Title: Societal discontent, the Role of Social Work and the importance of the community-based approach

Authors: I. Veldkamp, MSc. & J.A.H. Heine

1. Introduction

The body of literature on societal discontent in the Netherlands is growing. Numerous publications highlight an increasing distrust of citizens towards the government, growing regional and class disparities in prosperity, and deepening concerns about the performance of the public sector. These publications describe a disengagement by substantial groups of people from society and the traditional centrist governmental-orientated parties, and the steady decline of political, institutional and societal trust.[1]

Various explanations can be given for the rise of societal discontent, including big societal trends like globalization, secularization, individualization and the decline of strong communities[2], the decline of social cohesion in an increasingly diverse multicultural society[3] or the declining performance of public services.[4] Problems at the more personal level such as financial insecurity and social isolation also contribute.[5] This discontent is concerning as it erodes trust in institutions, potentially jeopardizing democratic stability and community resilience.[6]

Traditionally social workers play an important role in strengthening the individual and communities, improving their socio-economic position, and their overall participation in society and having an positive impact on trust and social engagement of citizens and bridging the gap between government and citizens. This paper aims to describe the way social work can play a role in preventing or alleviating societal discontent among citizens by helping individuals and strengthening communities.

This paper delves in section 2 into the theoretical frameworks of the relationship between discontent and the roles of social work. Section 3 outlines our research methodology. Section 4 , 5 and 6 present findings of diverse forms of societal discontent and the roles of social workers. Finally in section 7 we discuss the results of our research.

---

[1] Brons (2014); Schnabel (2018); Putters (2019); Milikowski (2020); Van den Brink (2020); Beugelsdijk (2021); Van den Berg & Kok (2021); De Voogd & Cuperus (2021); Verbrugge (2023); RLI/ROB/RVS 2023; Geurink & Miltenburg (2023)

[2] Putnam (2000); Korsten & De Goede (2006)

[3] Van den Brink (2020) p.109-162; Verbrugge (2023) p.65-150.

[4] Van den Berg (2022); Tjeenk Willink (2021)

[5] Engelen (2021); Meyer (2021); Louis (2021); Mellink & Oudenampsen (2022); WRR (2023), SCP (2023)

[6] Snyder (2019); Norris & Inglehart (2019); Levitsky & Ziblatt (2019); AIVD (2023); Nanninga, De Jonge & Valk (2022)

2. Theoretical frameworks: societal discontent and social work

Societal discontent is about the underlying feeling of concerns about the personal situation or the current state of government and society. It means people have the feeling that things are not going in the right direction with themselves, their group or society, and that they themselves are powerless to change that.[7]

This paper will not offer a definitive conceptualization. All kind of aspects - economic, cultural, and societal - are crucial, especially when examining the experience of discontent among clients. However, discontent is best understood as a relationship between the individual and their personal circumstances, the individual and the issues of their societal group, or the individual and the broader societal concerns.

Levels of societal discontent:[8]

1. Personal (micro): this involves worries about one's livelihood, income, health, and personal relationships, including family, friends, and community involvement.
2. Group (meso): this pertains to the relative position of societal groups, such as women, farmers, migrants, and low-income earners, within society.
3. Social and political (macro): encompasses feelings of dissatisfaction with broader societal developments, political discourse, government services, public amenities, and trust in politics.

Social work as community building

Social work historically plays a significant role in facilitating connections between residents and government entities. Social work and welfare organizations can be considered as bridging or intermediary entities. They serve a societal purpose and operate at the intersection of government institutions and citizens who rely on public services. Important aspects of social work are promoting social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. [9]

In contemporary social work practice there is a growing recognition of the importance of social networks in promoting the well-being and resilience of individuals and communities. This shift underscores the significance of collective initiatives in addressing complex social issues, characterized by Payne (2005) as the socialist/collectivist approach to social work.[10] Prioritizing community-based solutions that leverage the strength of social networks and support systems.[11] This entails fostering partnerships with local

[7] Kok & Van den Berg (2021) p13.

[8] Kok & Van den Berg (2021)

[9] IFSW (2014)

[10] Beck, Ohmer, & Warner (2012); DuBois & Miley (2011); Forde & Lynch (2014); Payne (2005)

[11] DuBois & Miley (2011)

organizations, grassroots initiatives, and informal networks to create a web of support for vulnerable populations, in addition to the more individualistic approach of strengthening and/or empowering the individual client.

