

Prepared for: *The American Journal of Psychology*

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Happiness: A Theory of Relativity

Review of 'The myths of happiness:

What should make you happy, but doesn't, what shouldn't make you happy, but does.'

by Lyubomirsky, S.

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Keywords: happiness, positive psychology, subjective well-being, decision-making

Note: The book is published by Oxford University Press, New York, 2014.

ISBN 978-0143124511, list price \$27.95

“A little misery may enhance the quality of one’s life.” (Parducci, 2000, p. 240)

Happiness is a basic human concern involving both desire and pursuit. Most people strive for satisfaction, contentedness, and meaning in life; yet, contemporary culture suggests that happiness is difficult to attain and fleeting when it comes. In *The Myths of Happiness*, Sonja Lyubomirsky (2013) argues that lasting happiness may be found by those who “think instead of blink” (p. 251). Thoughtful individuals can gain insight into the limitations of many culturally prescribed notions regarding the attainment of happiness, and thereby expand their freedom to pursue and achieve genuine life satisfaction.

The Myths of Happiness follows up on Lyubomirsky’s successful first book, *The How of Happiness* (2008). Both books are grounded in the positive psychology movement, of which Lyubomirsky is a leading contributor. In *How*, she demonstrates that although much of the variation in well-being is genetically determined, a substantial part (~40%) is open to intervention. *Myths* primarily targets this piece of the happiness pie by tackling the question of how to increase day-to-day happiness. Lyubomirsky explores three psychological principles, each of which is uniquely devoted to debunking a pervasive and often injurious myth of western culture.

The first psychological principle is that humans learn from and adapt to their cultural environment. Doing so automatically and pervasively, individuals are prone to uncritically accept normative notions of what *should* make them happy. These include making a lot of money, finding and marrying their one true love, or being engaged in day-to-day parenting. Lyubomirsky argues that many of these culturally valued achievements and activities do not contribute to sustained life satisfaction. The second psychological principle is that people are not

particularly good at predicting their own emotional states. They overestimate the impact and duration of negative events (losing a job or getting divorced), and the hedonic benefits of positive ones (winning the lottery or getting a promotion). This neglect of psychological habituation contributes to the overreliance on cultural prescriptions for success, and it obscures the impact of day-to-day experience. The third principle is that people are quite good at marshaling psychological defenses when facing adversity. When bad things happen, many people use self-protective strategies to rationalize these events and cope with them. Lyubomirsky shows, however, that these defenses work better for calamities than for ordinary hassles. These commonplace frustrations (unexpected traffic, flights cancelled without explanation) fail to trigger the coping mechanisms that provide psychological protection. As a consequence, overall happiness is lower than it could and should be. People need to learn to look past the great ‘mythical’ milestones of success when seeking to gain control over their general psychological well-being.

Myths applies these three psychological principles to three great cultural domains of happiness: social connection, material wealth, and life experience. In the domain of social connection, the myth that a perfect (and traditional) family life is the key to happiness looms large. Going beyond this myth, Lyubomirsky focuses on how people may cultivate their relationships, set reasonable goals, and actively avoid stagnation. Similarly, Lyubomirsky argues that individuals’ inability to comprehend their own resilience explains the feelings of hopelessness and anxiety associated with loss and separation. In the domain of material wealth and social status, a wealth (so to speak) of data shows that windfalls and higher income do little to increase happiness. In fact, the relationship between money and happiness attenuates soon after basic needs are met. This highlights the lack of support for the traditional notion that power

and status beget happiness. *Myths*' final section turns to the question of how people reflect on life's losses: youth, health, and dreams. To psychologically manage inevitable losses, Lyubomirsky advises readers to focus attention and memory on what they were able to achieve. Indeed, older individuals appear to be happier than other age groups by doing just that.

Lyubomirsky's description and debunking of myths of happiness owes a debt to Parducci's (1968, 1984) seminal work on judgmental relativism. Parducci used psychophysical scaling techniques to model subjective judgment. According to his range-frequency model, total happiness can be represented as a weighted average of all positive and negative experiences. Judgments of individual episodes depend on comparisons with an entire set of relevant episodes, and especially the most extreme ones. In a classic demonstration, Parducci (1968) asked his readers to consider an outing on either of two ships: a low-speed sailboat or a yacht capable of a high top-speed. Because the value of any experience is computed, in part, as the experience itself *relative* to the peak experience (i.e., top speed), the tendency of the leisurely sailboat to consistently travel near its top speed will provide more satisfaction than the swifter yacht that rarely reaches its (greater) peak. Formally, this is computed over time as the sum of each boat's observed speed divided by its maximum speed.

By approaching subjective judgment within the context of the distribution of judgments in a reference class, Parducci arrived at a counterintuitive conclusion, namely that, "The average level of happiness can be raised by arranging life so that high levels of satisfaction come frequently, even if this requires renunciation of the opportunity for occasional experiences that would be even more gratifying" (Parducci, 1968, p. 85). If so, people could modify the distribution of their own experiences by avoiding highly positive extremes (thus truncating the *range*) and by increasing the overall *frequency* of positive events. Lyubomirsky's theory of

happiness is Parduccian in spirit, although she shuns the technical aspects of his theory. This is presumably for good reason, as it is a trade book. In the remainder of this review, we note some of the additional implications emerging from the range-frequency model.

