I'm Happy, Hope You're Happy Too Examining the Different Dynamics of Individual Subjective Well-Being and View on Society

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Abstract While most empirical studies show stable and high levels of subjective well-being in Western societies, other studies have documented an apparently contradictory feeling of a loss of sense of community and high levels of discontent with the way society functions. Based on an analysis of the Social Cohesion Indicators survey (SCIF, Belgium), we demonstrate that subjective well-being and one's view on society are two distinct concepts. Both measurements are related, however, with some spill-over effects from individual well-being toward the assessment of society. Most notably, ethnocentrism does not have an impact on subjective well-being, but it has a strong negative impact on the view on society. Ethnocentrism has a strong effect on the distribution of discontent with society. We hypothesize that ethnocentric actors might still be satisfied with their own living conditions, but that they feel increasingly alienated from the culturally diverse society they live in.

Keywords Subjective well-being · Belgium · Ethnocentrism · Alienation · SCIF survey

1 Introduction

In recent years, various authors have argued that contemporary Western societies are confronted with a general cultural malaise among the population. Levels of generalized trust seem to be declining in some countries, and there is a concern about a lack of social cohesion and a loss of general social purpose (Lane 2001; Putnam 2000). Some authors have even argued that we are witnessing a general rise in discontent with the way contemporary societies are functioning (Sandel 1996). In countries like the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France and Belgium, acts of random violence are often portrayed as a symptom of this general malaise, and these countries have witnessed a number of mass mobilizations to protest against this form of violence (Furedi 1997).

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On a political level too, this form of discontent has manifested itself quite strongly. Populist and extreme right parties have gained ground in a couple of countries (Taggart 2000). Distrust, either toward the political system or toward other groups within society, has been identified as a very important voting motive for these parties (Hooghe et al. 2011). Apparently, at least some part of public opinion is so fed up with the ways their societies are being governed, that they prefer to cast a protest vote.

While there is quite some anecdotal evidence about the occurrence of this social malaise, from the point of view of subjective well-being studies, these complaints offer a challenge to the current state of knowledge. Lane (2001) has claimed that we are experiencing a “loss of happiness in market democracies”, but this bold claim is not supported at all by the available data on happiness and well-being. Systematic studies of subjective well-being and happiness in Western Europe have not identified any downward trend (Bjørnskov et al. 2008; Veenhoven 2007). In fact, even the opposite phenomenon is quite likely, as at least for a couple of countries, an upward trend with regard to general life satisfaction has been identified in recent decades. This trend, of course, makes the puzzle all the more intriguing. If Western populations apparently have become more satisfied with their life, why do they increasingly resort to casting protest votes and why do they voice their discontent with society? Why is there an apparently large audience for studies decrying the allegedly growing dissatisfaction in contemporary Western societies, if the studies documenting rising levels of happiness are correct? And even if we would be skeptical about the upward trend in subjective well-being, it is still very clear that subjective well-being levels are at least stable, and they certainly do not decline in a significant manner. Even in these circumstances, the puzzle remains that we do not see any objective grounds for the increasing political role of feelings of dissatisfaction with society.

To add to the puzzle, we know that on a country level, there tends to be a positive correlation between subjective well-being and political trust (Veenhoven 2009). In countries where citizens most readily express trust in their political institutions, the level of subjective well-being also tends to be higher (Hudson 2006; Newton 2007). Various reasons have been invoked to explain this positive correlation. On the one hand we can assume that government institutions delivering high quality services to the population also are able to increase the well-being of their citizens (Hudson 2006). A reverse causal logic, however, is just as likely: if citizens on average are trusting and satisfied with life in their communities, it becomes easier for government institutions to function in an effective manner (Catterberg and Moreno 2006).

While these studies at the country level show a positive correlation between subjective well-being and trust in the social system, this kind of relation should not be taken as self-evident at the individual level.

Not all that much studies are available, however on the individual level relation between individual well-being and the attitude toward society as a whole. A Dutch population survey has highlighted the fact that while most respondents in the Netherlands are quite satisfied with their own life experience, they do seem to be rather critical about the state of Dutch society. Even parents who are satisfied with the school their own children are attending, express doubts about the quality of the Dutch education system (Bijl et al. 2007).

