

Unhappy people watch TV, happy people read/socialize, says study

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A new study by sociologists at the University of Maryland concludes that unhappy people watch more TV, while people who describe themselves as very happy spend more time reading and socializing. The study appears in the December issue of the journal *Social Indicators Research*.

Analyzing 30-years worth of national data from time-use studies and a continuing series of social attitude surveys, the Maryland researchers report that spending time watching television may contribute to viewers' happiness in the moment, with less positive effects in the long run.

"TV doesn't really seem to satisfy people over the long haul the way that social involvement or reading a newspaper does," says University of Maryland sociologist John P. Robinson, the study co-author and a pioneer in time-use studies. "It's more passive and may provide escape - especially when the news is as depressing as the economy itself. The data suggest to us that the TV habit may offer short-run pleasure at the expense of long-term malaise."

TV VIEWING DURING A FINANCIAL CRISIS

Based on data from time use surveys, Robinson projects that TV viewing might increase significantly as the economy worsens in the next few months and years.

"Through good and bad economic times, our diary studies, have consistently found that work is the major activity correlate of higher TV

viewing hours," Robinson says. "As people have progressively more time on their hands, viewing hours increase."

But Robinson cautions that some of that extra time also might be spent sleeping. "As working and viewing hours increase, so do sleep hours," he says. "Sleep could be the second major beneficiary of job loss or reduced working hours."

STUDY FINDINGS AND DATA

In their new study, Robinson and his co-author, University of Maryland sociologist Steven Martin, set out to learn more about the activities that contributed to happiness in people's lives. They analyzed two sets of data spanning nearly 30 years (1975-2006) gathered from nearly 30,000 adults:

- A series of time-use studies that asked people to fill out diaries for a 24-hour period and to indicate how pleasurable they found each activity;
- General Social Survey attitude studies, which Robinson calls the national premier source for monitoring changes in public attitudes – in-depth surveys that over the years consistently asked subjects how happy they feel, how they spend their time among a number of other questions.

UNHAPPY PEOPLE VIEW SIGNIFICANTLY MORE

Robinson and Martin found that the two sets of data largely coincided for most activities – with the exception of television.

From the General Social Survey, the researchers found that self-described happy people were more socially active, attended more religious services, voted more and read more newspapers. By contrast, unhappy people watched significantly more television in their spare time.

According to the study's findings, unhappy people watch an estimated 20 percent more television than very happy people, after taking into account their education, income, age and marital status – as well as other demographic predictors of both viewing and happiness.

UNHAPPY PEOPLE ARE HAPPY WITH TV

Data from time-diaries told a somewhat different story. Responding in "real time," much closer to daily events, survey respondents tended to rate television viewing more highly as a daily activity.

"What viewers seem to be saying is that 'While TV in general is a waste of time and not particularly enjoyable, the shows I saw tonight were pretty good,' " Robinson says.

The data also suggested to Robinson and Martin that TV viewing was "easy." Viewers don't have to go anywhere, dress up, find company, plan ahead, expend energy, do any work or spend money in order to view. Combine these advantages with the immediate gratification offered by television, and you can understand why Americans spend more than half their free time as TV viewers, the researchers say.

Unhappy people were also more likely to feel they have unwanted extra time on their hands (51 percent) compared to very happy people (19 percent) and to feel rushed for time (35 percent vs. 23 percent). Having too much time and no clear way to fill it was the bigger burden of the two.

AN ADDICT'S FIX

Martin likens the short, temporary pleasure of television to addiction: "Addictive activities produce momentary pleasure but long-term misery and regret," he says. "People most vulnerable to addiction tend to be

socially or personally disadvantaged. For this kind of person, TV can become a kind of opiate in a way. It's habitual, and tuning in can be an easy way of tuning out."

Source: University of Maryland

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