

The spatial economics of happiness, unhappiness and discontent: moving Beyond GDP to Reverse the Joyless Economy

Dimitris Ballas (University of Groningen), Martijn Burger (Erasmus University Rotterdam), Elli Papastergiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) and Spyridon Stavropoulos (University of Patras)

It's been half a century since Richard Easterlin introduced his famous paradox about happiness and income in his 1974 article, and Tibor Scitovsky incorporated psychological concepts and insights into economics in his seminal book 'The Joyless Economy' (1976). Since then, the interdisciplinary science of well-being has been expanding rapidly towards a broader understanding of social welfare and progress. Today, this approach is more relevant than ever. Societies, amidst a global polycrisis, face a range of challenges whose implications for people's life satisfaction and happiness are poorly captured by monetary indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Ecosystem degradation, the climate crisis, and resource exploitation, mental health challenges that reach epidemic levels (including depression, stress, loneliness, and burnout), and rising interpersonal, intra-urban, and inter-territorial inequalities, interact and impose a substantial human and economic cost for societies (WHO, 2025; World Economic Forum, 2025; OECD, 2024; OECD, 2025).

These intertwined challenges underline the limits of growth-oriented paradigms and the need for policy frameworks that are not only concerned with traditional economic outcomes but also account for real quality of life impacts. While advances in well-being research have produced several tools, their systematic integration into public policy and planning still lags behind across regions and spatial scales.

This special session will include contributions that consider the geographical dimension in the research of happiness, unhappiness and discontent from a regional science perspective. In particular, the session will include contributions that consider the measurement, analysis, and governance of happiness and well-being beyond GDP as well as work on the geography of unhappiness and discontent. We welcome theoretical, empirical, and methodological work that engages with subjective well-being and its determinants, including spatial and social inequalities, urban and regional dynamics, environmental sustainability, and policy design. Submissions may draw from economics, geography, urban studies, psychology, public health, environmental sciences, and related disciplines.

References:

- Easterlin, R. A. (1974). Does Economic Growth Improve the Human Lot? Some Empirical Evidence. In P. A. David & M. W. Reder (Eds.), *Nations and Households in Economic Growth* (pp. 89–125). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-205050-3.50008-7>
- OECD. (2024). *How's Life? 2024: Well-being and Resilience in Times of Crisis*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/90ba854a-en>
- OECD. (2025). *To Have and Have Not – How to Bridge the Gap in Opportunities*. OECD Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1787/dec143ad-en>
- Scitovsky, T. (1976). *The joyless economy: An inquiry into human satisfaction and consumer dissatisfaction*. Oxford University Press.
- World Economic Forum. (2025). *Global Risks Report 2025*. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/>
- WHO. (2025). *World mental health today: latest data*. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240113817>