The aim of the current article is to try to explain the discrepancy between and the different dynamics of individual subjective well-being, and the prevailing view on the functioning of the society one lives in. A rather naive assumption would be that the two attitudes should be closely related. After all, one would expect that respondents have a rather optimistic outlook on society if they live in a country where the aggregate level of subjective well-being is quite high. Accepting this intuitive logic would imply that the

rating of one's society should more or less equal the aggregate level of subjective well-being in that society.

Most available evidence, however, suggests that this is not the case. The Dutch study seems to indicate that high levels of subjective well-being can be combined with a negative outlook on the society one lives in. If subjective well-being and satisfaction with one's society would be two distinct concepts, this would allow us to solve an important apparent contradiction in the contemporary social science literature. High levels of subjective well-being (Kahneman et al. 2003) and happiness (Veenhoven 2010) can be combined with a negative view on society, as described in other studies (Putnam 2000; Lane 2001). If these measurements are distinct, it is theoretically possible that both measurements evolve in different manners in contemporary societies. In most of the literature, it is assumed that these two lines of investigation are contradictory or even mutually exclusive. But if both assessments can be combined independently from one another, the result could be that both attitudes actually coexist. That would shift the main research question. In that case we no longer have to argue whether the 'optimistic' or the 'pessimistic' is correct, but rather we have to try to explain the different dynamics of individual well-being and discontentment with society.

In the current article, we first want to ascertain what are the differences between subjective well-being and one's view on society. In a second step of the analysis, our aim is to investigate how we could explain different levels and distribution across the population of these two variables. The analysis will be based on recent Belgian survey data on subjective well-being.

2 Data and Methods

In order to investigate the relation between subjective well-being and one's perception of society, we will rely on the results of the Social Cohesion Indicators Survey, that was conducted in Belgium in 2009. The survey was conducted with the explicit goal to test and to validate social cohesion indicators (Social Cohesion Indicators in Flanders, or SCIF survey). In total 2,080 respondents took part in the survey, and the response analysis demonstrated that respondents are largely representative for the population. It has to be noted, however, that the survey was conducted only in one language (Dutch) and therefore remained limited to the Dutch speaking autonomous region in the north of Belgium (Hooghe et al. 2009). This region, however, is by far the largest of the Belgian federation, with some 5,800,000 inhabitants out of a total of 10,500,000.

Belgium is one of the smaller countries in Western Europe, it is a founding member of the European Union, and in most attitudinal surveys, it occupies a middle position. Trust and subjective well-being averages tend to be lower than in the Scandinavian countries or the Netherlands, but they are clearly and consistently higher than in France or the Southern European countries. As such, we have no reason to assume that Belgium would be a highly distinctive case for the European context (Veenhoven and Hagerty 2006).

In the survey, respondents were asked to indicate how "satisfied" they were with the following items in their life: health, leisure time, professional life, family life, social life, sexual life, the way democracy works in Belgium, and the kind of society we live in. For each item, respondents could indicate satisfaction on a 0 ("very dissatisfied") to 10 ("very satisfied") scale (Table 1).

Clearly, respondents are first of all satisfied with their family life, and this indicator obtains an average score of 8.24. For the five other indicators, differences remain limited,

Table 1 Subjective well-being indicators in Belgium

	Family life	Social life	Health	Sexual life	Professional	Leisure	Society	Democracy
All	8.24	7.77	7.45	7.32	7.29	7.29	5.56	5.07
Gender								
Women	8.15	7.74	7.28	7.27	7.20	7.20	5.46	5.19
Men	8.33	7.80	7.63	7.38	7.38	7.39	5.66	4.94
Age								
18–34	8.33	7.98	8.00	7.80	8.33	7.23	5.83	5.42
35–49	8.22	7.64	7.51	7.58	8.22	6.62	5.53	5.03
50–64	8.20	7.75	7.22	7.03	8.20	7.53	5.46	4.86
65+	8.17	7.70	6.89	6.50	8.17	8.00	5.31	4.88
Education								
Lower	7.93	7.40	6.66	6.40	6.66	7.62	5.27	4.80
Lower Sec.	8.20	7.79	7.23	7.08	6.89	7.37	5.46	5.02
Higher Sec	8.30	7.86	7.49	7.46	7.40	7.25	5.41	4.96
Higher Ed.	8.29	7.80	7.79	7.56	7.50	7.17	5.85	5.28

