

## The Mythical Myths of Happiness

*Ad Bergsma*

A Book review of:

**Sonja Lyubomirsky, *The myths of happiness; What should make you happy, but doesn't, what shouldn't make you happy but does.* The Penquin Press, New York, 2013, ISBN 978-1-59420-437-1, 299 pp.**

Suppose I have divorce fantasies and ask myself the classic question: 'Should I stay or should I go?'. This is not an easy position to be in, so I turn to a marriage counselor for advice. After hearing my predicament, she answers: 'The sooner you consider the research, the sooner you will be prepared to make a decision based on reason rather than intuition.' She goes on to explain that I should remember that having the right partner will not bring me one hundred percent happiness all the time and that maybe divorce isn't the answer. On the other hand, she continues, divorce does not irreparably harm most children according to the majority of studies.

I personally would appreciate the information given by the counselor, for it would allow me to make an informed decision, but I would not pay her a second because her counseling was not in contact with my reality. Going through all the relevant facts laid out in a number of meta-analyses on divorce and its consequences, will not make my decision making process any easier.

The marriage counselor in the example above does not exist, but the words I put in her mouth are taken from the book *The myths of Happiness* by the prominent happiness scholar Sonja Lyubomirsky. Lyubomirsky favors making important life decisions based on a rational analysis, but in my mind this is an impossible ideal to achieve, because we can never know all the relevant facts, especially about an unknown future. One problem is that the empirical studies Lyubomirsky refers to might or might not be valid for individual circumstances.

Knowledge drawn from empirical happiness studies are not 'good enough' for personal decisions. In happiness studies, the empirical generalizations deal with short-term effects of decisions, but the long term-effects are usually unknown. Having children regularly comes at the cost of reduced happiness because of the loss of sleep and the stress involved (e.g. Pouwels, 2011), but less is known about the long-term impact and consequences of having children, for example whether you will be blessed (or burdened) with having grandchildren or not. Knowing the facts does not relieve people from the burden of weighing up the uncertainties<sup>1</sup>, before they make any lasting decisions.

Lyubomirsky treats the pursuit of happiness as a tame problem, for which there is a good or false solution. Just be rational and go through the research, she suggests, and everything will turn out fine. I think it is more accurate to think of happiness as a wicked problem, one that is characterized by a complex set of interdependencies. Solving one part of the puzzle may have unexpected consequences for others parts of this problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). There is not good or false, but only better and worse. The quest for happiness is never over. Happiness is not definitively or infinitely achieved. The pursuit of happiness requires continuous work, and some trial and error as well. Suggesting that research can provide all answers for individuals, comes close to what Shaw

stated long before the invention of positive psychology: 'Every profession is a conspiracy against the laity' (quoted in Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 12). I do think that an extra dose of modesty with respect to the importance of happiness studies for daily living, would have been appropriate.

A strong feature of the book is that it offers a tremendous amount of adequate study summaries. Lyubomirsky really loves science and her passion carries over to the readers. Lyubomirsky is ambitious, and she is trying to make an important innovation in the field of happiness advice. In her former book *The how of Happiness* Lyubomirsky tried to tailor her advice to different personality types (Bergsma, 2010). In *The myths of happiness* she focuses her counsel on the decisive moments in life, such as marriage, failed relationships, having kids, loss of health, getting old, being employed, unemployed or broke, and so on.

In the chapters in 'The Myths of Happiness' on the bright and dark sides of life Lyubomirsky offers a wealth of advice and follows the same structure; Goal achievement does not bring the lasting happiness we might expect from it, and adversity does not harm our happiness for as long as we fear. People are not very good at affective forecasting and underestimate their own resilience (Gilbert, 2006). Lyubomirsky describes these mistakes as pervasive, toxic myths. She fears that people leave a good marriage, because it does not offer them the lasting happiness they expected, only to discover that this pattern is repeated itself in the next relationship. Therefore she advises couples or individuals to practice gratitude, seek novel experiences and to keep touching.

The advice is solid, but I think her statements about the toxic myth of lasting marital bliss are overdone. Our culture offers heterogeneous ideas about relationships, and Lyubomirsky herself quotes Raymond Chandler's words: 'The first kiss is magic. The second is intimate. The third is routine.' Lyubomirsky's happiness myths are a rhetoric device to give her facts a sense of urgency, but the idea that these myths are very important or harmful in our society is not backed up with references or empirical facts. Of course, many people have done and will do silly things in their lives, and I might add that I am certainly one of them: but how is it possible that the majority of people in rich democratic societies are happy, when we all suffer from such toxic, pervasive myths that ruin our lives? Again Lyubomirsky is a bit too enthusiastic about the studies she describes, and uses the enthusiasm of a self-help guru to bring this across.

Lyubomirsky sometimes seems so immersed in the scientific studies, that she forgets to offer enough guidance to place the facts in a proper context. For example, if you are broke and decide to read the chapter that describes how you can be happy without money, you will find the recommendation to spend your money, which you don't have, on experiences rather than stuff. Lyubomirsky seems to have a different definition of being broke than the one I use. I do however understand why she comes up with data from these kinds of studies in this chapter. There is a paucity of data from empirical happiness intervention studies that specifically deal with people that are broke. As a result, even for the best researcher it is impossible to give evidence based advice that is tailored for different personalities and specific life circumstances.

My major problem with the book is that the distinction between intellectual knowledge and practical wisdom is ignored (Ardelt, 2000). Reading the latest scientific studies will not necessarily offer you the required 'expertise in the conduct and meaning of life', to borrow part of a wisdom definition (Baltes & Staudinger, 2000, p. 124). Making choices for a good life, involves making your mind up in full awareness of the uncertainties involved. I do believe that knowledge about positive psychology

can sometimes make a huge difference, but we should not bother the readers with the idea that knowing the psychological facts offers the best solutions. This idea might enhance feelings of frustration and failure when things are not going as well as expected. Therefore I am ambivalent when thinking about recommending *The Myths of Happiness* to lay persons. It does offer excellent and relevant information about happiness research, but it requires quite some effort from the reader to put all this knowledge into perspective (Bergsma, 2008).

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**Cite as:**

Bergsma, A. (2014) The Mythical Myths of Happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*. Online first

The final publication is available at Springer via:

"<http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10902-014-9574-8>".

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<sup>i</sup> I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for suggesting this phrase.