

Tristan

Formal Description

Tristan sought out participation in DES because he has constant pain in his head and elsewhere in his body. Spoiler alert: Pain was *not* present in most of Tristan's samples, leading us to speculate about the nature of Tristan's pain.

Tristan was introduced to DES by his brother Julian Bass-Krueger, who is the co-interviewer in Parts X and XI of this series of videos. Julian, who had learned about DES from reading Russ's writings, thought that participating in DES might help Tristan's pain, and so had, several years earlier, conducted his own version of DES sampling with Tristan as a participant. Part X had revealed that that Julian's version of DES was substantially different from the DES that Russ recommended, and Julian suggested in an email to Russ that Julian and Russ have another go at conducting DES with Tristan.

Here is Russ's reply:

Hi Julian--

RE "I'd like to start DES with my brother. My primary motivation there is that I think it could help him."

I think, as do most if not all ethics codes, that dual or multiple relationships are often problematic. Therefore I think it is risky for a person to be involved in the treatment of a family member—that's why psychotherapists decline to treat their family members—so your motivation to help suggests that you should not be involved in DES with your brother.

I think it is a dilemma to promote DES as a helping tool. It is indeed the case that many people who participate in DES find it helpful and/or therapeutic, but that may be a byproduct of the DES pure intention to be forthright about inner experience. By contrast, when the intention is to help someone, then one loses (or at least may lose) that pure intention to be forthright.

So I have to decline to be a part of the sampling that you suggest.

However, if you would like to suggest to your brother that he get in contact with me, I would be happy to talk with him. You should feel free to talk to your brother about whatever you wish, including characterizing me and DES in whatever way you like. But then if he decides to contact me, that should be between him and me, and if I/he thinks that we have the dual relationship issues under control, then he and I might decide to engage in DES. But that has to be between him and me.

--Russ

Tristan did contact Russ a few months later. He said he had been participating in orthodox psychoanalysis for several years and believed DES might provide a different view. He said he understood that DES was not a treatment and appreciated Russ's position on that front.

In sum, we agreed that we would undertake DES and that his brother would not be a part of it.

Results

Tristan participated in 14 days of descriptive experience sampling (DES). Excluding the first day's samples, as is usual in DES, we discussed 42 samples, 3.23 samples per day. This is fewer samples per day than is usual in DES, which nominally considers 6 samples per day. Tristan usually came to the interview with only 3 or 4 samples; rarely if ever did he come to the interview with the suggested 6 samples.

Experience was nearly always complex

All or nearly all of Tristan's samples were complex, or had multiple strands of experience, or were unfocused in some way. Here is arguably the *least* complex of Tristan's samples:

Sample 14.1 - [Tristan has just successfully plunged his toilet.] At the moment of the beep, Tristan was somehow attending to what he was seeing (the water swirling down the drain, perhaps tinged with the notion of having been successful) and also possibly involved hearing the water going down the drain. At the same time, he was somehow thinking (without words) about how to clean the plunger, possibly about flushing the toilet again to use the new water to clean it (but that was more inchoate than explicit).

Even this sample is relatively complex (he is seeing, and maybe hearing, and maybe feeling satisfaction all while somehow thinking, perhaps thinking in two ways).

Here are samples at a *typical-for-Tristan* level of complexity:

Sample 4.1 - [Tristan was watching a movie and one of the characters said "what do you mean, wrong?"] At the moment of the beep, Tristan innerly heard "what do you mean wrong?" That is, Tristan was particularizing "what do you mean, wrong?" and continuing to hear it moments after the character had said it. At the same time, Tristan felt anxiety, a mental feeling apparently related to an idea for a paper he was planning to write for a class. At the same time, Tristan both externally saw the movie and innerly saw a classroom where he was presenting the results of the paper he was planning. (Tristan understood himself to be innerly seeing a familiar classroom at the moment of the beep, but he was not sure about how much of the classroom he saw, or whether he innerly saw himself or

simply knew that this was him speaking.) [He was unable to describe more specific details about what he saw.]

