



The daydreamer: Exploring the personality underpinnings of daydreaming styles and their implications for well-being



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ABSTRACT

In the present research, we looked at how positive-constructive daydreaming, guilty-dysphoric daydreaming, and poor attentional control associate with both broad (i.e., openness to experience) and specific (i.e., introspection) personality traits. A second aim was to determine how daydreaming styles were associated with psychological well-being. Across four studies, 1181 undergraduate (studies 1, 2, and 4) and MTurk (study 3) participants completed online questionnaires. A fixed-effect meta-analysis revealed that introspection was a significant predictor of both positive and negative daydreaming styles, but not a consistent predictor of poor attentional control. Positive-constructive daydreaming was more strongly associated with personal growth, purpose in life, and positive affect; guilty-dysphoric daydreaming was associated with depressive symptoms, negative affect, and lower psychological well-being, while poor attentional control was associated with lower positive well-being. Although correlational, these results demonstrate the usefulness of examining the experience and content of recurrent daydreaming and mind-wandering styles to further understand well-being.

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1. Introduction

He looked at his own soul with a Telescope. What seemed all irregular, he saw and shewed to be beautiful Constellations; and he added to the Consciousness hidden worlds within worlds.

[Coleridge, *Notebooks*]

Internal dialogues, mental images, and other thoughts occupy almost half of our waking life (e.g., Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Klinger & Cox, 1987). Hence, our mind works around the clock; whether our internal mentation is intentional or spontaneous, there seems to be little to no respite from our flow of consciousness (i.e., thoughts, emotions, and mental images rising and falling across time; James, 1985/1895). As such, the nature and structure of internal mentation likely plays a central role in well-being. To this end, the present research replicates and extends previous work on daydreaming, mind-wandering, and personality (Zhiyan & Singer, 1996) by exploring how the introspective personality may predict a more positive and constructive style of daydreaming, a guilty and dysphoric style of daydreaming, and distraction away from external tasks. In order to understand the possible benefits and downfalls of daydreaming and mind-wandering, the present research also investigates how daydreaming styles and poor attentional control relate to psychological well-being.

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In the present research, we view *mind-wandering* and *daydreaming* as highly overlapping constructs that involve a decoupling of attention from the external environment (i.e., task-unrelated and stimulus independent thought), which can occur spontaneously or intentionally (e.g., Giambra, 1995; Klinger, 2009; Seli, Carriere, & Smilek, 2015; Seli, Cheyne, Xu, Purdon, & Smilek, 2015; Seli, Risko, & Smilek, 2016; Singer, 1966a, 1966b). Research has demonstrated that mind wandering and daydreaming can lead to positive outcomes such as adaptive emotion regulation (Poerio, Totterdell, Emerson, & Miles, 2015a, 2015b; Singer, 1975), and can be intentionally used to distance oneself from stressful or painful situations (Antall & Kresevic, 2004; Kucyi, Salomons, & Davis, 2013; Singer & Antrobus, 1966). In contrast, negative moods lead to more mind wandering when mind wandering is assessed as the number of errors made on a sustained attention task (Poerio, Totterdell, & Miles, 2013; Smallwood, Fitzgerald, Miles, & Phillips, 2009). Using thought probes, Smallwood and O'Connor (2011) have also demonstrated that participants who underwent a negative mood induction reported more past-oriented mind wandering episodes. Alternatively, Killingsworth and Gilbert (2010) have argued that mind wandering may lead to negative moods. However, recent research has found that the effect of mind wandering on later mood depends on the content of the mind wandering episode (i.e., interest, valence; Franklin et al., 2013; Poerio et al., 2013; Ruby, Smallwood, Engen, & Singer, 2013).

In sum, mind wandering has been associated with both desirable and undesirable experience. However, the specific association of *recurrent* daydreaming and mind-wandering style with emotional experience has yet to be explored. In the present research, we focus on dispositional daydreaming and mind-wandering to better understand for whom this process of the imagination is most beneficial.

