op gaat in Nederland?’



**Figure 3.** Public mood and concerns with regard to the economy and one's financial situation in The Netherlands  
 Source: COB ( $n=30.812$ ).

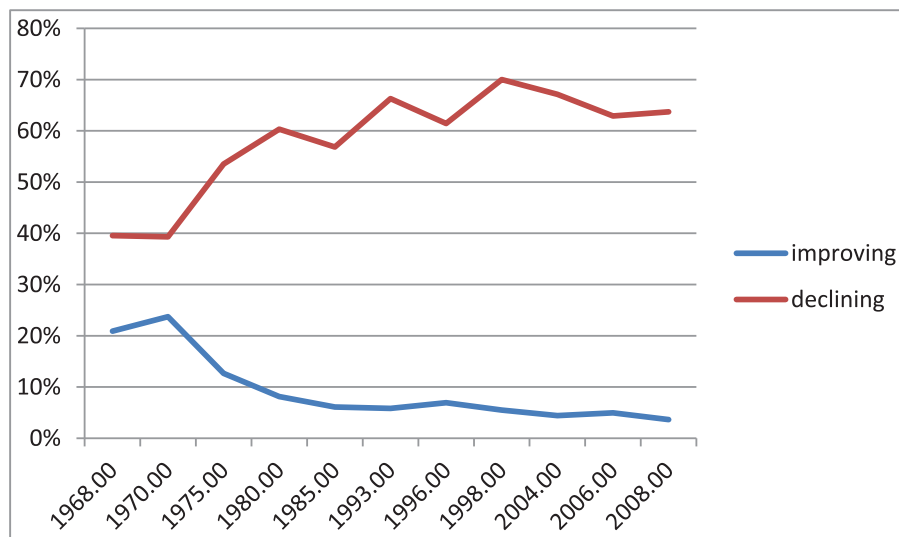
the same period, the public mood deteriorated by only 10 percentage points. Even when, at the beginning of 2011, two-thirds of the Dutch public was optimistic about the economy, a majority still believed society was heading in the wrong direction. In other words, public mood in The Netherlands, at least during the period measured, seems to be fundamentally pessimistic, and this is not just caused by the strength of the economy.

It therefore comes as no surprise that when we ask Dutch citizens, in an open question, to explain *why the country is heading in the wrong direction* non-economic factors dominate. Even more, an analysis of the answers written in 2009 shows that the state of the Dutch economy is one of the very few factors about which the Dutch are *relatively optimistic*. However, just like the Japanese and Americans, the Dutch are apprehensive about their future (Table 1). What then are they worried about? According to explanations given by the respondents themselves, the Dutch are especially worried about a decline in norms and values, criminality, and immigration. Healthcare, unemployment, and inequality between the rich and poor are also topics that concern a lot of people.

These Dutch anxieties are not new and they seem to have been increasing during the last decades. Since 1968, the following question has been asked regularly in surveys:

Some people believe that the understanding of behavior and morals in our country is steadily declining, others believe it is improving. What do you think?<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> In Dutch: 'Sommige mensen zijn van mening dat de opvattingen over gedrag en zeden in ons land steeds meer achteruit gaan, anderen vinden juist dat het er beter op wordt. Wat is uw mening hierover?'



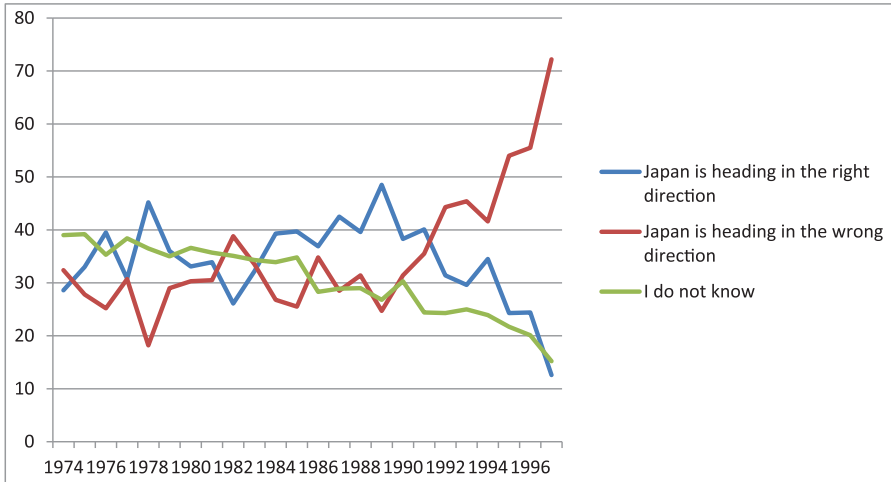
**Figure 4.** Concerns with regard to 'behavior and morals' in The Netherlands