Subjective Well-Being scores (0–10 scale). Entries are mean scores per group. *Source* SCIF 2009 ($n = 2,080$)

although social life, health and sexual life receive somewhat higher scores than leisure time and professional life. If we have a look at the distribution of the scores across subgroups of the population, one can observe that gender differences remain very limited, but on average men score slightly higher on this scale than female respondents do. The strongest difference is that with regard to health (difference: .35), but it has to be kept in mind that the average age of female respondents was higher than that of male respondents, and this age difference largely explains the difference in health scores. The smallest differences between women and men are recorded with regard to social life and satisfaction with one's sexual life.

For most indicators, age differences remain limited. Only for health and sexual life, we can observe a sharp decline among the 65 + age group. On the other hand, this age group is very satisfied with one's leisure activities. Finally education level explains quite some difference, as the higher educated are much more satisfied with their health, their sexual life and their professional life.

3 Two Distinct Concepts

For the two social items toward the end of the battery, the main observation is that the average score is a massive two points lower than for the individual items. Respondents tend to be much more satisfied about their own private life, while they are quite skeptical about the society they live in and about the way democracy functions in their country. As such, the present results are in line with the results from the Dutch survey that was already quoted: while respondents are quite satisfied with their own living conditions, they still express doubts about the quality of the society they live in.

The figures reported in Table 1 suggest that the view on society tends to be more negative than the level of satisfaction with one's own life. We need a factor analysis,

Table 2 Factor analysis for subjective well-being and view on society

	Subjective well-being	View on society
Social life	.802	.095
Family life	.798	.090
Sexual life	.701	.093
Leisure time	.612	.068
Health	.566	.171
Professional life	.558	.183
Democracy in Belgium	.128	.907
The society we live in	.172	.901
Eigen value	2.83	1.73
Explained variance	35.3	21.6
Cronbach's α	.77	.81

Principal component analysis of subjective well-being scale, Varimax Rotation with Kaiser Normalization. Bold figures indicate that the item loads on that factor. SCIF survey 2009, $n = 2,080$

however, to ascertain, whether we can actually label this as two distinct attitudes. The factor analysis confirms that both attitudes should be distinguished. The principal component analysis clearly demonstrates two different factors, and the cross-loadings remain very limited (Table 2). For subjective well-being, the highest factor loads are obtained for social life, family life and sexual life. Health, and one's professional life score somewhat lower. The factor analysis offers compelling evidence that one's view on society is empirically distinct from subjective well-being.

In some of the recent literature, there has been a discussion on whether the measurement of subjective well-being is equivalent across various groups of the population (Blanchflower and Oswald 2008). Therefore we also compared the factor solution for various subgroups within the population, and it is striking to observe that the scale for subjective well-being proves to be one-dimensional for the various subgroups within the sample (Table 3). We do see however, that for women the scale is more consistently one-dimensional than it is for men, with a Cronbach's α of .81 among female respondents and .70 among male respondents. The ranking for the various items is identical for women and

Table 3 Factor analysis for subjective well-being

	Full sample	Gender		Age			
		Women	Men	18/34	35/49	50/64	65+
Social life	.794	.806	.782	.782	.778	.802	.793
Family life	.783	.797	.765	.781	.800	.812	.752
Sexual life	.687	.711	.656	.661	.757	.744	.608
Leisure time	.594	.622	.559	.593	.567	.668	.680
Health	.592	.612	.553	.553	.552	.628	.621
Professional life	.562	.592	.511	.529	.527	.603	.611
Eigen value	2.74	2.90	2.52	2.60	2.72	3.06	2.79
Explained variance	45.6	48.4	41.9	43.3	45.4	51.0	46.4
Cronbach's α	.77	.81	.70	.73	.74	.83	.79

Principal component analysis of the subjective well-being scale, for various subgroups, $n = 2080$. SCIF 2009

for men, and for both groups, social life and family life are clearly the main determinants of subjective well-being. For women, satisfaction with one's sexual and professional life receive a stronger factor loading than this is the case for men.

