

Exploring Inner Experience: The Descriptive Experience Sampling Method

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Annotated Table of Contents

Preface

Part I: Caring about inner experience

There are, broadly speaking, two opinions about inner experience. Some people think that inner experience is simple to explore—we do it all the time, and we can simply ask others about their experience. Other people, however, think that inner experience is impossible to explore—they point to psychology’s introspection debacle, for example. We show that both positions are based on not paying adequate attention to inner experience. But inner experience is important, and failing to pay attention to it is a risky business.

Chapter 1: Inner experience

Inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) are among the most important features of the human condition, and have been since the beginnings of recorded history. However, modern psychological science has avoided the study of inner experience in the (we think mistaken) belief that obtaining accurate descriptions of inner experience is impossible or unnecessary. We show that it is possible to observe inner experience with accuracy, and introduce a method for doing so, the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) method.

Chapter 2: Amy’s Inner Experience

We illustrate DES by describing Amy, a 22-year-old college student who had sought therapy from her university’s psychological services center to help her deal with what she saw as a compulsion to lie—she couldn’t stop herself from saying things that weren’t true. She lied even about inconsequential things like what she had for lunch or whom she had seen at the library. DES showed that the root of her lies was her inability to be in contact with her own experiences—her own thoughts, feelings, sensations, and so on. We watch as Amy acquires this ability to be clear about her own experience and observe that her life situation improves dramatically.

Chapter 3: Telling what we know: Describing inner experience

Psychological scientists fall onto one or the other side of a deep chasm. On one side are those who believe that exploring inner experience is impossible or at best unnecessary; we provide a brief historical account of this belief, showing how it is mistaken. On the other side of the chasm are those who believe that exploring inner experience is easy—just ask people what they’re thinking and feeling. We show that people are often dramatically mistaken about what they think they’re thinking. Thus both sides of the chasm reflect a lack of concern about inner experience: on one side it doesn’t exist, and on the other side there is little concern for whether what is said about it is true. We conclude on an optimistic note, however: although exploring inner experience is not trivially easy, it can be successfully accomplished. Furthermore, we show that to be successful, psychological science *must* incorporate accurate investigations of inner experience. [Revised from Hurlburt, R.T. & Heavey, C.L. (2001). Telling what we know: describing inner experience. *TRENDS in Cognitive Science*, 5, 400-403.]

Part II: It is possible, but not trivially easy, to observe inner experience

We show that it is possible to observe inner experience accurately, but that doing so requires some sophistication of method. We describe some characteristics of that sophistication.

Chapter 4: Psychological science's prescription for accurate reports about inner experience (with Todd Seibert)

Whereas psychological science has generally not explored inner experience directly for the past century, it has produced substantial research that bears on the way such explorations should be conducted. Drawing on that research, we identify 15 general guidelines for obtaining accurate reports about inner experience, including the following: 1. Keep the interval between the experience being explored and the reporting of its characteristics short; 2. Explore specific, well-defined moments; 3. Keep the experience being explored brief; 4. Explore experiences in varied natural contexts; 5. Don't ask for attributions of causality; and 6: Distinguish carefully between describing inner phenomena and explaining conscious processes.

Chapter 5: To beep or not to beep

We argue that using a beeper to define specific moments helps the accuracy of observing inner experience in 13 ways. We divide those ways into three categories: time sampling per se, minimizing the reactive disturbance of evanescent phenomena, and aiding phenomenological fidelity. We turn aside six criticisms of beeper-based research, and describe six characteristics of a good beep. [Revised from Hurlburt, R.T. & Heavey, C.L. (2004). To beep or not to beep: Obtaining accurate reports about awareness. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 11, 113-128.]

Part III: One method of exploring inner experience

Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) is one method that satisfies all the criteria for the sophisticated methods of exploring inner experience that we described in Part II. We describe DES in enough detail that an interested reader can begin to think clearly about what it takes to explore inner experience accurately.

Chapter 6: The Descriptive Experience Sampling procedure

Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) is one procedure to explore inner experience that embodies the conclusions of the previous chapters. We have used this procedure for 25 years, and discuss here how to do it. We provide an annotated transcript of the invitation to participate in one of our sampling studies. This invitation will allow you to hear for yourself what is asked of a DES participant, and will define some of the issues central to the sampling method.