Source: CV 1968–2008 ([https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeks\\_beschrijvingen/Culturele\\_veranderingen\\_in\\_Nederland\\_CV](https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeks_beschrijvingen/Culturele_veranderingen_in_Nederland_CV)).

At the beginning of this time series in 1968, already twice as many people in The Netherlands believed that 'behavior and morals' were on the decline in The Netherlands. Forty years later, 16 times as many people are pessimistic instead of optimistic as far as the development of the understanding of 'morals and values' in Dutch society are concerned.

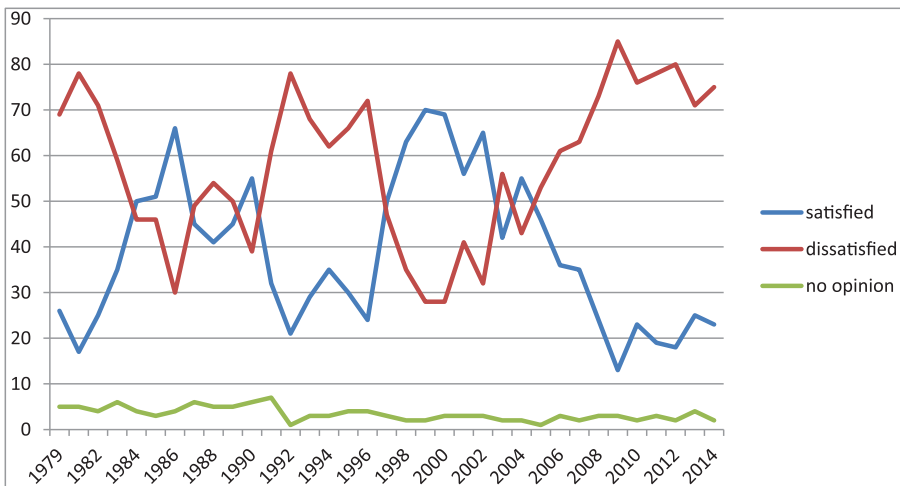
Again, this illustrates the importance of using temporal questions when measuring public mood and public anxiety because as we have seen at the same time the Dutch give their society an overall grade which is comparable to a B or B- grade in the United States: not very good but certainly still satisfactory. Indeed, at this moment and when compared with other societies, the Dutch are still relatively satisfied with their society. However, when we look at the public mood based on temporally oriented survey questions that focus on developments and the future we can discern a considerable amount of anxiety (Figure 4). Already since the end of the 1950s, the Dutch are quite pessimistic about their future (Dekker and Den Ridder, 2014). Moreover, as we have argued, when asked people indicate that they are worried about the future, even if they continue to grade society more or less the same.

It appears that, the more people are asked to look ahead, the more anxious they (and therefore the public mood in general) become. Even though in 2014 more than 60% of the Japanese are, all things considered, satisfied with their society (Table 2) at the same time 60% are anxious when asked what Japan will look like 50 years in the future (Table 1). We see the same pattern in The Netherlands. In a 1986 survey, the



**Figure 5.** Public mood in Japan (1974–1997)

Source: Japanese Cabinet Office 'social awareness' surveys, <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/index-sha.html>.



**Figure 6.** Public mood in the United States

Source: Gallup (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/149753/satisfaction-pdf.aspx>).

Dutch were asked 'what the country would look like in 2000' for a number of different categories. The answers were quite pessimistic.

