

Descriptif d'enseignement / *Course descriptions*

3^{ème} année internationale / International undergraduate program

Semestre 2

Titre du cours - *Course title*

Happiness and Public Policy

Langue du cours/Language of instruction : English

Enseignant(s) – *Professor(s)*

Xavier Landes

Professor at the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga

Contact : xavier.landes@sseriga.edu

Résumé du cours – Objectifs - *Course description – Targets*

The objective is to introduce students to the latest developments of happiness research in psychology, economics and politics. Moreover, it is to present some concrete implications of this research for public policy (e.g. nudges, paternalism, quality of life assessments, and social indicators). Over the last fifteen years or so, the topic of happiness has gained ground in the academic research as well as in the public at large. This increased popularity has several causes: an increased scepticism toward economic growth in the aftermath of the economic crisis, the sense that sustainable development requires humanity to focus on quality of life, the individual quest for meaning, and so forth. The course offers an overview of happiness research and its implications for economics and politics. The idea is to start from the definition of happiness and to move towards the potential implications of this stream of research for public policy. For achieving that, the course will be based on home reading, discussions and presentations. Students are expected to actively participate to class content.

Evaluation - *Assessment*

Students will be evaluated on the basis of their course participation and a final assignment which topic will be decided with the professor.

Plan – Séances - *Course outline*

1. What is happiness? Psychology and philosophy

During this session, the main conceptions (i.e. interpretations) of happiness will be introduced: hedonia (balance between negative and positive affects), eudaimonia (virtuous life and self-fulfilment) and life satisfaction (self-assessment of who one's life goes). Therefore, happiness is heterogeneous, referring to mental states as well as objective accomplishments. In addition, it will be shown how happiness research articulates two dimensions: descriptive (what is hedonia, eudaimonia or life satisfaction? How to measure it? Etc., mostly the domain of psychology) and normative (what is the value of hedonia, eudaimonia or life satisfaction? What is a happy/good life? Mostly the domain of philosophy).

2. Hedonia and its critiques

The second session will be devoted to hedonia, i.e. happiness defined as the positive balance between pleasures and pains. In particular, students will study the philosophical origins (Jeremy Bentham) and more recent developments (e.g. Daniel Kahneman). The main objections against hedonia as a description and hedonism as a valuation of happiness will be discussed (hedonia as a simplistic conception of the good life, the absence of moral evaluation of human behaviour, affective manipulation).

3. Eudaimonia and its critiques

The third session will be devoted to eudaimonia, i.e. happiness defined as self-accomplishment or virtuous behaviour. A brief history of eudaimonia will be spelled out, stretching from Aristotle to modern eudaimonists such as Martha Nussbaum or Alan Waterman. The session will insist on the differences with hedonia along with exposing the main criticisms against eudaimonia (elitism, moralism, etc.).

4. Life satisfaction and subjective well-being

The fourth session will be devoted to life satisfaction and subjective well-being (composed of life satisfaction and positive/negative affects) since they are widely used in polls and research. The emphasis will be put on the evaluation of the self-assessment component. In other words, how reliable are indicators using individual self-assessments? The value of personal authority (the idea that individuals have a special authority when judging of their own happiness) will be discussed.

5. The Easterlin Paradox and the importance of happiness

The fifth session will be devoted to the Easterlin paradox that stipulates that while at a given time, richer people within a country are happier than poorer ones, and richer countries are on average happier than poorer countries, longitudinal studies show that economic growth does not have a significant impact on average national happiness. Students will discuss the paradox, its potential explanations and shortcomings. In addition, the presentation of this paradox will provide an opportunity to consider the public policy dimension of the research: why and how happiness matters for political communities?

6. Politics of Happiness

The last session will provide an overview of the potential implications of using happiness research for designing public policies. It will be shown that happiness can inspire various political projects with quite different justifications and ambitions. For instance, governments could decide to implement policies with the aim of maximizing happiness, which opens to serious criticisms in terms of respect for the diversity of views and happiness as the ultimate political goal. Alternatively, governments could use happiness as one of many indicators in order to figure out how to spend efficiently resources (e.g. as in the nudge theory developed by Sunstein and Thaler). Students will be given the opportunity to elaborate their own assessment of the political potential of happiness research.

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- Frey, Bruno and Alois Stutzer (2002), *Economics and Happiness: How the Economy and Institutions Affect Human Well-Being*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, chapter 1
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World Happiness Reports, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018