

Pristine Experience, the Feeling of Veracity, Iteration, and the Bracketing of Presuppositions

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Upshot: Based on 40 years of practice using descriptive experience sampling, I clarify three important ways that my view of reflective inquiry differs from that of Kordeš and Demšar. I differentiate between investigations that do and do not explore pristine experience, discuss the risks of using the feeling of veracity as a guide to an investigation, and distinguish between two importantly different kinds of iteration.

Q1: Should we evaluate reflections about pristine experience?

Urban Kordeš and Ema Demšar's (hereafter K&D) write: "We see little sense in evaluating reflection in terms of its capacity to represent the ... 'pristine' original experience" (§41). I unpack that claim by contrasting a descriptive experience sampling (DES; Hurlburt 2011) investigation of pristine experience with an investigation of subjective experience by Kordeš and Florian Klauser (2016).

Adriana is a participant in a current DES investigation. She has worn the DES beeper on four prior sampling days, each followed (within 24 hours) by an "expositional" interview designed both to help her describe that day's sampled experiences and iteratively_D [the subscripts *D* and later *K* will be discussed in section Q3] to improve her skill at apprehending and describing experience on subsequent sampling days. She was lying on her bed, FaceTiming with her boyfriend at 9:12:43pm when a DES beep happened to occur; she immediately interrupted the conversation and jotted a few notes about her beeped experience. As a result of the expositional interview the following morning, her 9:12:43pm experience was characterized as follows:

Adriana is on FaceTime with her boyfriend, teasingly quizzing him about their first date. She asks, "What did I wear?" and as she asks, she imaginarily sees herself in the restaurant, as if from his point of view. She sees herself wearing her light-grey hoodie with the dream-catcher design; the hoodie is seen clearly and the surroundings of the scene (table, booth, her face) are seen dimly.

(Accepting for the moment the aptness of the description,) the inner seeing of the hoodie is an instance of Adriana's pristine experience as defined by Sarah Akhter and me (Hurlburt & Akhter 2006; Hurlburt 2011): an inner experience that naturally presents itself, a phenomenon immediately apprehended as ongoing directly before the footlights of consciousness. Adriana's seeing of the hoodie was apprehended, not inferred—the

hoodie was *seen*, not concluded to exist on the basis of some theory. Seeing the hoodie was a natural aspect of Adriana’s experience—she had *not*, for example, been specifically instructed to see an image. Adriana’s seeing was apprehended as ongoing—she did not experience herself as creating the image *as a result of* being beeped, but apprehended the hoodie-seeing as being already ongoing at the leading edge of the beep, as being “caught in flight” by the beep. That is, seeing the hoodie was part of Adriana’s pristine inner experience.

One might infer that Adriana’s teasing first-date question arose out of some subjective feeling of relationship with her boyfriend, but because such feeling-of-relationship was inferred, not directly apprehended before the footlights of consciousness at 9:12:43pm, the feeling-of-relationship was not part of Adriana’s pristine inner experience at that moment and so was excluded from the DES investigation.

For comparison, Kordeš and Klauser investigated “*Feeling of the relationship*[, which] is a deductive category [that] refers to descriptions of interlocutors ... being in the centre of attention: ‘What does he/she think of me? What is our relationship? What is expected of me in this exchange?’” (Kordeš & Klauser (2016: 375). To elucidate the feeling of relationship, they investigated a subject’s (let’s call her Barbara) subjective “feeling of the relationship...with that boy” (376), eliciting from Barbara generalizations such as “he wouldn’t think badly of me,” “he never said or did anything, that would make me think he thinks bad of me” (375-376). Barbara eventually concludes, “a feeling ... of the relationship, that ... you develop over time. And at every point you have a feeling of the relationship. In this case, with that boy” (376).

Table 1
Characteristics of two investigations of experience

	DES investigation of pristine experience	Kordeš & Klauser (2016)
Who	Adriana	Barbara
What	Innerly seeing a hoodie	Subjective feeling of the relationship
Where	In her bedroom	(Irrelevant)
When	9:12:43pm	“At every point”
Why	Investigate whatever appears before the footlights of consciousness	Investigate a category initiated by the investigator
How	Investigator helps Adriana apprehend and describe whatever directly presents itself at randomly selected moments	Investigator elicits from Barbara experiential reports relevant to the topic under investigation

The Adriana and Barbara investigations are summarized in Table 1. The investigation of Adriana’s pristine-experience sought to apprehend in high fidelity whatever experiential phenomena happen to be ongoing at randomly selected moments. By contrast, the

investigation of Barbara's experience sought to help her elicit a feeling of the relationship. Adriana's pristine experience would be expected to change from moment to moment: now innerly seeing her hoodie, now feeling an itch in her left elbow, now saying to herself silently "I need to do my homework," pristine experience potentially dramatically changing every few seconds. Barbara's feeling-of-relationship experience is presumed to be, at least relatively speaking, constant.

