

Mel May

Formal Description

Mel is a 30-year-old Australian video producer who lives in New York. She wore the beeper for 13 sampling days (12 excluding day 1 as training, as DES typically does) spread over 5 months, collecting 65 samples (excluding the day-1 samples). We targeted 6 samples per day, but (usually for time constraints during the interview, but sometimes for other reasons) we discussed on average 5.4 samples per day.

Background

The sampling-with-Mel project arose out of a series of email exchanges between Russ Hurlburt and Julian Bass-Krueger. Russ is the creator and 50-year practitioner of DES. Julian had become interested in DES in about 2017 and several times over the years had contacted Russ, who had given him some suggestions. Julian became a Master's student in cognitive science at the University of Vienna, completing a thesis using DES as he had learned it from Russ's books, articles, and web materials. The thesis also included an extension of DES that Julian called dDES (dynamic DES). In 2020, Julian sent some of his results to Russ, who responded critically—Russ was skeptical of Julian's results and doubted that dDES could be successful.

Russ and Julian have never met in person. In 2023, Julian contacted Russ inquiring about supervision, and Russ suggested the possibility of conducting joint interviews of a DES participant and then candidly discussing any issues that might arise. That might provide the opportunity to compare DES-as-read-about-and-implemented-by-an-outsider (Julian) to DES-as-written-about-and-practiced-by-its-creator (Russ), which might be a win-win: Julian might learn something about DES and Russ might learn something about what he should do to make his DES materials more effective.

At about the same time, Mel May, a video producer, contacted Russ saying she loved the videos in the 'Do I have inner monologue?' series and would like to produce some sort of media piece that would be much shorter than the 80 or so hours of video that are on the site.

Russ suggested to Julian that we might enlist Mel as a DES participant; and Russ suggested to Mel that she might wish to experience DES from the inside. Each thought that was a good idea, and this series of interviews was born.

Procedure

We agreed in a preliminary meeting amongst the three of us that we would do DES interviews for as long as all of us as individuals thought it was useful; that we would video all our interactions (using Zoom or Riverside); that the videos would be the private property of each of us individually (meaning that none of us would make a video public until all agreed); that all of our interchanges should be three-way (meaning that no two of us should discuss any aspect of

the project without the third being present); that it was likely that we would want to make our videoed interactions public, and if so we would make them all public (so that an outside observer can experience the entirety of our interactions); and that once the entirety is public, each of us individually may want to (and should feel free to) make some portion of the videos public in some other way.

Beyond that, there were no ground-rules for our interactions. Over the course of the sampling, we developed a procedure that can be characterized as follows:

1. We agreed on a date/time for a DES expositional interview;
2. The day before that interview, Julian reminded Mel to collect six samples between then and the interview;
3. We met by Zoom or Riverside, reconsidered whether videotaping was still okay, and then conducted a fairly standard DES expositional interview that focused on each of Mel's six samples from the just-concluded sampling day. The interviewers alternated leading off the discussion of each beep, but either interviewer was free to interrupt, ask clarificatory questions, and so on.
4. Within 24 hours of the expositional interview, Julian wrote ...; yet to be written (sent to Mel; Mel didn't look, etc.)

Results: Mel's inner experience

Nothing or non-figurized experience. By far the most salient feature of Mel's inner experience was what we came to call its *non-figurized* nature: In 43 (66%) of Mel's 65 samples, she did not single out any particular thing, did not particularize, did not make any particular thing the figure against the ground of the remaining experience, did not editorialize, did not create anything extra, did not Mel-ize her experience. Often there was nothing in her experience. Here are examples, at sample 2.4, Mel was making a cup of tea and walking to fill up the kettle. Mel was not experiencing anything as she traveled toward the sink. No doubt her eyeballs were aimed at the sink; no doubt her muscles and joints were creating a skilled navigation of the space; no doubt she had the intention to make tea; and so on; but none of that was particularly in her experience. Instead, she was as if on autopilot, making her way toward the kettle.

