Running Head: BLENDED AND MULTIPLE FEELINGS

Mixed Emotions: Toward a Phenomenology of Blended and Multiple Feelings

Christopher L. Heavey

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Noelle L. Lefforge

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Leiszle Lapping-Carr

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Russell T. Hurlburt

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Correspondence to:

Christopher L. Heavey

University of Nevada, Las Vegas

4505 S. Maryland Pkwy Box 451099

Las Vegas, NV 89154

Phone: (702) 895-0186

Fax: (702) 895-3670

Email: chris.heavey@unlv.edu

Abstract

After using descriptive experience sampling to study randomly selected moments of inner experience, we make observations about feelings, including blended and multiple feelings. We observe that inner experience usually does not contain feelings. Sometimes, however, feelings are directly present. When feelings are present, most commonly they are unitary. Sometimes people experience separate emotions as a single experience, which we call a blended feeling. Occasionally people have multiple distinct feelings present simultaneously. These distinct multiple feelings can be of opposite valence, with one pleasant and the other unpleasant. We provide examples that inform theories of emotions and discuss the important role observational methodology plays in the effort to understand inner experience including feelings.

KEYWORDS: Mixed Emotions, Feelings, Inner Experience, Descriptive Experience Sampling

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Emotions are multifaceted, with one facet being what people actually experience or feel (e.g., Barrett, Mesquita, Ochsner, & Gross, 2007). Feelings are sometimes, but not always, directly experienced aspects of naturally occurring, or "pristine," inner experience (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008; Heavey, Hurlburt, & Lefforge, 2012; Hurlburt, 2011). Pristine inner experiences are the thoughts, feelings, sensations, and any other phenomena that are directly present to a person as part of their ongoing experiential consciousness. Pristine inner experience does not require judgment or inference; it is apprehended as directly present (Hurlburt, 2011; Hurlburt & Akhter, 2006).

We have used Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) to investigate pristine inner experience and produce high-fidelity descriptions. DES participants wear a beeper as they go about their normal daily activities. When the beep sounds at a random moment, participants jot down notes about what was present in their inner experience, if anything, immediately before the beep interrupted them. DES investigations never target a specific kind of experience such as feelings, aiming instead to apprehend whatever is directly present in experience. Participants repeat this procedure to gather about six random samples of their inner experience. They are then interviewed by DES investigators who collaborate with the participants to describe what was present in experience at each moment, while working to bracket the presuppositions (i.e., eliminate the distorting influence of prior beliefs) of both the participant and the interviewers (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006; Hurlburt, 2011). These interviews focus on the answer to one question – What, if anything, was present in experience when the beep interrupted you. The investigators then produce written descriptions of each moment, attempting to capture it with as much fidelity as possible. This procedure is repeated iteratively, building skills over several

cycles of gathering samples of experience, participating in the interview to develop faithful apprehensions of each moment, and then writing high fidelity descriptions of each moment.

Using DES to examine inner experience, we have found that most of the time participants are not experiencing any feeling in their pristine experience (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008; Heavey, Hurlburt, & Lefforge, 2012). That is, at most randomly chosen moments, nothing that the participant or we would describe as a feeling is directly present in experience. It is possible (likely) that at some (many) of these moments emotions as ongoing processes are present but outside of direct experience; our observation is that at roughly three quarters of sampled moments there is no ongoing emotional experience apprehendable to the participant. At about a quarter of randomly chosen moments, however, some type of feeling is directly present to them (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008). These frequencies are only rough approximations because we have not studied adequately representatively diverse populations.

Heavey, Hurlburt, and Lefforge (2012) examined many moments when participants did report feelings being directly present in their inner experience to sketch an initial phenomenology of the experience of feelings. They made nine observations about the phenomenology of feelings. Here we narrow our focus to two observations directly relevant to the debate about mixed emotions: that sometimes people experience multiple feelings blended together into one feeling experience, and that sometimes people experience multiple distinct feelings.

Although we do not ascribe to any particular theory of emotion or theoretical position on the possibility of mixed emotions, our careful empirical observations of thousands of moments of naturally occurring experience, made across many studies, do provide us an empirical basis from which to weigh in on the ongoing discussion about mixed emotions. We begin by providing

examples of moments of blended and multiple feelings culled from previous studies. We categorize these examples as reflecting blended or multiple feelings based solely on these descriptions of what was present in experience. Thus the reader can judge the extent to which our categorization conforms to the described experience. As for the reliability, validity, and fidelity of the method used to produce these descriptions, we have described that extensively elsewhere (e.g., Hurlburt & Heavey, 2002, 2006, 2015; Hurlburt, 2011).