Sample 6.3 - [Tristan was reading with comprehension.] At the moment of the beep, Tristan (33%) was reading a sentence and was interrupted by the beep while reading the words “shows how.” (The words “shows how” were present in Tristan’s experience, but did not have a spoken or heard quality to them.) (This was an upper-panel experience (see Figure 2 below): a smooth-taking-in until interrupted by the beep at “shows how.”) At the same time, Tristan (33%) felt anxiety, experienced cognitively (how much I have to read, experienced without words or images) and as a feeling (diffusely throughout the body [perhaps the same diffuse bodily sensation present in beep 6.2, but RTH has the same skepticism about it]). At the same time, Tristan (33%) was flipping the pages back and forth, experienced as a diffusely cognitive I’ve got a lot to read; I’m flipping back and forth; I should read this; whatever. [As a fact of the universe, Tristan has his fingers between two sections of the book he was reading and was still holding on to the pages but the pages were not moving at the moment of the beep.]

Here are samples that are at the *complex* end of the spectrum:

Sample 9.1 – At the moment of the beep, Tristan (40%) had an array of anxious separable thoughts without words or images. That is, if these thoughts were put into words, they would be something like *I don’t have anything interesting to share, how would I describe listening to the podcast if the beep went off, and what if it is embarrassing because I have to poop* (that is, all the thoughts were related to some problems with the DES procedure). These thoughts occurred in a way that seemed both successive and simultaneous, though it was not possible for Tristan to be specific in what order these thoughts were present in Tristan’s experience at the moment of the beep. Figure 1 schematizes that one thought starts, lasts for a while and then slowly wanes; during that time another thought starts and relatively soon stops; but during that time another thought starts slowly and lasts a while; and so on. The beep comes somewhere in there.

At the same time, Tristan (30%) was slightly attending to an ongoing podcast but simultaneously



Figure 1 Multiple asynchronous experiences

noticing that he was not fully attending to that podcast (this second part was therefore a meta-awareness experience).

At the same time, Tristan (30%) felt a bodily pain inside his stomach.

Sample 10.1 – [Tristan was swiping through Tinder; he was about to swipe on the pic of a woman.] At the moment of the beep, had four separable experiences. None of them was a clearly focused experiential event. First (perhaps 60%), Tristan was somehow analytically and emotionally evaluating the woman's picture, cognizing (without words or images) and affectively recognizing that she was attractive; and that she was young. Part of this first experience was the about-to-swipe aspect. (Was this primarily a cognitive or an affective experience—hard to say. Was the swiping part of the experience? Hard to say. Was the attractiveness and the youngness two separable strands or one? It seemed that they were separable—it was *not* merely that the face was youthfully attractive, but that the youngness was somehow being considered on its own. But does that mean that the youngness was primarily cognitive? Hard to say. In short, this first experience was all on the same topic, but there was no particular figural aspect.)

Second (perhaps 20%), and at the same time, Tristan felt a diffuse mental emotional and analytical anxiety that the person in the photo would not like him back, an experience that might have included that men typically like him back, but women don't. (Does this seem separate from the first experience, even though it seems that the anxiety is about the process that was underway? Mostly it seems separate, but not entirely. It did seem that the anxiety was present before this moment, and the Tinder swiping may have somewhat focused that already ongoing anxiety. Is the anxiety mostly a feeling or a cognitive/analytical experience? Hard to say.

Third (perhaps 10%), and at the same time, [Tristan was mostly not paying attention to a Podcast that was playing]. At the moment of the beep Tristan latched on to the podcaster's words "a year and a half earlier." (Those were the currently-being-said words, but it seemed that the latching-onto had happened before the beep occurred—that is, the latching onto was ongoing at the moment of the beep and was *not* brought into experience by the beep. The words did not have much or any semantic meaning.

Fourth (perhaps 5%), and at the same time, he innerly saw a man he had previously Tinder-matched with. The seeing was not especially clear though Tristan could see the man's blonde hair and the dog the man was holding.

Anxiety

Roughly three quarters of Tristan's samples involved anxiety. In three quarters of those, the anxiety was felt, and in one quarter, the anxiety was an unclear combination of emotion and cognition.

When anxiety was felt, it was usually experienced as involving a diffuse bodily aspect—it was apprehended as being bodily but it was not possible to say what portion of the body was involved.

Sample 4.1 (the “what do you mean wrong?” sample described above) is the relatively rare (for Tristan; mental feelings are common across people) experience of anxiety that we call “mental,” meaning that there was no apprehension of bodily feeling. In sample 6.3 (the “shows how” sample described above), the anxiety was experienced both as felt and as some sort of cognitive/affective experience. In the attractive woman sample 10.1, the anxiety was both mental and cognitive/affective.

Tristan's anxiety was often free floating, but that anxiety may become somewhat focused by an event that subsequently occurs. That is, it seemed that there might always or almost always be a background level of anxiety that becomes more intense and focused on and by an event.