Sample 3.2: [Mel was applying for a New York residency card form online, reading and filling in information]. Nothing was in Mel's experience (even though she was actively reading and filling in the form).

Sample 4.3: [Mel was in a café having a conversation with a friend Milly. Milly was talking]. Mel was absorbed in the conversation. (Mel not experiencing anything else—no café sounds, no bodily sensations.)

Sample 6.3: [Mel was putting away clothes]. She was not experiencing anything (or barely anything).

Sample 7.2: [Mel is texting. The words are skillfully coming out of her thumbs, but this is happening "on autopilot" with no experienced sense of the words, content, or the action.] She has no directly apprehended experience.

Sample 8.2: [Mel was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she was carried along by the movie. [She wasn't particularizing any aspect. She certainly wasn't *singling out* any particular thing from the movie. And nothing stuck out enough for her to feel useful to describe to us.]

Sample 9.2: [Mel was writing on her computer and had decided she wasn't satisfied with a sentence. She's staring at the screen, in the process of reconsidering what to write.] She's actively-featurelessly-pondering what to write—that is she's actively considering/contemplating what to write, but no new sentence or hints thereof, no thoughts about a sentence, no specifics about the old sentence are present.

In all those samples (and many others), Mel is skillfully performing, comprehending, absorbed in, carried along by the occurrences in her environments, but she is *not* attending to, particularizing, making the figure of (against the perceptual ground), singling out any particular aspect of the environment. By way of contrast, here are the kinds of things that DES participants *other than Mel* describe in similar situations:

Counter-example 3.2: [Some other DES participant was applying for a New York residency card form online, reading and filling in information]. She feels a wave of anxiety run down her spine as she fills in the date.

Counter-example 4.3: [Some other DES participant was in a café having a conversation with a friend Milly. Milly was talking]. The participant was innerly saying "When I was in Ireland..." (holding it in mind, waiting for her turn in the conversation).

Counter-example 6.3: [Some other DES participant was putting away clothes]. She smelled the Downy fabric softener, a pleasant / sweet smell.

Counter-example 7.2: [Some other DES participant is texting.] She innerly speaks the words as she types them.

Counter-example 8.2: [Some other DES participant was watching the movie *Saltburn* on her laptop.] At this moment she is drawn to the yellow bananas and lemons that were in a box at the end of the bathtub.

Counter-example 9.2: [Some other DES participant was writing on her computer and had decided she wasn't satisfied with a sentence. She's staring at the screen,

in the process of reconsidering what to write.] The words “assessment” and “evaluation” are somehow present to her as potential replacements for the word “examination,” which seems out of place in the existing sentence.

In each of those counter-examples, the participant reacts to, narrows down, figurizes some aspect of the situation; those are very typical DES descriptions. Mel had experiences where some aspect was figural (22 or 34% of Mel’s 65 total samples); of those, 17.5 were sensory awareness (see the Sensory Awareness section below), 4 involved words present, 4 involved feelings, and 3 involved unsymbolized thinking (those exception do not add to 22 because an experience might involve more than one particularized aspect). Those samples made it evident that Mel was capable of describing focused aspects when they were present, but by far the majority of her experiences had no such particularization.

Many people think having no inner experience is impossible. See the appendix below for a discussion of this issue.

Sensory awareness. Sensory awareness, as DES defines the experience, is “the individual’s being immersed in the experience of a particular sensory aspect of his or her external or internal environment without particular regard for the instrumental aim or perceptually complete objectness” (Hurlburt et al., 2009, p. 232). Mel experienced sensory awareness in about 17.5 (27%) of her 65 samples (counting as .5 those instances where we were not confident). Here are some examples:

Sample 6.5 [Mel was standing, typing a message on her phone.] She felt a sore, throbbing, tingling sensation in her glute muscle region. It was not particularly strong. The typing and its content was at most a small part of her experience (it may have been that the words were merely coming out of her fingers).