Although we do not have a precise estimate of the relative frequencies of blended and multiple feelings, we can say with confidence that they are fairly rare among the populations we have studied, with blended feelings likely occurring in fewer than 5% of moments. We find multiple feelings (i.e., mixed emotions) less commonly than we do blended feelings, perhaps with a frequency closer to 1% of sampled moments. And although we will discuss blended and multiple feelings as meaningful categories of emotional experiences, we are not confident that there is sharp boundary between them.

Blended Feelings

We start by considering nine examples of blended feelings, where, as best we could determine, different feelings are merged or blended into one feeling experience.

> Example 1: Angela had been thinking about the weather—that it was nice out. At the moment of the beep, Angela was feeling a good/happy/content feeling. She experienced this feeling mentally and not bodily. She understood this to be one feeling with good, happy, and content connotations.

Example 2: A coworker had asked Barbara to do something that was against company policy, which she didn't want to do. Barbara was trying to write a text message to her coworker. At the moment of the beep, Barbara was trying to think of a polite way to refuse the coworker's request. She experienced the trying to think of a way to refuse as a small, pulsing tension in the entire inside of her head. At the same time, she was experiencing an awkward/bad feeling that did not have any identifiable physical features or location. This was experienced as one feeling with awkwardness and badness as aspects.

Example 3: Cassie was walking up to the door of the library, seeing the handle of the door (about 25% of her experience) as she approached it. At the moment of the beep, Cassie was feeling mildly anxious/disgusted (a single experience that occupied about 50% of her experience), which was a mild feeling that was not localized and did not have any bodily aspects to it. She was also thinking, without words or pictures, that there are a lot of germs on this door handle (25%).

Example 4: At the moment of the beep, Darlene was thinking, "How don't you notice that you don't get paid from a company?" This thought was a general impression and not represented in words. There was also a negative feeling of surprise and wondering. This was one feeling with two aspects, and was not intense; it did not have any associated bodily sensations.

Example 5: Ellen was watching the TV news and feeling shocked and concerned about what they were saying about the local economy. Her feeling of shock and concern – one experience – seemed to be all over her body, though she could not describe it further.

The first two of these examples may be one feeling that can be described in different ways – good/happy/content (example 1) and awkward/bad (example 2), with multiple feeling words used to zero in on the experience with more precision than one word would allow. The feelings in examples 3, 4, and 5 seem to be somewhat more distant from one another but still comfortable companions – anxious and disgusted, surprised and wondering, and shocked and concerned. Those feelings seem like unsurprising partners in complex emotional experiences. Examples 6, through 9 are more distant.

Example 6: Fiona went to the gym to work out. She was in the middle of doing a back exercise when the beep went off. She was feeling a sad kind of happiness throughout her whole body, because she was thinking about missing home. She was innerly seeing her friends, two girls and a guy, at a track meet, standing in front of a yellow touchdown post. They were trying to antagonize their coach, having a good time.

In Example 6, Fiona is feeling a happiness that is tinged by sadness. This example gives a sense of the complexity of dealing with unconstrained, naturally occurring experience. It could reasonably be debated whether or not that is a blended feeling of sadness and happiness, or just a particular type of happiness. Either way, because of the temporal specificity of the beep and the iterative interviews where we teased apart these details, we are confident that Fiona was

describing one feeling, one experience, not a feeling of sadness and, separately, a feeling of happiness (which would make it a multiple feeling).

Example 7: Prior to the beep, Gary had been watching a YouTube video of a reporter talking about and showing pictures of the battle of Fallujah. At the moment of the beep, Gary was thinking/feeling guilt and regret. These were experienced as mental, and encompassed feeling guilty that he was not there, wondering what would have happened if he had been there, a sense that he had missed out, a knowledge that he could have gone there, remembering a conversation with his gunner, and numerous other ideas related to the Marine battle in Fallujah. None of these were specific thoughts directly in experience at the moment of the beep, but all taken together comprised the feeling of guilt and regret.

