

## Mind Wandering and Apperception: A Pilot Study

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### ABSTRACT

The present study explores the possibility of mind wandering content analysis as an effective tool for understanding the components of personality like desires, conflicts, emotions and defenses. Here the researcher intends to analyze five participants' content of mind wandering and compare it with the results of the Thematic Apperception Test. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect data. The participants completed the procedures for the mind wandering experiment and Thematic Apperception Test as prescribed in the manual. The data from these participants have been analyzed and interpreted. The results obtained from the two techniques were parallel in more than one area. Desires or needs and conflicts have the most similarity and is very prominent whereas defenses have the least similarity and is the least prominent. Thus Mind Wandering Content Analysis as Thematic Apperception Test can be a swift and effective method to better and quicker understand the desires, needs and conflicts of an individual which facilitate an overall understanding of a personality.

**Keywords:** *Mind Wandering, Apperception, Content Analysis, Personality*

The occurrence of Mind Wandering is natural phenomenon experienced by most individuals. (Benjamin W. Mooneyham, 2013,) To never experience an episode of Mind Wandering (MW) would mean to be perpetually mindful of one's thoughts. When one is engaged with the external world, one has to process information from the external in the working memory and associate them with internal to perform tasks. When we don't pay attention to the external and focus on self-generated thought, is when we can say Mind Wandering (MW) happened. For ex;- when we read a phrase "the pup licked the boy", One may start thinking about his pet, we can say the attention decoupled from External (the phrase) to the internal (the memory with the dog). The thoughts engaged in MW thus are called Task Unrelated Thought (TUT) because they are independent of the stimulus one is engaged with. It involves a disengagement of attention from the current external activity which is called decoupling of attention. (Schooler, Smallwood, Christoff, Handy, Reichle, & Sayette, 2011) This reduction in resource allocated to the task affects task performance as it doesn't engage with the demands of the environment. (Schooler J. S., 2009, 2010) From a neurological point of view mind wandering includes the activation of default network and executive network regions,

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which is unique mental state because it enables otherwise opposing networks to work in cooperation. (Christoff, et al., 2009). A distinction should be made within Mind Wandering states of one with awareness of the wandering mind (Meta awareness- awareness of one's mental state) and without this awareness. It should also be noted that degree of mind wandering is much more when it is done without awareness. (Christoff, et al., 2009). However Meta awareness of MW is associated with better task performance. (Smallwood, McSpadden, & Schooler, The lights are on but no one's home: Meta-awareness and the decoupling of attention when the mind wanders, 2007) The concept of cognitive affordance of the situation decides on the extent of mind wandering. High cognitive affordance means the individual has to be more focused on the here and now and vice versa. Cognitive Affordance could depend upon internal factors like current concerns (thoughts that are active on the persons mind) interest or motivation or on external ones like the complexity of the task, rate of stimulus presentation, frequency of targets or duration of task. Daydreams (henceforth abbreviated as- DD, differ from MW as such) are a conscious conceptual fantasy containing more thoughts than symbolic images as opposed to night dreams (Tóth, 2007). Freud suggested that daydreaming represented a middle ground between wish fulfillment fantasies or underlying conflict in the individual and social standards of morality. There is a significant relation between MW themes and memories and affect. (Somer, 2002). Daydreaming is related to life satisfaction and happiness. The content of daydreams tends to contain elements from our social environment and is elaborates on these roles. Thus the subject of day dreaming should influence happiness. Daydreams about people not close to the daydreamer indicate loneliness and low perceived social support, whereas those who daydream about people who they are emotionally close to have higher life satisfaction. Mind-wandering to the past memories implicates depressive thinking or precursor to negative mood. Studies also point MW correlates with dissociation when the fantasies engaged in are too extreme. (Mar, Mason, & Litvack, 2012) (Eli Somer, 2002) However it may also be used to alleviate mood from boredom, emotional stress, conflict, and physical pain. It also helps in inhibiting physiological reactions to stressful events. Thus it sometimes also helps in emotional wellbeing. (Mar, Mason, & Litvack, 2012). And hence MW should be considered in therapy to help the person. Monotony and repetitiveness of stimuli like simple or over learned task can induce day dreaming (Sudbery, Obonsawin, Smallwood, & O'Connor, 2007) (Benjamin W. Mooneyham, 2013,) (Somer, 2002) (Smallwood, Beach, Schooler, & Handy, 2003) "In particular, TUT is higher when:

The rate of stimulus presentation is slow.

