

Attention need not always apply: Mind wandering impedes explicit but not implicit sequence  
learning

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### Abstract

According to the attentional resources account, mind wandering (or “task-unrelated thought”) is thought to compete with a focal task for attentional resources. Here, we tested two key predictions of this account: First, that mind wandering should not interfere with performance on a task that does not require attentional resources; second, that as task requirements become automatized, performance should improve and depth of mind wandering should increase. Here, we used a serial reaction time task with implicit- and explicit-learning groups to test these predictions. Providing novel evidence for the attentional resource account’s first prediction, results indicated that depth of mind wandering was negatively associated with learning in the explicit, but not the implicit, group, indicating that mind wandering is associated with impaired explicit, but not implicit, learning. Corroborating the attention resource account’s second prediction, we also found that, overall, performance improved while at the same time depth of mind wandering increased. From an implicit-learning perspective, these results are consistent with the claim that explicit learning is impaired under attentional load, but implicit learning is not. Data, analysis code, manuscript preparation code, and pre-print available at [osf.io/qzry7/](https://osf.io/qzry7/).

*Keywords:* mind wandering, inattention, implicit learning, serial reaction time task

*Word count:* 7969

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From time to time, you might find that your mind wanders away from a task toward something unrelated. For instance, perhaps while driving to work, you catch yourself thinking about the groceries you need to get later in the day, or the upcoming fishing trip that you have planned for the weekend. Of course, failing to maintain your attention on the road can be dangerous, increasing the likelihood you will make a potentially disastrous mistake (Gil-Jardiné et al., 2017; Yanko & Spalek, 2014). Alas, mind wandering tends to get a bad rap for its often-negative consequences on task performance (see Mooneyham & Schooler, 2013 for a review); indeed, some even refer to it as a curse (Hasenkamp, 2013)! Nevertheless, mind wandering can have positive consequences. For instance, returning to our opening example, mind wandering could help you plan the next grocery shopping trip, help you generate a creative recipe (i.e., future planning and creativity; Smallwood & Schooler, 2015), or provide a “mental break” from the mind-numbing activity of driving (i.e., attentional dishabituation; Mooneyham & Schooler, 2016).

Although several accounts have been offered to explain how mind wandering can have these distinctive positive and negative effects (e.g., McVay & Kane, 2010; Seli et al., 2016; Seli, Kane, et al., 2018; Smallwood, 2013; Smallwood & Schooler, 2015), arguably, the most popular of these is the attentional resources account. On this view, mind wandering—hereafter conceptualized as task-unrelated thought (Seli, Kane, et al., 2018)—and task-relevant processes compete for attentional resources (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006).

The attentional resources account makes several predictions about the relationship between mind wandering and task engagement. First, it predicts that if mind wandering and task engagement draw on the same attentional resources, then focusing on a task (i.e., allocating attentional resources to task performance) should result in lower rates of mind wandering, as there are fewer resources available for mind wandering. Second, and relatedly, this account predicts that more mind wandering should diminish task performance when both mind wandering and task engagement draw on the same resources. Third, if mind wandering and task engagement do not compete for attentional resources, then mind wandering should not impair task performance. In other words, if mind wandering and task engagement do not draw on the same resources, then the processes supporting each can run in parallel and should not interfere with each other. Finally, the attentional resources account predicts that mind wandering should increase as a function of task automatization—or by proxy, time-on-task (Antrobus, 1968; Cunningham et al., 2000; Smallwood et al., 2004, 2003). Specifically, as time-on-task increases, people learn the task and subsequently automatize elements of task performance (Logan, 1988; Logan & Compton, 1998; Moors & De Houwer, 2006; Newell & Rosenbloom, 1981; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977). Automatization results in fewer resources needed to maintain task performance, which leaves more resources available for mind wandering (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006). Thus, the increase in mind wandering with time-on-task corresponds to the rate of learning in the focal task, or task automatization.

Research on mind wandering provides abundant support for the first two predictions. Increased task focus (resulting from increases in task difficulty) typically decreases the rate of mind wandering (e.g., Brosowsky, Schooler, et al., under review; Giambra, 1989; Seli, Konishi,

et al., 2018; Smallwood et al., 2011; Thomson et al., 2013, but see Xu and Metcalf, 2016). Research has also found that mind wandering impairs task performance in a variety of contexts (e.g., Franklin et al., 2016; Reichle et al., 2010; Seli et al., 2013; Smallwood et al., 2004; J. Smallwood, Beach, et al., 2008; J. Smallwood, McSpadden, et al., 2008).

Surprisingly, there is little work investigating the third prediction of the attentional resource account: that some tasks can run in parallel with mind wandering without interference. This might be due to the outsized use of attentionally demanding tasks in mind-wandering research, which are likely to compete for attentional resources with mind wandering. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that the vast majority of the literature has found that mind wandering impairs task performance (and, likewise, unsurprising that mind wandering has earned a bad reputation). Indeed, if people perform an attentionally demanding task without focusing on it (i.e., they are mind wandering), probably their mind wandering will be associated with poorer task performance.

Mountains of evidence conflict with the fourth prediction of the attentional resources account: that task automatization is associated with increases in mind wandering. Although mind wandering typically does increase as a function of time-on-task (Antrobus, 1968; Cunningham et al., 2000; Smallwood et al., 2004, 2003), this increase does not appear to reflect automatization of primary-task performance. Indeed, one implication of this prediction is that task automatization should reflect stable (if not improved) performance over time. However, as mentioned previously, many studies find that performance decreases as a function of time-on-task (e.g., Brosowsky, Degutis, et al., under review; Krimsky et al., 2017; McVay & Kane, 2012; Metcalfe & Xu, 2016; Risko et al., 2012; Teasdale et al., 1995; Thomson et al., 2014).

The conflicting evidence, however, should be taken with a grain of salt: Tasks used to study mind wandering (e.g., SART, vigilance tasks, metronome response tasks) are unlikely to be appropriate for evaluating the relationship between learning, skill-acquisition (i.e., task automatization) and mind wandering. These tasks are simple and monotonous by design, often requiring single-button responses, and presenting target stimuli that are either rare and unpredictable (e.g., SART) or perfectly predictable (e.g., the metronome response task). In other words, such tasks are unsuitably structured for learning because there is nothing to learn about the tasks beyond their very basic performance requirements. Likewise, there are few, if any, skills to develop while performing such tasks. In these situations, then, mind wandering is less likely to reflect learning than it is to reflect a scenario in which participants give up on fully focusing on the task (Brosowsky, Degutis, et al., under review; Seli et al., 2013).

The attentional resources account predicts that increased learning should lead to increased mind wandering by “freeing up” resources to be allocated to mind wandering. Critically, however, this argument presumes that tasks can be learned; while this may be true, the tasks employed in many laboratory studies tend not to permit such learning. Moreover, in light of restricting mind-wandering research to a few attentionally demanding tasks, extant research has not investigated whether mind wandering can run in parallel with certain kinds of tasks. Thus, to test these two predictions of the attentional resources account, different tasks must be used.

Therefore, in the current study, we assessed whether (a) a focal task that does not draw on the same attentional resources as mind wandering can run in parallel with mind wandering without interference, and (b) task-automatization is associated with increases in mind wandering.