Words “latched onto”

In about a quarter of all Tristan's samples, and in nearly all samples where Tristan was reading, listening to a podcast, or in a conversation where someone else was speaking, Tristan “latched onto” some word or words that were being read or heard. DES participants often (while reading, for example) report that the beep occurred at a particular word or words in the sentence that was being read. That is *not* what Tristan meant by “latched onto.” This can be schematized in Figure 2, where what is being read is schematized in black and the reader's experience is schematized in purple.

The upper panel schematizes most DES participants' experience of reading—experience (shown in purple) is something like riding along what is being read until the beep occurs, at which time the person “freezes” what he is experiencing, which was the meaningful words “Nam vulputate.”

The lower panel schematizes, by contrast, Tristan's naturally (“pristinely”) occurring reading. As he reads, he *latches onto* a word or phrase (“ipsum dolor”) and then holds that in mind while he continues reading. Soon he latches onto another word or phrase (“consectetur”) which he holds in mind as he continues to read; and then latches onto another phrase (“tincidunt”), and so on: that his reading is naturally experienced as a series of *latching-ontos* while his reading is ongoing. Here, the beep happens to occur at the latched onto “Nam vulputate.”

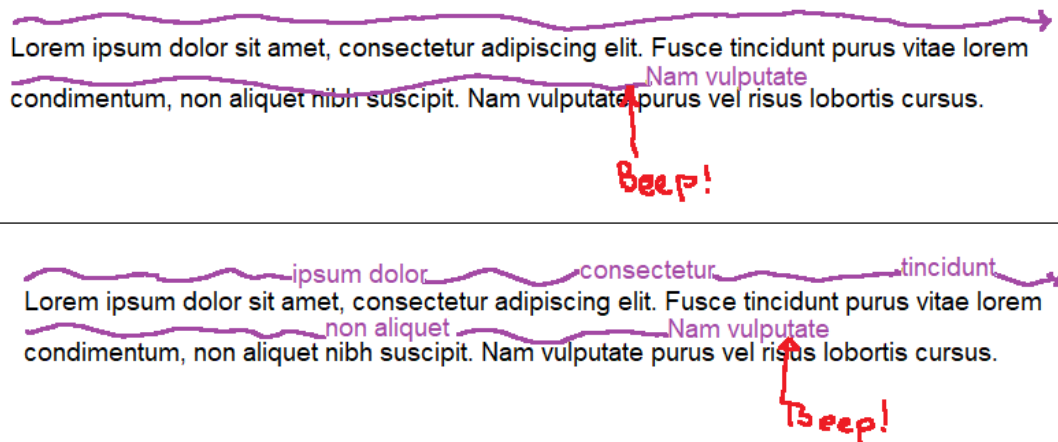


Figure 2. Upper panel = usual inner experience while reading. Lower panel = Tristan's "latched onto" experience

The two panels intend to schematize two very different experiences: in the upper (most people) panel, reading is experienced as a naturally receptive smooth influx of meaning; in the lower (Tristan's) panel, reading is experienced as an actively generated saltatory series of arbitrarily created word blocks. Each of the *latching ontos* is experienced as somehow holding in mind that particular word or phrase, as a word (or phrase), without innerly speaking it. Here is an example:

Sample 5.1 - At the moment of the beep, Tristan (60%) latched onto the words "significant event" and was somehow innerly articulating these words (they seemed to have inner speaking characteristics: he experienced himself as the producer; they unfolded over time, and so on, but they didn't seem to have a voice; it was definitely **not** a hearing phenomenon). Tristan was also (perhaps) reading with comprehension the phrase "our most significant event" [though during the expositional interview was unsure if this was directly apprehended at the moment of the beep.]

At the same time, Tristan (40%) felt anxiety and (perhaps) a bodily pain in his stomach. (This emotional anxiety and stomach pain were somehow linked to each other, though they were mostly two separate phenomena. We spent perhaps a half hour trying to disentangle this. There was a directly apprehended anxiety; there was a directly apprehended stomachache; the stomachache seemed both a sensory experience and a part of the anxiety.) [We acknowledged that we were not (yet) very good at apprehending or describing this kind of experience.]

