

# Default mode network can support the level of detail in experience during active task states

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Regions of transmodal cortex, in particular the default mode network (DMN), have historically been argued to serve functions unrelated to task performance, in part because of associations with naturally occurring periods of off-task thought. In contrast, contemporary views of the DMN suggest it plays an integrative role in cognition that emerges from its location at the top of a cortical hierarchy and its relative isolation from systems directly involved in perception and action. The combination of these topographical features may allow the DMN to support abstract representations derived from lower levels in the hierarchy and so reflect the broader cognitive landscape. To investigate these contrasting views of DMN function, we sampled experience as participants performed tasks varying in their working-memory load while inside an fMRI scanner. We used self-report data to establish dimensions of thought that describe levels of detail, the relationship to a task, the modality of thought, and its emotional qualities. We used representational similarity analysis to examine correspondences between patterns of neural activity and each dimension of thought. Our results were inconsistent with a task-negative view of DMN function. Distinctions between on- and off-task thought were associated with patterns of consistent neural activity in regions adjacent to unimodal cortex, including motor and premotor cortex. Detail in ongoing thought was associated with patterns of activity within the DMN during periods of working-memory maintenance. These results demonstrate a contribution of the DMN to ongoing cognition extending beyond task-unrelated processing that can include detailed experiences occurring under active task conditions.

default mode network | principal gradient | mind wandering | representational similarity analysis

The functions of regions of transmodal cortex, such as those in the default mode network (DMN), remain a puzzle (1). They can deactivate during tasks (2, 3) and increase activity during periods of off-task thought (4–7)—leading initial accounts to emphasize task-negative functions for these regions (8, 9). An alternative perspective emerges from work showing regions in the DMN increase activity in tasks when cognition and behavior benefit from memory, such as when decisions depend on information from a prior trial (10, 11), when task-relevant stimuli are supported by long-term memory (12), when participants retrieve a task context from memory (13), or when participants have encoded the rule upon which their actions can be based (14). In addition, in conditions when activity in the DMN decreases, such as during more demanding semantic memory or working-memory tasks, connectivity between this network and task positive systems can increase, indicating that regions that make up this network continue to make an important contribution to cognition (15, 16). These recent studies show the DMN can play a role in task processing and provide support for alternative accounts that have explored the functions of this network from a topographical perspective. These studies show the cortex is organized along a macroscale gradient, anchored at one end by regions serving primary sensorimotor functions, and at the other by transmodal regions that make up the DMN (17, 18). This view suggests neural systems can be understood

along a spectrum, from unimodal systems more directly involved in acting in the here and now to transmodal association cortex, which support neural operations less tethered to input (18). The DMN falls at the most extreme transmodal end of this spectrum (17), which may enable neural signals within it to integrate signals from other brain regions, providing top-down predictions to lower levels in the hierarchy (19, 20). This combination of recent empirical work, and advances in our understanding of the DMN in the larger cortical context, cast the functional role of this system in a different light. These integrative accounts of DMN function suggest its topographic location may enable it to encode relatively abstract representations by integrating signals from regions lower in the hierarchy. In this way, it is assumed to support neural contexts that reflect more integrated patterns of cognition, including those taking place during a task (17, 21, 22).

In light of this converging evidence for a role of the DMN in tasks states, we reevaluated the role of this system in ongoing thought. Our study used experience sampling to explore the traditional perspective that the DMN is important in the off-task state, as well as the alternative, that, given the DMN's role in memory-guided cognition, this system contributes to ongoing thought during the active maintenance of task-relevant information in working memory. Prior studies exploring the neural basis of patterns of ongoing cognition have combined experience sampling with measures of neural activity, such as functional

## Significance

Accounts of the default mode network (DMN) as task negative are partly based on evidence for a role of this system in off-task thought. We revisited the evidence for this assumption in a study combining experience sampling with functional neuroimaging. Whether thoughts were related or unrelated to an ongoing task was associated with patterns of neural activity in regions adjacent to unimodal sensorimotor cortex. In contrast, during periods of working-memory maintenance, activity patterns in the DMN were associated with whether thoughts were detailed. These results demonstrate that activity within the DMN encodes information associated with ongoing cognition that goes beyond whether attention is directed to the task, including detailed experiences during active task states.