The philosophy underpinning the collective social work approach emphasizes the interconnectedness of individuals within their social environment. It recognizes that social isolation can exacerbate socio-economic and health challenges, and seeks to counteract this by facilitating connections, communities and mutual support among individuals facing similar circumstances. By fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity, social work endeavors to empower individuals to actively participate in their communities and access resources for collective empowerment.

In addition, the transition towards more local and community-based approach also reflects a broader shift in governance paradigms, moving away from top-down, centralized models towards more participatory and community-driven approaches for healthcare and social welfare. To some extent, the decentralization of social policies in the recent decades also acknowledges the needs and strengths of local communities and seeks to empower them to take ownership of their local welfare systems.[12]

The community-based approach of social work aims by using the power of social connections and support initiatives, to build stronger, more resilient communities capable of supporting the diverse needs of their members. The assumption is that social work has an important key role in preventing or reducing societal discontent. However, the connection between societal and the positive role that social work can play isn't frequently highlighted in the literature.

3. ***Method of research***

In this research, we explored patterns of societal discontent among clients, and additionally, we investigated welfare activities of social workers. At the micro level, we investigated patterns of (personal) discontent among clients and the activities of social workers on the individual care level. At the meso level, we explored patterns of (collective) discontent among clients and the activities of social workers at the collective or network level. We examined interactions and dynamics within groups or communities engaged in welfare activities, exploring how these interactions contribute to or alleviate discontent. Lastly, at the macro level, we considered broader societal and structural factors that influence the overall effectiveness of welfare activities in addressing discontent on a larger scale.

Our research approach involved qualitative methods, using interviews and focus groups. We included 36 social workers and 28 clients. The clients included various target demographics such as elderly individuals, youth, immigrants, caregivers, and those seeking support for mental health issues or debt counseling. The professionals included

[12] Andreotti, Mingione & Polizzi (2012)

social workers, youth workers, community workers, legal advisors, earthquake coaches, debt counselors, peer support specialists, and leaders of toddler groups. With this approach, we obtained a representative perspective of the target groups.

Through these methods, we aim to gain insights into the intricate relationship between welfare activities and societal discontent. By adopting an exploratory approach, we seek to uncover the underlying dynamics.

4. Aspects of societal discontent of clients

The interviews provided insight into various elements of discontent. N=36 social workers were asked what kind of concerns they saw on personal (micro), collective (meso) and societal, political (macro) level. Our analysis demonstrates that societal discontent often results from a complex interplay of socio-economic, institutional, and cultural factors that mutually influence and reinforce each other. However, several key elements can be distinguished.

Socio-economic and financial problems:

Professionals N=36 stated that they saw financial concerns among their clients. Financial issues, lack of affordable housing and energy poverty are repeatedly mentioned. The respondents related the financial problems to societal discontent, because these problems lead to stress, (intergenerational)-poverty, and feelings of inferiority and frustration among the population.

Psychological and multi-problem issues:

Psychological problems such as depression are mentioned as significant stressors for individuals and families. This can lead to a hardening of social interactions on the interpersonal level, such as relational problems and domestic violence, and a overall decrease in social cohesion and activities within communities, *R11: "We see increased psychological problems and people with confused behavior, more complex problems. It is about a combination of different types of problems, psychological disorders and financial problems, acceptance and quality of life in neighborhood and within families. People are less resilient, people bounce back less easily." (Individual social worker)*

Social isolation and individualization

N=30 respondents claimed that social isolation was an important source. The respondents related the concept of social isolation to growing individuality in society and lack of facilities, *R1:"no family here, no car, and living in a small village without facilities. Then there is a very high risk of social isolation" (community social worker)* In addition, the respondents stated that an individualized society ensured that people who fall outside the system/society, are increasingly less able to be accommodated by the community. In their work, they see a society in which solidarity is declining and citizens end up in social

isolation, *R12:" Individualism plays a major role here. And solidarity has deteriorated. Where you used to help each other in the street, you no longer see it as often" (social worker, individual care)*

Cultural change and diversity:

Increasing diversity in neighborhoods is cited as a source of tension, especially concerning integration issues and clashes of value systems between different groups. Respondents saw that changes in the neighborhood caused concerns among clients.