Now that we have differentiated two importantly different kinds of experience (pristine and subjective) and two kinds of investigations, we are in a position to consider K&D's "We see little sense in evaluating reflection in terms of its capacity to represent the ... 'pristine' original experience" (§41). The investigations that involved Adriana and Barbara are both reflective. From the standpoint of the DES investigation of Adriana's pristine experience, evaluating reflection is of central importance. Suppose that we had claimed that Adriana, while asking her boyfriend "What did I wear?" was innerly saying to herself "3 million, 2 hundred thousand" as part of mentally estimating the power required, in kWh per day, to operate Google's data center in Lenoir, North Carolina. One of those claims (hoodie-seeing or power-calculating) is doubtless better than the other. DES needs to (and, we believe, does) create a method where such claims can be evaluated. In the investigation of Adriana, therefore, K&D's claim is not correct. By contrast, the investigation of Barbara never inquired about experience that Barbara apprehended as ongoing at any moment, that is, never inquired about pristine experience. In the investigation of Barbara, therefore, K&D's claim is correct: it makes no sense to evaluate the representations of pristine experience because the investigation never inquired about pristine experience.

In short, if one has an interest in pristine experience, then it is of fundamental importance to "evaluat[e] reflection in terms of its capacity to represent the ... 'pristine' original experience." If one does not care about pristine experience, then that evaluation makes little sense.

DES practitioners are happily agnostic about the ontological status of pristine experiences such as Adriana's inner seeing. There is no warrant for certainty that Adriana's hoodie-seeing was not swiftly created in response to the beep and then referred (unwittingly) back to a time just before the beep began. I think that is unlikely, because (a) Adriana, like most DES participants, is experientially adept at identifying, when beeped, some aspects of experience as *occurring caught in flight by* and others as *occurring as a result of* the beep; (b) fMRI studies are beginning to show that the *caught in flight by* understanding is consistent with brain-activations (see Simone Kühn et al. 2014, but much more work needs to be done); and (c) nearly everyone, including those on both sides of the so-called "imagery debate" (Kosslyn 1994), believe that at least some people some of the time imaginarily and naturally see so-called mental images.

I happily accept that Adriana's hoodie-seeing was initially a construction of her own psychological processes (whatever those are), that our questioning and understanding of her description was constructive, and that all those constructions operate within some

horizon of our investigation of Adriana's experience. The same could be said of Barbara's boyfriend-relationship. The question is whether there is a meaningful difference in the degree of influence of such constructions. It seems to me that Adriana was very likely engaged in some sort of hoodie-inner-seeing at 9:12:43pm, and that hoodie-seeing was importantly less dependent on the horizon of the investigation that was Barbara's feeling-of-the-relationship-with-that-boy.

Q2: Is the feeling of veracity a guide or an impediment?

K&B write: "The feeling of veracity of what is being enacted is the most significant guide through the reflective act" (§33). My DES experience has shown that a feeling of veracity is often, probably usually, a pointer in the *wrong* direction.

Here is an exchange from a fairly typical DES interview. Julian, a DES participant, was working at his desk when he heard the door behind him open. He turned, expecting to see his mother, but no one was there. At the moment of the beep, he was trying to figure out why the door had opened. He immediately jotted notes about his experience. At the next day's expositional interview, the interview discussed the door-having-opened context and then:

Interviewer₁: And how does that [the trying to figure out why] present itself to you?

Julian₂: It's kinda like, um, [pause], I would, I would say it was, it's kind of like uh an internal dialog (nods affirmatively) [pause], where, um, like, kind of just playing it, replaying it in my head. It's kind like, uh, I guess I was kinda asking myself, it's like, "Oh! What was that sound?" That kinda thing. Um, and, uh, kind of answering it with seeing the door open, and, y'know, um, knowing just prior to that like the door is kind of loose anyway. I don't know, I think it's more, it's, it's, it's processing it. I don't know exactly how to describe how I processed it, though. Um, like I think it was, the best way is like an internal kind of dialog (affect brightens considerably), um of asking questions and not necessarily answering it, but like knowing the answer.

Suppose that Interviewer now follows Julian's brightening affect and says, "Please tell me more about this internal dialog." It is likely (based on my observations of many DES training interviews) that Julian, now perhaps guessing that Interviewer is particularly interested in internal dialog, will give a slightly elaborated description of that internal dialog accompanied by slightly more brightened affect, to which Interviewer will respond by asking for more detail, and so on, as the growing feeling of veracity iteratively_k guides the elaboration of the characteristics (words used, etc.) of the dialog.