1.1. Daydreaming and personality

Singer (1966a, 1966b, 1975) was one of the first researchers to explore daydreaming in terms of “recurrent structures” stemming from personality processes. Through their research, Singer and his colleagues have identified three broad styles of daydreaming: positive-constructive, guilty-dysphoric, and poor attentional control (McMillan, Kaufman, & Singer, 2013; Singer, 1966a, 1966b; Singer & Antrobus, 1966). Positive constructive daydreaming is characterized by an acceptance and enjoyment of internal mentation, as well as the ability to elaborate on playful and creative mental images and thoughts, while guilty-dysphoric daydreams tend to be more achievement and failure oriented. These daydreams also focus heavily on guilty and hostile thoughts and images. Finally, the poor attentional control style describes individuals who are easily bored, distracted, experience frequent unintentional mind-wandering, and who have difficulty in elaborating on the content of daydreams.

In the present research, we view these styles as possessing distinct characteristics (e.g., Callard, Smallwood, Golchert, & Margulies, 2013; Dorsch, 2015), such that positive-constructive and guilty-dysphoric daydreaming likely represents the experience of internal events once attention has been decoupled from the external environment (i.e., content-focused), while poor attentional control may better represent this decoupling of attention. We also conceptualize these daydreaming and mind-wandering styles as characteristic adaptations (McCrae & Costa, 1997) because they represent enduring yet flexible imaginative tendencies that are influenced both by traits (e.g., Zhiyan & Singer, 1996) and by the external environment (e.g., Poerio, Totterdell, Emerson, & Miles, 2016). That is, the content of positive-constructive and guilty-dysphoric daydreams, and distraction away from the external environment may reflect the ongoings of everyday life, while the specific styles (i.e., positive, negative, or lack of external attention) are dispositional in their tendency to stay more or less fixed across situations and time. Because these daydreaming and mind-wandering styles do not operate at the level of Five Factor Model (FFM) traits, we expect them to be uniquely predicted by dispositions while also uniquely predicting well-being.

Past research by Gold and Reilly (1985) has found no significant association between personality –as assessed by the *Personality Research Form* (Jackson, 1967) –and daydreaming content. However, Zhiyan and Singer (1996) have provided initial evidence that the FFM personality trait of neuroticism –characterized by a high sensitivity to negative emotions, and a proneness to jealousy, low self-esteem, and depression (McCrae & Costa, 1983) –is associated with guilty-dysphoric daydreaming; and that conscientiousness –characterized by diligence, low impulsivity, and organization (McCrae & John, 2006) –is negatively associated with poor attentional control. In turn, these authors found that openness to experience –characterized by imaginative daydreaming, artistic sensitivity, awareness and appreciation of emotional responses, and intellectual curiosity (McCrae & Costa, 1983) –is related to positive-constructive daydreaming. These authors suggest that positive-constructive daydreaming and openness to experience are related because, together, they foster an enjoyment of daydreaming, similar to what Guilford (1977) termed thinking introversion or thoughtfulness.

Partly based on Guilford's (1977) theory, Grimes, Cheek, and Norem (2011) developed a scale measuring four facets of introversion: social, thinking, anxious, and restrained introversion. Of particular interest, these authors conceptualized “thinking introversion” as the frequency and enjoyment of introspective thoughts and images. In line with Zhiyan and Singer's (1996) reasoning, the personality processes that are expected to underlie daydreaming likely involve an appreciation, awareness, and openness to one's internal mentation. Considering that the FFM describes introversion as a lack of approach to external and social reward, assertiveness, and positive affectivity (i.e., McCrae & John, 2006; Zelenski, Sobocko, & Whelan, 2014), it seems that the “thinking introversion” subscale is less representative of introversion, and better conceptualized as a specific instance of openness to experience within the five-factor model of traits.

According to James (1950/1890), introspection represents the act of looking inside one's mind and making a judgment about what is found, whether it be a feeling, a thought, or an image. More recently, philosophers have described introspection

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