The clients mainly see the change in status quo as a source of societal discontent. This means that it is not only related to changes due to migration, but also caused by, for example, the energy transition or the pressure brought by the housing market crisis, which increases the idea that there is no longer a place in the Netherlands.

Institutional distrust:

Distrust towards the government and public institutions is often mentioned, particularly due to complex regulations, lack of tailored solutions, and poor communication. Leading to feelings of powerlessness and frustration. Types of distrust include 1) towards the national politics: with rural and peripheral regions feeling underrepresented, *R1: "People do not feel understood by national politics. The gap is widening between national and local" (Community social worker),* 2) towards government executive services, like municipality or child protection services, and 3) towards institutions, such as police. In the Norther-Netherlands, social workers noted themes that fueled institutional distrust, including natural gas extraction problems, farmer protests and/or withdrawing public services, *R18: "farmers' protests, that was really a thing with us. We are a rural municipality. Many young people become farmers. There was a lot is dissatisfaction about that. And since COVID-19, it feels as if there has been a change, as if people have the feeling they can anything" (youth social worker)*

Digitalization and accessibility of public services:

Issues with a lack of digital skills and access to services are noted, leading to certain groups being excluded of help. The interviews showed that there are many concerns among professionals about the accessibility of facilities, due to low digital literacy, distrust in government organizations and the financial benefits systems, *R4: "When you have to apply for beneficial financial support, that's so complicated, providing so much evidence. That almost makes people feel like they're a fraudster" (Community social worker*) and due to a lack of social connection.

Social hardening and polarization:

Society's hardening and polarization are observed, especially in debates on issues such as climate, migration, and housing. This can lead to a lack of consensus and a decrease in solidarity. Several respondents indicated that they saw polarization in their daily work. In the area of hardening, youth social workers also see more youth gangs, mainly in North Groningen, or drug use among young people in rural areas.

5. Social work: strengthen individuals

Our analyses identified several activities of social workers that strengthen the individual clients and local communities.

Prevention loneliness/social isolation

Social work provides various that contribute to combating social isolation or loneliness. All professionals N=36 stated that establishing connections between groups, strengthening social cohesion and identifying loneliness are among the important tasks of the social workers. Mainly for the social workers who work out-reaching and can be seen in the neighborhoods, they identify the need for help. They look at how they can serve this request for help individually and collectively, R35: *"The walking group is actually quite a bit of a social safety net. So that's me and those clients, they have quite little to fall back on." (Community social worker)*

Clients of the young mother's group mentioned that the evolvement of social workers in their lives helped to prevent or reduce social isolation or loneliness. They stated the groups or collectives organized by the social workers provided social contacts and it also endured involvement in society, such as being eligible for volunteer work.

Practical help and access public services and facilities

Social workers provide practical assistance and support to individuals and groups, assisting with tasks like form completion, accessing financial aid, daily chores and tax filling. They provide individual and group support, providing practical care, a listening ear and guidance to appropriate sources.

Some serve as independent support staff, helping individuals navigate municipal regulations and articulate their needs, N34: *"We pay attention to the entire request for help. Try to outline the context. At the municipality they usually look flatly at the regulations and whether there is a right to it. But, sometimes clients do not know how to put their story in the right words" (Independent client supporter)*

Trust is deemed crucial in the social worker-client relationship, with practitioners trained to establish and maintain it. The independent and trusted position of social workers helps clients to seek the right help and supports them. *N45: "in recent years, I have seen many care providers come and go, but I trust X very much. She is always honest, says what she thinks and especially is here to help me. She cannot impose or oblige me to do anything, that makes our relationship equal" (client)*

Services are tailored to meet individual needs, ranging from one-on-one assistance for tasks like budgeting, to group programs such as budget courses. Some respondents also stated that the client is sometimes better served by referring them to a group. Social work is highly responsive to the client needs, with interventions shaped by the nature of request and the potential for collective support.

Activating self-reliance and active citizenship

Social workers see an important role for them in encouraging active citizenship. They intervene to prevent problems and foster self-reliance through individual coaching, organizing collective activities and encouraging community participation. This involves both emotional and practical needs. N32: *"We try to get people out of social isolation. We see what the person likes or what suits them. You see progress, which sometimes even means that people are returning to the labor market" (Village coordinator, community social worker)* They see a connecting role for the individual and the community. Clients often find themselves engaging in voluntary work, such as at libraries, through connections made in group sessions. This sense of belonging fosters community engagement and keeps individuals informed about local developments, *N39: "this group support me, you stay active and informed, for example about new developments in the municipality. The group supports each other and it has also provided volunteer work" (Client, mothers group)*

Signaling function and prevention

Social work's proactive approach allows for early problem detection and prevention. Most respondents N=32 indicated that signaling and prevention are key aspects, with social workers addressing individuals needs and broader societal issues. They organize interventions to prevent these problems and they bring these issues to the attention of relevant authorities. Collaboration among different social professions enhances this process, from addressing language delays in toddlers to preventing youth gang involvement and financial dept accumulation.

