

A Penny for Your Thoughts: Mind Wandering Tendencies of Individuals with Autistic Traits

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Abstract : There is abundant research on the nature and content of mind wandering (MW) in neurotypical (NT) adults, however, there is little to no research in these areas on autistic individuals. The objective of the current study was to uncover any differences between low and high autistic trait individuals in their MW. In particular, we examined their attitudes toward, and the themes and temporal dimensions (past, present, future) of, their MW episodes. For our online study, we recruited 518 students (394 women and 124 men), between the ages of 18 and 51 years ($M = 20.93$, $SD = 3.40$) from the undergraduate Human Subject Pool at the University of British Columbia. Participants completed the Short Imaginal Processes Inventory (SIPI), which includes the three subscales Positive-Constructive Daydreaming (SIPI-PC), Guilt and Fear of Failure Daydreaming (SIPI-GFF), and Poor Attentional Control (SIPI-PAC). Participants also completed the Past (IPI-past) and Present (IPI-present) subscales of the Imaginal Processes Inventory (IPI), the Deliberate (MW-D) and Spontaneous (MW-S) Mind Wandering scales, the Short Form Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4), and the 10-item Autism Quotient (AQ-10). Results showed that overall, participant AQ-10 scores were significantly correlated with MW-S, SIPI-GFF, and PSS-4 scores, such that as the number of autistic traits endorsed by participants increased, so did their reports of spontaneous mind wandering, guilt and fear of failure themed day dreaming, and stress levels. This same pattern held for female participants, however, AQ-10 scores were positively correlated with only PSS-4 scores for males. These results suggest that compared to males with autistic traits, MW in females with autistic traits is more similar to individuals with low autistic traits in terms of content and intentionality. Results are discussed in terms of clinical implications, their limitations, and suggested directions for future research.

Keywords : autism, deliberate, mind wandering, spontaneous, perceived stress

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