BOOK REVIEW


As suggested by the title, the comprehensive overview of this book is to aggregate and disseminate the genetic and psychological underpinnings of happiness, or in scientific terminology, subjective well-being. Besides being a highly readable account of the multiple pathways by which genes, character traits (e.g., sociability, self-awareness), and environments (e.g., choice of romantic partner, interesting activities) interact to affect happiness, David Lykken offers insight on different methods to increase happiness. The author draws from the literature on social-cognition, intrinsic motivation, work and leisure, romantic relationships, parent-child relationships, and psychopathology in order to make the case that happiness is mutable despite its high heritability rate. The research synthesized from these diverse areas of psychology coupled with the author’s own personal wisdom and intuitions provides the reader with a number of specific, untested, falsifiable hypotheses about happiness and a rich avenue of future research directions.

The first and strongest section of the book focuses on the genetics of happiness. Based on seminal twin studies conducted by Lykken and his colleagues at the University of Minnesota, genetic differences explained an astounding 40–50% of the variance in happiness between individuals. Even more intriguing, Lykken provides details on a 9-year follow-up study of the happiness levels of 410 twin pairs. The 9-year test-retest correlation of happiness for all twins was 0.55, whereas the scores of monozygotic twins on the first testing correlated 0.54 with their co-twin’s happiness score 9 years later. In explaining these findings, Lykken reiterates that the “monozygotic co-twins correlated with each other over this long interval about as strongly as they correlated with themselves over that period” (p. 58)! In essence, these results provide demonstrable evidence that happiness appears to fluctuate around a stable set-point, and that the heritability of this “stable component of well-being” is close to 100 percent (p. 58). The concept of “happiness set-points” coincides with decades of theory and research positing that individuals certainly respond to positive and negative life events, but that they tend to adapt over time and return to their original levels of happiness. Building on the primary thesis that our happiness set-points
do not bind us to specific levels of momentary or long-term happiness, Lykken creatively refers to happiness set-points as a calm lake and that our mood fluctuations are analogous to waves (hedonic experiences) and troughs (unhappy experiences).

Lykken posits that there are substantial differences in happiness levels from moment to moment, month to month, because of changes in how we evaluate our lives based on different events and moods. Because of these life-appraisal changes, Lykken indicates that happiness is best understood by focusing on an individual’s average level of happiness (set-point), and the decisions and environmental fits (e.g., work environment, leisure activities) that can guide individuals to increases in happiness. Lykken eloquently summarizes these arguments by stating that “the true formula is not Nature versus Nurture, but rather, Nature via Nurture” (p. 60). For the reader familiar or unfamiliar with his genetic research, this section provides a clear and extensive distinction between the myths and truths about what leads to happiness, and the implications of the high genetic component in happiness. In short, this section is an excellent didactic resource on the genetics of happiness, as well as human strengths (e.g., self-awareness, future orientation, aesthetic appreciation, curiosity) that interact with genes to influence the experiences and environments that are sought. According to the tenets of the book, happiness and positive emotions cannot only be cultivated, but beget further positive outcomes (e.g., productively using one’s talents at work facilitates positive emotions which facilitate even greater productivity; chap. 5).

As a natural progression of the topic, the second section devotes even greater attention to the human experiences that push individuals beyond their happiness set-points. Using real-world examples, Lykken focuses on the role of mental energy, passive versus active leisure activities (e.g., cooking vs. watching the cooking channel), and the importance of avidly seeking experiences that challenge our personal resources and cause us to be fully absorbed and devoid of self-consciousness (i.e., Csiksentmihalyi’s flow states). Additionally, Lykken offers a strong case for the salience of effectance motivation, which he defines as the process of engaging in activities with clear standards that allow us to use our skills to directly impact the environment (e.g., growing our own vegetables vs. buying them at the supermarket). The author offers insight into how effectance motivation could account for the similar happiness levels between white and blue-collar workers,
and how prison populations could be safer and more harmonious if opportunities for effectance motivation were more readily available. Though there is little mention of empirical research, the multitude of methods by which SWB can be obtained (e.g., meaningful goals, intrinsically motivating activities) provides rich ideas for questions to explore both personally and scientifically.

After laying the framework for the genetics and antecedents to happiness, the next section of the book focuses on happy families, parents, and children. By means of genetic findings and work in the field of child antisocial tendencies, Lykken explores how parent-child relationships and familial households could lead to happy or unhappy children. Drawing conclusions from his own correlational data on the well-being of twin pairs and their parents, Lykken expresses the strong likelihood of a reciprocal relationship between parent and child happiness. His interpretations evoke a number of testable hypotheses, including the potential moderating role of parental discipline styles (i.e., authoritative vs. authoritarian vs. passive), child compliance, and parental and child goal-orientation (i.e., seeking flow experiences) on the happiness of family members. Nonetheless, one glaring weakness of this section is the speculative nature of the author’s discussion. For example, after indicating that approximately 25% of children have the potential to develop oppositional-defiant disorder or conduct disorder, Lykken states that “if your child is counted among either of these candidate groupings, you will not be a happy parent, and yours will not be a happy family” (p. 121). To date, research is not yet available to validate this stringent claim and few citations on the topic are presented in the appendix. However, based on Lykken’s discussion on the importance of effectance motivation or a parent’s ability to impact their children (e.g., child compliance, eliciting prosocial behavior) on happiness, one can expect to find strong relationships between child antisocial tendencies and parental happiness.