However, Julian₂ is a labored, difficult, highly subjunctified¹ attempt at describing his experience. Julian's subjunctification is an indication from his deep language-processing systems (whatever those are) that "internal dialog" is probably *not* a

straightforward description of his pristine experience at the moment of the beep. Perhaps he has not adequately apprehended his experience; perhaps he has not figured out how to describe his experience straightforwardly; perhaps there is some other reason that Julian cannot simply declaratively describe his experience. If Interviewer were to disregard Julian's subjunctification by asking about the internal dialog, Julian would be invited to disregard his doubts/difficulties, resulting in an undeserved feeling of veracity.

The problem is that whenever one's presuppositions are confirmed, it feels good, feels truthful, feels like veracity. However, in general, people don't get a *feeling* of veracity when there simply *is* veracity: when someone points out that my computer keyboard is black, I don't get a feeling of veracity, I see the blackness of my keyboard. In my view, people often get a feeling of veracity when there is ambiguity, obscurity, or other difficulty that they are encouraged to neglect.

Therefore the DES interviewer distrusts the feeling of veracity. When a DES participant says "My experience had characteristic *X*" and seems to evidence a feeling of veracity, the DES interviewer will say something like, "Hold on a minute. Let's not just accept or elaborate *X*. What other possibilities are there? Could it be *Y*, or *Z*, or something else?" When the investigators have identified and jointly understood the possibilities, they would work to suspend them all. On some subsequent sampling day the investigation may get another sample (or several) that will allow it to favor one possibility over the other (that is the heart of iteration_D; see section Q3).

In the end, the DES participant and interviewer may indeed come to accept the veracity of *X*, but that will *not* be the result of having been guided by the feeling of veracity. That conclusion will have come as the result of *doubting* the feeling of veracity, considering and reconsidering *X*, *Y*, and *Z* (and any other alternative strands of potential understandings) in the light of new evidence (see Q3), until *Y* and *Z* become untenable and only *X* remains.

Q3: Is there an important difference between iteration_D and iteration_K?

Iteration_D (Hurlburt 2009, 2011) is an essential feature of DES. K&D also hold that iteration_K is an essential feature of their investigation. However, the two iterations are very different from each other, so we use the *D* subscript to refer to DES iteration and the *K* subscript to refer to K&D iteration.

Instead of asking Julian about his internal dialog as imagined above, the interview actually continued as follows:

Interviewer₃: So [long pause] I wanna, I, I'm a skeptical guy, uh, every, I'm not, and I don't mean that in a critical [J: Um hm], y'know, in a critical, in a critical way at all. It means I'm trying to understand any, any possibility, uh, what you're trying to tell us. [J: Um hm.] And, and so I guess I could understand it [as if you are] saying, "Well, there's a dialog, and I'm saying

to myself, 'Well, what was that?!' and then I'm giving myself an answer." That would be one possibility. And another possibility would be [that you are saying], "Well, it's not really a dialog, but it's a, I'm somehow *thinking about* it, that if I had to put it into words I'd say it was a dialog, 'cause I gotta explain to these guys what's happening, and it's more or less like a dialog, but I don't really *experience* a dialog..."

Interviewer₃ honored, by word and deed (e.g., Interviewer₃ matching Julian₂'s degree of subjunctification) both the brightening affect part and the subjunctified part of Julian₂'s expression. Interviewer₃ accepts Julian₂'s uncertainty and presents alternative understandings, saying, in effect, "I don't know what Julian₂ means; it could be that he is describing internal dialog; it could be something else entirely."

...
Julian₄: Correct. Yeah. I'm having a harder time explaining *how* I'm processing it [I: OK] Yeah. It's kind like if, if I heard the door open over there, and I turned, and there was no one at that door, like, I just kind of [pause] think of [pause] well what else could of possibly [pause] led to that, y'know, led to that event.

Interviewer₅: (tentatively) So, I'm quite sure that it is possible to think about something quite specific, actually (like, *What was that noise*) and have, and have that thinking take place not in words... [J: (emphatically) Yeah.] And I'm also quite confident that it's possible to *process* something that's not even in consciousness (like, I can see the door, and I can, I can wonder what made that, and the wondering could be entirely out of my awareness. [J: Um hm.] So, does it... So, I'm understanding you to be saying, "I'm processing in some way how this door..."

Julian₄ is still highly subjunctified, so Interviewer₅ again honors both the expressed and the subjunctified portions of Julian₄ and again presents alternative understandings, this time between outside-of-awareness and in-direct-awareness. That is, Interviewer₅ continues to inhabit the I-don't-know of this interchange.

Julian₆: Yeah. (emphatically). It's definitely in my awareness.

Interviewer₇: So, there's, so there's something *in awareness* about...

Julian₈: Yeah.

