

Myths and Misconceptions about Happiness: A Study of 13 Myths

Adrian Furnham 

Department of Leadership and Organisational Behaviour, Norwegian Business School (BI), Nydalveien, Oslo, Norway
Email: adrian@adrianfurnham.com

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Abstract

This study examined to what extent people endorsed thirteen myths about happiness. In all, 405 European adults over 21 years indicated the extent to which they thought established happiness myths true or false. Five myths were thought to be more true than untrue, while only two were predominantly rated as definitely false. These beliefs were unrelated to demographic and ideological variables. Limitations and implications are discussed.

Keywords

Happiness, Myths, Misconceptions

1. Introduction

The psychology of happiness has been researched predominantly over the last 30 years, despite the fact that it has been discussed in many fiction and non-fiction texts for many centuries. A number of books and papers by psychologists have summarized what we know in the area [1]-[12]. More than one book in this area has focused on myths about happiness, as set out in their title [8] [13] [14]. This paper examines the extent to which people endorse 13 myths identified by Eysenck [13]. Whilst there are a large number of blogs about happiness myths, it remains unclear to what extent people endorse them, as myths or truths. That is, how well informed are people about human happiness and flourishing.

There is an extensive and growing literature on myths and misconceptions in psychology stimulated particularly by the book of Lilienfeld *et al.* [15] [16]-[24]. It is a matter of concern to many psychologists that people endorse many myths despite their attempts to educate them through a range of media including books, blogs and articles in popular magazines. There is also a continual academic interest in the topic [9] [25].

The *Positive Psychology Centre* at Pennsylvania State University has a website dedicated to answering frequently asked questions about issues related to happiness. They note 13 points such as: Wealth essentially not related to well-being and happiness; Many activities thought to bring happiness do not; Often trying to be happy leads to the opposite; Happy people do better in most aspects of their lives; Optimism, the essence of happiness can be learned; People are not good at estimating how long positive and negative life events have on their happiness.

Many of the positive psychologists, including the late Ed Diener, spent a great deal of their career investigating the causes of happiness and well-being and trying to educate the general public in their findings.

In this study, we used the items highlighted by Eysenck [13], set out in **Table 1**. We attempted to assess the extent to which adults endorse what are essentially proven myths about happiness: that is would people recognize these myths as false statements. We were also interested in individual difference correlates of these beliefs. Most studies in this area have tried to determine what individual difference factors, such as ability, demography, ideology and personality are correlates of an acceptance of myths but few if any studies have found any close and consistent relationships [8].

2. Method

2.1. Participants

A total of 405 participants took part 202 were men and 203 were women. They ranged in age from 28 to 67 years, with a mean age of 38.93 years ($SD = 11.11$ years). All had completed secondary school education and 55% were graduates. In total 24.8% were single and 48.1% married/co-habiting, and 48% had no children. They rated themselves on two scales: How religious are you? (*Not at all* = 1 to *Very* = 8) ($M = 2.47$, $SD = 2.40$); How would you describe your political beliefs? (*Very Left Wing* = 1 to *Very Right Wing* = 8) ($M = 5.88$, $SD = 1.75$).

2.2. Questionnaire

This questionnaire (see **Table 1**) was derived from Eysenck (1990) and presented people with thirteen myths. Based on his extensive research in this area he concluded that these statements were myths in the sense that the data available suggested they were untrue. They had five response options to each question: Definitely True; Probably True; Definitely False; Probably False; Don't Know. The questions were presented in the order given in the table however they were interspersed at five different points by different questions to increase attentiveness.

2.3. Procedure

This study was run in March 2021, when the COVID-19 epidemic was receding. Departmental ethical approval was gained prior to data collection. Data was collected on Prolific and participants were compensated for their time at the set rate. We specified that we wanted predominantly non-students over the age of 25 years,

to ensure a more representative sample. There was very little missing data. This type of sample has been used in previous studies on the acceptance of myths [8] [9] [11].

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results for each question. If ignoring the Don't Know answers and combining Probably and Definitely answers, then five statements (1, 2, 5, 7, 11) attracted a predominantly True answer, particularly item 2. The statements which attracted most "False" answers were 8 and 9 about money and sex differences.

We then computed a single score which reflected an individual's accuracy: that they saw the statements as myths. We gave a score of 4 for Definitely False, 3 for Probably False, 2 for Probably True and 1 for Definitely True. We treated this as a knowledge about happiness score. We then correlated this with age, education, sex as well as religious and political beliefs. None of the correlations were significant, all being $r < 0.05$. Thus, of the individual difference variables that we investigated, none was systematically and significantly related to these myths.

Table 1. The responses to the Thirteen questions.