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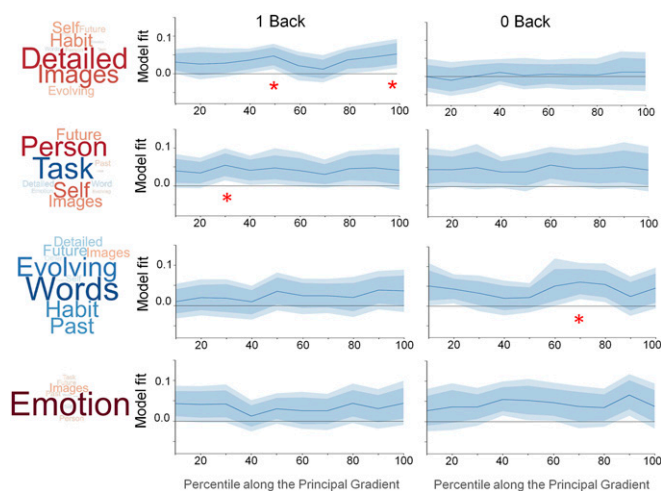
This article contains supporting information online at [www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1721259115/-DCSupplemental](http://www.pnas.org/lookup/suppl/doi:10.1073/pnas.1721259115/-DCSupplemental).

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**Fig. 4.** Ribbon plots showing model fits plotted at each percentile of the principal gradient. The inner range of the confidence interval presents the 95% CI; the outer confidence interval describes the 99.5% CI. The regions indicated by the red asterisk describe regions that show a brain-experience association after applying the Bonferroni correction.

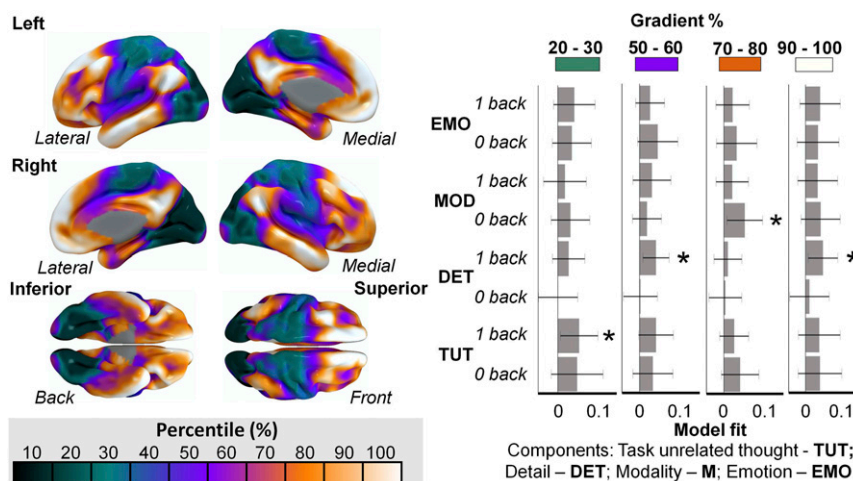
within regions of DMN are associated with the level of detail during working maintenance, suggesting a role in cognition extending beyond the off-task state. In the easier 0-back task, we found no associations with whether experience was directed to the task, whether it was detailed, or with the emotional tone of the experience. However, there was an association between the modality of experience and patterns of neural activity in the easier 0-back task in bin 7, including ventromedial prefrontal cortex, lateral prefrontal cortex, superior and middle temporal sulci, and regions in lateral parietal cortex (indicated in orange in Fig. 5).

## Discussion

Our study reexamined the assumption that neural activity within the DMN reflects the difference between the presence of an on-task or an off-task state. We compared a task-negative view of the DMN with an alternative that it supports representations of

task-relevant information in working memory. Although we could predict whether attention was directed toward or away from the task based on patterns of neural activity, the regions in which this was possible were located relatively close to unimodal sensorimotor cortex—including motor, premotor, and dorsal parietal regions. These brain areas serve functions allied to perception and action. It is possible, therefore, that this association represents a role for motor preparation in the on-task state during the 1-back task, an interpretation supported by prior studies linking the off-task state to poor motor control (33). We found that during periods of active working-memory maintenance, activity within the DMN was associated with the level of detail in ongoing thought. Together, these observations are problematic for task-negative accounts: regions outside of the DMN are diagnostic of whether attention is directed away from the task, and neural activity within this network was associated with detailed experiences during an active task state. Based on our results, patterns of activity within the DMN are neither necessary nor sufficient to determine if attention is directed away from the task.