The frequency of targets is low.

Task duration is long. "

(Smallwood, et al., 2004)

However a distinction needs to be made between MW and daydreaming in the sense that MW is relative to the external task at hand (when one is not engaged in tasks MW can't happen), however Daydreaming is done regardless to the external. Daydreams constructs are thus of an imaginary nature. MW contents are cued by autobiographical associations with the current task environment. (Smallwood, Nind, & 'Connor, The temporal focus of the wandering

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mind). (Huba, 1982) identified patterns of Daydreaming namely, Positive Constructive Daydreaming which are those daydreams that are worthwhile, solve problems, help generate original ideas, are stimulating, leave warm pleasant feelings and generate pleasant thoughts. Some of these daydreams have vivid visual and auditory qualities. It is assumable that these daydreams could provide answers to problems, help plan alternatives and have significance. These daydreams have future time frame.

Guilt & Fear of Failure Daydreaming are daydreams with depressing, frightening, panicky or such negative qualities. It has fantasies of winning awards, being an expert, or being in a recognized group. It could include thoughts of fearing responsibilities, not being able to finish a job, failing loved ones, becoming angry, getting even, and aggressive toward enemies, having friend discover lies, feeling guilty, and afraid of doing something wrong.

Poor Attentional Control Tendencies toward mind wandering and drifting thoughts include easy loss of interest, tends to become bored, cannot work at something for a long time, easily distracted by telephone, television set, or talking.

Klinger and Cox (1988) argued that daydreams comprise two defining characteristics: spontaneity (versus deliberate) and realism (versus fanciful). They proposed that these characteristics (task distraction, spontaneity, and realism) are independent of each other. Spontaneity refers to the degree to which daydreaming is under deliberate, voluntary control (Klinger, 1971). In deliberate (directed) thought, one has the impression that the stream of thought is under conscious control, whereas in spontaneous (undirected) thought the stream of thought seems to steer itself. Realism refers to the likelihood or plausibility of depicted events or situations in the daydream and distinguishes regular thoughts from those that are more bizarre, dreamlike, or nonsensical which sometimes intrude into waking thought. Klinger (1971) also noted that daydreaming can be intermixed with task-related thought - in such cases there is no clear distraction (from on-going tasks) towards thoughts unrelated to the external environment. Thus, Klinger (1978; 1990) daydreams are not exclusively irrelevant to a current task situation; they can occur at any given time and situation and can incorporate themes realistic or improbable in nature (or a combination of the two)" (GRUIS, 2005).

## METHOD

### *Sample*

The participants comprised of 25 Adults aged between 19-21 from an undergraduate programme of an institution who readily volunteered and agreed to be a part of the study after the consent they were taken through a semi structured interview where the researcher through a series of questions identified 5 participants who were more susceptible to Mind Wandering. The sample size and power was set using a G\*power analysis software where a study of this kind would require a sample size of 10. The actual study sample is 5 and hence the data would be acceptable at .085 levels. Purposive sampling was used for data collection during

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March-April 2016 in the study. The experiments were conducted in the psychology laboratory setting.