To do this, we examined the influence of mind wandering on performance during an implicit (versus explicit) sequence-learning task.

Implicit learning is the process of acquiring information about the underlying structure of the material without any intention to do so (Keele et al., 2003; Nissen & Bullemer, 1987; Reber, 1989; Seger, 1994). Implicit learning occurs across a variety of domains (Cleeremans et al., 1998), but is most commonly investigated using a serial reaction time (SRT) task (Nissen & Bullemer, 1987; for a review, see Schwarb & Schumacher, 2012). In this task, a target can appear in one of four locations, and participants are instructed to identify the location of a target by pressing a corresponding key. Critically, unbeknownst to participants, targets occur in a fixed sequence that repeats throughout the experiment until eventually the sequence changes to a new sequence of target locations. Participants typically perform better on the training sequence as compared to the unpracticed sequence. However, despite this performance advantage, participants are often unable to reconstruct the sequence, and they report no awareness of the repeating sequence, which rules out explicit learning (Pasquali et al., 2019; Schwarb & Schumacher, 2012).

Historically, there has been considerable debate as to whether implicit learning relies on attentional resources (Cleeremans et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2003). Nevertheless, numerous results converge on the view that implicit learning does not require attentional resources (e.g., Baker et al., 2004; Frensch & Miner, 1995; Jiang & Chun, 2001; Jiménez & Mendez, 1999; Turk-Browne et al., 2005). Explicit learning, however, requires executive processing and attentional resources to guide attention, maintain task goals, and reduce interference (e.g., Cowan, 1988; Frensch & Miner, 1995; Johnson & Hirst, 1993; Unsworth & Engle, 2005). Therefore, the SRT task is well-suited for our present goals because it allows us to examine the influence of mind wandering during identical tasks with and without attentional resource demands. Furthermore, this task permits us to measure changes in task automatization over time, and it is sensitive to small variations in learning rates via multiple measures: the improvement in performance over time and the disruption caused by changing to an unlearned sequence (i.e., “transfer” effects; Pasquali et al., 2019).

Notably, one prior study investigated the effect of mind wandering on performance on the SRT task (Franklin et al., 2016). While this study found—at odds with the attentional resource account—that mind wandering interfered with SRT task performance, there are several limitations of this study that bear mentioning.

First, the study did not include an explicit (intentional) learning group for comparison. Critically, however, such a comparison allows researchers to test for (a) poorer performance and (b) less explicit knowledge in the implicit relative to the explicit learning group, both of which outcomes allow one to more confidently conclude that implicit learning has in fact taken place.

Second, although the measurement of awareness in SRT tasks is still a contentious issue (Pasquali et al., 2019; Schwarb & Schumacher, 2012), Franklin et al. (2016) employed a now-outdated and atypical measure of awareness that has since been replaced with improved measures (Pasquali et al., 2019). More specifically, Franklin et al. used a version of the “inclusion generation” task, which requires participants to reproduce the training sequence from memory. Importantly, this inclusion generation task fails to adequately dissociate implicit and explicit learning because, during this task, participants who implicitly learn a sequence can often still

generate the sequence above chance (see Pasquali et al., 2019). In light of these shortcomings, most contemporary studies employ an “exclusion generation task,” which requires participants to generate the training sequence in reverse. Critically, this exclusion generation task (which was not employed in the Franklin et al. study) allows one to more confidently dissociate implicit and explicit learning because it requires participants to mentally rehearse and reverse the sequence, a task that requires explicit knowledge of the sequence. Thus, when participants can generate patterns from the reverse sequence above chance, one can more confidently say they had acquired explicit knowledge.

The final limitation of Franklin et al.’s (2016) study is that the authors alternated the training sequence and random sequences in a predictable fashion (two random, six training, two random, etc.) throughout the entire task and, critically, they did not report how performance changed across the experiment; instead, they reported an aggregate of early performance (presumably prior to any learning) and later performance (after learning had presumably occurred). If, as the authors argue, the modest performance benefit for training sequences occurred because participants learned the sequence, then the difference in performance between the training and random sequences should have increased over time (since more learning would take place with increased exposure to the learning sequence). However, because Franklin et al.’s performance measure was an aggregate of early and later performance, this essential test of implicit learning is absent from their article. Consequently, the reader is unable to assess how—or if—participants were learning, and to what extent mind wandering influenced learning rates (if learning did in fact occur). Therefore, Franklin et al.’s results cannot directly speak to the hypotheses proposed by the attentional resources account, which require an assessment of performance and mind wandering over time.

### **The Present Study**

In the present study, participants completed a five-response serial reaction time task. On every trial, participants responded to one of five targets, each corresponding to a response on the keyboard. Participants practiced a 10-element repeating sequence for 13 blocks of 80 trials before switching to a new, unpracticed sequence in the 14th block, and ending with the training sequence in the 15th block. To assess awareness, we had participants complete two sequence generation tasks: the inclusion task, wherein participants generate the training sequence for 100 trials, and the exclusion generation task, wherein participants generate the training sequence in reverse (Pasquali et al., 2019). Whereas participants in the “explicit” group were given instructions about memorizing the repeating sequence, participants in the “implicit” group were not given any information about the sequences.

Our design addresses the aforementioned limitations with Franklin et al.’s (2016) study in several important ways: first, we measured both mind wandering and task performance as a function of time on task to determine whether mind wandering is associated with task automatization. Second, we included both explicit and implicit learning groups, allowing us to draw direct comparisons between these groups and to determine whether implicit learning (as compared to explicit learning) is negatively associated with mind wandering. Third, we employed more robust measures of awareness, which allowed us to more confidently rule out explicit learning in the implicit group.

## Method

We report all data exclusions and all measures in the study. Moreover, in accordance with the recommendations of Seli, Kane, et al. (2018), we report that, in the present study, we conceptualized mind wandering as task-unrelated thought, and we operationally defined it for our participants in terms of thoughts pertaining to something other than what they were doing when queried about their mental states (see below for more details). All data, analysis, experiment, and manuscript preparation code can be found at [osf.io/qzry7/](https://osf.io/qzry7/).

### Participants

Participants were 200 individuals who completed a Human Intelligence Task (HIT) posted on the Amazon Mechanical Turk. Participants were paid \$3.25 (U.S. dollars) for completing the HIT, which lasted approximately 25 minutes. Participants were told that the experiment would take fewer than 30 minutes to complete but were not informed about how many trials they would be presented or how often they would be asked to report their thoughts.

### Serial Reaction Time (SRT) Task

The primary task was a serial reaction time (SRT) task, with five response options, each corresponding to a single location (see Figure 1). The display contained five rectangles, each corresponding to a response on the keyboard (left to right: C, V, B, N, and M), displayed in dark grey on an off-white background. Each rectangle was 125.6 x 196 pixels and displayed 14.4 pixels apart. Each rectangle was initially outlined in dark grey and filled with off-white. On each trial, one rectangle changed color (dark grey or green) and participants were instructed to press the corresponding key as quickly and as accurately as possible. Once the participant pressed the correct key, the next target would immediately appear.