Lykken also explores the role of gender in happiness and the association between happiness and romantic relationships. Using his extensive data on twins, Lykken provides research on gender differences in interests, careers, social relationships, and concerns about physical attractiveness that require consideration in discussions on well-being. Lykken reports no gender differences in general well-being, but that women have greater fluctuations around their happiness set-points than men. An argument is made for the importance of women’s higher levels
of fearfulness than men, and men’s higher levels of aggression than women on environmental decisions and happiness across the life span. This argument is based on the notion that men can be more adventurous, seeking pleasure from novel experiences that incite both anxiety and curiosity, whereas women’s lower levels of aggression can facilitate more intimate relationships. Lykken explores fascinating findings from his twin data set on the role of genetics and traits in the context of love and relationships. This includes the results of a study asking spouses about their initial meeting with their partner’s twin and twins about their initial meeting with their co-twin’s spouse. Findings are carefully interpreted within an evolutionary framework of love and relationships. Overall, Lykken’s interpretations and intuitions suggest a number of future studies on the interface between gender, personality traits, relationships, and everyday behavior, cognitions, goals, and SWB. For the non-scientist, this section provides a clear picture of the dynamic role of genetics and evolutionary sex differences in relationships to partially account for infatuation, divorce, and satisfying long-term relationships. My only criticism is that with a chapter entitled, “How to stay happy through marriage,” I had hoped for greater attention to relationship qualities and processes that are more open to change (e.g., self-disclosure, shared novel activities) than personality characteristics.

The next section of the book focused on the interface between the positive side of human nature and psychopathology. Specifically, Lykken provides a parsimonious account of how depression, fear, and social anxiety, and anger can inhibit SWB. Using personal anecdotes of his vulnerabilities and lucid experiences involving anger, anxiety, and calm energy, Lykken sheds light on the strong grip these states have on the pleasurable, mindful experiences at the foundation of happiness. Whereas Lykken does mention some of the treatments available for depression and social anxiety, specifically Prozac and relaxation training, he fails to mention the most efficacious interventions in the field and does not offer any discussion on the treatment of anger management problems. While psychopathology is certainly not the focus of this book, without reference to cognitive-behavioral treatments and the interactive role of cognitive restructuring, relaxation training, and exposure, the author does little justice as to how happiness can be restored when the “thieves of happiness” arise.

The book culminates with a section on happiness in the elderly, including a brief synopsis of findings demonstrating that elderly twins
report greater SWB than younger twins. Lykken provides ample caveats in interpreting his data while simultaneously explaining how happiness can be maintained and even amplified in old age.

Overall, the extensive genetic research conducted by Lykken and his colleagues provides an excellent background to furthering our understanding of happiness. Most importantly, Lykken elucidates the point that the high heritability of happiness does not imply that humans cannot affect the frequency and intensity of SWB. The author provides stimulating ideas on the effects of mindfulness, vitality, effectance motivation, and selecting environments that are in the greatest concordance with one’s natural behavioral tendencies, on happiness.

However, there are a number of areas that could be developed further. The principal difficulty is the imbalance between speculation and supporting evidence, with a less than satisfactory review of the empirical literature. Despite the provision of references for each chapter at the end of the book, Lykken could have incorporated a broader scientific literature on the field of SWB. Lykken lucidly describes a number of his own personal theories, such as the reciprocal relationship between productivity and worker happiness, and the belief that “if your innate strengths and weaknesses are compatible with one another, then doing the things that make you happy will come easier than if your various proclivities pull in different directions” (p. 59). Unfortunately, he failed to address the wide body of research on the relationship between self-efficacy, goals, and daily goal efforts, progress, and obstructions to SWB. Similarly, there is minimal mention of the empirical literature on positive emotions and their robust relationship with social activity, altruism, and problem-solving abilities.

Because of the relatively broad scope of the book, there is limited discussion on many of the germane topics introduced; excluding discussions on genetics. Perhaps the greatest weakness of the book is the cursory attention given to depression, social anxiety, and anger in the “thieves of happiness” section. Lykken does provide a caveat in this section indicating that he is focusing on “mild to moderate depressions . . . the little periods of mild melancholia, to which most of us are subject from time to time” (p. 214). In his account of social anxiety he indicates that, “for shy and fearful people, however, not only risky pastimes but many tamer pleasures, including ordinary social interactions, may be too stressful to enjoy” (p. 221). Lykken’s section on fear and shyness risks trivializing the chronic course and severe
impairment associated with social phobia. Depression and social phobia comprise two of the three most prevalent psychological disorders in the United States. Recent research not only demonstrates that depressed and socially anxious individuals experience lower SWB, but also greater suicidal ideations and substance abuse problems than normal controls and individuals with other anxiety disorders. In light of the popular audience that will be drawn to this book, the “thieves of happiness” section warrants further discussion of efficacious treatments and/or available references in the appendix.

Despite these limitations, Lykken’s wisdom, humor, and ability to communicate complex genetic findings in an easily understandable format, will do wonders for providing an active resource for individuals interested in the applications of the scientific study of happiness. I believe that this book will lead readers to look at their lives with greater depth as to what leads to their most optimal psychological experiences. As such, I have been using his book as one of the primary textbooks for my undergraduate college classes on positive psychology. In addition, the book provides a reservoir of hypotheses for researchers to test in the burgeoning field of positive psychology. With the advent of new experience-sampling technologies (e.g., electronic diaries), scientists can test Lykken’s hypotheses about the predictors of happiness in parents and their children, romantic couples, the elderly, prison populations, and human beings in general. This book provides an excellent complement to further our understanding of Lykken’s provocative findings on the potent genetic roots of happiness.

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