### *Instruments*

Thematic Apperception Tests was used to evoke an involuntary display of one's personality. There are trends and patterns, which help identify personality traits, the original 31 cards were divided into three categories, for use with men only, with women only, or for use with subjects of either sex. The appropriate set of cards is selected. The subject is then instructed to tell a story about the picture on each card, with specific instructions to include a description of the event in the picture, the developments that led up to the event, the thoughts and feelings of the people in the picture, and the outcome of the story. The examiner keeps the cards in a pile face down in front of him or her, gives them to the subject one at a time, and asks the subject to place each card face down as its story is completed. Administration of the TAT usually takes about an hour.

### *Procedure*

To check similarities in the content analysis of mind wandering and apperception. The participant was seated comfortably and instructed to completely shade in every alternate line on a single ruled sheet which was provided to the participant. After the line shading activity the content was obtained and scored respectively based on the interview questions and analysis sheet prepared by the researcher.

A day after the MWCA procedure TAT was conducted in the same settings the examiner shows the subject a series of story cards taken from the full set of 31 TAT cards. The original 31 cards were divided into three categories, for use with men only, with women only, or for use with subjects of either sex. The appropriate set of cards is selected. The subject is then instructed to tell a story about the picture on each card, with specific instructions to include a description of the event in the picture, the developments that led up to the event, the thoughts and feelings of the people in the picture, and the outcome of the story. The examiner keeps the cards in a pile face down in front of him or her, gives them to the subject one at a time, and asks the subject to place each card face down as its story is completed. Administration of the TAT usually takes about an hour.

## **RESULT**

The similarity in apperception and MW was then compared on 4 categories i.e., Needs, Conflicts, Emotions and Defenses. From the table it can be seen that the common needs are abasement, affiliation, aggression, dominance, counteraction and sentence. The common conflicts are none. The common emotions/ feelings is fear, (along with grief and anxiety though not observed in all). There are no common defenses. There is some similarity in desires and needs, however the conflicts, defenses and emotions vary as can be observed from the analysis table. Thus it can be concluded that MWCA can be used as a technique to understand need and desires of the participants.

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**Table: 1 TAT and MWCA common desires, conflicts and emotions of the group**

Case	Desires / Needs	Conflicts	Emotions	Defenses
1	Affiliation Achievement Aggression	Aggression vs. Affiliation.	Fear And Greif	Intellectualization
2	Achievement Aggression Abasement	Autonomy vs. Affiliation Abasement vs. Achievement.	Fear, Greif, Anxiety and Zest	Acting Out Projection
3	Achievement Affiliation		Anxiety	
4	Achievement Affiliation	Harm avoidance vs. Affiliation.	Fear	Intellectualization Denial
5	Abasement Affiliation Aggression Dominance Counteraction Sentence		Fear	

From the table it is seen that desires and emotions/ feelings have more similarity as compared to conflicts and differences. Desires or needs have the most similarity and is very prominent whereas defenses have the least similarity and is the least prominent. Thus the group as a whole has shown that “contents obtained during data collection have no effect on assessment of personality.”

### **DISCUSSION**

The objective of the research was to compare the significance of MW Content Analysis with Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) for personality assessment. From the data analyzed and compared it can be observed that there is a relation between Mind Wandering Content Analysis and Thematic Apperception Test for personality assessment. The Desires and Needs have been consistently similar. In clinical practice with a skilled analyst the differences in apparent defenses and conflict can be further reduced. A conceptual difference in emotions and feelings was felt and this too can be tackled with a deeper qualitative analysis of the contents.

### **CONCLUSION**

There is a prominent relation between contents of mind wandering and the contents of Thematic Apperception Test. However effective the technique maybe it is worth observing that in Considerable emotional energy was felt by participants in MWCA and that it needs to be revised for a more clinical use. Also there is variation in the models of needs, press, feeling and emotion obtained from TAT and the interpretations based on theme of content and Plutchick's wheel of emotion used to obtain desires, conflicts and emotions of the person used in MWCA. Reliability and validity of the same remains to be quantified. Despite these

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reasons Mind Wandering Content Analysis can be a quick and efficient technique to gather and understand the unconscious content.

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