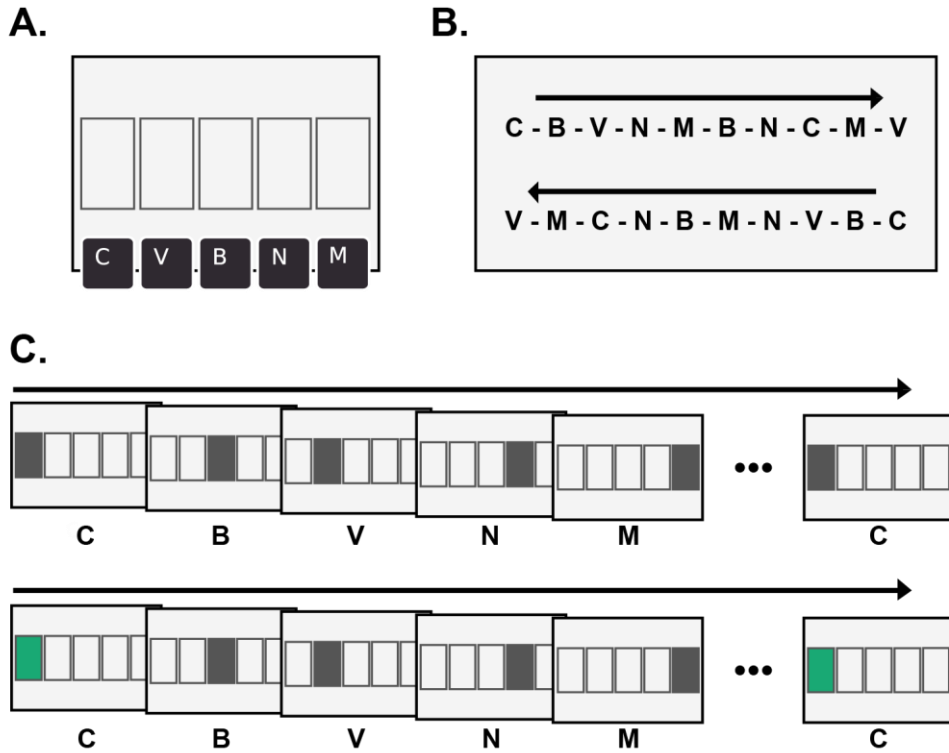


Figure 1

*Illustrations of the task and stimuli used. Figure A illustrates the keyboard responses associated with each of the five possible target locations. Figure B shows an example of the training sequence and the corresponding reverse sequence (Pasquali et al., 2019). Each participant was randomly assigned a sequence from the total set of 840. Participants practiced the training sequence for 13 blocks before switching to the reverse sequence for the 14th block and returning to the training sequence in the 15th block. Figure C illustrates a series of trials for the implicit group (above) and the explicit group (below). Stimulus presentation differed only in that the first target in the sequence was presented in green for the explicit group.*

The experiment followed a typical SRT paradigm (see Pasquali et al. 2019): Participants completed 13 blocks of the training sequence, followed by a transfer block containing a new sequence (block 14), followed by a return to the original sequence (block 15). The entire experiment consisted of 15 blocks of 80 trials (1200 trials). Blocks 1 through 13 and block 15 contained a repeating 10-element sequence, referred to as the “training sequence”. The 14th block consisted of a new sequence, which was a reversal of the original, training sequence (i.e., the “reverse sequence”).

We used 10-element refined reversible second-order conditional (RSOC) sequences as described by Pasquali et al. (2019; see also Jiménez, Méndez, Pasquali, Abrahamse, & Verwey, 2011). These are second-order conditional sequences that are traditionally used in SRT tasks. Each target appears with the same frequency—twice per sequence loop—and each transition occurs with equal frequency. In addition, refined ROC sequences contain no common transitions



with their reversed sequence patterns (i.e., “reversible”), but are otherwise fully analogous to the original sequence. Finally, refined ROC sequences do not contain any ascending or descending runs (i.e., “refined”). Ascending and descending runs are excluded to eliminate potential abstract cues and keystroke facilitations that may enable chunking strategies (abstractly homogeneous; “no transition would be responded faster than others in the absence of learning”; cf., Jiménez, 2008). Each participant was randomly assigned a refined RSOC sequence from the total set of 840.

Participants were either assigned to the implicit (incidental) or explicit (intentional) learning group. The task and instructions were identical for both groups with two exceptions: First, in the explicit learning group, a green rectangle appeared in place of the black rectangle. This was to indicate the beginning of the sequence (no green rectangle appeared in the transfer block, but participants were not told in advance about the change in task). Second, participants in the explicit group also received the following additional instructions:

*Important: the same sequence of locations/responses will repeat throughout the experiment. You will know when you are at the beginning of the sequence because the color of the rectangle will be green instead of black. As you complete the task you should try to memorize the repeating sequence so that you can respond as quickly as possible.*

### Generation Tasks

After the SRT task, awareness was assessed with two unexpected sequence generation tasks. In the inclusion generation task, participants were instructed to generate the training sequence over 100 trials. The display began with one of the five rectangles randomly filled, and participants were instructed to press the button corresponding to the next location that would have appeared in the training sequence and to continue with the sequence for 100 trials. Participants were given the following instructions:

*Now we are going to test your knowledge of the sequence you’ve been practicing.*

*In this part of the experiment, we want you to generate the practiced sequence from memory for 100 trials.*

*The session will begin at a random location. You will respond with the next location that would have come right after it in the sequence you have practiced. Then you will respond again with the location that would come next, and so on, generating the sequence you have practiced. If you are unsure of the next location, try to rely on your intuition and respond as best as you can.*

The instructions differed slightly for the implicit learning group. For them, we included an additional statement to assure participants that they were not required to learn the sequence to receive payment (“You may or may not have noticed that there was a sequence of locations/responses that repeated throughout the experiment (if you didn’t notice, that’s ok)”).

Participants then completed the exclusion generation task. This was the same as the inclusion task, except here participants were instructed to generate the reverse sequence from the one they had practiced:

*In this part of the experiment, we want you to generate the reversed pattern of the previously learned sequence from memory for 100 trials.*

*The session will begin at a random location. You will respond with the location that would have come before it in the sequence. After that, you will respond again with the one that would have come before that, and so on, generating the sequence in reverse.*

*If you are unsure of the next location, try to rely on your intuition and respond as best as you can.*

Following the procedure outlined by Pasquali et al. (2019), performance on the generation tasks was assessed by computing the number of training and reverse sequence triplets. The number of triplets we expected they would produce by chance alone was computed as the number of triplets in the sequence divided by the total number of possible triplets; that is,  $10 / (5 \times 4 \times 3) = 16.667\%$ .

### **Thought probes**

Throughout the SRT task, depth of mind wandering was sampled using intermittently presented thought probes. Thought probes were presented at the end of every block of 80 trials. When a thought probe was presented, the task temporarily stopped, and the participant was presented with the following question: “To what extent were you mind wandering?” Participants were instructed to report their depth of mind wandering by using a sliding scale, the anchors for which were “Not at all Mind Wandering” (which corresponded with a value of 0) and “Fully Mind Wandering” (which corresponded with a value of 100).