Comparing the age groups, it can be observed that the internal coherence of the scale is positively related to age, with the lowest Cronbach's α being recorded for the youngest age group. The highest Eigen value is recorded among the 50–64 age group. This implies that this age group tends to have the most coherent outlook toward life, with cumulative relations between the various topics of satisfaction. In general however, it can be observed that the factor loadings, and the rank order of the items are remarkably stable across groups, so we can assume that the structural characteristics of this scale tend to be equivalent across various groups within the population. As such we can be confident that the theoretical concept of subjective well-being is captured in a valid manner by these survey items.

4 Multivariate Analysis

The previous analysis has shown that subjective well-being and the view on society should be empirically distinguished, as they cannot be reduced to one latent factor. This implies that, in principle, it is possible to combine a high level of subjective well-being with a negative view on the society one lives in, or the other way around. That does not mean, however, that the two measurements are not related, as it could still be argued that subjective well-being will have an impact on the view actors have about society in general. In order to investigate this possibility we conduct a regression analysis, using the view of society as dependent variable and subjective well-being as independent variable. This allows us to assess the assumption that if actors are satisfied with their own life, they might generalize this feeling toward society as a whole. Self-evidently, other control variables that have been shown to have an effect on subjective well-being, like age, having a partner, gender, education and income level, too, need to be included in the multivariate model (Wrosch and Scheier 2003; Dolan et al. 2008; Blanchflower and Oswald 2008; Winkelmann 2009; Hooghe and Vanhoutte 2011). Attitudinal covariates too, were included in the model. Generalized trust, i.e., the expectation that other actors will behave in a trustworthy manner, is taken into account. Empirical research has shown that generalized trust enhances cooperation and communication between citizens, leading not only directly to higher levels of subjective well-being among those involved in this interaction process, but also indirectly by having a positive effect on objective quality-of-life indicators, and by the presence and availability of pure collective goods (Helliwell and Wang 2010). There is also an extensive literature demonstrating that an optimistic outlook toward life helps to create the conditions that are conducive to the development of subjective well-being, and some authors have even argued that optimism should be considered as one of the main determinants of well-being (Scheier and Carver 1992). The concept of ethnocentrism refers to a negative attitude toward outsider groups, that are seen as a potential threat to the culturally or economically dominant position of the own insider group. In the European context, the feeling of ethnocentrism mainly refers to a negative attitude toward immigrant groups in the population (Pettigrew and Meertens 1995).

Both subjective well-being and view on society have been calculated independently from another, as the Varimax rotation used in Table 2 would maximize the distance between the two measurements. To avoid this, we simply conducted two separate factor analyses.

Table 4 Explaining view on society

	Model I		Model II	
	B (SE)	β	B (SE)	β
Cte.	4.344		4.520	
Gender	.056 (.076)	.016	.113 (.082)	.032
Age	-.009 (.002)	-.088***	-.008 (.003)	-.072**
Education level	-.040 (.028)	-.035	-.017 (.031)	-.015
Income	-.000 (.000)	-.050*	-.000 (.000)	-.061*
Partner	.303 (.090)	.077**	-.005 (.104)	-.001
Number of children	-.021 (.037)	-.013	.035 (.039)	.023
Voluntary associations	-.036 (.021)	-.037	-.067 (.023)	-.071**
Religious practice	.139 (.055)	.056*	.115 (.064)	.042
Optimism	.219 (.046)	.106***	.039 (.055)	.018
Ethnocentrism	-.509 (.050)	-.244***	-.535 (.055)	-.257***
Generalized trust	.026 (.002)	.262***	.024 (.003)	.236***
Subjective well-being			.451 (.046)	.254***
Adj. r^2		.217		.278

Entries are the result of an ordinary least squares regression. Dependent variable: view on society (society and democracy). Source SCIF 2009, $n = 2,080$

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

A first model (Table 4) demonstrates that the effect of socio-economic background variables tends to remain limited. Older respondents have a somewhat more negative view on society, while we observe that having a partner is associated with a more positive outlook on society. Religious practice and membership of voluntary associations do not have an effect on the view on society. Attitudinal variables, on the other hand, prove to have a very strong effect, with mostly ethnocentrism (negative) and generalized trust (positive) standing out. Overall, this model is already quite powerful, with an explained variance of 22%.

