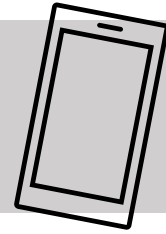


# Capturing students' social interactions through smartphones



**Martina Mölsä**

*As youth spend most of their time in school, and as mental illness amongst young people is one of the most serious public health challenges today, it seems reasonable to focus on research methods that captures a deeper understanding of students' daily experiences. Could the key to youths' mental health lie in a mobile-based data collection method?*

Social experiences and interactions have typically been measured with retrospective methods. However, traditional surveys are prone to recall biases. By using the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), researchers can get a more nuanced picture of individual's subjective experiences than with retrospective assessments, as the latter usually generates a simplified picture of a phenomenon.

Therefore, we—the research group within project REBOOT at Åbo Akademi University in Vaasa, Finland—aim to explore everyday social interactions in the school context by the means of ESM.

## **Experience Sampling Method (ESM)**

- A structured diary technique developed by Larson and Csikszentmihalyi (1983)
- Records activities in real time and in the natural environment
- Multiple measures over time
- Grown in popularity across various fields of psychology
- Today ESM is typically electronic/mobile-based

During 2020–2021, we conducted a systematic literature review, identifying 52 experience sampling studies on social interactions among students. We investigated study design characteristics and methodological quality of the studies. We were also interested in exploring how much individual social experiences fluctuated over time.

Our findings revealed generally wide variation in reporting of study design choices and results, indicating room for improvement for this field of research. About 58% of the variance in social interactions fluctuated between time points, underscoring social interactions to be highly fluctuating phenomena, and that ESM can be a valuable tool for detecting such momentary fluctuations among youth in school.



Choosing to collect data with the use of ESM, researchers may gain a deeper understanding of social phenomena in specific contexts. In a long-term perspective, knowledge of momentary variation in social interactions may improve intervention research targeting changes in specific behaviors and mental health outcomes in educational settings.

The project *Re-assessment of Bullying and Ostracism among Ostrobothnian Teenagers*, REBOOT, is funded by Högskolestiftelsen i Österbotten.