At the beginning of the experiment, participants were given the following instructions, followed by a working example of the thought probe response interface:

*While you are completing this task, you may find yourself thinking about things other than the task. These thoughts are referred to as ‘task-unrelated thoughts’ or ‘mind wandering’. Having task-unrelated thoughts is perfectly normal, especially when one must do the same thing for a long period of time.*

*We would like to determine how frequently you were thinking about the task versus how frequently you are thinking about something unrelated to the task (mind wandering). To do this, every once in a while, the task will temporarily stop and you will be presented with a thought-sampling screen that will ask you to indicate to what extent you have been focused on the task (not at all mind wandering) or focused on task-unrelated thoughts (fully mind wandering).*

*Being focused on the task means that you were focused on some aspect of the task at hand. For example, if you have been thinking about your performance on the task, or about when you should make a button press, these thoughts would count as being on-task.*

*On the other hand, experiencing task-unrelated thoughts means that you were thinking about something completely unrelated to the task. For example, thinking about what to eat for dinner, about an upcoming event, or about something that happened to you earlier in the day. Any thoughts that you have that are not related to the task you are completing count as task unrelated.*

*When the thought-sampling screen is presented, we will ask you to indicate the extent to which you have been mind wandering. You will indicate the extent you have been*

*mind wandering on a scale from 0 to 100 (0 being not at all mind wandering, 100 being fully mind wandering).*

### Data analysis and manuscript preparation

This manuscript was prepared using R (R Core Team, 2019). A variety of notable R packages were used for data analysis (Bates et al., 2015; Fox & Weisberg, 2019; Kuznetsova et al., 2017; Singmann et al., 2019; Wickham et al., 2019; Wickham & Henry, 2019), data visualization (Fox & Weisberg, 2018; Kassambara, 2019; Wickham, 2016; Wilke, 2019), and general manuscript preparation (Aust & Barth, 2018). All data, analysis, and manuscript preparation code can be found at [osf.io/qzry7/](https://osf.io/qzry7/).

## Results

### Generation Tasks

**Inclusion generation task.** To assess awareness, we first compared the percentage of triplets produced to the percentage we would expect by chance (16.667%), and then compared performance across groups (see Figure 2). In the inclusion generation task, both the explicit,  $M = 44.01$ , 95% CI [37.40, 50.63],  $t(92) = 8.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , and implicit groups,  $M = 22.65$ , 95% CI [18.79, 26.51],  $t(98) = 3.08$ ,  $p = .003$ , produced practice sequence triplets above chance. However, the explicit group produced significantly more triplets than the implicit group,  $\Delta M = 21.36$ , 95% CI [13.86, 28.86],  $t(190) = 5.62$ ,  $p < .001$ . Additionally, both the explicit,  $M = 7.29$ , 95% CI [5.57, 9.00],  $t(92) = -10.88$ ,  $p < .001$ , and implicit groups,  $M = 11.39$ , 95% CI [9.79, 12.98],  $t(98) = -6.56$ ,  $p < .001$  produced fewer triplets from the reverse sequence than would be expected by chance. The explicit group however, produced fewer triplets than the implicit group,  $\Delta M = -4.10$ , 95% CI [-6.42, -1.78],  $t(190) = -3.48$ ,  $p = .001$ .

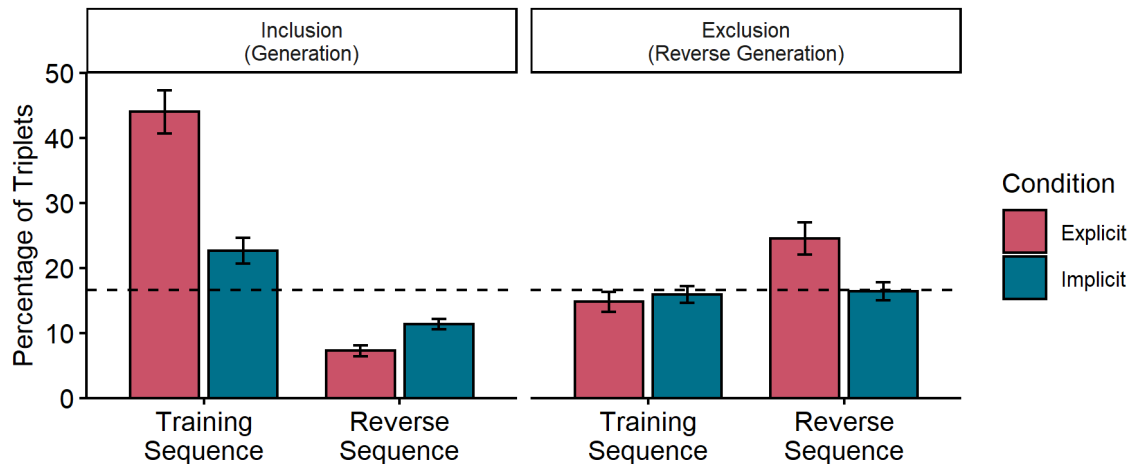


Figure 2

*Results of the sequence generation tasks used to assess awareness across the explicit and implicit learning groups. Plots show the percentage triplets produced that match triplets from the training or reverse sequence when asked to produce the training sequence (inclusion generation task) or the reverse sequence (exclusion generation task).*

**Exclusion generation task.** Turning to the exclusion generation task, participants in the explicit group produced more reverse sequence triplets than would be expected by chance,  $M = 24.55$ , 95% CI [19.68, 29.42],  $t(92) = 3.22$ ,  $p = .002$ ; the implicit group, however, did not,  $M = 16.41$ , 95% CI [13.69, 19.12],  $t(98) = -0.19$ ,  $p = .850$ . Furthermore, the explicit group produced more reverse triplets than the implicit group,  $\Delta M = 8.15$ , 95% CI [2.69, 13.60],  $t(190) = 2.95$ ,  $p = .004$ . The number of practice sequence triplets however, did not differ from chance for either the explicit,  $M = 14.80$ , 95% CI [11.69, 17.91],  $t(92) = -1.19$ ,  $p = .236$  or implicit groups,  $M = 15.93$ , 95% CI [13.39, 18.48],  $t(98) = -0.57$ ,  $p = .569$ . Similarly, there was no significant difference between conditions,  $\Delta M = -1.14$ , 95% CI [-5.10, 2.83],  $t(190) = -0.56$ ,  $p = .573$ .

### Serial Reaction Time (SRT) Task

Prior to all analyses, we removed any participants with accuracy less than 80% (removing 7 participants) and one participant who did not complete all the trials. Prior to all analyses, we removed error trials, removed the first trial following a thought probe, any responses with reaction times longer than 3000 ms (removing 1.47% of observations) before finally applying the non-recursive Van Selst and Jolicoeur outlier removal procedure [Van Selst and Jolicoeur (1994); removing 2.52% of the remaining observations). To determine how performance changed across the experiment, we analyzed a “practice effect” and a “transfer effect” for RT and accuracy, separately. The practice effect is the change in performance (RT or accuracy) from the first to the 13th block, and the transfer effect is the change in performance (again, RT or accuracy) from blocks 13 and 15 (averaged) compared to the reversed block, block 14 (see Figure 3 and Appendix A).

