New method measures emotional quality of daily experience

December 5 2004

For Marcel Proust, the taste of a madeleine conjured remembrance of the distant past. In today's multi-tasking, hyper-speed world, it can be a trick to remember what we did yesterday.
But a new method of reconstructing the previous day's activities not only helps people remember how they spent their time, it also captures how they really felt about their activities.
The technique, described in the Dec. 3 issue of Science, provides insight into what people actually enjoy and what kinds of factors affect how happy we are with our lives.

Some of the findings confirm what we already know while others are counter-intuitive. The researchers assessed how people felt during 28 types of activities and found that intimate relations were the most enjoyable, while commuting was the least enjoyable.

More surprisingly, taking care of their children was also among the less enjoyable activities, although people generally report that their children are the greatest source of joy in their lives.

"When people are asked how much they enjoy spending time with their kids they think of all the nice things---reading them a story, going to the zoo," said University of Michigan psychologist Norbert Schwarz, a co-author of the Science article. "But they don't take the other times into account, the times when they are trying to do something else and find the kids distracting. When we sample all the times that parents spend with their children, the picture is less positive than parents expect. On the

other hand, we also find that people enjoy spending time with their relatives much more than they usually assume."

General reports of what people enjoy may also differ from descriptions of how people actually feel in a specific situation because many people hesitate to report socially inappropriate feelings. This is less of a problem when they report on specific episodes. "Saying that you generally don't enjoy spending time with your kids is terrible," Schwarz said, "but admitting that they were a pain last night is quite acceptable." The new Day Reconstruction Method provides a better picture of people's daily experiences by improving accurate recall of how they felt in specific situations.

By illuminating what kinds of activities, under what conditions and with what partners, are most likely to be linked with positive or negative feelings, the method has potential value for medical researchers examining the emotional burden of different illnesses and the health consequences of stress, according to Schwarz, who is a research scientist at the U-M Institute for Social Research (ISR).

For the study, researchers analyzed questionnaires completed by a convenience sample of 909 working women. Participants answered demographic and general satisfaction questions and were asked to construct a short diary of the previous day: "Think of your day as a continuous series of scenes or episodes in a film," the directions began. After participants developed their diary, they answered a series of structured questions about each episode, including when it started and ended, what they were doing, where they were, with whom they were interacting, and how they felt. The study builds on earlier work on Americans' use of time, initiated by ISR economist F. Thomas Juster.

The average number of daily activities participants reported was 14.1 and the average duration of each episode was 61 minutes.

In addition to intimate relations, socializing, relaxing, praying or meditating, eating, exercising, and watching TV were among the most enjoyable activities. Commuting was the least enjoyable activity, with working, doing housework, using the computer for e-mail or Internet, and taking care of children rounding out the bottom of the list.

Interactions with friends and relatives were rated as the most enjoyable, followed by activities with spouses or significant others, children, clients or customers, co-workers and bosses. At the bottom of the list: activities done alone.

Personal characteristics such as trouble maintaining enthusiasm (an indicator of depression) or a poor night's sleep exerted a pervasive influence on how people felt during daily activities. Features of the current situation such as the identity of partners in an interaction or the level of time pressure experienced at work exerted a powerful effect.

But general life circumstances---such as how secure people think their jobs are, or whether they are single or married---had a relatively small impact on their feelings throughout the day. These factors were closely linked with how satisfied people said they were with their lives in general, but had little influence on how positive they felt during specific activities.

"It's not that life circumstances are irrelevant to well-being," notes Schwarz. "On the contrary, we found that people experience large variations in feelings during the course of a normal day. This variation highlights the importance of optimizing the allocation of time across situations and activities. If you want to improve your well-being, make sure that you allocate your time wisely."

Unfortunately, that's not easy. When the researchers examined the amount of time spent on various activities, they found that people spent

the bulk of their waking time---11.5 hours---engaged in the activities they enjoyed the least: work, housework and commuting.

Source: University of Michigan

Citation: New method measures emotional quality of daily experience (2004, December 5) retrieved 18 September 2024 from
https://phys.org/news/2004-12-method-emotional-quality-daily.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.