Maybe this pessimistic outlook as far as the (far) future is concerned is well-grounded, or is it a part of Dutch culture, or perhaps more likely – since as we

**Table 6.** *In 2000, will the Dutch be more or less ... ?*

	less	more
Happy	35	7
Materialistic	53	11
Attached to their families	29	11
Enjoy their work	33	12
Kind	32	13
Criminal	7	66
Mentally ill	12	54

Source: CV (1986) ([https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte\\_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Culturele\\_veranderingen\\_in\\_Nederland\\_CV](https://www.scp.nl/Onderzoek/Bronnen/Beknopte_onderzoeksbeschrijvingen/Culturele_veranderingen_in_Nederland_CV)).

will see the same can be said about the Japanese – is it part of human nature in general?

### *Japan*

In Japan, the Cabinet Office asked a quite similar question in 1988. The Japanese were asked to imagine how their society would appear in the twenty-first century.<sup>7</sup> The Japanese indicated they worried about a society that would be getting older, lose its vitality, and be overtaken by developing countries. In Japan, the Cabinet Office has been measuring the public mood on a yearly basis among 10,000 Japanese aged 20 years and older since 1974. Initially, the following question (again from an explicitly temporal perspective) was used: *Do you think that Japan as a whole is moving in the right or wrong direction?*<sup>8</sup> Respondents could choose between three answers: ‘the right direction’, ‘the wrong direction’, or ‘I do not know’. Unfortunately, this time series was stopped in 1997, after which it was replaced by a series of questions asking the Japanese to indicate separately for 24 different fields (economic situation, culture, safety, etc.) whether they felt, considering the current situation, Japan was heading in the right or wrong direction. First, we will look at the 1974–97 time series.

As should be no surprise, public mood in Japan was optimistic and gradually rising until 1989 when the economic bubble burst. Until 1992, on average somewhat more Japanese were optimistic than pessimistic and in absolute figures in 1989 almost half of all Japanese thought that Japan was heading in the right direction outnumbering those who were pessimistic by a factor of two. However, even then, at its economic height, a quarter of all Japanese believed that the country was heading in the wrong direction, signalling that factors other than the economy were probably also important.

<sup>7</sup> <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/s62/S62-12-62-17.html>.

<sup>8</sup> 全体としては、日本は良い方向に進んでいると思いますか、悪い方向に進んでいると思いますか。

After 1989, the public mood in Japan dramatically worsened until an absolute low is registered in 1997 when only 13% of the Japanese believed the country was moving in the right direction versus 72% who did not. Unfortunately, as mentioned, this time series has been discontinued after 1997. However, other similar indicators tell us that the pessimistic mood has continued since then. For example, from 1997 until 2014, on average, the Japanese mention twice as many ‘fields’ (such as ‘safety’, ‘the economy’, ‘culture’) that are moving in the wrong instead of the right direction, and, as mentioned in [Table 2](#), in 2014 60% of the Japanese answered that they believed that the future, 50 years from now, will be dark.

Finally, a small survey measuring public mood from a temporal perspective has been distributed during the spring of 2015 among 217 students aged 17–23 in Tokyo.<sup>9</sup> Thirty-one of them believed that, in general, Japan was heading in the right direction while 94 believed Japan to be heading in the wrong direction (the rest did not know). In other words, for every optimistic student there are more than three pessimists, again indicating that after the last official measurement in 1997 the public mood has probably remained dark.<sup>10</sup> Also, the number of students who have little or no hope for Japan’s future is about 66%, higher compared to those who have hope. As far as their own future is concerned, there are just as many optimistic as pessimistic students.

What are the Japanese most concerned about? From 1980 onwards, the Japanese are asked in a ‘social awareness survey’ to mention Japanese society’s strong and weak points. At first, the Japanese worry the most about the economy and (consumer) prices. Employment, working conditions and the social climate are also seen as problematic. After 1990, the natural environment is more and more seen as problematic, and, after 1996, besides the economic situation in general, many Japanese started to worry about the financial situation of the country. In 2007, food scandals (often originating from China) became another point of concern. Finally, in the latest 2014 survey, the three areas most often mentioned as ‘heading in the wrong direction’ are ‘international relations’ (mentioned by 38% of the Japanese) – not surprising considering recent territorial disputes with China and South Korea – the financial situation of the country (33%), and employment and working conditions (28%).<sup>11</sup>

At a first glance, the economy would seem to be a more important factor for determining the public mood in Japan as compared to The Netherlands. After the bursting of the bubble in 1989, public mood deteriorated quickly and has remained

<sup>9</sup> The author would like to thank professor Mariko Hirose, lecturer Hiroyuki Fujimaki and associate professor Toshiyuki Takagi of Tokai University, and professor Yoshihiro Shimodaira of Meisei University for their generous cooperation and assistance.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, it should be mentioned that these students are not representative of the whole of Japanese society and might very well be somewhat more pessimistic compared to the average Japanese citizen because Japanese students are quite free, a freedom that will usually end as soon as they graduate and start working.