Sample 7.3 [Mel is lying on her bed]. She feels heavy (mostly in her head, torso, and legs). The overall impression is that her whole body is being pushed (pulled?) down. She is also hearing her brother and mom talking down the hall. This is less present than the heaviness.

Sample 9.5 [Mel has just finished writing the description for the previous sample. She's sitting cross-legged]. She feels a tingling sensation in her feet. (The sensation may extend a bit past them, as if the borders of her feet aren't clear; we were not confident. The tingling is not painful or pleasurable; there's an impression of lightness and weightlessness to it.)

Sample 12.3 [Mel was rummaging through a package of easter eggs in the cupboard.] She was caught by the crinkly crunchy sound of the plastic wrap.

Most of Mel’s sensory awareness (15.5 or 89% of 17.5 sensory awarenesses) were of bodily sensations (see samples 6.5, 7.4, 9.5), and many of those (6.5 or 42% of 15.5 bodily sensory awarenesses) involved the bodily sensation of weight or pressure (see sample 7.3 and

sample 12.1, below). Two of Mel's sensory awareness were not bodily—one was visual and one was auditory (see sample 12.3).

Other present characteristics. Mel had 4 samples where words were directly apprehended in her experience, but were not experienced as being spoken, heard, seen, or otherwise articulated, whether inner or outer. DES calls such experiences *words present*. For example:

Sample 8.5 [Mel was watching *Saltburn* on her computer, and it was buffering] and was thinking: "For God's sake what's going on with this Wi-Fi?! " (This exact sentence was present. She wasn't audibly hearing it, or speaking it, or seeing it, but the words of that sentence, not just the concept, were present.) She experienced that sentence both all at once and also with the words unfolding across the sentence. Frustration may have been a part of this.

She was also feeling her heart race, which may have come from excitement as the movie was reaching a climax and may have come from being interrupted.

Somehow that exact sentence was experienced, in words, even though Mel could not say how those words were present.

DES (as do many others) defines *feeling* as the direct apprehension of emotion. DES (as do many others) accepts that emotional processes can occur within the body without being directly apprehended—DES does not count such processes as being feelings, because DES is concerned only with phenomena that are directly apprehended. Mel had 4 samples that involved feelings. Sometimes Mel's feelings were experienced bodily (as in sample 8.5 above); sometimes feeling had no bodily aspect. For example:

Sample 12.1 [Mel was reading a book where a character was drinking away her depression/loneliness]. Mel empathetically felt lonely / depressed (felt clearly but not bodily). This was the main thing present to her.

Mel also felt relaxed—felt her heavy / soft /malleable body pressing into the ground. This wasn't in any specific part of her body, more overall.

Here, the lonely / depressed feeling did not involve any bodily aspect. The relaxed heaviness is a sensory awareness (see above). (In DES, feeling is commonly with and also commonly without bodily aspects.)

DES defines *unsymbolized thinking* as "an explicit, differentiated thought that does not include the experience of words, images, or any other symbols" (Hurlburt & Akhter, 2008, p. 1364). Mel had 2 samples that involved unsymbolized thinking. For example:

Sample 3.1 [Mel was looking at movie times on her phone and specifically for the movie *Killers of the Flower Moon*.] She was wondering: should I see that movie this afternoon. The main emphasis was whether she should see it this

afternoon as opposed to on a different day. The content of the thought was clear, but there were no words, images, or feelings accompanying this thought. [Visually looking at the phone was not in her experience.]

The wondering in this example is unsymbolized thinking. Note the specificity of this thinking—this afternoon vs. a different day. This thought, like all unsymbolized thinking, is *not* merely a gist—it is as specific as if it had been expressed in words.

There were two instances where Mel experienced herself as thinking, but the content might not have been specific enough to qualify as unsymbolized thinking. We counted those as .5.

Characteristics not present. In her 65 samples across 12 days, Mel had zero samples that included inner speech (which DES calls inner speaking) and zero samples that included visual images (which DES calls inner seeing).

