

The counselor's wandering mind: Being empathic by default

Day and night our minds wander; wander between past and future, images of the self and others, reality and fantasy, unpredictable chains of thoughts and a cascade of emotions. Our minds seem to cover unlimited territories in each short period of time. Our wandering minds are like time-travel machines, indifferent to the physical constraints of external “reality.” Not infrequently, we encourage our minds to wander when listening to a Mozart concerto, contemplating a landscape by Degas or simply choosing to relax in our favorite chair or take off for an evening run. However, at times we also struggle to keep our minds from wandering when we are trying to concentrate on our reading, a lecture we are attending or even during our daily conversations.

It is not uncommon for counselors to feel apprehension and guilt when recognizing that their minds are wandering despite trying to stay focused on their clients' experiences. We know now that our wandering minds are “expensive,” meaning that in order for our minds to wander, we are using limited resources that are also needed for focused attention. Nevertheless, mind wandering is an unavoidable consequence of focused attention. The counseling relationship is a bidirectional stream — “outside in” as well as “inside out.” Outside in, the more we focus out, the more we feed our mind wandering. Inside out, the wandering of our mind helps to guide our attentional focus.



The persistence of mind wandering, along with its generalization across individuals, may be explained by its important adaptive function. Benjamin W. Mooneyham and Jonathan W. Schooler have been studying the costs and benefits of mind wandering at the University of California, Santa Barbara. They remark that mind wandering accomplishes some important functions such as autobiographical planning, self-reflection, goal-directed thoughts, future planning and creative incubation. All of these functions are instrumental in the process of actively listening to our clients. No wonder that the mind of the counselor is often wandering!

The brain's default mode network

The spontaneous wandering of our minds seems to be the brain's default mode. There is evidence that in absence of a specific task demand, our minds tend to wander. As shown in a study by Malia Mason from Dartmouth College, along with colleagues from Harvard and Aberdeen universities, mind wandering is associated with the brain's default mode network (DMN), an important brain connectivity system that seems to be particularly active when the individual is resting without focusing on any specific task. The DMN, which is spontaneously activated in resting nontask conditions, connects regions of the medial frontal

cortex with the posterior cingulate, precuneus, inferior parietal and lateral temporal cortices. Interestingly, these regions are usually deactivated when the individual performs a task that requires focused attention.

Sina Fazelpour and Evan Thompson, two philosophers from the University of British Columbia, claim that the DMN is neural evidence for Immanuel Kant's idea of "spontaneous" mind. According to this principle, our brain is continuously self-generating spontaneous rhythms to construct meaning from the flow of internal and external experience. In neurophenomenology terms, mind wandering is a way of connecting internal experience with the outside world. Neurobiologically, this activity is sustained by functional connectivity among the different areas of the DMN.

Recent studies have been providing evidence that the DMN may play an important role in high-level social cognitive processes present in mind wandering (e.g., self-referential thought, judgment of others' beliefs, focus on the internal representation of affective states and social processing). Additionally,

efficient deactivation of the DMN has been found to be a good predictor of the ability to switch between a self-referential task and an externally focused attention task.

The empathy response

Several decades ago, Robert Carkhuff and colleagues found that a counselor's empathy response could be empirically differentiated into several levels depending on the degree of focus on the client's experience. With "subtractive empathy," a counselor's responses are out of focus and dissociated from the client's experience. The "interchangeable empathy" response mirrors a client's discourse in a process of emotional and cognitive contagion. Finally, with "additive empathy," by taking the client's experience into account, the counselor is able to convey a complementary perspective.

Recently, our lab put together a series of studies looking at the neurobiological correlates of the empathic response. In one of these studies, we hypothesized that additive empathy would require higher level social-cognitive processing such as that involved in mind wandering.

That is, for counselors to appropriately respond to their clients, they need to be able to absorb clients' experiences while also gaining sufficient cognitive and emotional distance. This "tuning in" and "tuning out" seems to be important in being able to feed back a refreshing framework. In other words, counselors need to let their minds wander while listening to their clients.

If this is the case, at the psychophysiological level additive empathy responses should be associated with biological markers representing higher social-cognitive processes (i.e., cardiac response) rather than markers of emotional arousal contagion (i.e., skin conductance response). Our results confirmed that additive empathy is, indeed, a question of "heart" rather than a question of "skin." In other words, additive empathy responses are accompanied by an increase in heart rate without a corresponding increase in electrodermal activity. The increase of cardiac response may be a good autonomic indicator of the mind wandering activity required to respond with additive empathy.



We carry a large selection of counseling resources.



Basket of Babies
Promote fine motor skills with these six diverse dolls that have attached caps and removable sleep sacks.



Who is in Your Family? A Celebration in Diversity
In this full-color, illustrated book, children describe their families including what they like to do together. Brings out the uniqueness of each family.