<sup>11</sup> The students mentioned in the previous note are also worried about peace, the economic situation, and the ageing of society. A remarkable number of those who are optimistic point to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020 as a reason to be hopeful.



pessimistic ever since. However, a closer look at the data reveals a different picture. In the 1980s, for example, the economy is regularly and even more often (for example by 58% of the Japanese in 1982) mentioned as a problem, but the public mood then was not by any stretch as pessimistic compared to the 1990s. Also our first data point in 1974 seems to indicate differently. The year 1974 was the very first year in Japanese post-war history that a negative growth rate was recorded.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, during that year almost as many Japanese were optimistic as pessimistic about the direction the country was heading. Even more so, when asked in the same ‘social awareness survey’ of 1974 how hopeful they were about the future,<sup>13</sup> 61% said hopeful, more than twice the number of Japanese when compared to those who were not hopeful about the future (29%).

What can explain this fundamental optimism during the first post-war year of negative economic growth? Of course, this is a very difficult question to answer. One plausible explanation may be that even though Japan’s economy was faltering, Japan, at that time, was still recovering from the war and catching up with developed countries. When the bubble burst in the 1990s however, this ‘national goal’ was already accomplished while a clear new national goal was lacking. In 1989, when asked in the same survey what Japanese society would be looking like in the twenty-first century, 37% expected that new industrialized countries would be catching up while the Japanese economy would stagnate; 41% indicated that the number of elderly would increase reducing the vitality of Japan.

In 1984, a somewhat similar question was asked about Japanese society in the twenty-first century<sup>14</sup> in a different survey among 3,000 Japanese of 20 years or older.<sup>15</sup> The Japanese were afraid that twenty-first century society would be ‘dark’ (22%) instead of ‘light’ (12%), ‘hectic’ (43%) instead of ‘easy-going’ (7%), ‘cold’ (21%) instead of ‘warm’ (2%), and ‘unsafe’ (42%) instead of ‘safe’ (12%). Therefore, *even during a period when Japan was economically doing very well*, the Japanese were apprehensive about the (far) future, at least as far as the more sociological aspects of society were concerned. Remarkably, with regard to the economy more Japanese believed that the twenty-first century would be rich (16%) than poor (12%). However, the fact that, compared to the other more ‘sociological’ categories, ‘rich’ and ‘poor’ were not chosen often seems to suggest that, also for Japanese, factors other than the economy seem to be quite important for determining the public mood.

### *The United States*

In both Japan and The Netherlands two institutions, respectively the Cabinet Office and The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, are mainly responsible for measuring the public mood. In the United States, a number of different (private)

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.stat.go.jp/english/data/handbook/co117.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> あなたは、日本の将来に、どの程度希望をもっていますか。この中ではどうでしょうか。

<sup>14</sup> それでは、これから20年くらい後(21世紀はじめ)の日本の社会は今と比べてどのようになっていると思いますか。この中から3つまで選んでください。

<sup>15</sup> <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/s58/S58-09-58-10.html>.

institutions measure the public mood regularly. These institutions use survey questions that are often framed slightly differently with significant results for the outcomes that are measured. When asked if America's *best years are 'still ahead'*<sup>16</sup>, or if one would *describe oneself* as optimistic or pessimistic about the long-term future of the country,<sup>17</sup> the arguably optimistic, hopeful and 'can-do' American attitude seems to shine through and overcome any anxiety about the future. This fundamental positive attitude, even a moral duty according to some (Popper, 2000), is of course important and of interest in and of itself but not the topic of this article. As far as the public mood is concerned, we are interested in how Americans *feel* about the future and how they *expect* it to be not how they *hope* that it will turn out or *should* be. It is therefore important, especially in case of the United States, to find a survey question that measures the mood of the general public (again of course from a temporal perspective) that focuses on how the public feels about and expects the future to turn out instead of triggering emotions that focus on hope or how the future should and could be changed.

