Thinking Elsewhere: Differentiating Daydreaming from Mind-Wandering as a Distinct Cognitive Phenomenon

Scientific research suggests that we spend about 30–50% of our time mind-wandering—that is, when our attention drifts away from the task at hand and turns inward to our thoughts. But are all cases of mind-wandering the same?

Imagine you're sitting through a monotonous lecture, and your thoughts begin to drift. They move freely from one unrelated topic to another—perhaps dinner plans or errands—and you're only loosely engaged. If someone calls your name, you snap back to the lecture. This is a classic example of mind-wandering.

Now picture a slightly different scenario. During that same lecture, you start imagining something more vivid and structured—like a detailed scene of your upcoming vacation, involving specific people, settings, and events. You follow this story attentively, becoming mentally absorbed in it. According to current definitions, this would also be labeled as mind-wandering.

However, these two experiences feel fundamentally different. Yet in much of the literature, they are treated as one and the same, with the terms mind-wandering and daydreaming often used interchangeably. The second case may better reflect what is commonly understood as daydreaming.

This project asks a central question: What are the differences and similarities between mind-wandering and daydreaming? To answer this, we propose a systematic series of studies that address a major gap in our understanding of our mental activity.

- Study 1 explores how people experience mind-wandering and daydreaming in everyday life, using a method that prompts participants several times a day to report the nature of their thoughts.
- Study 2 focuses on developing a new research tool: a questionnaire that separately measures the frequency of mind-wandering and daydreaming. The goal is to allow more precise distinctions between the two and improve research into everyday thought processes.
- Study 3 examines how these two types of thinking differ in controlled lab conditions, helping us objectively compare them under standardized tasks.
- Study 4 takes a clinical perspective. It looks at individuals who report maladaptive daydreaming—highly immersive, often uncontrollable daydreams that interfere with daily life and cause distress. The study will compare them to people who daydream regularly but without report such condition. This will help determine what makes daydreaming dysfunctional and to help individuals who find their daydreaming disruptive to everyday life.

Both lab studies will use specially designed tasks that simulate monotonous and low-stimulation conditions, allowing us to observe how spontaneous thoughts unfold during both mind-wandering and daydreaming.

Clarifying whether and how these two mental states differ will help establish daydreaming as a legitimate and independent area of research—even within the general, non-clinical population. By refining our definitions and separating these phenomena, we can gain deeper insights into how the mind works in daily life and develop more precise tools for studying cognitive processes.