Teens - Accept and Embrace Diversity
Help teens to understand and appreciate diversity, thus steering them away from hate and prejudice.



GLBTQ: The Survival Guide for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Teens
Indispensable resource for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning teens



Wooden Multi-Cultural Family set
Set of four families of different ethnicities. Durable, long lasting wood construction. Features painted details on both sides.



Ethnic Diversity 4 Puzzle Set
Designed to illustrate diversity and help children accurately understand their world and respect people from different ethnic backgrounds.

Get 10% off with code: Counseling Today

FREE Shipping on all orders over \$99

We Carry Spanish Language Books and Games

In a more recent study, we looked directly at the relationship between the DMN and the empathy response. We found that each time participants chose to respond with additive empathy, no significant attenuation of activity in the DMN was evident. In contrast, interchangeable and subtractive empathic responses were associated with a pattern of deactivation of the DMN. These findings suggest that the DMN seems to support the mind wandering state required to respond with additive levels of empathy.

To learn more

■ Benjamin W. Mooneyham & Jonathan W. Schooler, "The costs and benefits of mind-wandering: A review," *Canadian Journal of Experimental Psychology*, March 2013. An important review showing evidence for some of the most adaptive functions associated with mind wandering.

■ Malia F. Mason, Michael I. Norton, John D. Van Horn, Daniel M. Wegner, Scott T. Grafton & C. Neil Macrae, "Wandering minds: The default network and stimulus-independent thought," *Science*, Jan. 19, 2007. A landmark study showing that DMN sustains the mental activities of mind wandering.

■ Patricia Oliveira-Silva & Oscar F. Gonçalves, "Responding empathically: A question of heart, not a question of skin," *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*, September 2011. An empirical study from our lab showing the association between different levels of empathic response and psychophysiological markers.

■ Sina Fazelpour & Evan Thompson, "The Kantian brain: Brain dynamics from a neurophenomenological perspective," *Current Opinion in Neurobiology*, April 2015. Two philosophers discuss spontaneous brain activity from a neurophenomenology point of view.

It may also be interesting to disentangle the role of the different areas of the DMN to clarify distinct processes that are involved in a counselor's mind wandering during a therapeutic interaction. For example, the medial prefrontal cortex is involved in two psychological processes that both sustain mind wandering and are associated with additive empathy: self-other differentiation and emotion-regulatory mechanisms. Carl Rogers referred to the need to never lose the "as if condition" while entering the inner worlds of our clients and the need to separate empathy from emotional contagion.

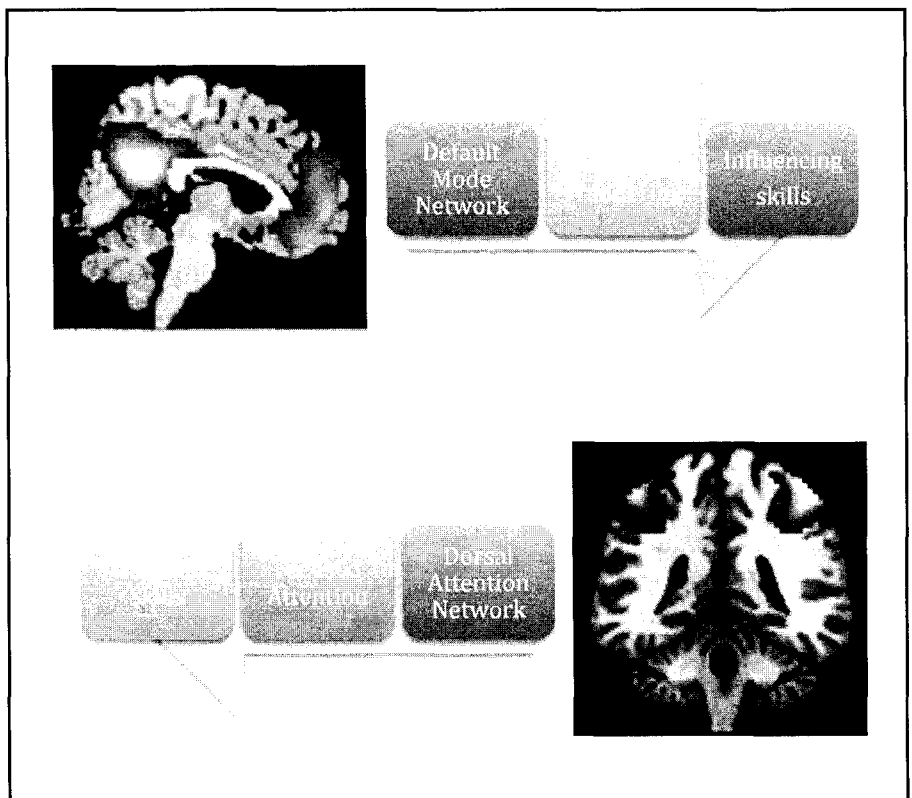
Two other nodes of the DMN, the posterior cingulate cortex and the precuneus, have been implicated in integrating external information into an autobiographical context, favoring subjective processing. This interplay between another's experience and one's own experience may be instrumental in allowing counselors to come up with a new point of view without losing contact with the client's experience.