Some, but not all, of Tristan's latched-onto words had a speech-y quality:

Sample 11.1 - [Tristan read online something about the movie *After the Hunt*. "After the Hunt" were the last words he had read.] At the moment of the beep,

Tristan latched onto “After the Hunt”; this latched “After the hunt” had a slight innerly speech-y quality, though he did not (innerly or outerly) speak (or hear) those words.

Second, Tristan had the physical sensation of shaking himself after peeing. This is a physical sensation, perhaps including hand, penis, and wetness, but he could not be confident about which or all aspects were experienced

Third, Tristan had a vague visual cognizing about the Megan robot from the movie *Megan*. [We did not (or could not) adequately discriminate what of this experience was innerly seen (even if inchoately) or was somehow visualized without being seen.]

Sample 11.2 demonstrates that latching onto was *not* merely a characteristic of the most-recently-encountered words—he could latch onto words from mid-sentence while the sentence continued.

Sample 11.2 - [Tristan was listening to a podcast and cleaning his countertop.] At the moment of the beep, Tristan latched on to “spine-tinging moment” (from the podcast) with perhaps some heard-y quality. (The words “spine-tinging moment” were *not* the most recently heard words, but in some perhaps-heard way continued in his experience as he heard the ongoing podcast.)

Second, Tristan saw a piece of a carrot (on his countertop) and felt a mental satisfaction (from the act of cleaning). Tristan’s seeing involved a latching onto the carrot with a bodily directedness.

Third, Tristan had a diffuse bodily anxiety and anxiously thought about watching and writing about the documentary (that was being discussed in the podcast). This thinking was a cognitive/analytical process without words or images.

Visual imagery

Occasionally, Tristan’s samples included visual imagery. For example:

Sample 3.3 – [Tristan was driving while Emily was telling him about a news article pertaining to a gas leak that killed a bunch of furies.] At the moment of the beep, Tristan (60%) innerly saw several (more than 2, but less than 20) dead furies lying on the ground. Tristan also saw a pipe, though the location of the pipe was not seen (that is, he saw but didn’t see the pipe). At the same time, Tristan (40%) saw a stop light and (perhaps) understood himself as both cognitively registering the need to stop and feeling himself putting on the brakes. [Tristan was unsure of braking was an automatic response to having seen the stoplight or if the braking was present directly in the footlights of his consciousness. Though, if it was experienced, it was much less than prominent than seeing the stoplight.] At the same time, Tristan was hearing with comprehension Emily talking. [Unlike sample 3.2, this hearing did not involve latching on to particular words.]

Note that this inner seeing had some inchoate detail—he saw but didn’t see the pipe. Note also that there was no latching in this experience, indicating that latching onto was not a necessary part of his word experience.

Pain

Tristan came to sampling because of constant pain. However, there were only two samples where pain was a relatively straightforward aspect of his experience, but in those samples, the portion of his experience involved with the pain was small. One was sample 9.1 (*I don’t have anything interesting to share*) described above, where pain was about 30% portion of his experience. The other is sample 6.1, where pain was about 20% of his experience:

Sample 6.1 - [Tristan was looking at a lamp on Amazon.] At the moment of the beep, Tristan (60%) thought that the design and gold color (of the lamp) was good, a cognitive/analytical process without words or images, (and was not sensory awareness or feeling).

At the same time, Tristan (20%) was wondering how much the lamp cost, a cognitive process without words or images. (The two cognitive processes were, experientially, the same, but were apprehended as separate cognitive processes.)

At the same time, Tristan (20%) felt an internal bodily pain in his stomach and an internal and external *I have to poop* bodily sensation in his anus/colon region below the stomach—two separate sensory experiences.

There were three samples where pain could be said to be part of the bodily aspect of his anxiety. One of these was described above—sample 5.1 (where he was latched onto the words “significant event”). Here are the other two examples:

Sample 4.3 - At the moment of the beep Tristan innerly saw a female crack being licked. [This is apparently the same seeing as the inner seeing from sample 4.2.]

At the same time, Tristan innerly saw Emily’s genitalia, particularly the butt hole) in color and some (but not complete) detail.

At the same time, Tristan felt anxiety that seemed to be linked to whether he should talk about the sample 4.2 experience in tomorrow’s (that is, today’s) sampling meeting. The anxiety included feeling bodily ache/pain deep in his mid-section. (It is possible that the stomachache was a separable sensory pain and as well as being a part of the anxiety; that was the focus of some iterative exploration.)

Sample 5.2 - [Tristan was reading something that included the words “won’t be.”] At the moment of the beep, Tristan (40%) latched onto an innerly articulated “won’t be” (with apparently the same speaking quality as in sample 5.1).