Example 8: Henrietta was having a fight with her boyfriend over Skype. At the moment of the beep she was focused on her emotion—a feeling of anger, sadness, upset, and frustration. This was a mental experience and not experienced in any part of her body.

Example 9: Isabel was in her office looking at the website myspace.com on her computer, drawn to the navy blue, white, and black colors on the computer screen. She had received a random message from a guy that she did not know and had replied sarcastically to him. She was feeling annoyed/amused, which she experienced as a little bit of tenseness throughout her whole body and a smile on her face. She was also sighing out loud.

Examples 6 through 9 show the complexity that can be blended into one experientially single feeling. Example 9 shows that this complexity can include the experiential integration or lack thereof of diverse bodily sensations – annoyance probably more related to the bodily tension and amusement probably more related to the experience of the smile. Example 9 may thus be seen to sit somewhere in the middle ground between blended feelings and more distinct multiple feelings.

Multiple Feelings

We make multiple kinds of efforts to bracket presuppositions and avoid holding any preferred or theoretical position about whether or not multiple simultaneous feelings exist. In that light, we aver that there are occasions when our best judgment is that multiple simultaneous feelings occur. Of those, the most common examples we find are instances where the person is having two seemingly opposite and experientially separate feelings related to the same event. Examples 10 through 12 illustrate this type of multiple feeling.

> Example 10: The phone had rung and the answering machine was picking up the message that they could hear was from Jack's uncle. At the moment of the beep, Jack was alarmed. This feeling involved a sensation of adrenaline/tenseness in a diffuse area approximately the size of a grapefruit in his chest. Related to the alarm were three other experiences. First, he was hearing his grandmother yelling, "Get it! Get it!" and experiencing the urgent meaning to answer the phone. Second, he was also trying to hear what his uncle was saying on the phone that the machine had picked up. He heard the first part of what his uncle was saying and then his uncle speaking was drowned out by his grandmother's yelling. Third, he was seeing his sister near the phone; this was a

looking to see if she was going to answer the phone. Jack was simultaneously feeling relief, which was a mental experience and a bodily experience of diminishing alarm. Jack was confident that the relief was a separate mental feeling that was calming or reducing his feeling of alarm.

Example 11: Karen was leaving work and had just shut the gate. At the moment of the beep she was feeling both happy and bummed. She felt happy and relieved to be leaving work but the happy feeling was merged together with the bummed feeling about having to come back to work. Although she experienced the happy and bummed feelings as two separate feelings, she had the sense of the happy feeling being lessened by the bummed feeling. She felt happier than she did bummed at the moment of the beep.

Example 12: Larry was getting ready to stop typing his term paper for the night. He was clicking on the Save button, but this was not part of his awareness. He was worrying, a feeling experienced as tension in his neck and shoulders, worrying about getting the paper done and knowing that he had to get it done. He also felt relieved, which was experienced as lightness being lifted off his chest. Part of this relieved feeling was thinking that he was done for the day.

In examples 10 and 11, the positive and negative feelings exist separately but also aggregate or combine in some subtractive manner such that the good diminishes the bad, and vice versa. In the example 12, the separate feelings exist more distinctly, with little or no indication that there is any aggregated valence that results from their combined effect.

Next is an example where two related feelings stem from the same event (nearing end of a philosophy course), and where the feelings have generally the same valence even though they are experientially distinct.

> Example 13: Matthew was studying, but he had drifted off to reflect on his just-ending philosophy class and how he was going to miss it and the professor. At the moment of the beep, he was feeling nostalgia/longing for the professor and the class (which was about 70% of his experience). This feeling was mental, without any bodily sensations. At the same time he was feeling sad, which was felt throughout his body. The sadness was experientially separate from the nostalgia/longing. Also at the moment of the beep he was also innerly seeing the professor at the whiteboard in the classroom.

We also find examples where distinct feelings occur in experience stemming from different thoughts or events.

> Example 14: Nick's daughter had just asked to start her math homework, and at the moment of the beep, Nick was feeling hopeful that she would eventually understand and improve at doing subtraction problems. The hopefulness was a mental feeling that consumed most of Nick's experience at the moment. He was also feeling a small amount of annoyance (about 20% of his experience) that he needed to study for his own history test, a feeling physically located somewhere behind his head.

