



Investigating pristine inner experience: Implications for experience sampling and questionnaires



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ABSTRACT

We argue that inquiring about directly apprehended (“pristine”) inner experience requires four overlapping methodological characteristics: effectively limiting investigation to specific, clearly identified moments; effectively limiting investigation to pristine experience; bracketing presuppositions; and iteratively acquiring skills. We compare and contrast Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES), other (non-DES) experience sampling methods, and questionnaires and conclude that whereas non-DES sampling methods and questionnaires appear to inquire about pristine inner experience, they fall short on all four methodological counts and therefore might be better understood as investigating an ill-defined mixture of presuppositions, judgments about experience, and pristine experience itself. Typical experience sampling studies and questionnaires can be valid and useful, but their validity and utility does not (or at least does not necessarily) arise from their phenomenological fidelity.

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1. Introduction

Pristine inner experiences (Hurlburt, 2011) are salient phenomena (including seeings, hearings, inner speakings, tickles, sensations, feelings, etc.) that are directly apprehended by people in their everyday environments. Hurlburt, Heavey, and Kelsey (2013; hereinafter called the “inner speaking paper”) described inner speaking in this journal; other aspects of inner experience have been described elsewhere (Heavey, Hurlburt, & Lefforge, 2012; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2008; Hurlburt, Heavey, & Bensaheb, 2009).

One method that seeks to investigate pristine inner experiences is Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES). DES was described in the inner speaking paper and much more completely in Hurlburt (2011) and Hurlburt and Heavey (2006). The inner speaking paper presented some results of DES studies. However, responses to the inner speaking paper in this journal (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2014; Krueger, Bernini, & Wilkinson, 2014) suggest that the phenomena of pristine inner experience have also been effectively investigated using techniques other than DES, including typical (non-DES) sampling methods such as the experience sampling method (ESM, Larson & Csikszentmihalyi, 1983) and questionnaires. We think such views reflect a widespread lack of appreciation of the requirements (Hurlburt, 2011, called them “constraints”) that a study of the phenomena of pristine experience requires.

The present paper shows that although typical sampling methods and questionnaires may *appear* to investigate the phenomena of pristine inner experience, that appearance is largely illusory. Such studies should be thought of not as

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investigations of pristine experience, but rather as investigations of some ill-defined mixture of presuppositions or judgments about experience and pristine experience itself. We suggest that that mixture is probably more heavily influenced, perhaps much more heavily influenced, by presuppositions and judgments than by pristine experience itself.

1.1. Pristine inner experience

Although we have described pristine inner experience in the inner speaking paper and elsewhere (particularly Hurlburt, 2011), comments are often made (e.g., Krueger et al., 2014) that betray serious misunderstandings of pristine inner experience (and of DES, a method aimed at investigating it). Thus it seems necessary to amplify our description of the concept of pristine experience.

As is well known, the term “experience” is used in disparate ways (Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007), sometimes very broad and imprecise (as in “my college experience,” which characterizes years of a polyglot of educational, social, financial, partisan, sexual, competitive, enlightening, and maturational interactions, all retrospectively glossed), sometimes narrow and specific (as in “I experienced a wave of panic when the thief suddenly appeared,” which characterizes a few seconds of a specific occurrence), sometimes non-human (as in “The offspring of marmoset mothers who had previous experience rearing younger siblings were healthier than those without previous experience”). All such uses are legitimate and useful in their own ranges of convenience, but their disparity illustrates the risks of presuming what is meant by “experience.”

Hurlburt and his colleagues have sought to investigate one particular class of phenomena that they refer to as *pristine inner experience* (Hurlburt, 2011; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt et al., 2013). Here is Hurlburt’s description:

By *inner experience* I mean directly apprehended ongoing experience, that which directly presents itself “before the footlights of consciousness” (as William James would say) at some particular moment. A thought, a feeling, a tickle, a seeing, a hearing, and so on count as experience by this definition. Seeing a baseball player in your imagination is an experience; seeing the orange and gold of a real sunset is an experience. Elsewhere (Hurlburt, 2009; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) I have explained why I refer to this as *inner experience* when it includes things like seeings, hearings, smellings of the outside world. ... Here suffice it to say that inner experience means directly experienced, apprehended directly before the footlights of consciousness. Sometimes, when there is little room for ambiguity, I will refer to inner experience as simply ‘experience’. By *pristine* I mean naturally occurring in natural, everyday environments, *not* altered or colored or shaped by the specific intention to apprehend it.

[2011a, p. 2]

Hurlburt and his colleagues have provided additional discussion of the phenomena of pristine experience. As an example, consider this from the inner speaking paper:

Ellen was watching the TV show *Cops*. The cops had wrestled a guy to the ground and the sirens were continuously going off. At the moment of the beep Ellen was hearing the profoundly annoying/unpleasant sirens and innerly yelling, “Turn those sirens OFF!!” yelled in her own voice with an extremely annoyed/frustrated tone. Ellen was simultaneously paying attention to the TV show, especially the blue and red flashes at the left.

[Hurlburt et al. (2013, p. 1477)]

Ellen’s annoyed/frustrated, own-voice inner yelling, “Turn those sirens OFF!!” is intended as a description of pristine inner experience. She directly apprehended herself to be innerly yelling, not merely speaking loudly; she was saying the exact words “Turn those sirens OFF!!”, not some similar locution such as “Turn those sirens DOWN!!” or “That is too LOUD!!” Ellen expressed great confidence that this yelling was directly present in her (inner) experience at the moment of the beep; the interviewers, whose job is to be skeptical of such claims, found her description to be unshakeable, coherent, and otherwise consistent with the claim that she was innerly yelling those words. At the same time, Ellen was particularly attending especially to the blue and red flashes at the left of the TV screen. That phenomenon (which DES calls sensory awareness; Hurlburt, 2011; Hurlburt et al., 2009) is also part of her pristine inner experience at that moment. She was “drawn to” or “immersed in” the redness and blueness of the flashes.

In short, pristine inner experience refers to directly apprehended phenomena as they immediately present themselves at particular times.

Ellen’s experience can be said to include or be shaped by or otherwise influenced by a nearly infinite number of other aspects—some close, some distant—that Hurlburt (2011; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006; Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt & Schwitzgebel, 2007) has called the “welter” of potential or actual experience. For example, Ellen’s welter at the time of yelling “Turn those sirens OFF!!” included: the police car was at the left side of the screen; the wrestling was vigorous and the police outnumbered the man three to one; Ellen likes the TV show *Cops* and watches it frequently; Ellen is sitting on the couch with her feet on an ottoman; Ellen’s boyfriend is sitting next to her on the couch; there is more pressure on the calf of her left leg than there is on her right leg; Ellen and her boyfriend had had a fight about money last night, and Ellen in some way knows that he is watching *Cops* with her not because he likes the show but as a way of making up; the *Cops* theme is “Bad Boys” performed by Inner Circle and Ellen knows that as a fact; Ellen really should be doing her physics homework and watching *Cops* is a way of procrastinating homework; it had been an hour and 17 min since she had finished dinner; she was in a Denny’s restaurant on September 11, 2001 when she first heard the news of the Twin Towers tragedy; and so on.

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