Open Peer Commentaries

on Aleš Oblak's "Visual Representation in the Wild"

Cleaving to the Moment, Cleaving to Experience, Bracketing Presuppositions, and the Iterative Method in the Apprehension of Pristine Inner Experience

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> Abstract • We review four constraints we judge to be necessary to the high-fidelity apprehension and description of inner experience: cleaving to specific moments, cleaving to pristine inner experience, bracketing presuppositions, and using an iterative method. With the aim of promoting discussion of inner-experience-exploration methods, we use methodological concerns in Oblak's study of inner experience to provide concrete perspectives on those four constraints.

Handling Editor • Bryony Pierce

« 1 » In his target article, Aleš Oblak (2020) investigated the "experiential aspects of drawing while simultaneously monitoring one's experience" (§1). We applaud his studying inner experience, a topic of great value to the scientific community.

« 2 » However, inner experience research is fraught with well-known pitfalls. Retrospection effects, observation distortion, misinformation, false memories, demand characteristics, and so on, may distort apprehensions of inner experiences and degrade the fidelity of their descriptions (Loftus & Palmer 1974; Nisbett & Wilson 1977; Hurlburt & Heavey 2001).

« 3 » Facing these challenges, Hurlburt and Christopher Heavey (2015, 2018) described four primary, overlapping requirements for inner-experience investigations aspiring to provide high-fidelity descriptions:

1 | cleave to (relentlessly focus on) specific moments;
2 | cleave to pristine inner experience;
3 | relentlessly bracket presuppositions about experience; and
4 | iteratively build participants' skill in apprehending and describing inner experience.

With the aim of promoting discussion of inner-experience-exploration methods, we examine Oblak's method from those perspectives.

Does Oblak cleave to specific moments?

« 4 » Inner experience is variable and evanescent (James 1890; Hurlburt & Heavey 2018), so temporal specificity is essential: fidelity requires identifying a specific moment and excluding consideration of all other moments. Oblak claims to follow the Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES; Hurlburt 2011) procedure by stopping participants at "a random moment and [asking] them to report on their experience of the moment immediately preceding [the] prompt" (§7). This procedure is elaborated in §§16f: the investigator prompted aloud "okay," and participants reported their experience between *memorizing the motif* and the *prompt*. We identify three ways that this procedure does not identify specific moments.

« 5 » First, "okay" is a problematic experience-sampling prompt due to its slow rise time (Hurlburt 2011: Ch. 3) and the requirement for semantic interpretation, a process of indeterminate length and interference. By contrast, other methods (such as DES) use an unambiguous beep and practice responding to it.

« 6 » Second, *memorizing the motif* does not specify an unambiguous beginning of the target period, and it makes the interval dependent on the experience.

« 7 » Third, the interval between *memorizing the motif* and the *prompt* is very long (about 4 minutes; §16). If one crudely accepts that inner experience alters every second or so, there may be hundreds of varied experiences in such an interval.

« 8 » We conclude that a mature science of inner experience will have to reflect carefully on its methods of identifying the specific experiences it wishes to consider.

Does Oblak cleave to pristine inner experience?

« 9 » Hurlburt and Heavey (2015) define *inner experience* as directly apprehended phenomena; *pristine* means naturally occurring, not altered by any specific intent to apprehend. Any observation of experience likely distorts that experience (Heavey, Hurlburt & Lefforge 2010; Petitmengin & Bitbol 2009), so the apprehension of pristine inner experience is always aspirational.

« 10 » To *cleave to* pristine inner experience is to consider *only* pristine inner experience, *excluding* abstractions, hypotheticals, explanations, generalities and so on (which are not directly apprehended phenomena) and avoiding manipulations such as experiments (which destroy pristine-ness).

« 11 » First, Oblak's sessions were contrived (participants were instructed what to draw, when to draw it, and what to observe while drawing; see §§15–17) and therefore the investigation was not of *pristine* inner experience (their experiences were not "in the wild").

« 12 » Second, inner experience is a directly apprehended phenomenon. Inner

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seeing (e.g., the beard of §40) is a phenomenon, directly apprehended by VWMW-08: "I actually see it in my head." Imagined touching is a phenomenon: "I can actually feel the material" (§45). We think that referring to visual-spatial working memory as a phenomenon (§3 and §4) obscures the fundamentally important distinction between what can be directly apprehended (inner seeing, etc.) and what can only be the result of inference (working memory, etc.). A mature inner-experience science would require clarity about that distinction.

« 13 » Third, Oblak used a closed-form debriefing session about interview quality (§20) to evaluate sample descriptions. Closed-form responses are *not* apprehensions of pristine inner experience and we think their use undermines the high-fidelity apprehension of experience. For example, Oblak asked, post interview, "Do you feel that I understand you? [... a] negative response constituted the elimination of data, as the phenomenological interview itself failed to establish an intuitive relationship with the experience under investigation" (§§20f). However, (a) that question is hugely ambiguous: what does "feel" mean (is it different, for example, from "think")? What does "understand" mean (comprehend? empathize? sympathize?), and at what depth? And which aspect of the interview is being inquired about? We think that such a question cannot be part of a serious investigation of pristine experience. Relatedly but more importantly, (b) the fidelity of apprehensions in interviews requires implicitly or explicitly asking and answering the do-I-understand-you question at every turn of the entire interview. For example, when VWMW-08 said "I can actually feel the material," an interview that aims at fidelity should not advance until the interviewer and VWMW-08 have some sense of the degree of shared understanding of what VWMW-08 intended to convey by that utterance. We think that a closed-form post-interview question can do nothing to improve (and is likely to interfere) with those understandings.