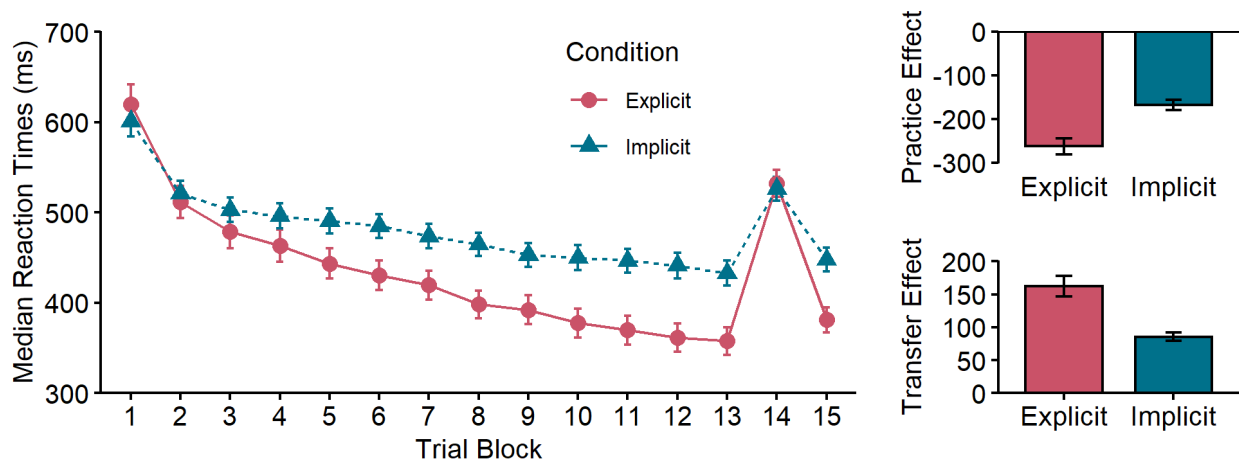


Figure 3

*Results of the serial reaction time task. Median reaction times are plotted across trial blocks on the left. Practice effects (reaction times from the 1st block were subtracted from the 13th block)*

*and transfer effects (reaction times from the 14th block were subtracted from the average of the 13th and 15th blocks) are plotted on the right.*

We found significant RT practice effects for both the explicit,  $M_d = -262.32$ , 95% CI  $[-299.28, -225.36]$ ,  $t(92) = -14.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.71$ , 95% CI  $[-1, -0.41]$ , and the implicit,  $M_d = -262.32$ , 95% CI  $[-299.28, -225.36]$ ,  $t(92) = -14.10$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.71$ , 95% CI  $[-1, -0.41]$ . Comparing conditions, we found the RT practice effect for explicit group was significantly larger than the implicit,  $\Delta M = -94.31$ , 95% CI  $[-137.05, -51.58]$ ,  $t(190) = -4.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.63$ , 95% CI  $[-0.92, -0.34]$ .

Turning to the RT transfer effect, median reaction times were significantly slower in the reversed block (block 14), for the explicit group,  $M_d = 162.64$ , 95% CI  $[131.38, 193.90]$ ,  $t(92) = 10.33$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.64$ , 95% CI  $[0.34, 0.94]$ , as well as the implicit group,  $M_d = 85.47$ , 95% CI  $[72.98, 97.96]$ ,  $t(98) = 13.58$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.4$ , 95% CI  $[0.12, 0.69]$ . Comparing effects across groups, the RT transfer effect was significantly larger for the explicit group,  $\Delta M = 77.17$ , 95% CI  $[44.46, 109.87]$ ,  $t(190) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.67$ , 95% CI  $[0.38, 0.96]$ .

We also analyzed accuracy scores in a similar manner. We found significant accuracy practice effects, in that performance was better in 1st compared to the 13th block, for both the explicit  $M_d = -0.05$ , 95% CI  $[-0.07, -0.03]$ ,  $t(92) = -4.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.37$ , 95% CI  $[-0.66, -0.07]$ , and implicit groups,  $M_d = -0.04$ , 95% CI  $[-0.05, -0.02]$ ,  $t(98) = -3.77$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.32$ , 95% CI  $[-0.6, -0.03]$ . However, this effect did not differ across groups,  $\Delta M = 0.01$ , 95% CI  $[-0.02, 0.04]$ ,  $t(190) = 0.87$ ,  $p = .387$ ,  $d = 0.13$ , 95% CI  $[-0.16, 0.41]$ . More generally, performance was best in the first three blocks, but remained high (88-90% accurate) throughout the experiment (as in Pasqueli et al. 2019). We also found significant accuracy transfer effects for both the explicit,  $M_d = -0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.08, -0.04]$ ,  $t(92) = -5.93$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.36$ , 95% CI  $[-0.65, -0.06]$  and implicit,  $M_d = -0.07$ , 95% CI  $[-0.09, -0.05]$ ,  $t(98) = -7.35$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = -0.47$ , 95% CI  $[-0.76, -0.19]$  groups showing better accuracy in blocks 13 and 15, compared to block 14, the reverse block; and no significant difference in transfer effects between groups,  $\Delta M = 0.01$ , 95% CI  $[-0.02, 0.04]$ ,  $t(190) = 0.63$ ,  $p = .531$ ,  $d = 0.09$ , 95% CI  $[-0.19, 0.38]$ .

### Thought Probes

We adopted the same analysis plan as above to determine how depth of mind wandering changed throughout the experiment (see Figure 4 and Appendix A). First, we analyzed the practice effect for depth of mind wandering. This mind-wandering practice effect indexes the change in depth of mind wandering that occurred after participants had practiced the SRT sequence. More specifically, it is the reported depth of mind wandering in the 13th block minus the reported depth of mind wandering in the first block.

Here, we found a significant mind-wandering practice effect—an increase in the reported depth of mind wandering from the 1st to the 13th block—for both explicit,  $M_d = 22.62$ , 95% CI  $[14.92, 30.32]$ ,  $t(86) = 5.84$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.51$ , 95% CI  $[0.2, 0.81]$ , and implicit groups,  $M_d = 19.24$ , 95% CI  $[12.36, 26.12]$ ,  $t(98) = 5.55$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.43$ , 95% CI  $[0.15, 0.72]$ ;

however, no significant difference between groups,  $\Delta M = -3.38$ , 95% CI  $[-13.60, 6.84]$ ,  $t(184) = -0.65$ ,  $p = .515$ ,  $d = -0.1$ , 95% CI  $[-0.39, 0.19]$ .

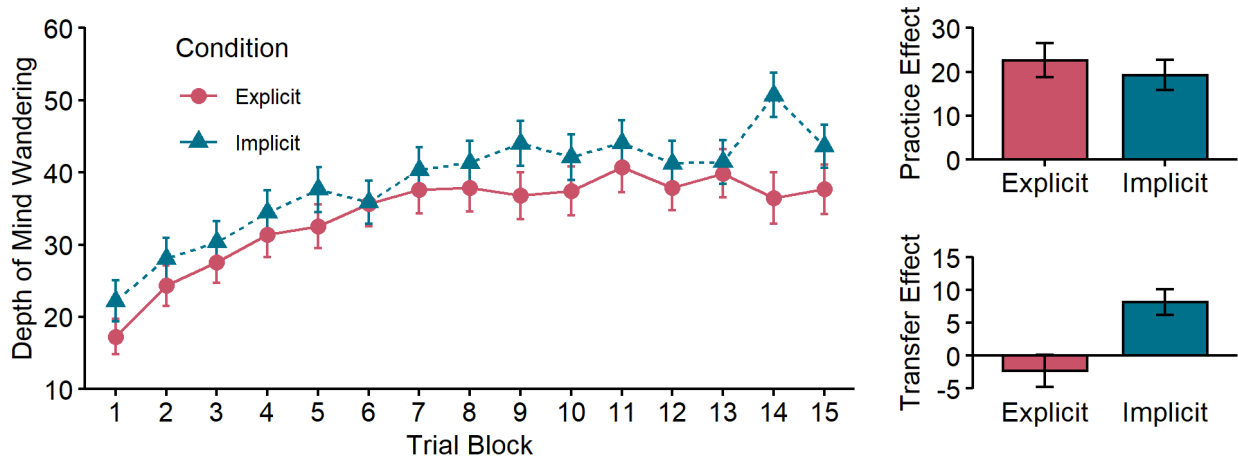


Figure 4

*Results from the depth of mind wandering thought probes. Thought probe responses are plotted across trial blocks on the left. Practice effects (reported depth of mind wandering in the 1st block is subtracted from the 13th block) and transfer effects (reported depth of mind wandering in the 14th block is subtracted from the average of the 13th and 15th blocks) are plotted on the right.*