Subsequently, in Model II we also introduce individual subjective well-being as an additional independent variable. The explained variance of this model rises substantially from 22 to 27%. This already implies that while the two attitudes we distinguished might not be identical and certainly cannot be reduced to one common factor, they are still closely related. In fact, subjective well-being becomes the single most important independent variable with a standardized regression coefficient of .25. Most other independent variables that were significant in Model I remain significant, although they tend to lose some of their statistical power. The only exceptions are optimism and having a partner. While these two variables were significant in Model I, they are rendered completely non-significant by including subjective well-being.¹ We can observe from the difference between the results of model I and model II that optimism as such does not have a direct impact on one's satisfaction with society. The effect of optimism is completely absorbed by individual well-being. This is important, as it suggests that one's view of society is not

¹ In an additional model, we investigated whether there is an interaction effect between, on the one hand individual subjective well-being, and on the other hand optimism or having a partner. Both interaction effects, however, were clearly non-significant.

just a reflection of a general feeling of optimism. Optimism might have an impact on the assessment of one's own living conditions, but taking this form of well-being into account, it does no longer have an independent effect on one's view on society.

The main thing to be learned from the analysis reported in Table 4, is that there is still a strong relation between subjective well-being and one's view on society. A positive assessment of one's own life tends to have a spill-over effect on one's view on society in general.

5 Different Dynamics

The previous analysis demonstrates that both assessments are related, but it still does not inform us on how we could explain the different dynamics of both measurements. To explore these dynamics, we will conduct two different regression analyses, one on subjective well-being and one on the view on society, to assess whether these two evaluations are determined by different background variables. Basically the same models are used as in Table 4, where we include well-established determinants of subjective well-being without any effort to build a fully comprehensive model for the two dependent variables.

Comparing the two models allows us to investigate the different dynamics of both variables. It has to be noted, of course, that this kind of regression analysis only informs us about possible differences in the slope of both variables, and it does not inform us about differences in the intercept or absolute level of the variables. First, we can observe there is no difference with regard to age. Older people have a more negative outlook, both on their own well-being as on society as a whole. Having a partner might be a first obvious culprit. While living together with a partner has a strong effect on subjective well-being, the effect on the view on society lies in the same direction but it remains somewhat more limited. This kind of relation seems again rather obvious, since we can expect that having a partner

Table 5 Explaining subjective well-being and view on society

	Model I: Subjective well being		Model II: View on society		Model III: View on society	
(Constant)	-.126		5.679		5.739	
Gender	-.091 (.049)	-.045	.056 (.078)	.016	.072 (.076)	.020
Age	-.005 (.002)	-.074*	-.012 (.003)	-.114***	-.009 (.003)	-.089***
Education level	-.014 (.018)	-.021	.019 (.028)	.016	-.043 (.028)	-.037
Income	.000 (.000)	.036	-.000 (.000)	-.048*	-.000 (.000)	-.049*
Partner	.643 (.059)	.285***	.254 (.093)	.064**	.304 (.090)	.077***
Children	-.094 (.023)	-.108***	-.003 (.039)	-.002	-.018 (.037)	-.011
Memberships	.035 (.014)	.065*	-.030 (.022)	-.032	-.035 (.021)	-.037
Religious practice	.028 (.038)	.018	.158 (.057)	.063**	.142 (.055)	.057**
Optimism	.307 (.031)	.257***	.263 (.048)	.128***	.218 (.047)	.106***
Ethnocentrism	-.021 (.033)	-.018			-.514 (.050)	-.247***
Generalized trust	.105 (.032)	.091**	.658 (.047)	.322***	.513 (.048)	.251***
Adj r^2		.189		.160		.206

Entries are the result of an ordinary least squares regression. Dependent variables: subjective well-being and view on society. $N = 2,080$, SCIF 2009

*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

Fig. 1 Predicted values for subjective well-being and view on society. Predicted values based on regression reported in Table 5. Respondents divided in eight equal groups depending on level of ethnocentrism

has a strong effect on the individual life situation of the respondent, while it will have only a limited effect on society as a whole. Somewhat counteracting this partner effect is the effect of generalized trust. Generalized trust has a very strong effect on the view on society, while its impact on subjective well-being remains limited. Again, this relation seems obvious, as generalized trust is meant to capture the trust in strangers in general, and it does not refer to private acquaintances.