Interviewer₉: ...that could be like *What was that?* Or *What made that happen?*
Or...

Julian₁₀: Yeah. I don't think it was words.

Interviewer₁₁: Probably not words.

Julian₁₂: Yeah.

Interviewer₁₃: OK.

The result of this interchange is that Interviewer *still does not know the characteristics of Julian's experience at the moment of this beep*. Julian₂ started out saying his experience was in words; Julian₁₀ ended up denying the presence of words. Interviewer did not interpret; instead, he sketched a range of potential understandings. At the end of the interview, in his closing statement, Interviewer continued to convey his I-don't-know:

Interviewer_{last}: But it's, it's, y'know, it's a two-way street. We're, we're trying to figure out what you're saying; you're trying to figure out what we're saying. And I think we're being pretty honest about trying to, trying to get it right.

This excerpt illustrates the iterative_D nature of DES: this interview has raised questions, (dialog or not? directly experienced or not?), clarified issues, considered possibilities, but it has *not* answered—nor even really attempted to answer—those questions. Interviewer did *not* conclude that Julian₂'s word-description was preferable to not preferable to Julian₁₀'s no-word description. Interviewer's primary intention was to build skill at discriminating among important characteristics of inner experience so that *on subsequent sampling days*, Julian may be more effectively able to attend to such distinctions and thence to apprehend and describe his experience in higher fidelity. That is the heart of the DES iterative_D procedure.

K&D also emphasize the importance of iteration_K, which we are here marking with the *K* subscript to indicate that K&D's meaning is diametrically opposed to the DES iteration_D:

Enaction is an iterative_K process in which each step narrows down the field of possible next steps – while being at the same time itself shaped by the reflecting subject's implicit understanding of her experiential life and the social context of the reflective process. (§45)

The iterative_K punctuation of the subject's past experience is performed in an overt cooperation of the two co-researchers, who... jointly lay down the path towards the enaction of belief. (§49)

Iteration_K is a within-session collaborative narrowing of beliefs about past-event experiences. The K&D participant's feeling of veracity leads to more detail, which leads to heightened sense of veracity, which leads to more detail, all within the same interview, all based on the same single long-past data point.²

By contrast, iteration_D is a between-session independent deepening of skills to be used in future-event apprehensions. Iteration_K accepts that today's apprehension and interview were not adequate (e.g., as evidenced by the subjunctification at Julian₂ and

Julian₄). The desired result of today's DES iterative_D step is to help Julian to *weaken* any feeling of veracity (as if he were to think *Gee! Now that I think about it, I don't really know what my own experience was like!*) and to build his skill and interest (as if he were to think *But I do care about my own experience. It's fascinating! I'd like to get it right! I will try to be more careful/discerning when I wear the beeper next time.*). Then, the next day's sampling will provide a new data point, a starting-over that will bring a fresh perspective on Julian's experience.

K&D recognize that the heart of any investigation of experience is the "reflecting subject's active attempt to suspend or bracket assumptions and theories that she would commonly apply in her everyday understanding of the world" (§2). I agree but would go farther: both the subject and the investigator need to bracket presuppositions. Iteration_D is undertaken in the service of the bracketing of presuppositions; iteration_K, I fear, is likely to reify presuppositions rather than bracket them. Iteration_D says, at the end of the first sampling day: whatever theories or impressions you may have built from the first day's sampling or before, let's try to set those aside and next time we meet start entirely anew, with a new set of experiences to consider, on a new day, with a new background, and with perhaps an improved ability to apprehend, discriminate, and describe. Iteration_D is a progressive widening of possibilities, a putting all possibilities in the sunlight of examination until all irrelevancies have, eventually, dried up and blown away on their own, leaving one possibility remaining. By contrast, iteration_K says, I fear, throughout the only interview: whatever theories or impressions you may have built from the beginning of this day's interview or before, let's elaborate them, without any effective way of starting over or of bringing in a new perspective.

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Footnotes

1. A subjunctifier (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006) is a verbal, vocal, or behavioral hint that a person is not confidently describing inner experience. In Justin₂ there are, by my count, 34 subjunctifiers: “kinda like,” “um,” [pause], “would,” “would say,” “kind of like,” “uh,” etc.). Some may quibble about the exact count, but no matter how you slice it, 34ish subjunctifiers in a 139-word utterance is a lot.

The author

Russ Hurlburt is the originator of thought sampling, inventing (1973) the beeper that made it possible. By the early 1980s he had abandoned quantitative analysis of thought-sampling data in favor of attempting to apprehend inner experience as it naturally occurs, in the belief that phenomena should be carefully understood before they are quantified. Toward this end he created the descriptive experience sampling method (DES), authoring six books and many articles about the DES method and its results. He is also the author of a highly regarded statistics textbook. He is Professor of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.