Next, we analyzed the mind-wandering transfer effect across groups. This transfer effect indexes the change in depth of mind wandering that occurred when the sequence was reversed. More specifically, it is the depth of mind wandering reported in the 14th block (the reversed sequence block) minus the depth of mind wandering reported in the 13th and 15th blocks (the blocks immediately preceding and immediately following the sequence change).

Here, we did not find a significant mind-wandering transfer effect for the explicit group,  $M_d = -2.34$ , 95% CI  $[-7.24, 2.57]$ ,  $t(86) = -0.95$ ,  $p = .346$ ,  $d = -0.06$ , 95% CI  $[-0.36, 0.24]$ , but did find a significant mind-wandering transfer effect for the implicit group,  $M_d = 8.16$ , 95% CI  $[4.30, 12.01]$ ,  $t(98) = 4.20$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.18$ , 95% CI  $[-0.1, 0.46]$ . Additionally, the transfer effect was significantly smaller for the explicit versus implicit conditions,  $\Delta M = -10.50$ , 95% CI  $[-16.62, -4.37]$ ,  $t(184) = -3.38$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $d = -0.5$ , 95% CI  $[-0.79, -0.2]$ .

### Mind wandering, awareness, and SRT performance

To determine the association between mind wandering, awareness, and SRT performance, we analyzed trial-level reaction times using a linear mixed model with awareness group (explicit versus implicit), depth of mind wandering, and block as fixed effects, and subject as the random effect (see Figure 5). The same outlier removal procedures outlined above were applied here. The full results of this analysis can be found in Appendix B. Of interest are the three-way interactions between block, mind wandering, and group ( $ps < .05$ ), showing that the association between mind wandering and performance differed between the explicit and implicit groups. Whereas for the explicit group, lower depth of mind wandering was associated with a sharper learning curve,

bigger RT practice and transfer effects, for the implicit group, depth of mind wandering was not associated with changes in learning, or with RT practice or RT transfer effects.

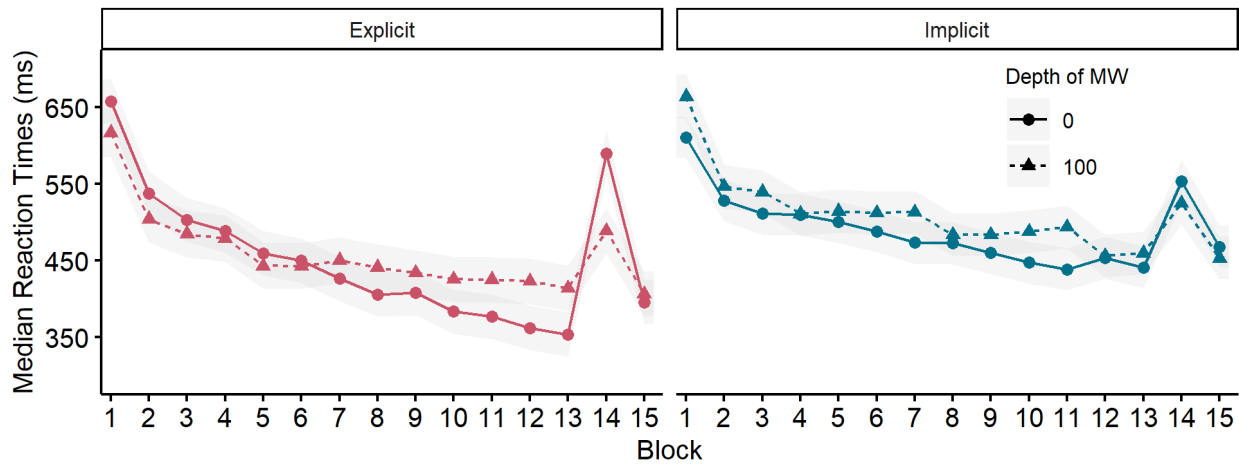


Figure 5

*Results from the linear mixed model with depth of mind wandering, block, and awareness as fixed effects and subject as a random effect. Estimated reaction times are plotted for 0 and 100 depth of mind wandering across awareness groups.*

To further corroborate this interpretation, we analyzed the data using two linear regression models (see Figure 6), followed-up with Pearson correlations. In the first, we included depth of mind wandering and awareness group (explicit versus implicit) as explanatory variables, and the RT practice effect as the dependent variable. Here, we found a significant interaction between depth of mind wandering and group,  $b = 2.59$ , 95% CI [0.75, 4.43],  $t(182) = 2.78$ ,  $p = .006$ , such that mind wandering was negatively associated with practice effects in the explicit ( $r = -.23$ , 95% CI [-.42, -.02],  $t(85) = -2.22$ ,  $p = .029$ ), but not implicit condition ( $r = .15$ , 95% CI [-.05, .34],  $t(97) = 1.50$ ,  $p = .137$ ). Interestingly, in the implicit group, although non-significant, the correlation coefficient was in the positive direction.

In the second analysis, we included depth of mind wandering and condition as explanatory variables and the RT transfer effect as the dependent variable. Here again, find a significant interaction between depth of mind wandering and condition,  $b = 1.89$ , 95% CI [0.51, 3.27],  $t(182) = 2.71$ ,  $p = .007$ . Like the first analysis, we find a negative association between mind wandering and RT transfer effects in the explicit ( $r = -.31$ , 95% CI [-.49, -.11],  $t(85) = -3.00$ ,  $p = .004$ ), but not implicit condition ( $r = -.08$ , 95% CI [-.27, .12],  $t(97) = -0.79$ ,  $p = .431$ ).