	Statement	DT	PT	PF	DF	DK
1	Happiness depends on the quality and quantity of pleasurable events that happen to one	67	189	80	30	39
2	Modern stressful living has made people less happy than in previous times	121	205	34	11	34
3	Those with serious physical disability are less happy than other people	17	96	134	89	69
4	Young people in their prime of life with few responsibilities are happier than older people.	33	114	137	43	78
5	People who experience great happiness also experience great unhappiness.	54	158	87	24	82
6	Intelligent people are happier than unintelligent people.	6	19	183	130	67
7	Children usually add significantly to the happiness of a married couple.	56	149	81	29	90
8	Winning a fortune ensures happiness.	15	64	127	176	23
9	Men are happier than women because it is a man's world.	10	42	106	208	39
10	Pursuing and searching for happiness directly is the surest way to lose it	20	92	145	61	87
11	Happiness is a superficial goal to pursue.	22	86	124	118	55
12	Happiness is a fleeting experience; an ephemeral state.	36	166	103	54	46
13	Marriage tends to reduce happiness.	7	40	178	97	83

4. Discussion

Given that these were all myths, in the sense that empirical data suggest that they were untrue, it is particularly interesting to consider those items that participants thought most true. Interestingly, around 20% of the participants recorded "Don't Know" on five myths: 5, 7, 10, 13. We believed it was important to offer the option of don't know, as not having it could distort results.

Both Eysenck (13) and Furnham and Tsivrikos [18] discuss each of these myths and why they are untrue. For instance, “*Happiness depends on the quality and quantity of pleasurable events that happen to one.*” Alas, the effect of such events is often transient; worse, they make subsequent events that are only moderately pleasurable appear uninteresting in comparison. A person enjoys pleasures because he or she is happy, not vice versa. Happiness is not the result of ever more vivid jabs of excitement. It can be the result of extremely humdrum activities such as stamp collecting or bird watching.

“*Modern stressful living has made people less happy than in previous times.*” This is not 20:20 hindsight but rather a view of the past through rose-tinted spectacles. People in advanced (and supposedly stressed) Western societies are generally happier than those in underdeveloped countries. It is the way people live, not your standard of living, that counts most, however.

“*People who experience great happiness also experience great unhappiness.*” This is a popular oversimplification. Being neurotic tends to lead to great highs and lows, but for the most part people do not swing widely between the two extremes.

“*Children usually add significantly to the happiness of a married couple.*” Again, the opposite is true, particularly for married women. We can be pretty certain that the presence of children reduces happiness because most married couples become happier again as soon as all of their children have left the nest. But there is a strong biological need to procreate.

“*Happiness is a fleeting experience, an ephemeral state.*” But we know from longitudinal research that the degree of happiness is stable over time. It is linked to personality and, despite some misconceptions, these changes relatively little over time. Happiness can be attained by adopting an outlook and lifestyle and can be permanent.

As in those studies which have sought to explore individual difference correlates of myth endorsement, we found no clear pattern that may explain how, when and why certain individuals accept and reject these beliefs. It may be of interest to qualitatively assess why participants did or did not endorse each myth, and this may provide insight into further factors to measure within participants to find an explanatory pattern.

A study such as this, which aimed to assess the extent to which people endorse myths on a particular topic, are of importance to understand how wide-spread they are within society. Believing certain myths can have an impact on individual decision-making, particularly those about happiness influencing the lifestyle choices someone may make, which may in fact be counterproductive to their well-being and happiness. Therefore, understanding which and why these myths are believed can aid in their debunking.

It is interesting to note that the vast majority did not believe that money (“winning a fortune”) led to happiness nor that men are happier than women. However, one result may be heavily time-related. The vast majority agreed that the state-

ment/myth “Modern stressful living has made people less happy than in previous times” was true, which could be a part function of the precise time that this study was run, namely after over two years of the COVID-19 pandemic which had a profound effect on many people’s health, happiness and well-being.

Like all studies this had limitations. The sample was heterogeneous but not fully representative in terms of age, marital status and educational attainment. These factors may have related to their knowledge in the area. It would also have been interesting to assess the participants actual level of happiness/well-being and see if that was related to the endorsement of the myths of happiness. More importantly, there will happiness experts who disagree with the classification of essentially True and False, mainly because the statements are not qualified. Finally, the fact that all the statements were myths, may have distorted results in the sense that some participants would assume that in this list some would be true and others false.

Data Availability

This is obtainable from the first author upon request.

Registration

This paper was not pre-registered with the journal.

Ethics

This was sought and obtained (CEHP/2017/565).

Informed Consent

Participants gave consent for their anonymised data to be analysed and published.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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