Using Experience-Sampling to Understand Multifaceted Desire


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Background
- Previous experience sampling research has been somewhat reductionist in its examination of desires, often limiting its focus to those that are more easily enacted, such as eating, sex, and working (Hoffman, Vohs, & Baumeister, 2012).
- Integrating Buddhist philosophy with current scientific research suggests that certain types of psychosocial desires can contribute to undercurrents of suffering and stress (Ekman, Davidson, Ricard, & Wallace, 2005). Taking a broader focus to the examination of desires could reveal such types.
- We used experience sampling methods to collect in-the-moment self-reports of desire and of feelings associated with desire. Unlike previous research, we used open-ended and categorical questions to better understand the mental landscape of desire.
- Using a smartphone app – Qwantify – participants responded to random alerts, reporting on whether they wanted anything and, if so, what it is that they wanted most, and how they wanted to feel (along with other questions).
- Participants independently coded the open-ended data with a 9% inter-rater agreement.

Methods
- Participants were recruited for a pilot study using Qwantify via online postings and word-of-mouth in the researchers’ personal networks.
- Participants with at least a 50% response rate who completed at least 30 surveys (each filled out in less than 5 minutes start to finish) were included in the sample:
  - 36 participants (27 female, 9 male)
  - Ages 18-72; median age 27
  - 1660 total surveys from all participants
- Three researchers independently coded the open-ended data with a 9% inter-rater overlap for reliability analyses.
- The following scheme was used:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension 1: Context</th>
<th>Dimension 2: Social Relations</th>
<th>Dimension 3: Change</th>
<th>Dimension 4: Orientation</th>
<th>Dimension 5: Primary Beneficiary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>Mental</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Non-Social</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>84-94%</td>
<td>94-99%</td>
<td>86-90%</td>
<td>91-99%</td>
<td>96-100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results
- More than half of the reported desires were coded as “Mental” context, many of which reflect psychosocial desires that have not been examined in previous experience sampling research (Hoffman et al., 2012). Dimensions 2, 4, and 5 begin to characterize some ways in which the “Mental” and “Physical” contexts differ.
- The majority of desires reflect a primary benefit to the self. Although infrequent, “Other” in Primary Beneficiary (DS) supports the existence of compassionate desires. One possibility is that cultivating these kinds of desires more frequently would improve well-being.
- One purpose of coding the open-ended question is to integrate this data with other app questions. Our example integrates the orientation dimension with the want-to-feel question. The figure shows descriptively that the frequency with which certain want-to-feel categories are endorsed varies in the orientation dimension (e.g., higher proportions of wanting to feel connected, acknowledged, helpful, less stress, and good about oneself for relational desires).
- Future Directions: An ongoing lab-based study will also examine whether patterns of desire in the experience-sampling data are associated with physiological reactivity and recovery during stress and/or with pro-social behavior.

Discussion
- Hypothesis: Participants will report a wide variety of psychosocial desires in their daily lives, many of which have not been systematically examined in previous experience sampling research.

Qwantify App
- The app randomly alerted participants throughout their day to complete a survey involving questions related to the participant’s current state, including desires and emotions they were experiencing.
- As an ongoing incentive to reach 50 completed surveys, data from each survey was continually compiled into a series of graphs to give the participant feedback about their daily desires and emotions.

Settings Page Home Screen Feedback Graph

Setting Page
- Mood & Stress
- Do you feel better when you are more or less stressed?
- Thank you for participating!
- Qwantify

References