Chapter 7: Transcript of a DES Expositional interview

To allow the reader to evaluate the DES procedure, we provide an annotated but otherwise verbatim transcript of a DES expositional interview so the reader can assess the extent to which we do pay attention to the moment, set aside preconceptions, not lead the witness, and so on.

Chapter 8: How to do DES: The moment of the beep

The DES procedure is conceptually simple: interrupt a subject and ask the one legitimate question: "What are the details of your inner experience at this very moment?" But in practice, asking such a question is a substantial skill. We discuss the characteristics of that skill.

Chapter 9: A Sampling Journal: Learning about DES (Sarah A. Akhter & RTH)

Sarah Akhter was a new graduate student just learning about DES. She kept a journal of her experiences as she served both as a DES subject and neophyte investigator. This journal and her reflections on the process of learning DES has something important to say to people who are considering DES.

Chapter 10: Bracketing presuppositions

Any investigator using any subjective procedure is at risk for finding what the investigator expects to find rather than what is actually there. DES reduces that risk by using a random beep to select the moments to examine; thus the investigator's presuppositions don't drive the targets of the investigation. That is a large improvement over other methods, but by itself is not enough to eliminate the biasing effects of presuppositions on the results. Here we discuss how to "bracket" those presuppositions, putting them out of play so that the phenomena can be observed as faithfully as possible.

Part IV: Analysis

This section analyzes DES: is it reliable? valid? How does it compare to other methods?

Chapter 11: Reliability and validity of DES

We establish that the inter-rater reliability of our DES ratings is as good as or better than the best psychological tests. However, just because raters can agree doesn't mean that phenomena are being described accurately—perhaps both raters share the same delusions. We therefore discuss "idiographic validity," the extent to which descriptions of a single individual are true. We present five reasons to accept the idiographic validity of DES reports. Includes excerpts from Hurlburt, R. T. & Heavey, C. L. (2002). Interobserver reliability of Descriptive Experience Sampling. *Cognitive Therapy and Research*, 26, 135-142; and from Hurlburt, R. T. (1997). Randomly sampling thinking in the natural environment. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 65, 941-949.

Chapter 12: DES compared to other systems

We compare and contrast DES with Kvale's qualitative psychology and Giorgi's phenomenological psychology.

Part V: Results and Implications

This section describes some of the findings of DES. What does inner experience look like when explored accurately? What difference does it make whether we know about inner experience? We argue that inner experience is the central feature of the human condition, essential to understanding ourselves, to communicating about ourselves to others, and in understanding others. Therefore paying accurate attention to inner experience is essential both for psychology and for nonpsychologists.

Chapter 13: Everyday inner experience

We describe the five main features of inner experience that emerge frequently across many different subjects: Inner speech, images, unsymbolized thinking, sensory awareness, and feelings. Four of those are probably uncontroversial, but unsymbolized thinking—thinking that apparently uses neither words, images, nor any other kinds of inner symbols—requires some discussion because many people, including most psychologists and (surprisingly) many individuals who themselves engage in this process frequently, believe that it is impossible and therefore nonexistent.

Chapter 14: Implications of inner experience (with Sarah A. Akhter)

We observe that there are great individual differences in the extent to which different people employ the various forms of inner experience: some people's experience is dominated by images, other people's inner experience is dominated by inner speech, and so on. Then we speculate about the personality implications of those individual differences: people who use images frequently are likely to be imaginative, creative, but not realistic; people who use inner speech predominately are likely to be realistic but not as imaginative; and so on.

Chapter 15: Idiographic science

Chapters 11, 13, and 14 have treated the science of inner experience as a “nomothetic” endeavor, applying the same common characteristics (inner speech, images, etc.) across people. Almost all psychological science is nomothetic in this sense. We argue, however, that DES allows “idiographic” descriptions of people, descriptions that are objective but at the same time aimed at one single individual. We show that the future of psychological science must involve the combination of nomothetic and idiographic methods. Additionally, we discuss the importance of recognizing the difference between validity and truth and argue that psychologists and others interested in inner experience should recognize that truth, not validity, is the ultimate target.