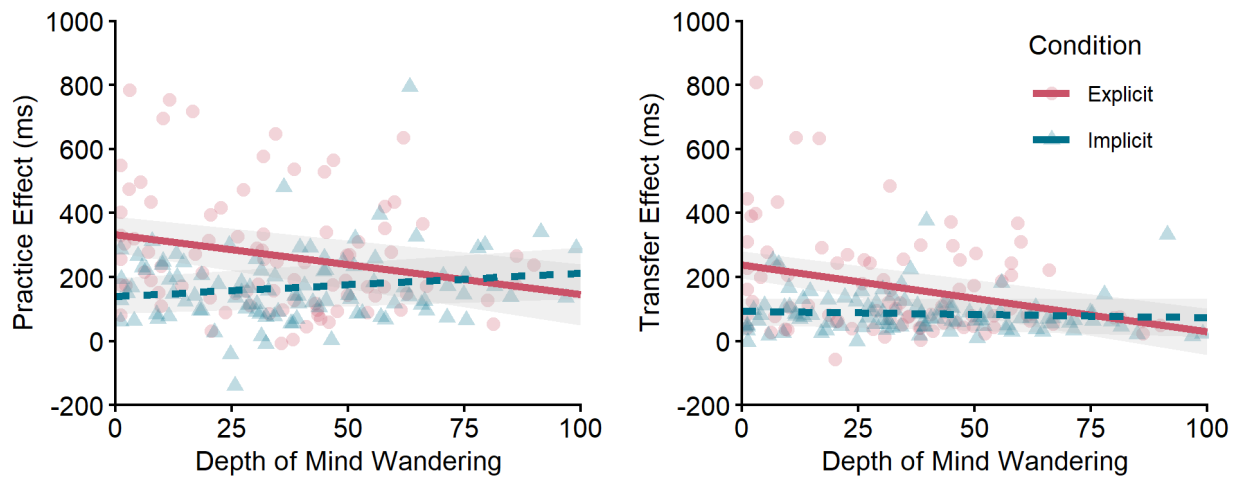


Figure 6

*Results from the linear regression models plotted over participant data. Practice effects are plotted against depth of mind wandering (left) and transfer effects are plotted against depth of mind wandering (right).*

### Discussion

In the present study, we assessed two predictions of the attentional resources account. First, that when task performance and mind wandering do not recruit the same attentional resources, mind wandering has no effect on task performance (i.e., mind wandering and task performance can run in parallel without interference). Second, that task-automatization frees up attentional resources that can, in turn, be used for mind wandering (i.e., task-automatization is positively associated with mind wandering). To these ends, participants completed an SRT task using a 10-element repeating sequence (e.g., Pasquali et al., 2019). One group was made aware of the repeating sequence (i.e., the “explicit” group) and the other was not (i.e., the “implicit” group). Participants practiced the sequence for 13 blocks, at which point they were presented the reverse sequence for one block (block 14) before returning to the training sequence for the final block (block 15). After each block of trials, we presented participants a thought probe to gauge their depth of mind wandering and, at the end of the experiment, we assessed their awareness of the repeating sequence using two sequence generation tasks.

To assess awareness of the repeating sequence, we included two sequence generation tasks. We found that both groups could produce training sequence triplets and refrain from producing reverse sequence triplets. However, the explicit group outperformed the implicit group in both cases and only participants in the explicit group could produce the reverse sequence triplets above chance. Taken together, these results suggest that the knowledge acquired in the explicit learning group was indeed explicit, as they were better able to mentally reconstruct the training sequence and even reverse it. Importantly, these results also suggest that knowledge acquired in the implicit learning group was likely implicit, as participants in this group could not reproduce the reverse sequence at rates above chance. Critically, these results indicate that our study was able to effectively assess the association between mind wandering and task performance when varying the resources necessary to maintain adequate task performance. This, in turn, allowed us to test two key predictions of the attentional resource account: that (a) a focal task that does not draw on the same attentional resources as mind wandering can run in parallel



with mind wandering without interference, and (b) task-automatization is associated with increases in mind wandering.

To test the first prediction (that task-automatization is associated with increases in mind wandering), we examined changes in mind wandering and task performance before and after participants practiced the sequence. Here, we found that SRT task performance improved considerably with increased time on task (indicating that task performance became increasingly automated), while at the same time, depth of mind wandering increased. These findings provide novel evidence in favor of the task-automatization prediction of the attentional resources account: As the task became automated, mind-wandering depth increased without interfering with the focal task (in fact, performance improved).

To test the second prediction (that a focal task can run in parallel with mind wandering without interference), we examined the association between mind wandering, learning, and awareness. In the explicit learning group, we found that depth of mind wandering was negatively associated with learning rates (as indexed by both RT/accuracy practice and transfer effects). However, this was not the case for the implicit group, whose learning rates were not associated with their reported depth of mind wandering. This result likewise provides novel evidence for the attentional resources account: Explicit learning requires attentional resources and is therefore disrupted when participants engaged in deeper bouts of mind wandering. In contrast, implicit learning does not require attentional resources and is therefore unaffected by a participants' depth of mind wandering.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the foregoing, our results provide novel evidence that implicit learning in an SRT task does not require attentional resources. The relation between attention and implicit learning has been, and is still, a heavily debated topic (Cleeremans et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2003). Typically, dual-task paradigms are used to determine whether implicit learning is impaired under attentional load. Although many studies have demonstrated unimpaired learning under attentional load (e.g., Cohen et al., 1990; Frensch & Miner, 1995; Reed & Johnson, 1994; Shanks & Johnstone, 1999), others have shown impaired learning, slowed reaction times, and diminished transfer effects (e.g., Jimenez & Vazquez, 2005; Shanks et al., 2005; Shanks & Channon, 2002). Here, however, we find self-reports of inattention (i.e., mind wandering) were not associated with performance in the implicit group, but that they were negatively associated with performance in the explicit group. These results provide strong support for the view that implicit learning, unlike explicit learning, is unimpaired under attentional load using a novel measure of inattention. This is an important contribution to the ongoing debate about the relation of attention and implicit learning (Cleeremans et al., 2019; Jiménez, 2003).

Finally, we turn to a surprising, but potentially important, result: Participants in the implicit group reported a considerable increase in mind-wandering depth during the reversed-sequence block. This contrasts sharply with the explicit group, who showed no differences in

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that our results are generally inconsistent with the work by Franklin et al. (2016), who found that implicit sequence learning was negatively associated with mind wandering. As mentioned in our Introduction, however, there were numerous methodological and statistical shortcomings with Franklin et al.'s study that suggest that their results should be interpreted with caution. Given that the present study addressed all of these concerns, we think it provides a more appropriate test of the effect of mind wandering on implicit and explicit learning.

their mind-wandering depth across the three final blocks. The question, then, is what explains this difference in mind-wandering reports between the implicit and explicit groups?

Perhaps the simplest explanation is that the change in task performance caused an increase in mind wandering in the implicit, but not the explicit, group. Recall that participants in the implicit group were unaware that there was a repeating sequence throughout most of the SRT task. Thus, the sudden and inexplicable change in performance occurring when the task switched from the repeated sequence to the novel, reverse sequence (i.e., block 14) may have caused participants in the implicit group to experience more task-related interferences (e.g., “Why am I suddenly doing so poorly?”), which may have been reported as increased mind wandering. In contrast, participants in the explicit condition, who were aware of the repeating sequence, were likely less confused about the sudden shift in their performance during block 14; indeed, participants in this group ought to have immediately realized that the sequence was switched, which would result in fewer task-related interferences (and hence, no increase in reported depth of mind wandering) because these participants would have been fully aware of why their performance was temporarily poorer.