At the same time, Tristan anxiously thought about the logistics of booking a hotel. This thought was present without words or images. (Tristan described his anxiety and thought about the hotel as separate but linked experiences that he

could not disentangle, with the anxiety and the thinking about the hotel each occupying 25% (although that description may make the anxiety and the thinking too discretely separate) of this experience at the moment of the beep.)

At the same time, Tristan (10%) felt a pain in his chest/head that he understands to be part of the anxiety (the same link as he described in sample 5.1). [As a fact of the universe, Tristan understood himself to have pain throughout his body, but at the moment of the beep, he directly apprehended only the pain in his chest/head.

In summary, there was no experienced pain in most of Tristan's samples, and there were no samples where pain was more than 30% of Tristan's experience. This should not be taken as implying that Tristan was mistaken about his pain. It does suggest that at most of the samples, Tristan was not directly apprehending pain, but when he retrospects, he retrospects himself as always apprehending pain. And those are different kinds of things.

We discussed this discrepancy with Tristan, where he said that his pain was similar to his vision. In most of his DES samples, Tristan's eyes were open and were aimed at something in the natural environment, but he did not experience himself as seeing that object. (That is extremely frequent across most DES participants, where seeing is a skillful visual processing of the world that happens most of the time but is not directly apprehended. For example, participants beeped while driving often have no directly apprehended experience of the road or cars around them, even though they are skillfully navigating through them.) Tristan understands his pain to be like that: ongoing, skillfully processed, but not directly apprehended.

Neither he nor we understand what it means for pain to be skillfully apprehended but not felt as part of directly apprehended experience. There is one very important difference between Tristan's pain skill and skills such as driving: in driving, the features that are skillfully processed are external objects, whereas the pain that Tristan skillfully processes is created by Tristan himself at the time of the processing. That is, RTH suspects, a huge difference, because the pain and the processing interact with each other, feedback to each other, whereas the seeing and the car ahead have no such interaction and feedback. RTH thinks that this feedback is, or at least may be, an essential component of anxiety and anxiety-related pain. This is, we think, an arena for substantial psychological investigation. It is likely that such phenomena can be discovered only through an investigative technique such as DES.

Discussion

In some previous writings about anxiety (e.g., "When [anxious individual] Jean listened to others who were speaking, her listening was experienced to be an active, conscious, purposeful, effortful focusing of attention"; Hurlburt, 1993, p. 186) I have noted a phenomenon I have called the *doing of understanding* in individuals with anxiety. Most non-anxious adults, when reading or hearing others speak, more-or-less automatically understand the semantic intention of what they read or hear—that is, the meaning of the incoming words is immediately, effortlessly understood. People absorb that meaning like a sponge absorbs water—when the water comes, the sponge takes it in. By contrast, at least some anxious individuals with whom I have sampled

somehow have to intentionally grasp the meaning—to go out and meet a word or words and seemingly intentionally extracting or securing the meaning.

Tristan's *latching onto* phenomenon seems to be an instance of this kind of *doing of understanding* in an individual with anxiety. Tristan, like the other anxious individuals, did not know that he latched onto heard or read words prior to his participation in this study. Prior to sampling, he knew that sometimes individual words were prominent in his experience, and that sometimes those words were emphasized; he understood this as being part of inner speech as it is colloquially talked about. He would not previously have described this as the latching onto as described here.

As far as I know, this observation about anxious individuals has not been noticed outside of DES studies. I suspect that it is the kind of phenomenon that is readily apparent only when a method is employed that adequately explores pristine inner experience.

Tristan's multiple and not clearly focused inner experience is an experiential characteristic of many individuals with whom I have samples who have a variety of psychiatric diagnoses. Without making a claim of cause or effect, it seems that the ability to focus on one or a small number of aspects of the ongoing welter of experiences while experientially ignoring other ongoing aspects is a valuable skill. Perls (Perls et al., 1951) notes that the transition from one gestalt figure to another requires the destruction of the first figure, and being comfortable with such transitions is an essential aspect of psychological skill or health. Tristan's complex, multiple, unfocused experience provides, I think, a glimpse into the kind of experiences Perls saw as interfering with psychological health; the kinds of exercises Perls was known for would seem to be designed to simplify these kinds of experience.

Perls, F.S., Hefferline, R.E. and Goodman, P. (1951) *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and growth in the human personality*. New York: Dell.