The main difference in the two analyses is the effect of ethnocentrism, as is rendered clear by the comparison between Models II and III in Table 5. First, we observe (Model I) that ethnocentrism is not related at all to subjective well-being. The variable proves not to be significant at all. On the other hand, however, ethnocentrism has a very strong and significant negative impact on the view on society (Model III). Comparing models II (without ethnocentrism) and III (with ethnocentrism) shows that the inclusion of ethnocentrism lead to a rise in explained variance of 4.6%. It is clear therefore that including ethnocentrism contributes rather strongly to our understanding of respondents' view on society. Including ethnocentrism somewhat reduces the strength of most other independent variables. Ethnocentrism therefore proves to offer the main explanation for the different dynamics of both dependent variables: while ethnocentrism is not related at all to subjective well-being, it proves to be a key component in explaining respondents' view on society. This differential impact of ethnocentrism can also be visualized (Fig. 1).

In Figure 1 we plot the predicted values of subjective well-being and view on society for various groups of respondents. The predicted values are obtained as a result of the regression analysis reported in Table 5. Subsequently, respondents are divided in eight equal groups, depending on their level of ethnocentrism, ranging from the group with lowest levels of ethnocentrism to the group with the highest levels. It can be observed that even among the group with low levels of ethnocentrism, subjective well-being scores tend to be higher than the appreciation of the society one lives in. The current analysis does not offer us any information on how we could explain this observed difference between the levels of subjective well-being and satisfaction of society. As ethnocentrism increases, however, subjective well-being remains rather stable or decreases only slightly (and not in a significant manner as the multivariate analysis reported in Table 5 has demonstrated). The view on society, on the other hand, is considerably more negative among the group with high levels of ethnocentrism. Among the group with the highest levels of ethnocentrism, the difference between the two attitudes is twice as large as it is among the group with the lowest levels of ethnocentrism.

6 Discussion

From a sociological point of view, there is an apparent contradiction between the fact that most people in Belgium are quite satisfied with their own lives, but that this feeling does not extend toward society as a whole. For almost all subgroups and indicators, averages are well above 7 on a zero to ten scale, and the few exceptions on this rule can be readily explained. Lowly-educated respondents tend to be less satisfied about their professional life, while those above 65 are less satisfied with their health and their sexual life. If we would simply aggregate all these scores, the only sound conclusion would be that quality of life tends to be quite high in Belgium, as most people are happy about their family life, social and sexual life. Taking this mechanistic point of view, respondents in principle should be very happy with the ‘society they live in’, as this society is composed of people who, on average, have a rewarding and full life. This would be in line with the observation made by Veenhoven (2009) that there is not a conflict at all between individual well-being and the well-being of societies.

Nevertheless, it seems that while respondents in this Belgian survey are satisfied about their own lives, they have serious doubts about the society they live in. Both measurements seem to be quite distinct, and certainly cannot be reduced to one latent concept.

The current analysis on subjective well-being largely confirms the findings of previous studies. It has been shown that having a partner, and feelings of optimism and generalized trust have a strong positive effect on subjective well-being. Here we merely confirm previous studies, and there are not much new insights we can add to the literature. The main contribution of the present analysis, however, is that we can demonstrate that the dynamics of subjective well-being and one’s view of society are different to some extent. Given the data that are available, we cannot list all possible elements that could help us to explain the difference between both measurements. Others have already hinted at the different role of attribution in order to explain the apparent difference in the absolute level of both measurements. While the respondents in our survey might assume that they are mostly responsible themselves for the choices that lead to their subjective well-being, it is rather easy to attribute the things that go wrong in society to the decision of anonymous ‘others’. This different level of attribution, and hence of responsibility, might indeed play a role. It seems hard to imagine, however, that this would offer a full explanation. Not all elements of the subjective well-being scale are the result of independent choices by the respondent. Family life, e.g., by far is the most important item in this scale. To some point, one’s family life is the result of one’s own decision, if, e.g., one decides to enter a relation and to have children. But others do not make this kind of decision, like minors who still live with their parents. It also has to be noted that satisfaction with one’s health also loads quite strongly and unequivocally on this factor. Although personal life-style decisions have a strong impact on one’s health, it cannot be assumed that actors are fully responsible for the state of their physical health. If it is culturally legitimate to complain about the ‘state of society’, there is no reason to assume it would not be just as legitimate to complain about the state of one’s own health.