Example 15: Oscar was with his mom at Jack-in-the-Box playing his Nintendo 3DS. A few moments earlier he had just lost the game he was playing, ending an 18-game winning streak, which he was trying to build up to beat the record of winning 26 games in a row. His mother had said something funny about not needing to be scared of people who wear baggy pants because they aren't necessarily in a gang. At the moment of the beep, he was feeling amused about what his mother had said. This was approximately 60% of his experience. He was also feeling disappointment of losing the previous Nintendo game. This was experienced as a mental badness (approximately 20% of his experience). When he lost the game, which was before the beep, his disappointment had been experienced as a diffuse sinking feeling inside his chest about the size of a grapefruit, but this physical sensation was no longer in his experience at the moment of the beep. Oscar was also seeing the ball in the Nintendo game served by the opponent coming towards his character with a red streak indicating the ball was hit with a forehand.

Implications

Each example provided above is a description of an actual moment of some person's randomly selected, directly apprehended, naturally occurring inner experience. They were apprehended and described with great care: relentless and forthright efforts were taken to bracket presuppositions including any regarding theories of emotion or emotional experience. The examples provided are not representative; they were selected from a great many moments across various studies we have done because they are potentially relevant to ongoing debates about mixed emotions, including whether or not people do experience mixed emotions. Although these examples do not provide a basis for a comprehensive theory of emotional experience, they

allow us to begin to develop an understanding of the phenomenology of blended and multiple feelings and connect that phenomenology to extant debates about mixed emotions.

Although these examples are a step in the direction of understanding the phenomenology of blended and multiple feelings, much work remains before anyone can be confident about the full range and boundaries of emotional experience, including blended and mixed feelings. We can say that many of what people experience as single feelings with multiple facets, which we are calling blended feelings, are combinations that would be expected based on dimensional models of emotion (e.g., Russell, 1980; Watson & Tellegen, 1985). But sometimes they are not, such as Example 6, which involves a sad kind of happiness, and Example 9, which involves experiencing annoyance and amusement as seemingly one feeling (though perhaps this example rests within a fuzzy boundary between blended and multiple feelings). When feelings were experienced as more clearly distinct, they were most often of opposite valence, one pleasant and one unpleasant.

Those examples are relevant to the debate about a bipolar versus bivariate model of positive and negative emotional experience (Barrett & Bliss-Moreau, 2009; Larsen & McGraw, 2011, 2014; Russell & Carroll, 1999), convincing us that some people some of the time do experience positive and negative feelings simultaneously, as suggested is possible in bivariate models of positive and negative emotional experience. Although these simultaneous feelings sometimes mute the intensity of each other, as they do in Examples 10 and 11, even in those instances they are experienced as separate phenomena (i.e., not blended together into one net valence or feeling, such as a feeling a little bad or a little good). Sometimes multiple feelings are not divided between one positive and one negative feeling, as seen in the nostalgia/longing and sadness that were experienced in Example 13. It does appear to us, nonetheless, that the most

common multiple feelings are when one is positive and one is negative. Our observations are *not* consistent with a strong bipolar conception of positive and negative emotions such as that expressed by Russell and Carroll: "Bipolarity says that when you are happy, you are not sad and that when you are sad, you are not happy" (1999, p. 25).

Kahneman (1992) speculated that positive and negative feelings that result from mixed evaluations of a situation might alternate rapidly, much as do one's perception of a Necker cube. That is, Kahneman holds that both feelings are never present simultaneously and the net resulting feeling is a function of the relative presence of the positive and negative feelings. As a result, people might think they are having both feelings at the same time, but that is an illusion created by vacillation between two mutually exclusive feelings. Although this speculation seems plausible, we have never found any reports of people experiencing rapid vacillation between positive and negative feelings. Our method is well suited to discovering such vacillation because we work with participants to zero in as closely as possible on the moment that they were interrupted by the beep. If at the moment of the beep an experience was ongoing that was changing in some way that the participant is able to apprehend, perhaps increasing or diminishing or vacillating, we would describe that. In fact, we have sometimes discovered rapid-fire sequences of thoughts or inner seeings, but we have not seen these types of rapid-fire sequences or vacillations in the realm of feelings. Observing this in other forms of inner experience and having no examples of this phenomenon with feelings makes a stronger case that the vacillation hypothesis of mixed-emotions is not accurate from an experiential standpoint. Perhaps the vacillation occurs so quickly that it is completely outside the realm of conscious awareness, in which case we would argue that vacillation is not part of pristine experience and thus outside the bounds of discussions about emotional experience.

