TV Time, Unlike Child Care, Ranks High in Mood Study

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A team of psychologists and economists is reporting today what many Americans know but do not always admit, especially to social scientists: that watching television by oneself is a very enjoyable way to pass the time, and that taking care of children - bless their little hearts - is often about as much fun as housework.

Those findings, published in the journal Science, run contrary to previous research about what makes people happy and why.

The study also suggests that the fundamental realities of marriage and job security have far less to do with daily moods than factors like deadlines on the job and quality of sleep.

The study looked at 909 working women in Texas, though the researchers said the results probably applied more broadly.

It found that in general the group woke up a little grumpy but soon entered a state of mild pleasure that increased by degrees through the day, punctuated by occasional bouts of anxiety, frustration and anger. Predictably, the researchers found that commuting to work, housework and facing a boss rated as the least pleasant activities, while sex, socializing with friends and relaxing were most enjoyable.

Yet contrary to previous research on daily mood, the study found that the women rated television watching high on the list, ahead of shopping and talking on the phone, and ranked taking care of children low, below cooking and not far above housework.

The study marks the debut of a novel questionnaire that probes the subtle, moment-to-moment emotions that constitute an ordinary day. In the new approach, called the Day Reconstruction Method, people keep a diary of everything they did during the day, from reading the paper in the morning to arguing with children or co-workers over lunch, from running to catch the 6 p.m. bus home to falling asleep with their socks on.

The next day, consulting the diary, they relive each activity and, using seven-point scales, rate how they felt at the time relative to each of a dozen feelings like annoyed, criticized, worried, warm, friendly or happy.

Customarily, researchers who study well-being have asked sweeping questions about contentment or dissatisfaction. In contrast, the new survey method prompts people to relive a normal day, rating how pleased or annoyed, depressed or competent they felt in specific activities.