One final note is that the lateral temporal lobes are associated with advanced semantic processing that may be required in higher levels of interpersonal understanding.

Letting your mind wander

Finding the optimal level of counselors' focused attention has been a source of concern for both practitioners and trainers. Allen Ivey, in what is probably the most influential model for counseling training, suggests that effective therapy implies a strategic balance of attending and influencing skills. Attending skills seem to be mostly dependent on mechanisms of outward-focused attention and are probably sustained by other resting brain state networks apart from the DMN, such as the dorsal attention network, which controls the attention given to behaviorally important cues in one's environment. In contrast, influencing skills, not unlike additive empathy, seem to rely on a counselor's mind wandering and are sustained by a functional connectivity among the different areas of the DMN.

Curiously, during the inception of psychotherapy, Sigmund Freud recommended that counselors maintain an "evenly suspended attention" — a process of attending to the client's experience while allowing the mind of the analyst to freely associate. Stated differently, counselors should attend to (focus on) the client's experience while letting their minds wander into their



inner experiences as a way to come up with the most influencing counseling interventions.

As a counselor, you should trust the potential of mind wandering. Every time your mind wanders, you are entering a very active default mode zone — a zone in which core brain areas are processing high-level social-cognitive information that is necessary for most effectively understanding and responding to your clients. Thus, each time you feel apprehensive that your mind is wandering in a counseling session, remember Oscar Wilde's famous quotation: "To do nothing at all is the most difficult thing in the world, the most difficult and the most intellectual."



Lori Russell-Chapin and Laura Jones serve as co-editors of the Neurocounseling: Bridging Brain and Behavior column. Contact them with comments, questions about neurocounseling or ideas for future columns at lar@fsmail.bradley.edu or Laura.Jones@unco.edu. ♦

Oscar F. Gonçalves is professor and co-director of the Neuropsychophysiology Lab, School of Psychology, University of Minho, Portugal; senior research associate at the Spaulding Neuromodulation Center, Department of Physical Medicine & Rehabilitation, Spaulding Rehabilitation Hospital and Massachusetts General Hospital, Harvard Medical School; and adjunct professor in the Department of Counseling and Applied Educational Psychology at Northeastern University.

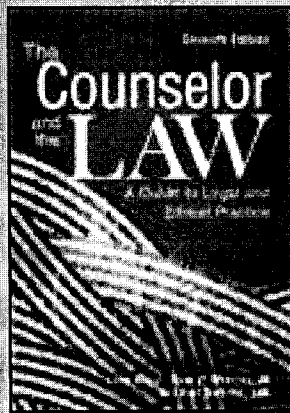
Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org

New Edition!

The Counselor and the Law: A Guide to Legal and Ethical Practice

Seventh Edition

Anne Marie "Nancy" Wheeler and Burt Bertram



"As the use of technology in counseling rapidly shifts, the authors clearly address opportunities and challenges and suggest practical recommendations for handling ethical and legal issues related to communication. As an educator and practicing counselor, I consider this book a must read for anyone in our profession."

—Chinwé Uwah Williams, PhD
Argosy University-Atlanta

"The key strength of this book is how the authors encourage the reader to think more deeply about the issues and to use the suggestions given to better understand

ethical and legal dilemmas. This is an essential book for all counselors who wish to practice in accordance with professional standards."

—Samuel Sanabria, PhD
Rollins College

The Counselor and the Law has been updated to reflect changes in the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics, findings of recent court cases, and new federal and state legislation. Attorney Nancy Wheeler and Burt Bertram, a private practitioner and counselor educator, provide an overview of the law as it pertains to counseling practice; an in-depth look at counselors' legal and ethical responsibilities; and an array of risk management strategies. This edition contains a thoroughly updated chapter on distance counseling, technology, and social media; regulatory updates to the HIPAA and the HITECH Act; and recent case law developments regarding legal risks for counselor educators. Civil malpractice liability, licensure board complaints, confidentiality, duty to warn, suicide and threats of harm to self, professional boundaries, records and documentation, and managing a counseling practice are also discussed in detail.

2015 | 368 pgs | Order #78107 | ISBN 978-1-55620-350-3
List Price: \$58.95 | **ACA Member Price: \$46.95**

Order Online: counseling.org
By Phone: 800-422-2648 x222
(M-F 8 a.m.—6 p.m.)



AMERICAN COUNSELING
ASSOCIATION