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Love is the triumph of the imagination: Daydreams about significant others are associated with increased happiness, love and connection

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ABSTRACT

Social relationships and interactions contribute to daily emotional well-being. The emotional benefits that come from engaging with others are known to arise from real events, but do they also come from the imagination during daydreaming activity? Using experience sampling methodology with 101 participants, we obtained 371 reports of naturally occurring daydreams with social and non-social content and self-reported feelings before and after daydreaming. Social, but not non-social, daydreams were associated with increased happiness, love and connection and this effect was not solely attributable to the emotional content of the daydreams. These effects were only present when participants were lacking in these feelings before daydreaming and when the daydream involved imagining others with whom the daydreamer had a high quality relationship. Findings are consistent with the idea that social daydreams may function to regulate emotion: imagining close others may serve the current emotional needs of daydreamers by increasing positive feelings towards themselves and others.

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1. Introduction

Social interactions and relationships are vital for a healthy, happy and meaningful life (e.g. Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2012; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010) and contribute to daily emotional well-being. For example, people report feeling happiest when socializing (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004) and during interactions with friends (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003), and feelings of social connectedness are predicted by social activities and supportive interactions (Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). Despite the emotional benefits of social interaction, a substantial portion of each day is typically spent in the absence of social activity and/or separated from close significant others (e.g. at work). However, even in the absence of social interaction the mind will invariably drift to imagine others and mentally simulate past and possible future social scenarios. Estimates suggest that we spend an inordinate amount of time daydreaming (Klinger & Cox, 1987), which is often social in nature (Mar, Mason, & Litvack, 2012). What would the impact of imagining others during daydreaming activity be on momentary feelings: could the influence of others on emotional well-being emerge from the imagination as well as from real events? In the present research we use

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experience sampling to explore whether everyday social daydreams are associated with increased positive social emotion and whether this depends on who is being daydreamed about.

1.1. Daydreaming and its social content

Whilst reading a novel, walking to work, or during everyday activities, the mind has a proclivity to drift to unrelated thoughts, images and feelings. Such daydreaming activity can occur as mind-wandering when attention becomes decoupled from one's current task (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006) but can also occur when there is no specific task at hand, such as during a commute to work or when relaxing on a beach (Klinger, 2009). Daydreaming can be defined as mental content experienced during a state of normal waking consciousness that is stimulus-independent and task-unrelated, because it is neither a direct reflection of the current sensory environment nor related to the thinker's current mental or physical task (e.g. Stawarczyk, Majerus, Maj, Van der Linden, & D'Argembeau, 2011). Defined in these ways, daydreaming occupies a substantial proportion of waking thought – a figure estimated to be between 30% and 50% (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Klinger & Cox, 1987) – and is thought to represent a psychological baseline to which people return in the absence of external demands (Mason et al., 2007).

Daydreams are proposed to reflect an individual's current goal commitments and they occur when individuals' encounter goal-relevant cues in situations that do not lend themselves to attaining those goals (Klinger, 1975; Klinger, 1996; Klinger, 2009; Klinger, 2013). For example, hearing a friend's name in a song on the radio may act as a reminder that the friend has an upcoming birthday, which then triggers thoughts and images about what gift to give, what the birthday party might be like, who will be there, and what conversations might unfold. In this way, daydreams are goal-relevant and involve mentally pursuing or seemingly attaining goals when doing so in reality is not possible (Baird, Smallwood, & Schooler, 2011; Klinger, 2013).

Building upon this, emerging evidence indicates that daydreaming may be predominately social in nature and centered on social goals and needs. This is unsurprising given that the need to feel close and connected with others is fundamental and drives behavior and thought content towards the formation and maintenance of close, positive social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Mar et al. (2012) demonstrated that 73% of a large sample ($N = 17,556$) reported that other people are 'frequently' or 'always' involved in their daydreams whilst less than 1% reported that others are 'never' involved. Likewise, Song and Wang (2012) found that other people featured in 71% of sampled task-unrelated thoughts, and Andrews-Hanna et al. (2013) provide evidence that the tendency to think about others represents a major dimension of thought content. Neuroimaging data also lends converging support for the social nature of daydreams; A meta-analysis of 12 neuroimaging studies reported substantial overlap between brain regions involved in daydreaming and those involved in social cognition, suggesting a predisposition to generate social thoughts during daydreaming activity (Schilbach, Eickhoff, Rotarska-Jagiela, Fink, & Vogeley, 2008).¹

1.2. Daydreaming and emotion

Why would daydreams influence feelings? Daydreams are imaginary experiences that resemble their simulated target, generally via visual and auditory imagery (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2013; Klinger & Cox, 1987). Imagining events or experiences can evoke the feelings that would arise if the simulated event were occurring (Kosslyn, Ganis, & Thompson, 2001). Indeed, the capacity of imagination to evoke and change feelings associated with the imagined subject matter is well established. Asking participants to imagine emotional events is a widely used technique to induce desired mood states (Westermann & Spies, 1996) and guided imagery is often employed in therapeutic interventions to promote positive feelings and reduce negative feelings (e.g. Hutcherson, Seppala, & Gross, 2008; Lewis, O'Reilly, Khoo, & Pearson, 2013; Panagioti, Gooding, & Tarrier, 2012). Given the capacity of the imagination to evoke feeling states, it seems plausible that social daydreams would induce social feelings associated with the imagined experience and underlying social goals and needs. Social daydreams may therefore play a role in shaping people's everyday feelings in relation to their social goals and needs, such as feelings of love and connection.

Previous research regarding the link between daydreaming and emotional well-being has tended to focus on its relationship with negative affect. For example, there is evidence to suggest that daydreaming may be detrimental to well-being due to its associations with dysphoria (Smallwood, O'Connor, Sudbery, & Obonsawin, 2007), depression (Carriere, Cheyne, & Smilek, 2008; Giambra & Traynor, 1978), rumination and self-focused attention (Marchetti, Van de Putte, & Koster, 2014) and feeling less happy in daily life (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010). However, research increasingly acknowledges that daydreaming is unlikely to be a homogenous experience and has begun to explore the conditions under which daydreaming is associated with negative and positive emotion. For example, the relationship between daydreaming and emotion may depend on its phenomenological and emotional content (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2013; Poerio, Totterdell, & Miles, 2013), temporal focus (Ruby, Smallwood, Engen, & Singer, 2013), interest in thought content (Franklin et al., 2013), personal lay theories (Mason, Brown, Mar, & Smallwood, 2013) and current depressive symptomatology (Marchetti, Koster, & De Raedt, 2012). As an

¹ This research concerned the Default Mode Network rather than daydreaming per se. Although the DMN is widely considered to be activated during daydreaming activity, it also has other functions, which may be independently associated with social cognition.

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