While our study provides little support for task-negative accounts of the contribution of the DMN to ongoing thought, several features of our data are consistent with views of this system as integrating information from regions lower in the cortical hierarchy to form a representation of the ongoing neurocognitive context (14, 17, 19, 22). Our analysis divided the brain into a spectrum of regions of interest spanning those in unimodal regions of cortex (i.e., visual and motor cortex) to regions with more transmodal functions, the most extreme of which are those in the DMN. In both regions adjacent to unimodal cortex, and those furthest along this spectrum, neural activity encoded patterns of detailed thought during periods of working-memory maintenance. These data are consistent with a view of DMN function that enables detailed cognitive representations through interactions with regions lower in a cortical hierarchy. Importantly, a role for regions in the DMN in detailed experiences during working memory is consistent with graph theoretical analyses, showing a role for this system in working-memory processes (16), and from studies that show that elements of this network are implicated in specificity (34) or detail (35) during memory retrieval. It is also consistent with links between individual variation in detailed thought to the functional connectivity of hippocampus with posterior cingulate cortex (26).



**Fig. 5.** Distribution of significant model fits for each experience displayed in the context of the principle gradient. The inflated brains on the *Left* display the continuous distribution of the gradient values across the cortical surface down-sampled into the percentile bins used in our analyses. The *Right* displays the specific percentiles on the gradient in which associations with each component for one task were identified. The bar graphs show the average correlation between each component in each task condition in each region of the gradient. The error bars show the 99.5% confidence intervals. The asterisks indicate situations where the model fit was significantly greater than zero, following Bonferroni correction.



Our study also found patterns of neural activity in regions intermediate between unimodal and transmodal regions that distinguish the modality in which ongoing thought unfolds in the 0-back task. Whether experience was based on verbal or visual codes was associated with neural patterns at around the 70th percentile of the principal gradient, marked in orange in Fig. 5. It is possible that we were able to classify the modality of ongoing thought in the easier 0-back task because under these conditions, experience is relatively unconstrained by input. In contrast, in the 1-back condition, participants must encode and maintain visual information, reducing trial by trial variation in the modality of ongoing thought, and limiting the ability to identify associations between experience and neural activity. Notably, within the temporal lobe the regions of high classification accuracy corresponded to the sulci that surround the middle temporal gyrus, and, in parietal cortex, to regions that form the boundary around the angular gyrus. Regions around the 70th percentile of the gradient encompass some of the regions identified by our prior task-based study as being sensitive to the modality in which a stimulus was presented (auditory vs. visual), but not its meaning (36). A common relationship between task-relevant differences in modality and dissociations between verbal and visual codes of ongoing thought provides confidence in our current data. It also provides converging evidence for contemporary accounts of semantic processing (37–39). These assume regions in the temporal lobe support the progressive integration of neural signal from peripheral regions on the lateral surface into a central core that represents information in a more amodal manner. In this regard, we note that in our current data, regions of cortex where neural patterns were associated with differences in the modality of ongoing experience were high, associations with the level of detail were low (Fig. 4). This partial dissociation supports the view that within the temporal lobe, modality-specific information is represented in more peripheral regions than are more abstract descriptions of experience (such as its level of detail), which are represented in the transmodal core.

In closing, it is worth considering why prior results linked activity in the DMN to off-task thought (4–7). One possibility is that this pattern emerged because these studies tend to use simple tasks that often do not vary task demands within an individual. The absence of such a task manipulation can make identification of patterns of experience linked to more active task states challenging (although see ref. 7). In addition, they often measure experience using only a small number of questions, and this neglects the heterogeneous nature of ongoing experience (40). Off-task thought differs from periods of external task focus in both the process it entails and the content it involves. For example, our data suggest off-task thoughts include episodic and social information, because they load on terms like “person” and “future.” Prior studies have shown that off-task thoughts depend more upon memory and less upon sensory processing (41) and they can also have close ties to affect (42, 43). Simplistic binary classifications of experience into on/off-task states, or any other dichotomous system, will necessarily confound overlapping aspects of experience. Our dimensional approach, in contrast, allows multiple distinct aspects of experience to be identified and shows neural activity in the DMN is not synonymous with the off-task state.