From 1973 until 1997, Roper has regularly asked the following public mood question that, in its wording, is not only quite similar to the public mood questions used in this article for Japan and The Netherlands but is also formulated in a manner that focuses attention on feelings and expectations about the future instead of focusing on hope and the respondent himself:

Now I'd like to ask you how you feel about the future. Considering everything, would you say you feel generally optimistic about the future of our country, or generally pessimistic, or that you're uncertain about our country's future?

From 1973 until 1991, between 35% and 45% answered 'generally optimistic' while between 25% and 35% were 'generally pessimistic' during this period. However, after 1991 the number of pessimists grew rapidly and peaked in 1995 at above 60% returning in 1997, the last year this question was asked, to 51%, but still outnumbering those who were generally optimistic (27%) about the future, with a ratio of almost two to one.<sup>18</sup>

What happened after 1997? Unfortunately, this particular time series has been discontinued. Gallup has been asking in its surveys the following public mood question:

In general, are you satisfied with the way things are going in the United States at this time?

This question is neutral and does not appear to make any references to deep American cultural frames like 'the best years still being ahead' or 'being an optimistic person' that trigger feelings of 'hope', 'personal responsibility', or a 'can-do mentality'. However, compared to the other survey questions we have used so far, the 'temporal

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.aei.org/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/FinalDownload/DownloadId-3163BB1678DF608997696660FC32BFF8/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/-bowling-with-tocqueville\\_114139863726.pdf](http://www.aei.org/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/FinalDownload/DownloadId-3163BB1678DF608997696660FC32BFF8/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/-bowling-with-tocqueville_114139863726.pdf), p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/FinalDownload/DownloadId-C343B95977A194C058B94EA9BE28801B/505595C8-F4C3-4E94-BB4F-37435B71B314/public-perspective/ppscan/105/105046.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu/public-perspective/ppscan/86/86002.pdf>.

perspective' in this question is rather limited. No explicit reference to 'the future' is made, either in the question itself or the answers, the future is only indirectly hinted at in the phrase 'the way things are going'.

While, as expected, compared to the (more temporally formulated) Roper question, the absolute figures do differ, the basic trend seems to be rather similar. Just as with the Roper survey, after 1991 pessimism is growing while from 1995 onwards the public mood is improving again. Based on these two surveys, we can therefore reasonably conclude that after the year 2000 public mood darkened considerably in the United States. Nowadays, just as in Japan and The Netherlands, about 70% of the American population consider their country to be moving in the wrong direction.

#### 4. Why are we so anxious about our future?

It seems that, during the past quarter century, the public mood has been, in general and with few exceptions, quite depressed in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands. In all three countries, public opinion is apprehensive about the future; an anxiety that, since 1990, seems to be increasing gradually. Of course, these three countries have all experienced quite different historical trajectories. These societies and their culture in general are of course also quite different. Thus, while we could say, for example, that the 'Japanese are culturally apprehensive about their future', this does not provide us with an explanation for the American 'future anxiety' since Americans are usually regarded as being optimistic. And while we could for example point at the rising multicultural tensions within Dutch society, especially after 1990, as an explanation for an apprehensive Dutch public mood, Japan, which has very few immigrants, has experienced a similar increase in 'future anxiety'.

Of course, in each case possible country specific developments can be singled out as explanations for the depressed public mood. Without a doubt, the bursting of the Japanese economic bubble in 1991 is an important explanation for the stark increase in pessimism about the future in Japan. But Japan has experienced recessions before, for example the oil shock in the early seventies. Yet, in 1974, when asked if, 'in general', Japan was moving in the right or wrong direction almost as many Japanese answered 'the right direction' (29%) compared to 'the wrong direction' (32%).<sup>19</sup> Apparently, something more fundamental has changed during recent decades.