The following activities of the social worker are important for prevention and early detection:

- Assessment and identification of potential risk factors and vulnerabilities in communities, families, and individuals.
- Community development involving the establishment of bottom-up support groups to address social problems.
- Different types of programs, such as early intervention programs, crisis prevention planning, parenting support programs, school-based programs.
- Collaboration with professionals in primary care and across social work disciplines, education, law enforcement, police, and housing cooperatives.
- Signaling function and policy advocacy.

In this way, social workers also endure that as many problems as possible in the primary care field can be solved, and preventing patients from getting into secondary care.

6. Social work: strengthening community and society

Social workers play a pivotal role in community strengthening and amidst societal challenges. The social worker tries to strengthen the social cohesion of the neighborhood by connecting those in need of help and those providing help, stimulating initiatives and preventing people from ending up in secondary care by focusing on collective assistance

groups with primary care. During the interviews various activities have been found: starting collectives, working on community development, organizing volunteers, supporting citizen initiatives and serving the needs of the community.

Social cohesion and community building: social workers play a role in strengthening social cohesion within communities. They organize activities, facilitate meetings, and encourage collaboration among residents, *R31: "I see it as a bridging function of connecting people and that you can therefore create more understanding towards each other"(Community social worker)* Several initiatives where mentioned by respondents, a village counter with volunteers to help people fill in the form, a reading club, sustainability initiatives, a neighborhood home set up by the housing cooperative and social workers.

Network and collaboration: social workers act as key connecters, collaborating with various partners (primary care), such as the general practitioner, schools, police and youth care. They built networks and maintain relationships to provide effective support to the individuals and to the community. They generally see themselves as linking pin and care about the different facets of the client's lives. This facilitates integrated care and endures clients have access to diverse services, N33: *"I'm kind of a road map. I talk to young people and refer them to the right organizations and people if necessary. I have contact with the police, education other care organizations. I receive information about the young, investigate what they encounter in daily life and provide the sight support or seek arrangements" (Community social worker)*

Societal transitions: social workers also have an important role within societal transitions, such as the energy transition, *R29: "We come in, are accessible and in principle neutral. So we don't come to sell something, or impose something on someone. I strongly believe in the value of bottom-up instead of top-down. Therefore we have a crucial role in societal transitions" (Community social worker)*

7. Conclusion and discussion

This study investigated societal discontent experienced by clients, as perceived by both clients and social workers. Analysis of interviews with N=36 social workers and N=25 clients identified several forms of discontent:

- Socio-economic and financial problems
- Psychological issues and multi-problems
- Social isolation and individualization
- Relational problems and domestic violence
- Cultural change and diversity
- Institutional distrust
- Digitalization and accessibility of public services
- Social hardening and polarization

The study explored also the positive impact of social work, highlighting various roles social workers play in strengthening individuals and communities:

- Prevention loneliness/social isolation
- Practical help and access public services and facilities
- Activating self-reliance and active citizenship
- Signaling function and prevention

A community-based approach in social work emphasizes seeking solutions within communities, recognizing that strengthening individuals also benefits the community as a whole. This approach is crucial in addressing societal discontent by promoting social cohesion, building networks, facilitating collaboration, and fostering grassroots initiatives. Social workers play a vital role in community development, focusing on enhancing social well-being at individual and societal levels. By bringing together people and systems, they provide tailored support, contribute to positive development and self-reliance, and foster social participation. Through these efforts, individuals gain more control over their lives, ultimately mitigating social discontent. We see that many social workers look for solutions in communities, and that strengthening the community also trickles down to the individual.