A second potential explanation is that participants were inferring their depth of mind wandering based on their performance (Head & Helton, 2018). However, it is unlikely that participants were using a simple heuristic that poor performance signals deeper mind wandering. Indeed, here we observed concurrent increases in performance and depth of mind wandering throughout the task. Furthermore, participants in the explicit group showed a larger performance drop than the implicit group, yet they did not report changes in their depth of mind wandering. While our results indicate that it is unlikely that participants infer their depth of mind wandering based on performance, *per se*, it is plausible that they instead infer mind wandering based on the discrepancy between their performance and their normative expectations about their performance (Whittlesea, 2002; Whittlesea & Williams, 2001a, 2001b, 2000). That is, when people perform worse than they expect in a given context, they might infer that they were inattentive or mind wandering. Participants in the implicit group were unaware that the task contained a repeated sequence and, consequently, would have been unable to accurately attribute their poor performance to a change in the task. This would result in a large discrepancy between their performance and their expected performance. In contrast, participants who were aware that there was a repeating sequence (i.e., those in the explicit group) were likely also aware that the sequence changed. Therefore, they could accurately attribute their poor performance to a change in the task, which would preclude the discrepancy experienced by participants in the implicit group. This possibility is, of course, speculative, but it would suggest that awareness of task structure and performance may influence self-reports of mind wandering and could potentially have important implications for mind-wandering research. Moving forward, more research on this topic is needed.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that the costs of mind wandering critically depend on the resource requirements of the primary task. When task requirements are high (e.g. during explicit learning), mind wandering is associated with considerable disruption. However, when task demands are low (e.g. during implicit learning), mind wandering can go on in parallel and even serve as a marker of successful learning. These findings support several key

predictions of the attentional resource theory of mind wandering (Smallwood & Schooler, 2006), while also illuminating the circumstances under which mind wandering is most versus least likely to be problematic.

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### Appendix A

Table 1

*Mean and standard errors for median reaction times (RT; ms), error rates (Error; %) and depth of mind wandering (MW) as a function of block and learning group*

Block	Explicit			Implicit		
	RT	Error	MW	RT	Error	MW
1	625.17 (22.61)	7.13 (0.75)	17.25 (2.46)	600.82 (16.78)	7.81 (0.63)	22.21 (2.84)
2	514.29 (18.09)	6.96 (0.62)	24.31 (2.84)	520.99 (14.01)	6.95 (0.57)	28.06 (2.92)
3	480.62 (18.93)	7.43 (0.71)	27.6 (2.88)	502.98 (13.55)	7.01 (0.62)	30.35 (2.89)
4	466.58 (18.56)	8.87 (0.95)	31.36 (3.08)	496.28 (13.82)	8.88 (0.79)	34.44 (3.11)
5	441.32 (16.89)	9.6 (0.87)	32.52 (3.01)	490.49 (14.06)	9.53 (0.65)	37.64 (3.11)
6	429.33 (16.79)	10.03 (0.87)	35.68 (3.13)	484.96 (13.31)	9.98 (0.74)	35.88 (2.96)
7	419.59 (16.83)	9.77 (0.71)	37.62 (3.32)	473.86 (13.24)	9.96 (0.72)	40.35 (3.1)
8	398.85 (15.55)	10.8 (0.87)	37.84 (3.22)	464.81 (12.89)	10.92 (0.85)	41.34 (3.06)
9	391.19 (16.53)	9.85 (0.9)	36.77 (3.23)	453.06 (13.34)	11.03 (0.89)	44.02 (3.1)
10	377.09 (16.55)	11.87 (0.87)	37.45 (3.39)	449.89 (13.76)	10.64 (0.72)	42.12 (3.17)
11	369.24 (16.58)	11.8 (0.97)	40.71 (3.47)	446.57 (13.3)	10.94 (0.84)	44.07 (3.1)
12	360.83 (16.08)	11.45 (0.84)	37.91 (3.19)	441.43 (14.15)	10.96 (0.69)	41.26 (3.12)
13	356.44 (15.84)	11.91 (0.98)	39.87 (3.37)	432.81 (13.99)	11.32 (0.81)	41.45 (3.01)
14	535.82 (15.44)	18 (1.17)	36.43 (3.57)	526.38 (13.03)	17.56 (1.06)	50.7 (3.06)
15	380.52 (14.52)	12.56 (1.28)	37.66 (3.4)	447.75 (13.16)	9.74 (0.74)	43.63 (2.97)

## Appendix B

Table 2  
*Linear Mixed Model Results*

Predictors	Reaction Times (ms)			
	Estimates	SE	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> -value
Block [7] * MW	0.65	0.11	5.81	< 0.001
Block [8] * MW	0.76	0.11	6.75	< 0.001
Block [9] * MW	0.67	0.11	5.94	< 0.001
Block [10] * MW	0.83	0.11	7.46	< 0.001
Block [11] * MW	0.89	0.11	8.07	< 0.001
Block [12] * MW	1.02	0.11	8.94	< 0.001
Block [13] * MW	1.01	0.11	9.06	< 0.001
Block [14] * MW	-0.60	0.11	-5.46	< 0.001
Block [15] * MW	0.52	0.11	4.64	< 0.001
Block [2] * Group [Implicit]	38.15	5.09	7.50	< 0.001
Block [3] * Group [Implicit]	54.89	5.26	10.44	< 0.001
Block [4] * Group [Implicit]	67.68	5.39	12.55	< 0.001
Block [5] * Group [Implicit]	87.44	5.55	15.76	< 0.001
Block [6] * Group [Implicit]	84.87	5.60	15.14	< 0.001
Block [7] * Group [Implicit]	93.85	5.67	16.55	< 0.001
Block [8] * Group [Implicit]	113.60	5.77	19.68	< 0.001
Block [9] * Group [Implicit]	98.74	5.80	17.03	< 0.001
Block [10] * Group [Implicit]	110.60	5.70	19.42	< 0.001
Block [11] * Group [Implicit]	108.70	5.86	18.54	< 0.001
Block [12] * Group [Implicit]	138.50	5.79	23.92	< 0.001
Block [13] * Group [Implicit]	134.20	5.84	23.00	< 0.001
Block [14] * Group [Implicit]	10.58	6.02	1.76	0.0789
Block [15] * Group [Implicit]	119.30	5.82	20.50	< 0.001
MW * Group [Implicit]	0.94	0.11	8.22	< 0.001
(Block [2] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.43	0.15	-2.89	< 0.001
(Block [3] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.47	0.15	-3.17	< 0.001
(Block [4] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.82	0.15	-5.65	< 0.001
(Block [5] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.63	0.15	-4.31	< 0.001
(Block [6] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.63	0.15	-4.27	< 0.001
(Block [7] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.78	0.14	-5.43	< 0.001
(Block [8] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-1.19	0.15	-8.13	< 0.001
(Block [9] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.97	0.15	-6.64	< 0.001
(Block [10] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.96	0.14	-6.67	< 0.001
(Block [11] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.87	0.14	-6.07	< 0.001
(Block [12] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-1.53	0.15	-10.46	< 0.001

(Block [13] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-1.36	0.15	-9.29	< 0.001
(Block [14] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-0.22	0.14	-1.51	0.132
(Block [15] * MW) * Group [Implicit]	-1.20	0.15	-8.20	< 0.001

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**Random Effects**


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$a^2$	25181.27
$^{T00}Subject$	18033.13
ICC	0.42
$^NSubject$	186.00
Observations	202921
Marginal $R^2$ / Conditional $R^2$	0.085/0.467

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