So what do post-1990 Japan, the United States and The Netherlands all have in common, despite their considerable cultural differences? All three countries are wealthy, modern, and developed countries. They do not have to catch up economically with other countries and there is also no longer a clear and dangerous common enemy (i.e. the former Soviet-Union) that has to be kept in check. In other words, the absence of a clear common national objective and the emergence of a multi-polar world may be one explanation why the Japanese, Americans, and Dutch have been so apprehensive the last quarter century about the direction their country is heading.

<sup>19</sup> <http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/s48/S49-02-48-14.html>.

Another important fundamental worldwide transformation that may explain pessimism about the future in all these three different countries is centralization of political power in general and globalization in particular. Psychological research has shown that a 'sense of control' increases subjective wellbeing (Verme, 2009). It therefore appears reasonable to expect that 'a sense of control' with regard to the actions of governments is also an important precondition for being satisfied and hopeful about the direction in which a country is heading, and indeed a recent international and comprehensive study has (again) shown that citizens of smaller municipalities tend to be more satisfied with their (local) governments (Denters *et al.*, 2014).

Globalization, as is often stated (Barber, 2013; Habermas, 1999) is weakening the nation state. At the same time, since the 1990s a process of municipal mergers in both Japan and The Netherlands and a, compared to the individual states, more and more powerful federal government in The United States (Zimmerman, 2009) have perhaps produced a frame of mind in the citizens of all these three countries that they are less and less in control. Because of differences in size, compared to their municipal governments, citizens, of course, have relatively less influence over their federal or national governments compared to their municipalities (Dahl and Tufte, 1973). Therefore, when municipal governments or state governments merge or their prerogatives are encroached upon by the federal government or when the state itself is becoming weaker due to globalization in general and the emergence of supranational structures, people feel less and less in control over their country and, as a considerable amount of research has substantiated, when people feel that they are no longer in control over their own future they become apprehensive and anxious (Abouserie, 1994; Barling and Kelloway, 1996; Rapee *et al.* 1996).

Indeed, in all three countries people are worried about the direction their country is heading but, at the same time, they are far less worried about how they and their families (entities about which they of course are much more in control) are doing themselves. The Dutch for example are considerably less pessimistic as far as their own financial situation is concerned when compared to the general economic outlook for the whole country (Figure 3). This apparently paradoxical outcome has been observed in other countries as well, as Figure 1 and Table 7 both clearly illustrate.

The percentage of people who are fearful about their *own future*, in all three countries, never exceeds 30%, less than half compared to those who are worried about the future of their country. As Figure 7 illustrates for Japan, this pattern is very stable through time.

One would therefore expect, if a sense of control is so important in combating public worries, that in all these three countries local governments would be more appreciated than the higher levels of government, and indeed this is the case.

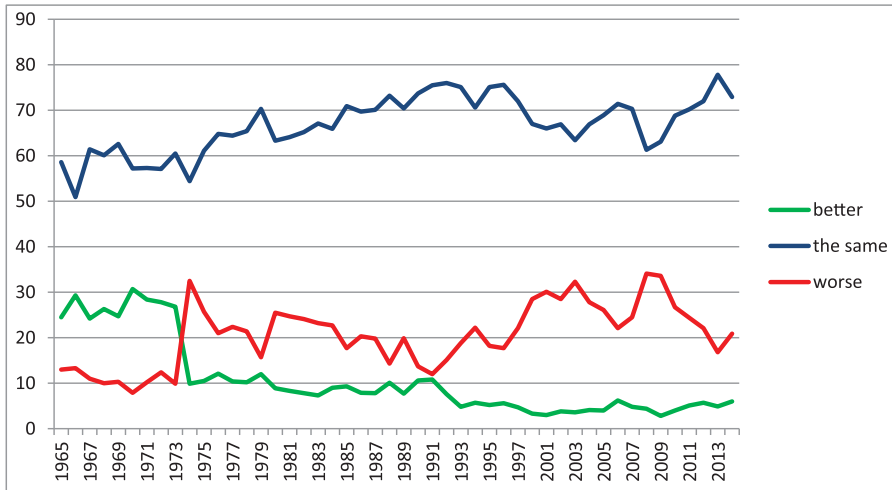
If government is perceived as 'far away' and uncontrollable, people are less inclined to have a favourable view and this, we might expect, will increase anxiety levels especially when clear national objectives (like defending the country against a possible attack by the Soviet Union during the Cold War) are lacking. Because, over the last few decades,