Literature

- Andreotti, Mingione & Polizzi (2012) "Local welfare systems: a challenge for social cohesion", *Urban Studies Journal Limited*, 49(9), p.1925-1940.
- AIVD (2023) *Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), Anti-institutioneel extremisme in Nederland: Een ernstige dreiging voor de democratische rechtsorde?*
- Beck, E., Ohmer, M., & Warner, B. (2022) "Strategies for Preventing Neighborhood Violence: Toward Bringing Collective Efficacy." *Social Work Practice, Journal of Community Practice,* 20(3), 225-240.
- Beugelsdijk, S. (2021) *De verdeelde Nederlanden: Hoe een perfecte storm een klein land dreigt te splijten (en wat we daaraan kunnen doen),* Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Balans.
- Van den Berg, G. (2022) *Can the centre hold? Over de robuustheid van de rijksoverheid (oratie),* Leiden..
- Van den Berg, G., & Kok, A. (2021) *Regionaal maatschappelijk onbehagen Naar een rechtsstatelijk antwoord op perifeer ressentiment*, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.
- Van den Brink, G. (2020) *Ruw ontwaken uit een neoliberale droom en de eigenheid van het Europese continent,* Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Brons, C. (2024) *Political Discontent in the Netherlands in the First Decade of the 21st Century* (dissertation) Amsterdam.
- DuBois, B., & Miley, K. K. (2011) Social work: An empowering profession (7th ed.) Boston: Pearson.
- Engelen, E. (2021) Ontwaak! Kom uit uw neoliberale sluimer. Amsterdam: Atheneum – Polak & Van Gennep.

- Goodhart, D. (2018) The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics.
- Geurink, & Miltenburg. (2023) Somber over de samenleving? Een studie naar verschillen in maatschappelijk onbehagen in Nederland. Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau (SCP), Den Haag, mei 2023.
- Forde, C., & Lynch, D. (2013) "Critical Practice for Challenging Times: Social Workers' Engagement with Community Work." British Journal of Social Work, 44(8), 2078–2094.
- IFSW. (2014) International Federation Of Social Workers (IFSW), Global Definition of Social Work.
- Korsten, A., & De Goede, P. (2006) Bouwen aan vertrouwen in het openbaar bestuur. Elsevier, Den Haag.
- Mellink, B. & Oudenampsen. M. (2022) *Neoliberalisme, Een Nederlandse geschiedenis,* Amsterdam: Boom Uitgevers.
- Meyer, R. (2021) De onmisbaren, een ode aan mijn sociale klasse. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Milikowski, F. (2020) Een klein land met verre uithoeken, ongelijke kansen in veranderend Nederland. Amsterdam: Uitgeverij, Atlas Contact.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2018) How Democracies Die. New York: Penguin Random House LLC.
- Louis, É. (2021) Ze hebben mijn vader vermoord. Amsterdam: De Bezige Bij.
- Nanninga, P., De Jonge, L., & Valk, F. (2022) Fenomeenanalyse Extremisme Noord-Nederland, 2014-2022. University of Groningen.
- Norris, P., & Inglehart, R. (2019) Cultural Backlash: Trump, Brexit, and Authoritarian Populism. Cambridge University Press.
- Reno, R. R. (2019) Return of the Strong Gods: Nationalism, Populism, and the Future of the West. Washington: Regnery Gateway.
- Verbrugge, A. (2023) Gezagscrisis, Filosofische essays over een wankele orde. Amsterdam: Boom.
- De Voogd, J., & Cuperus, R. (2021) Atlas van Afgehaakt Nederland: Over buitenstaanders en gevestigden.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000) Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Putters, K. (2019) Veenbrand, Smeulende kwesties in de welvarende samenleving. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- RLI/ROB/RVS. (2023) Raad voor de leefomgeving en infrastructuur, Raad voor het Openbaar Bestuur, Raad voor Volksgezondheid & Samenleving, Elke regio telt! Een nieuwe aanpak van verschillen tussen regio's, Den Haag.
- SCP. (2023) Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau, Eigentijdse ongelijkheid, De postindustriële klassenstructuur op basis van vier typen kapitaal, Verschil in Nederland: Den Haag.
- Schnabel, P. (2018) Met mij gaat het goed, met ons gaat het slecht. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Snyder, T. (2019) The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America. Tim Duggan Books.

- Tjeenk Willink, H. (2021) Kan de overheid crises aan? Waarom het belangrijk is om groter te denken en kleiner te doen. Amsterdam: Prometheus.
- Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (2023), Grip. Het maatschappelijk belang van persoonlijke controle. WRR-rapport 108. Den Haag.