While the level of attribution of responsibility certainly will play a role in explaining the absolute level of both variables, other elements clearly are partly responsible for the different dynamics and the distribution of the variables across groups in society. In the current analysis, ethnocentrism stands out as one of the elements that has a huge impact on the view on society, while it is not related to subjective well-being. At first sight, it might seem strange that ethnocentrism has such a powerful effect on the view on society. After all, Belgium is not that diverse as a society. While there are concentrations of immigrants

in the major cities, most of the smaller cities and communities in the country still tend to be rather homogeneous, with a very limited presence of visible minorities. Still, even for people living in these communities, ethnocentrism seems to have a very powerful effect on the way they view society. The discontent with society that is present crystallizes on the presence of ethnic minorities, that are seen as the visible element of contemporary social change.

One of the reasons why ethnocentrism could have such a powerful effect is that respondents grossly overestimate the presence of ethnic minorities in the country. In reality it can be estimated that between 5 and 10% of the population of Belgium can be seen as part of an ethnic minority.² Ethnic tensions therefore tend to remain limited and they are concentrated in a small number of metropolitan areas. Respondents, however, consistently tend to overestimate the degree of ethnic diversity in the country. In the SCIF survey, the respondents were also asked to estimate the proportion of inhabitants of Belgium that were not born in the country. The average estimate was 28.6% of the population, which is a gross overestimation. So apparently, respondents have the idea that Belgian society is very diverse, and this could explain the close relationship between ethnocentrism and their view on society as a whole. Respondents imagine their communities to be much more diverse than they are in reality.

Ethnocentric individuals almost by define perceive the distance between what they perceive as 'others' and themselves as rather large. If they furthermore have the idea that more than a quarter of their society is composed of 'strangers', this might further increase their feeling of alienation toward society as a whole. While ethnocentric individuals can be quite happy with their own life, they do express discontent about society, a society they increasingly perceive as very diverse. The cultural capability to handle this kind of diversity, therefore, might be an important resource if one wants to achieve higher levels of content with the society individuals live in. As such, it can be assumed that ethnocentrism and the resulting negative relation between various ethnic groups among the population has an effect, not just on the quality of these intercultural relations, but also on the way individuals perceive their society as a whole.

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Appendix

See Appendix Table 6.

² Official figures are not available. On the one hand we know that 7% of the population does not have Belgian citizenship. Most of these inhabitants, however, originate from the neighbouring countries, and they are not perceived as 'visible' minorities. On the other hand, most of the immigrants originating from Mediterranean countries have by now acquired Belgian citizenship, so they are no longer present in the statistics. Experts' estimates on the presence of visible minorities therefore differ rather strongly, but they tend to oscillate between five and ten per cent of the population.

Table 6 Variables used in the analysis

		Mean	SD
Gender	1 = Female	0.516	0.250
Age	Range: 17–84	47.19	17.94
Education level	1–6 range: Low to University	3.52	1.55
Income	In €/month	2838	2060
Partner	Yes = 1	0.675	0.468
Number of children living at home	Count	0.755	1.091
Membership of voluntary associations	Count: Are you member of any voluntary associations?	1.91	1.85
Religious practice	How often do you attend religious services? 1 = never, 7 = daily	2.10	1.54
Optimism	Five Item Scale. Strongest Item: “I expect that things will turn out well for me”. Eigen Value: 2.38; Explained Variance: 47.67%. Cronbach’s α : .72	0.00	0.87
Ethnocentrism	Three Item Scale. Strongest Item: “It is bad for Belgian economy that people from other countries come to live here”. Eigen Value: 1.96; Explained Variance: 65.43%. Cronbach’s α : .74	0.00	0.86
Generalized trust	Three Item Scale. Strongest Item: “Do you think that most people can be trust or do you think you cannot be to careful?”. Eigen Value: 2.01; Explained Variance: 66.83%. Cronbach’s α : .75	0.00	0.88

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