



Career Path: Would You Rather Win the Silver or Bronze Medal?

Skills and Professional Development



By now you know this is probably a trick question. But it illustrates a really important point that, if you can master, will help keep you on the path to happiness. First, some background.

Until recently I thought the so-called “replication crisis” was limited to the field of psychology. The crisis refers to the fact that many published studies of scientific results cannot be reproduced by others who perform the same study at a later time. This depressed me because my undergrad was in psychology. Was it all a waste of time? (Spoiler: not at all, and not just because many studies do replicate. We humans are so wacky in our thinking, but predictably so, that there are lots of ways to make good use of the bundle of quirks we all comprise.)

As it turns out, many fields besides psychology suffer from the problem that published scientific results are difficult to reproduce by others. Psychology was early in getting bad press, but psychology researchers are no longer alone in making more out of the results of a study than may be warranted. Studies in medicine, marketing, economics, and now hard sciences are each falling prey to the problem of unrepeatability.

But there is one lovely little area of psychological research that has seen its results replicated, several times. It concerns the reactions of Olympic medalists to finding out if they've won gold, silver, or bronze. As could be expected, gold medalists are quite delighted. "I'm the best in the world, baby. Beat that."

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Bronze medalists are also outrageously happy on average, and good for them. If you've any sympathy in you, save it for the poor silver medalists. In some disciplines, their reactions ranged from despair, to contempt, to nothing. "Nothing, really?! You just won a freaking silver medal in the Olympics."

The space between

What explains this amazing reaction? The studies refer to the athletes running "counterfactuals" in their heads, i.e. they compare their achievement to *what could have been*. But let's not make this too complicated. I've told you before that while people don't evaluate things well in isolation, we are excellent when it comes to comparing two things. The difference in the silver and bronze medalists' reactions can be explained by their comparison groups.

The silver medalist is looking at the tiny distance that separates them from the gold medalist. If only they could have eked out a few milliseconds more, they could be the champion. In this comparison, they forget that they've just beaten out every other person on the planet but one.

The bronze medalist, by contrast, is looking at the tiny distance that separate them from fourth place and everyone behind them. "My goodness," they think. "Only milliseconds separated me from not getting a medal at all." They look at all the others they have vanquished to become an Olympic medalist.

In other words, **what you feel about a situation depends on where you direct your gaze**. Are you looking upwards at what you could have achieved but did not? Or do you consider how far you have come and how many others you have outperformed?

Now for all of you who are not Olympic medalists or hopefuls, guess what? **The same phenomenon applies to all of us in our daily lives**. Are you happy with your house, your job, your spouse, your salary, your neighborhood, your schools, your children, your pet, and on and on? It's not an objective standard, but rather a relative one.

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If you're reading this, you're living a time when more people have more freedom, security, and material goods than any time in human history. Some 10 billion people who lived before you had a comprehensively tougher time, not to mention living lives that were "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." And you're complaining because your internet speed is too slow and there's nothing on Netflix?

Desires contribute to unhappiness

Do you understand how much your desires are themselves contributing to your unhappiness? Have you realized how little the things you attain actually contribute to your long-term happiness? To make yourself unhappy by wanting things that will not make you happy is not a recipe for success.

By all means, aim for gold. But on the way, don't forget to appreciate what you have already achieved in your life and in your career. And remember how much better you have it than countless others.

Or to say it once more because it bears repeating: Be thankful for what you have, and don't be sad for what you don't have.

Be well.

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