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Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society

Title

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Permalink

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Journal

Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society, 40(0)

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Publication Date

2018

Mind wandering during conversations affects subjective but not objective outcomes

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Abstract

How much do we mind wander during conversations, and how does that affect objective outcomes and subjective perceptions of the conversation? We studied computer-mediated dyadic negotiations during which participants ($N = 144$) discreetly reported whenever they were thinking about something else, and whenever they thought their partner was not attending. Participants mind wandered around 19% of the time. Surprisingly, the number of times that a participant thought that their counterpart was not attending correlated almost perfectly with the first participants own number of mind wandering reports ($r\text{-partial} = .941$), but very poorly with the other participants number of reports ($r\text{-partial} = .004$) (controlled for time until agreement). Mind wandering negatively affected subjective ($F(1, 57) = 6.48, p = .014$) but not objective ($F(1, 57) = .089, p = .766$) outcomes. These findings suggest that mind wandering, and the attribution of mind wandering to others, leads to worse social psychological outcomes.