It is currently the fashion in psychology to identify experiential *deficits*: lack of inner speech is called anendophasia and lack of visual images is called aphantasia. We think it is a mistake to understand that such deficits are problematic. You correctly judge the quality of a mirror when you see your face accurately reflected—that is, when you don’t see the mirror’s characteristics at all. I think it quite likely that Mel quite fully hears (for example) Milly’s 4.3 conversation because she is *not distracted by* her own inner speech or other characteristics. We are not here arguing that Mel is at a higher level of consciousness than those who innerly speak or innerly see—it is not given to us to make such judgments. We are, however, arguing *against* the notion that Mel’s “deficits” are necessarily problematic.

Appendix

We have said that Mel frequently has no inner experience. Many will wonder whether that is even possible. We provide three comments.

First, by “nothing in experience” we actually mean “little or nothing,” because, as Russ has written (Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2011), it is impossible for DES (and any other introspective method other than, perhaps, nirvana) to distinguish between absolutely nothing in experience and very little if anything in experience. This is a practical, not a theoretical, claim. In the theoretical realm, if you give a destitute man a penny, you move him from the category of *having no money* to the category of *having some money*. In the practical realm, giving him a penny doesn’t change his situation at all. So when a DES description say there was nothing in experience, that is *not* intended to rule out the penny’s-worth possibility—perhaps there is something negligible or inchoate in experience.

Second, we can follow a logic of “subtraction” as described by Hurlburt (2011):

Here is a “subtraction” way of approach that may make the concept of no inner experience seem less impossible. Let’s begin with our finding (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008) that there are five main forms of inner experience [later called the 5FP]: inner speech, inner seeing (AKA having images), unsymbolized thinking, sensory awareness, and feelings. There may be other less-frequent forms, and others may have somewhat different definitions of our forms—neither affects the present discussion.

Now ask yourself: does it seem possible for a person to have only four of those—say, to have all the kinds of experience *except* inner speech? Most people would say Yes—not everyone has to talk to himself. So we conclude that inner speech is not an essential feature of experience.

Then might a person have only *three* of those—say, all *except* inner speech and inner seeing? Yes. And we can do the same for all the other forms of experience, one at a time subtracting a form of inner experience, and eventually conclude that no form of experience is essential.

Then we can ask, If no form of experience is essential, is it possible to have none of those forms of experience? Answering Yes still requires a conceptual leap here, but perhaps not as long as before. (Hurlburt, 2011, pp. 149-150)

From the practical perspective of DES interviewing, we go through this process of subtraction, carefully ruling out not only the 5FP types of experience but also any other directly apprehended features of experience. Here, for example, is the opening salvo from Mel’s sample 12.2:

20:43 Mel: Cool. Number 2. Um, this went off at 2:30 PM and I have written “A real state of nothingness. Not aware of anything to do with my physical body nor, um, no thoughts, no particular feelings. I was laying on the ground and that’s about it. My eyes were open looking up at the ceiling, but I wasn’t taking anything in.” Uh, that doesn’t make sense, but I’ve written, “I wasn’t taking anything in my sight. I could also use the word ‘tranquil’ to describe this sort of state of nothingness.”

Note that Mel, by sampling day 12, is a skilled apprehender of experience, and she goes through the subtraction process on her own: not body, not thought, not feeling, not seeing. She ends her opening salvo by say she was “tranquil.” Julian follows up on that:

22:02 JBK: ...Uh, I’m wondering, you did mention kind of tranquility, but is that just, just as in the absence of something rather than a, like a feeling that’s present?

22:18 Mel: Yeah, I think that that’s probably a fair assessment. Yeah. The absence of something as opposed to an overwhelming sense of tranquility. Yeah.

In that part of the interchange, they also subtracted out the feeling of tranquility. When all has been subtracted, what is left is nothing in Mel’s experience at that moment.

Hurlburt, R. T. (2011). *Investigating pristine inner experience: Moments of truth*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel (2011). Little or no experience outside of attention? *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 18(1), 234–252.