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True self-alienation positively predicts reports of mindwandering


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ABSTRACT

Two studies assessed the relationship between feelings of uncertainty about who one truly is (i.e., true self-alienation) and self-reported task-unrelated thoughts (i.e., mindwandering) during performance tasks. Because true self-alienation is conceptualized as the subjective disconnect between conscious awareness and actual experience, we hypothesized that greater feelings of true self-alienation would positively relate to subjective reports of mindwandering. Two convergent studies supported this hypothesis. Moreover, this relationship could not consistently be accounted for by the independent influence of other aspects of authenticity, negative mood, mindfulness, or broad personality dimensions. These findings suggest that individual differences in true self-alienation are reliably associated with subjective reports of mindwandering. The implications of these findings for the true self-alienation construct, the ways that personality relates to mindwandering, and future research directions focused on curtailing mindwandering and improving performance and achievement are discussed.

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1. Introduction

As important as it may seem to be aware of and attuned to present experience, it is a simple truth that people's minds frequently wander to things unrelated to the task at hand. Research suggests that, on average, people's attention is focused on something other than the present environment nearly 50% of the time (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). And, while mentally focusing on things detached from present experience can be harmless or even beneficial in certain contexts (Baird et al., 2012; Smallwood & Andrews-Hanna, 2013), mindwandering can significantly impair performance in domains that place demands on attention. For example, mindwandering while driving can increase the likelihood of crashes (Yanko & Spalek, 2013), mindwandering in educational contexts can impair learning (Smallwood, Fishman, & Schooler, 2007), and mindwandering in health care settings may contribute to significant medical errors (Smallwood, Mrazek, & Schooler, 2011). Such consequences underscore the importance of identifying psychological factors that can account for variability in people's tendency to subjectively feel disconnected from focal tasks. The present research addressed this issue by integrating research on mindwandering with emerging work on individual differences in true self-alienation. True self-alienation (Wood, Alex, Maltby, Baliouis, & Joseph, 2008), or perceived true self-knowledge (Schlegel & Hicks, 2011; Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011), reflects the degree to which people subjectively feel like they know who they really are, deep down. In the current research, we hypothesized that people who feel greater uncertainty about who they truly are may be more likely to report mindwandering during performance tasks.

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The true self-alienation construct is a subcomponent of the more general personality dimension of authenticity (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Wood et al., 2008). Conceptually, individual differences in authenticity reflect differences in the degree to which people are aware of and freely express the characteristics and beliefs that reflect who they think they truly are at the “core” (i.e., their true self-concept). Wood et al. (2008) argue that authenticity is comprised of three interrelated components: true self-alienation, authentic living, and the acceptance of external influence. True self-alienation is defined as the *subjective feeling* of not knowing or being detached from who one believes she/he truly is. It is akin to the sentiments frequently portrayed by protagonists in literature and film who experience uncertainty or difficulty answering the question “Who am I, really?” Authentic living, on the other hand, reflects the degree to which one behaves in ways that are consistent with her/his core beliefs and values. It is likened to the common expression of behaving in ways that are “true to one’s self.” Finally, acceptance of external influence is defined as the degree to which one’s behavior is influenced by other people’s expectations. It is exemplified by common notions of succumbing to “peer pressure” and changing one’s behavior to meet the standards of other people. Wood et al. (2008) argue that these three facets undergird individual differences in authenticity and fundamentally contribute to psychological well-being. Considerable research supports this view.

Indeed, all three facets of authenticity are associated with self-esteem, positive affect, life satisfaction, and personal growth in ways consistent with the idea that authenticity underlies positive psychological functioning (e.g., true self-alienation is negatively associated with self-esteem; Wood et al., 2008). Likewise, authenticity is also linked to greater feelings of self-actualization, lower levels of stress, and more adaptive responses to psychological threats (for a review, see Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Moreover, the importance of authenticity for positive psychological functioning has been evidenced by recent experimental studies that induce people to feel inauthentic or to feel as if they don’t know who they truly are. For example, experimentally inducing people to feel like they don’t (vs. do) know who they truly are decreases the perception that life is meaningful (Schlegel et al., 2011) and general satisfaction with important life decisions (Schlegel, Hicks, Davis, Hirsch, & Smith, 2013). Inducing people to feel inauthentic (vs. authentic) also leads people to perceive themselves as less moral and pure (Gino, Kouchaki, & Galinsky, 2015), suggesting that feelings of authenticity are critically linked to perceptions of moral virtue (Newman, Bloom, & Knobe, 2013). Taken together, these and other findings (Kernis & Goldman, 2006; Schlegel & Hicks, 2011) demonstrate that authenticity contributes to positive psychological functioning and well-being.

Yet, while the links between authenticity and psychological well-being have been firmly established, no research (to our knowledge) has examined how aspects of authenticity relate to people’s propensity to report mindwandering. Do individual differences in aspects of authenticity predict tendencies to report mental disengagement from focal tasks? Answers to this question would seem to be important given the substantial impacts that mindwandering can have on educational outcomes and the fact that disturbances in authenticity and questions about who one really is likely become more salient during the high school and college years. We hypothesize that one facet of authenticity, feelings of uncertainty about who one really is (i.e., true self-alienation), should positively relate to mindwandering reports. Conceptually, true self-alienation is subjectively felt as a disconnection between “conscious awareness and actual experience” (Wood et al., 2008, p. 386), a feeling very consistent with mindwandering in that mindwandering occurs precisely when one’s conscious attention is directed toward something disconnected from the here and now. On an empirical level, several studies have also documented associations between true self-alienation and trait mindfulness (Allan, Bott, & Suh, 2014; Lakey, Kernis, Heppner, & Lance, 2008). An important aspect of mindfulness, “being attentive to and aware of what is taking place in the present” (Brown & Ryan, 2003, p. 822), is the conceptual inverse of mindwandering and research has not surprisingly documented inverse connections between mindfulness and reports of mindwandering (Mrazek, Franklin, Phillips, Baird, & Schooler, 2013; Mrazek, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2012). Thus, on the basis of these empirical and conceptual links, we hypothesized that differences in the feeling of being disconnected from and uncertain about who one really is (i.e., true self-alienation) would positively predict reports of mindwandering.

2. The present research

Two studies were conducted to assess the relationship between true self-alienation and tendencies to report being mentally disengaged from focal tasks. In both studies, participants completed a battery of personality measures, a measure of true self-alienation, and vigilance tasks used in previous research to elicit mindwandering. Mindwandering was assessed via thought probes during the vigilance tasks in both studies, but Study 2 also included a retrospective report measure of off-task thoughts to provide additional validity. We hypothesized that true self-alienation would positively predict mindwandering reports in both studies. Because Studies 1 and 2 utilized nearly identical methodologies, we describe the methods for each study first, followed by a cumulative presentation of the results.

2.1. Study 1 Methods

2.1.1. Participants

Introductory psychology students ($N = 93$; 51 females, 39 males, 3 unreported) completed the study for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 38 years old ($M = 20.23$, $SD = 4.18$) and were predominately Caucasian (84.4%; Indian, 4.4%; all other races <3.0%).

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