The heart of the matter is the boundary of what we consider emotional experience and consequently the data we use to inform our thinking about emotional experience generally and mixed emotions specifically. As we have said, our explorations of experience using DES ask participants to apprehend and describe only what was directly present in ongoing, naturally occurring inner experience. We do not ask participants to make judgments about their experience or to respond to imposed dimensions of their experience at a particular moment (e.g., rate the extent to which you were feeling *X* or *Y*).[i] As such, DES can be considered a phenomenological method for describing lived experience. Although DES is inspired by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and others, it is aimed only at pristine experience and is not concerned with essences lying behind phenomena or with any other aspect beyond that which is directly apprehended.

Hurlburt and Heavey (2015) compare DES to other procedures that putatively explore naturally occurring inner experience, such as questionnaires and the Experience Sampling Method, arguing that only DES examines naturally occurring inner experience in a scientifically adequate manner:

> 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 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. (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2015, pp. 148-149)

Heavey, Hurlburt, and Lefforge (2012) discuss the discrepancy between their findings that feelings are present in pristine inner experience only about a quarter of the time and Watson's (2000) assertion, based on his extensive research with the PANAS (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988), that "people are always experiencing some type of mood" (p. 13). We accept that if you ask people what they are feeling, they will likely search their experience *and* consider their current circumstances *and* potentially engage in other unknown and unspecifiable processes to provide an answer. Thus Watson (2000) is correct in the sense that at some level, some type of emotional processes are ongoing or can be created or discovered by a person at any time. But if our interest is in what is directly present in ongoing pristine inner experience—experientially ongoing *before* the self-reflective attempt to survey the possibilities, our findings demonstrate that feelings are not always present in pristine inner experience. In fact they are present for most people only a minority of the time (Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008).

These examples suggest that if we are to advance emotion science, we must keep the targets or our studies and our theories clear (e.g., that we must distinguish carefully between pristine inner experience of feeling and emotional processes that are ongoing but not directly present in experience) and make our first concern the quality of the data we use to inform our theories. For example, Tellegen, Watson, and Clark (1999) and Russell and Carroll (1999) both present sophisticated models of emotional experience based on careful statistical analyses of questionnaire data about emotional experience. However, Hurlburt and Heavey (2015) held that no amount of statistical sophistication or precision can overcome the inherent weakness in the questionnaire data regarding emotional experience if in fact the target of their theories is pristine inner experience. Similarly, Larsen (this issue) proposes a number of potential methods to help

resolve the debate about whether or not mixed positive and negative emotions occur in pristine experience, such as examining facial expressions of participants as they watch bittersweet film clips and psychophysiological measurements. Although these methods appear to us to have the potential to advance the broader understanding of emotion, they move further away from feelings per se and thus seem unlikely to shed light directly on questions focused on pristine inner experience involving emotions.

We have found that participants sometimes recognize ongoing emotions after they are signaled by the beep to apprehend their pristine inner experience, but that these emotions were not directly present in their pristine inner experience at the beep (Heavey, Hurlburt, & Lefforge, 2012; Hurlburt, 2011). This reinforces our view that there are important differences between pristine inner experience and all else. Thus we hold that the first consideration is the quality of the method used to study pristine inner experience. The value of statistical procedures and theories depend on the quality of the data underlying them. Despite our criticism of other commonly used methods, we do not claim that DES provides perfect or unimpeachable accounts of inner experience, merely that the method aims at high fidelity, faithful accounts of naturally occurring experience and, when practiced with adequate care, falls acceptably short of perfect apprehension. There is no doubt that DES has limitations, including the inherent difficulties of using language to describe private experiences, including feelings. We would welcome methods better suited for studying pristine inner experience than is DES and we would like to encourage further discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of the various methods, including criticism of DES. Surely some methods are better than others, but without thoughtful discussion of the characteristics of the methods used to produce observations of experience, we will likely be unable to resolve important questions about the nature of experience, including feelings.

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[i] There is one exception to this statement. We do sometimes ask subjects to provide rough estimates of the percentages to which different phenomena are present in their experience at a particular moment. We only do this once we have fully discussed the phenomena and we consider these estimates as only rough guides of the relevant prominence of the phenomena present in experience.