**Table 7.** Individual hope and fear about the future among Japanese, Americans and the Dutch

Country, source, year and sample population	<i>n</i>	survey question	% hopeful	% fearful	% neutral
<b>Japan</b>					
Cabinet Office, 2014, Japanese aged 20 years or older <sup>a</sup>	6,254	Do you think your (family's) life will be getting better or worse?	8.9	26.8	64.3
JGSS, 2010, 2010, Japanese aged 20–89 years <sup>b</sup>	2,496	The future seems <i>to me</i> to be hopeless, and I can't believe that things are changing for the better.	38	13.9	48.1
<b>United States</b>					
Gallup, 2012, Americans aged 18 or older ( <a href="http://www.gallup.com/poll/159698/americans-optimistic-life-2013.aspx">http://www.gallup.com/poll/159698/americans-optimistic-life-2013.aspx</a> )	1,025	Looking ahead to next year, are you optimistic or pessimistic about how you and your family will do in 2013?	69	27	5
<b>The Netherlands</b>					
The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, Dutch aged 18 or older	1,093	What are your expectations for the coming 12 months as far as your own financial situation is concerned?	13	20	61

Notes: <sup>a</sup> [http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-life/3\\_chosahyo.html](http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-life/3_chosahyo.html), eighth question.

<sup>b</sup> [http://jgss.daishodai.ac.jp/english/surveys/sur\\_frequency/JGSS-2010\\_FrequencyTables.html](http://jgss.daishodai.ac.jp/english/surveys/sur_frequency/JGSS-2010_FrequencyTables.html).



**Figure 7.** Satisfaction with one's one life in Japan: How is your daily life compared to last year?

Source: Cabinet Office (1965–2014), [http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-life/3\\_chosahyo.html](http://survey.gov-online.go.jp/h26/h26-life/3_chosahyo.html), first question.

**Table 8.** Satisfaction with local, state, federal and supranational government among Japanese, Americans, and the Dutch

	Local	State	Federal (nation)	Supranational (EU)
<b>Japan</b>				
Trusts 'local or municipal government' or 'the Diet' <sup>a</sup>	40%		30%	
<b>United States</b>				
Favorable view of ... <sup>b</sup>	63%	57%	28%	
<b>The Netherlands</b>				
Grades for municipal, national and European parliaments <sup>c</sup>	6.1		5.3	4.8

Notes: <sup>a</sup> JGSS (2010).

<sup>b</sup>Pew Research, State Governments Viewed Favorably as Federal Rating Hits New Low, April 2013.

<sup>c</sup>The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 2014, Dutch aged 18 or older.

all the three countries have experienced globalization and centralization we might assume that this fundamental transformation, besides the end of the Cold War, might be one of the reasons for the societal pessimism observed nowadays in each of these three, in other aspects, quite different countries.

## 5. Conclusion

The three main conclusions of this article are as follows. First, societal pessimism – a sentiment among citizens that their society is in decline – should be measured using survey questions formulated from an explicitly temporal instead of spatial or neutral perspective. Compared to other countries, respondents usually are quite positive about their own country. However, when asked how their own country is developing and how it will look in the future, the mood darkens considerably in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands. This feeling of societal decline is very real, and respondents, when explicitly asked, prefer this judgement above the more positive evaluation of their own countries when compared to other countries. Therefore, when measuring societal pessimism, temporally formulated survey questions should be used.

Secondly, in Japan, the United States, and The Netherlands people are nowadays quite pessimistic about the direction in which their own country is heading. This concern is certainly related to economic circumstances but the economy does not appear to be the fundamental factor driving societal pessimism. At the same time, the Japanese, Americans, and Dutch are all much more positive about their own and their family's future.

Thirdly, this difference may be explained because people are more in control of their own lives and that of their family compared to the direction in which their country is developing. Considering that, especially during the last few decades, all three countries have experienced processes of globalization in general and political centralization in particular, one of the fundamental factors that may explain the current rise in societal pessimism may indeed be an ongoing process of globalization and centralization that may result in citizens of all these three countries feeling less and less in control.

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