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978-1-107-00994-3 - Investigating Pristine Inner Experience: Moments of Truth

Russell T. Hurlburt

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#### INVESTIGATING PRISTINE INNER EXPERIENCE

You live your entire waking life immersed in your inner experiences (thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc.) – private phenomena created by you, just for you, your own way. Despite their intimacy and ubiquity, you probably don't know the characteristics of your own inner phenomena; neither does psychology or consciousness science.

*Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* explores how to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. This book will transform your view of your own inner experience, awaken you to experiential differences between people, and thereby reframe your thinking about psychology and consciousness science, which banned the study of inner experience for most of a century and yet continued to recognize its fundamental importance.

The author, a pioneer in using beepers to explore inner experience, draws on his thirty-five years of studies to provide fascinating and provocative views of everyday inner experience and experience in bulimia, adolescence, the elderly, schizophrenia, Tourette's syndrome, virtuosity, and so on.

Russell T. Hurlburt pioneered the investigation of inner experience, inventing (in 1973) the beepers that launched "thought sampling," the attempt to measure characteristics of inner experience. Despite the sophistication of his thought-sampling measurements, Hurlburt concluded (by about 1980) that science needed a better understanding of inner phenomena themselves. Therefore he developed "Descriptive Experience Sampling" (DES), the attempt to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. That has led to four books: *Sampling Normal and Schizophrenic Inner Experience* (1990), *Sampling Inner Experience in Disturbed Affect* (1993), *Exploring Inner Experience* (with Chris Heavey, 2006), and *Describing Inner Experience: Proponent Meets Skeptic* (with Eric Schwitzgebel, 2007). A special issue of the *Journal of Consciousness Studies* (January 2011) was devoted to DES. Hurlburt is Professor of Psychology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and is also the author of a highly regarded statistics textbook, *Comprehending Behavioral Statistics* (fourth edition 2006).

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# Investigating Pristine Inner Experience

MOMENTS OF TRUTH

Russell T. Hurlburt

*University of Nevada, Las Vegas*



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*To my wife*

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## PREFACE

Here's a thought experiment: I have invented a machine I call the Expero. You strap yourself inside, like an astronaut into a rocket, except the Expero takes you to someone's *inner* space, not outer space. You get to choose a person, called the Objective – maybe a friend, or a lover, or a celebrity, or a perfect stranger. The Expero personnel painlessly, safely, and surreptitiously slip tiny electrodes into the Objective's brain and heart while the Objective continues going about her everyday business as if nothing had happened. When you, safely in the Expero, push a button, the electrodes transmit to you in high fidelity a moment of the Objective's thoughts, feelings, and sensations – you get to think, feel, and sense exactly what she happened to be experiencing at the instant you pushed the button. Push the button again and you get another helping of her inner experience. The thought experiment is: Would you queue up for a chance to ride the Expero?

This book is for those who answer yes. The Expero doesn't exist, sorry to say, but the idea that the Expero would lead to fascinating discoveries exists widely. People have been fascinated by inner experience ever since there were people: The earliest known writings (*Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*) described the thoughts and feelings of the characters. Psychology was founded on the attempt to “introspect” the contents of consciousness, an attempt so problematic that the mere mention of “introspection” or “consciousness” became psychological heresy for most of the twentieth century.

In the early 1970s, I began to consider how to investigate inner experience in a scientifically adequate manner. In 1973 I invented a random beeper (Hurlburt, 1976) and, in 1974, began to use beepers in psychological research (Klinger and Csikszentmihalyi, working independently, launched similar studies using pagers within a few months). I called my method “random sampling of cognitions” (or “thought sampling” for short): Subjects carried beepers into their natural environments and, at the time of the random beeps, described their thinking by filling out a series of Likert scales, which I subjected to a

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variety of sophisticated analyses (correlational, factor analytic, etc.). The methods that are now called the Experience Sampling Method (ESM) and Ecological Momentary Assessment (EMA) are quite similar to thought sampling; such methods are now considered at the cutting edge of mainstream psychology.

By the early 1980s, as the result of ten years of research, I had concluded that (a) the understanding of inner experience was indeed central to psychology; (b) ecological validity such as provided by beepers in natural environments was necessary to the understanding of inner experience; (c) therefore thought sampling and similar methods were the best psychology had to offer for the exploration of experience; but (d) thought sampling and similar methods had not and probably could not productively investigate inner experience until an adequate exploration of the phenomena of experience had been accomplished.

So in the early 1980s I abandoned thought sampling and set about creating a new method aimed directly at exploring the phenomena of inner experience. That method has come to be called Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES), which uses beepers to trigger the careful description of phenomena. *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* demonstrates that the apprehension of inner experience can be fascinating and that modern psychology has not adequately attended to the methodological requirements that the investigation of experience imposes. That is, *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* shows why psychological and consciousness science must go through the same kind of transformation that I personally underwent in the early 1980s: Science must learn how better to explore psychological phenomena *and only then* to operationalize and measure psychological constructs. *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* therefore suggests a far-reaching rejuvenation of psychological science. It contains, to be sure, a criticism of modern psychological method, but that criticism is always constructive. Alongside every criticism I show what I think is a better way, based on DES investigations I've been performing for thirty years.

I hope in *Investigating Pristine Inner Experience* to show you what it takes to apprehend inner experience in high fidelity. I hope to demonstrate that many people, probably most people, including many if not most consciousness scientists and very likely you, are mistaken about the nature of their own inner experience and that of others. I hope to reveal some genuinely fascinating and entirely surprising features of inner experience.

All of that may seem a lot to ask from the description of a few beeped moments. However, if you will meet me in Chapter 1 and let me walk with you through these experiences, I think you will come out at the other end with a changed perspective on moments of experience and on psychological and consciousness science.

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This book is built around the investigation of moments of pristine experience. Those experiences are always personal and private, often unforeseen in form or content, sometimes embarrassing or unflattering, occasionally unnerving or unsettling. To you who willingly shared in the struggle to be forthright about moments of your experience, I am deeply grateful; I have tried to honor your participation, to deserve your trust, to help us keep our footing in difficult terrain. I have learned from you and been deeply moved by you. To those whose names I have used, I thank you and trust that the reader will respect the courage you have shown by allowing others a glimpse into inherently private matters.

I am indebted to Chris Heavey, who has been a trusted colleague and collaborator as we have tried to sort through this subject matter; to Marta Meana, the foil for many discussions about issues at the core of this book and a thorough reviewer of an earlier draft; to Sarah A. Akhter, whose influence can be felt throughout the book; to Eric Schwitzgebel, who honed my thinking with his good-natured, precise, and persistent requests for refinement; to Susan Stuart, who helped me grapple with some core issues; and to the students at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, who had the courage to venture into the unknown.

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