In the domain of social connection, Parduccian relativism suggests that individuals should seek stable, consistent relationships while avoiding the short-lived bliss of peak experiences. This conclusion contradicts the romantic notion that 'tis better to have loved and lost than to never have loved.' Ordinary loveless life experience should be tolerably happy if it can't be compared to the fleeting joys of love. By comparing day-to-day encounters with peak experiences, the range-frequency model clashes with powerful social norms. For example, newlyweds are expected to indulge in an exotic honeymoon. By doing so, however, these couples create an extreme (and irreproducible) positive experience against which future days of matrimony can only pale in comparison. The range-frequency model raises the question: would the average marriage be more successful without such lavish peak experiences?

A similar argument applies to the myths of wealth and status. Parducci (1968) showed that participants who were regularly rewarded with small amounts of money approaching a known maximum possible reward were more satisfied with their outcome than those who were awarded larger sums far from the highest possible amount. Critically, participants earned the same amount on average in these two conditions. Lyubomirsky is thus right to recommend that her readers ease their expectations regarding gains in wealth and status. When what was once considered a windfall (holiday bonuses, unexpected promotions) becomes standard and expected, all other experiences of gain seem trifling and disappointing.

Parducci (1984) notes an interesting limitation of his theory. His model assumes that relevant past episodes and judgments are equally available when a judgment is being made in the

present. This assumption is of course not psychologically realistic. Individuals can compare a present experience only to those other experiences that they remember. This elasticity of the effective reference set need not be a disadvantage, though. Parducci considered the beneficial effects of focusing one's attention away from the most positive past experiences when judging a new one. For example, people may reminisce about a recent, salient, or memorable event (renewing their vows on the 30th anniversary) instead of a more distant, but happier time (their honeymoon in Hawaii). This is the kind of thoughtful - if slightly self-manipulative - strategy Lyubomirsky similarly endorses in *Myths*.

Throughout *Myths*, Lyubomirsky applies the implications of Parducci's range-frequency model to subdomains of life-satisfaction. What she neglects, however, is an implication of the range-frequency model for *negative* life experiences. Parducci showed that truncating the range of experiences at the top will lead to more favorable comparisons of those experiences that remain, causing the happiness index to increase. He also saw the other side of this coin, that is, the increase in aggregated happiness resulting from an extension of the range at the negative end. When a single highly negative experience is added to the set, all others will appear comparatively benign. The epigraph ("A little misery. . .") betrays Parducci's ambivalence on this point. How can one advise an addition of local unhappiness in order to raise global happiness? And how does one deal with the implication that greater local unhappiness would have a larger positive effect on global happiness than a lesser local unhappiness would have? In an earlier paper, Parducci (1984) had already distanced himself from this implication of his theory. He claimed, "We would not seek out the worst even if we could believe, on theoretical grounds, that it might improve the rest of life" (Parducci, 1984, p. 16). When applied to the minor hassles of life, however, this strategy is more appealing. Small problems appear less

unfavorable when compared against a more striking setback. For example, the frustrations of rush hour traffic in Providence may fade when recalling Boston's legendary gridlock. Returning to Parducci's (1968) experiment on preferences for relative winnings, this application could be tested by adopting a loss frame. Here, participants should feel bad about small losses when warned that a large loss is possible. Participants who lose the same amount of money should feel worse, however, when told that their experience of loss regularly approaches or achieves the greatest possible loss. Indeed, the phrase 'it could be worse' captures Parducci's optimistic and happiness-guarding attitude toward negative experience.

It is important to acknowledge the radical nature of what this approach suggests. We would be careless to advise readers to seek an extreme negative experience to become happier. Parducci (1984) notes that intense negative experiences are often accompanied by psychological trauma. Here, a negative experience may fail to remain an isolated event: when comparing a moderately negative event to the most extreme negative experience, an individual may 'relieve' the trauma, which diminishes overall happiness. We suggest that an optimally negative experience may exist to anchor the scale of experience at the bottom: one that provides protection against being worn out by day-to-day annoyances without being so negative as to disrupt a person's psychological equilibrium. Although representing happiness on a value distribution of positive and negative experiences carries theoretical challenges, doing so provides a window into the formal benefits of optimism, gratitude, and reflection on the past. These are several of the instruments in the toolbox that *Myths* provides.

We conclude by noting that value distributions are inherently variable within and across individuals in both range and mean. Myers and Diener (1995) reviewed cross-sectional approaches to individual differences in levels of happiness, concluding that traditional measures

such as gender, income, and race explain little variation in life satisfaction and subjective well-being. Indeed, as Lyubomirsky argues, it appears as though an individual's support network, optimistic disposition, and active engagement are better predictors of happiness. By dispelling pervasive cultural myths, she claims to arm the reader with, "the tools that you can use to develop an appropriate response – or, rather, a response that's right for you" (p.16). Perhaps these tools, purported to allow individuals to increase mean levels of happiness, should include the Parduccian notion of range manipulation in order to provide an additional element of control over one's own distribution of experiences.

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