

Title: Is the content of the “inner human experience” related to mindfulness and well-being – An experience sampling study

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Background and Objectives

Humans are probably the only animals whose minds are constantly filled with thoughts, feelings and emotions. Previous studies have investigated different aspects of this “inner experience” using Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM), a self-report measure that tracks real-time experience, and shown that a large proportion of time is spent mind-wandering (i.e., not being “present”). The current study employed ESM to characterize the content of the inner experience, asking the following: 1) How does the contents of the inner experience vary across demographics?, 2) Are certain types of inner experiences correlated with level of mindfulness and mental well-being?, 3) Will being prompted to report one’s inner experience (as part of the ESM protocol) increase mindfulness and mental well-being?

Methods

Participants were students from UCSD and social media. They began by filling out two questionnaires: 1) Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire, and 2) Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale, and demographics. They then started the ESM part of the study: For 6 days, their devices prompted them to respond 3 times/day to a series of questions, starting with asking if they were “present”, “mind-wandering” or “zoned out” (i.e., almost in a sleep-like state). This was followed by a series of questions about the content of their thought (if one existed), for example, self- vs. other-related, past- vs. future-related, clarity, etc. After the 6 days, participants filled out (1) and (2) again, to determine whether mindfulness and/or well-being improved after the ESM procedure. Their improvement was compared to a control group who did not participate in the ESM procedure.

Results

Results are currently preliminary as we continue to collect data. So far, we see the following trends: 1) Participants are present, mind-wandering and zoned-out, about 53%, 23% and 24% during wake-time, respectively. 2) Participants’ thoughts are ranked to be clearer and more neutral if they are present vs. mind-wandering. 3) Mind-wandering thoughts are 66% about the past, consisting 80% of inner speech.

Discussion and Conclusion

This ecologically valid method provides a rich data set to characterize the “inner human experience” as well as investigate the relationship between mindfully “checking in” and well-being.