



Short Communication

How daydreaming relates to life satisfaction, loneliness, and social support: The importance of gender and daydream content

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ABSTRACT

Daydreaming appears to have a complex relationship with life satisfaction and happiness. Here we demonstrate that the facets of daydreaming that predict life satisfaction differ between men and women (Study 1; $N = 421$), that the content of daydreams tends to be social others (Study 2; $N = 17,556$), and that who we daydream about influences the relation between daydreaming and happiness variables like life satisfaction, loneliness, and perceived social support (Study 3; $N = 361$). Specifically, daydreaming about people not close to us predicts more loneliness and less perceived social support, whereas daydreaming about close others predicts greater life satisfaction. Importantly, these patterns hold even when actual social network depth and breadth are statistically controlled, although these associations tend to be small in magnitude. Individual differences and the content of daydreams are thus important to consider when examining how happiness relates to spontaneous thoughts.

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1. Introduction

Both empirical evidence and everyday experience reveal we have a mind with a penchant for simulating alternative realities (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Almost everyone reports engaging in some form of daydreaming on a daily basis (96%; Singer & McRaven, 1961), with estimates of how much of our day is devoted to daydreaming ranging from 30% to 50% (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Klinger & Cox, 1987). Yet there is no consensus on the role of daydreaming in emotional well-being.

On the one hand, daydreaming provides a helpful means for escaping a banal existence. People commonly report deliberately launching into vivid daydreams to ease boredom at work, for example (Fisher, 1987; Singer, 1961). Daydreaming also alleviates emotional stress, conflict, and physical pain (Lang, 1995). In fact, individuals with a proclivity for daydreaming exhibit less physiological reactivity to stressful events (Singer & Antrobus, 1972), and asking people to daydream results in a less acute stress response for those anticipating an electric shock compared to those without such instructions (Rowe, 1963). In medical patients, guided daydreaming reduces the need for pain medication and shortens hospital visits (Antall & Kresevic, 2004), as well as promotes greater overall well-being during recovery (Frick et al., 2008). Daydreaming has also been associated with other positive qualities that might promote happiness. Children with a disposition for internal musings exhibit more self-control and patience than children who have no such inclination (Singer, 1961), for example.

On the other hand, daydreaming may be a symptom of dissatisfaction with one's life. In fact, many clinical psychologists consider daydreaming a manifestation of frustration and a hallmark for a slew of mental illnesses (Freud, 1959; Rapaport,

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1951). Specifically, dissociative and schizotypal disorders are associated with a tendency to fantasize excessively and difficulties separating daydreaming from reality (Wilson & Barber, 1982). Dysphoria has also been linked to mind-wandering (Carriere, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2008; Smallwood, O'Connor, Sudbery, & Obonsawin, 2007; Watts & Sharrock, 1985), with childhood loneliness predicting fantasy proneness (Rhue & Lynn, 1987) and fantasy proneness in turn predicting a wide range of psychopathologies (Muris, Merckelbach, & Peeters, 2003; Waldo & Merritt, 2000). In extreme cases, the uncontrollable nature of these fantasies can cause distress, even when the fantasies themselves are often enjoyable (Schupak & Rosenthal, 2009).

Much of the work linking daydreaming to negative clinical outcomes has conflated a number of related constructs, however, such as fantasy proneness and dissociative experiences (Klinger, Henning, & Janssen, 2009). It is only recently that research has been done on how normal daily daydreaming relates to subjective well-being. Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) used an experience-sampling method to examine 2250 adults and found that mind-wandering was negatively related to happiness in the moment (cf. Kane et al., 2007), leading them to conclude that “a wandering mind is an unhappy mind.” Although their data argue that mind-wandering causes negative moods, an earlier study found the opposite can be true (Smallwood, Fitzgerald, Miles, & Phillips, 2009). Moreover, a mind wandering from a task can be seen as distinct from daydreaming in a number of ways. Daydreaming, for example, can occur when there is no particular task at hand. As well, mind-wandering is typically defined as thinking about something despite having no intention to do so (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006), whereas daydreaming can often be undertaken intentionally, as a willful respite from the present. Consistent with these observations, previous research has found that attentiveness to relevant stimuli in the environment (being “on-task”) is almost unrelated to spontaneous thoughts (akin to mind-wandering) and only weakly related to variables associated with daydreaming (Klinger & Cox, 1987).¹ This illustrates the fact that related forms of spontaneous thought are separable and unique, so previous work on the affective correlates of mind-wandering should not necessarily be interpreted as comments on daydreaming.

After considering the available research the relationship between daily daydreaming and happiness remains somewhat unclear. In an attempt to further explore how daydreaming and happiness relate, we examined individual differences such as gender and age along with the content of these daydreams.

2. Study 1

In order to examine the relation between daydreaming and life satisfaction, we turned to a large, publicly available dataset known as the Eugene Springfield Community Sample (ESCS; Goldberg, 1999).

2.1. Participants

The ESCS is a large community sample that was initially recruited in 1993 and consists of individuals who volunteered to complete questionnaires for at least 5–10 years. A total of 421 participants (253 women and 168 men), ranging in age from 18 to 85 ($M = 50.2$, $SD = 13.0$) completed the materials relevant to the current study and were used in our analyses.

2.2. Materials and procedure

2.2.1. Daydreaming

In order to measure individual differences in daydreaming tendencies, we drew items from the Curious Experiences Questionnaire (CEQ; Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001). Initially developed to measure fantasy proneness, the CEQ contains several items that directly pertain to daydreaming. These items tap two separate aspects of daydreaming, the frequency with which daydreams occur and how vividly these daydreams are imagined by the individual. Examining both frequency and vividness allows us to examine the phenomenon of daydreaming in greater detail, as either aspect (or both) could predict life satisfaction.

Two items were selected that pertain to frequency of daydreaming: (1) “[I] spend much of the day fantasizing or daydreaming” and (2) “[I] rarely get bored because I start daydreaming when things get boring,” Cronbach's $\alpha = .43$. Four items pertaining to the vividness of daydreaming were also selected: (1) “Many of my friends and relatives do not know that I have such detailed fantasies,” (2) “Many of my fantasies are lifelike,” (3) “Many of my fantasies are just as lively as a good movie,” and (4) “Confuse fantasies with real memories,” $\alpha = .73$. Using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from *very inaccurate* to *very accurate*, respondents rated the extent to which each phrase was self-descriptive.

2.2.2. Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction was measured using the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Included in this measure are items such as “I am satisfied with my life” and “I would change nothing about my life.” Respondents indicated their agreement with these statements using a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. This

¹ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this helpful observation.

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