## Methods

**Participants.** A total of 207 participants (females = 132, age = 20.2, SD = 2.35 y). Eight participants were excluded from the final analysis for failing to complete all sessions. A total of 34 participants participated in the scanning session (16 females). Four participants were excluded from the final analysis (2 fell asleep, 1 withdrew from the second session, and 1 showed movement >1 mm in more than 50% of runs). The study was carried out in accordance within the guidelines of, and with ethical approval from the York Neuroimaging Centre and the University of York's Psychology Department. All participants gave informed consent.

**MDES.** Experiential content was measured using MDES with a battery of 13 questions (*SI Appendix, Table S2*). In the scanner, probes occurred six times per run. Participants had 5 s to respond to each question and in total the probe question points were of a fixed 65-s duration. In each run, there were an average of 3 thought probes in the 0-back condition and 3 in the 1-back condition. In total, we administered a total of 48 probes in the scanner for each person. In each session (4 fMRI runs  $\times$  6 thought probes), an average of 24 (SD = 3.30) MDES probes occurred; in the 0-back condition, an average of 12 (SD = 2.36); and in the 1-back condition, an average of 12 (SD = 2.24). In the laboratory, MDES probes occurred on a quasirandom basis to minimize the likelihood of anticipating the probes. There was a 20% chance of a MDES probe instead of a target with a minimum of 1 probe per condition.

**MRI Acquisition.** Structural and functional data were acquired using a 3T GE HDx Excite MRI scanner with an eight-channel phased array head coil (GE) tuned to 127.4 MHz, at the York Neuroimaging Centre. Structural MRI acquisition was based on a T1-weighted 3D fast spoiled gradient echo sequence [repetition time (TR) = 7.8 s, echo time (TE) = minimum full, flip angle = 20°, matrix size = 256  $\times$  256, 176 slices, voxel size = 1.13  $\times$  1.13  $\times$  1 mm]. Functional data were recorded using single-shot 2D gradient echo planar imaging (TR = 3 s, TE = minimum full, flip angle = 90°, matrix size = 64  $\times$  64, 60 slices, voxel size = 3  $\times$  3  $\times$  3 mm<sup>3</sup>, 180 volumes). A FLAIR scan with the same orientation as the functional scans was collected to improve coregistration between scans.

## Data Analysis.

**Task performance of 0-back and 1-back.** In both fMRI and lab tasks, we recorded mean accuracy and reaction time (RT) for participants in the 0-back and 1-back experimental conditions (*SI Appendix, Table S6*). We calculated an inverse efficiency score (RT in milliseconds/accuracy in percent correct) for each participant in which small scores indicate better efficiency/performance (44).

**PCA of MDES data.** In both experiments, we created a single n-by-n matrix in which each row was a MDES probe and each column was a question. We used PCA with varimax rotation in SPSS version 24 to reduce the dimensionality of these data. Scree plots showed that extracting four principal components was appropriate in both cases (*SI Appendix, Fig. S3*). The resulting data were used as regressors of interest at the trial level in the imaging analysis. We also correlated PCA loadings across task environment (laboratory or scanner) to test their consistency (Fig. 1). Components were named based on the highest loading if the component was anchored at one end (i.e., detail). If they were anchored by two opposing scores (words or images), we named them based on the distinction these loadings imply (i.e., modality).