« 14 » We conclude that a mature science of inner experience will have to reflect carefully on what it can investigate and what are acceptable methods of inquiry.

Does Oblak bracket presuppositions?

« 15 » A presupposition is a belief or disposition that is accepted without question. Presuppositions are delusions – they are not mere ignorance about experience but instead are deep-set, invisible personal blind spots and fundamental misperceivings (Hurlburt 2011). Presuppositions are problematic for both participants and investigators and should be relentlessly bracketed (i.e., put out of play; Hurlburt 2011).

« 16 » Oblak demonstrated sensitivity to presuppositions by attempting to include "only those subjective reports that were not obviously informed by various theories and beliefs" (§9), but the operation of presuppositions is not at all obvious.

« 17 » For example, Oblak was justifiably worried that participants might (presuppositionally) over-report mental images (§39), so he asked them to visually imagine an apple and compare it to their original experience. If the imagined apple and the original experience were similar, the original was accepted as a mental image (§39). However, we think that that procedure is itself based on presuppositions: that when demanded to image an apple, participants can and do so (Hurlburt 2011 doubts that); that demanded inner experience is the same as pristine inner experience (Hurlburt et al. 2016 doubt that); that the participant can judge the qualitative similarity of two inner experiences (Hurlburt 2011 doubts that).

« 18 » The *mental commentary* section (§51) is another example of the pervasiveness of presuppositions and (we think) the failure to bracket them. When VWMW-08 says she counts triangles out, there is this exchange: Oblak: "In an inner voice?" VWMW-08: "*One, two, three, four.* Yeah. It's like an anchor that helps me remember" (emphasis in original). First, note that Oblak, not VWMW-08, suggests an inner voice. That suggestion is leading, likely arising out of his own inner-speech presuppositions. Second, Oblak apparently takes VWMW-08's answer as affirming the presence of an inner voice, but it makes no such explicit affirmation. It affirms only that *counting* took place, but it is presuppositional to assume that that counting was *voiced*. Third, "[i]t's like an anchor that helps me remember" is a failure to cleave to experience – it invokes a self-theory, *not* a description of a phenomenon. Suppose the exchange had gone like this: Oblak: "How did that counting present itself?" VWMW-08: "I said it in my head – *One, two, three, four!* With like an exclamation point at the end – my voice got louder and sharper." An exchange of this nature might permit us to have some confidence that VWMW-08 had experienced an inner voice.

« 19 » Presuppositions are pervasive, and we conclude that a mature science of inner experience will have to reflect carefully on whether and how to bracket them.

Does Oblak use iterative training?

« 20 » Iterative training refers to the gradual, successive refinement of skills over occasions of new, natural-environment sampling (Hurlburt 2009). DES research shows that participants are initially unskilled at cleaving to specific moments, cleaving to experience, and bracketing their presuppositions (Hurlburt 2011). Therefore, Hurlburt (2011) recommends discarding first-sampling-day reports. However, through principled confrontation, discussion, and feedback, participants can become more skilled (Hurlburt & Heavey 2015). Because skill acquisition is gradual, Hurlburt (2011) recommends bracketing all previous experiential descriptions: if a phenomenon is robust, it will appear again on its own, and the likely increased skill level will enable apprehending this new appearance in higher fidelity.

« 21 » Oblak did not discard his first-sampling-day samples. Moreover, on the second day, Oblak explicitly reminded participants of their "experiences of interest" that had been observed on the first day (§15). That procedure is diametrically opposite to the iterative process: rather than starting afresh and allowing genuinely robust phenomena to emerge, drawing attention to past phenomena reifies or amplifies whatever presuppositions might have operated on the first day and discourages describing not-before-reported phenomena.

« 22 » We conclude that a mature science of inner experience will have to reflect carefully on whether or why it might be desirable or necessary to use an iterative procedure, and how to do so.

Conclusion

« 23 » We applied Hurlburt and Heavey's (2015, 2018) four requirements for obtaining high-fidelity descriptions of inner experience to Oblak (2020) and used our analysis of Oblak's study to comment on inner-experience methods. We believe that science should consider at least three potential interpretations: that the four requirements are not essential; that our analysis of Oblak (2020) is flawed; or that the considerations and examples of our analysis is informative to inner-experience science. We hope that this comment will encourage science to wrestle with these possibilities. The stakes are high, and we must continue to challenge one another on issues of fidelity.

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About Process and Progress – Suggestions About How to Investigate Subjective Experience Most Ecologically

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> Abstract • While appreciating Oblak's call for and investment in more ecological research designs in psychology, I point out several aspects in Oblak's own experimental setup that might themselves derive from traditional psychological concepts about cognition and which, therefore, might hinder his intended exploration of subjective experience by disregarding the very nature of this new "object of investigation." Finally, I propose the use and development of microphenomenology to solve some of the possible issues raised, while at the same time promoting progress and change in the activity explored.

Handling Editor • Alexander Riegler

« 1 » Aleš Oblak's target article joins the ranks of those claiming that the context provided by traditional psychological research constructs its "own objects of inquiry" that differ substantially from what would be observable in a naturalistic setting. The author particularly focuses on the tasks usually chosen to investigate visual spatial working memory and shares some interview data that indeed exposes the artificial demands and stress participants are subject to when accomplishing such tasks. He then goes on to present his own research design that makes it possible to investigate visual spatial working memory in a more ecological way, i.e., via phenomenological interviews about accomplishing a drawing (by copying) task.

« 2 » There are some obvious weaknesses of the article. Perhaps the most obvious one is the claim that there is a crucial difference between the objects of inquiry in the two differing settings, which is not backed up directly by the collection and analysis of comparable phenomenal data from the lab setting. However, in general, I strongly agree with the approach as such and would argue