**fMRI Analysis.** Functional and structural data were preprocessed and analyzed using FMRIB's Software Library (FSL version 4.1, [fsl.fmrib.ox.ac.uk/fsl/fslwiki/FEAT/](https://fsl.fmrib.ox.ac.uk/fsl/fslwiki/FEAT/)) (45). Individual FLAIR and T1-weighted structural brain images were extracted using brain extraction tool (BET). Structural images were registered to the MNI-152 template using FMRIB's linear image registration tool (FLIRT). The functional data were preprocessed and analyzed using the FMRIB expert analysis tool (FEAT). Individual subject analysis involved: motion correction using MCFLIRT; slice-timing correction using Fourier space time-series phase shifting; spatial smoothing using a Gaussian kernel of full width at half minimum (FWHM) 6 mm; grand-mean intensity normalization of the entire 4D dataset by a single multiplicative factor; highpass temporal filtering (Gaussian-weighted least-squares straight line fitting, with sigma = 100 s). Although not always standard in RSA analysis, we chose to smooth our data for this analysis to increase the signal-to-noise ratio for each neural response pattern. This was motivated by the trial-by-trial nature of our comparisons which necessarily meant that the data were noisy. Consistent with prior studies (e.g., ref. 46) we found lower RSA fit correlations with the nonsmoothed data. We report the results of the nonsmoothed analysis in *SI Appendix, Fig. S4*.

First level analyses modeled six explanatory variables (EVs). EV 1 and 2 modeled time periods in which participants completed the 0-back task or 1-back condition. EV 3–6 modeled the four extracted principal components by assigning the beta weight of each extracted principal component to each thought at the trial level. PCA loadings were modeled in a 6-s time window (the minimum time period between thought probes or targets, labeled as the analysis window in Fig. 2). Individual participant data were entered into a higher-level fixed-effect analysis to measure and average neural response to the six EV's across all eight functional runs. Following this, for the univariate task comparison analysis a fixed-effects analysis was performed (FLAME, <https://fsl.fmrib.ox.ac.uk/fsl/fslwiki/>). We defined task-specific neural responses by contrasting z-stat maps for 0-B > 1-B and 1-B > 0-B conditions. These maps were then registered to a high-resolution

T1-anatomical image and then onto the standard Montreal Neurological Institute (MNI) brain (MNI 152 average template). For these contrasts, following ref. 47, we first applied a cluster-forming threshold of  $Z > 3.1$  to our analyses. This corresponds to a  $P$  value of  $>0.01$ . The resulting spatial maps were whole brain corrected at  $P < 0.05$  FWE.

**RSA.** We used a version of RSA (29) to compare patterns of dissimilarity between neural and experiential data in each scanning session. To create neural representational dissimilarity matrices (RDMs), the fMRI data were modeled in the same way as described in the previous section except individual thought probe trials were not weighted by principal component weights.

**Regions of interest for RSA.** We used the same masks as in ref. 17. Regions of interest masks were created by projecting the cortical surface principal gradient map to the 2-mm volumetric MNI152 standard space (available at <https://neurovault.org/images/24346/>). The volumetric map was then binned into five-percentile increments and binarized. These are available here: <https://neurovault.org/collections/3192/>.

**Neural RDMs.** Neural RDMs were created separately for the 0-back and 1-back tasks by first correlating the neural response patterns between each pairwise combination of thought probes (using pyMVPA version 2), we then converted these into distance measures ( $1 - r$  value) as recommended by Kriegeskorte et al. (29). Each participant had two neural RDMs per session (one each for 0-back tasks and 1-back tasks). These RDMs were created based on neural patterns in each individual's native echo planar imaging (EPI) brain space for each of the 20-gradient bins defined by ref. 17.

**Principal component RDMs.** Principal component RDMs were created in a similar fashion to the neural RDMs except that they were composed of the representational distances between principal component loadings for each pairwise combination of thought probes. This was done separately for each principal component [detail, task unrelated thought (TUT), modality, and emotion] in the 0- and 1-back conditions. The use of varimax rotation in the MDES decomposition allowed us to construct four separate models in each task that were not collinear.

**RSA model comparison.** We removed the diagonal components of each RDM and used one-half of the correlation matrix (the duplicated values). We used Spearman rank correlations (29) between each principal component RDM model (detail, TUT, modality, and emotion) in each condition (0-back, 1-back) and each neural RDM in each condition (0- and 1-back thought probes). RDMs were calculated for each participant and averaged across session, leaving eight correlation values for each participant: one for each principal component RDM compared with the neural RDM in that condition. The  $r$  values were Fisher transformed to ensure they fit assumption of normality for significance testing. Mean RSA model fit scores for each of the 20 bins were  $z$  scored and superimposed onto the inflated surface of a standard MNI152 brain in Fig. 4.

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