

Doing Sensory Ethnography

Introduction: About Doing Sensory Ethnography

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Introduction: About Doing Sensory Ethnography

In *Doing Sensory Ethnography* I outline a way of thinking about and doing ethnography that takes as its starting point the multisensoriality of experience, perception, knowing and practice. By a 'sensory ethnography' I mean a process of doing ethnography that accounts for how this multisensoriality is integral both to the lives of people who participate in our research *and* to how we ethnographers practise our craft.

In recent years a number of ethnographers have begun to comment on the multisensoriality of the ethnographic process. As I was writing this book, interdisciplinary academic conferences, seminars and arts events were simultaneously building on other recent explorations of the senses in relation to a plethora of different aspects of individual social and cultural experiences. These and other explorations are being materialised into a new literature that accounts for the senses across the social sciences and humanities. *Doing Sensory Ethnography* responds to these new directions in scholarship and practice. Their discussions and proposals, along with my own experiences of doing domestic and urban ethnography with attention to the senses, invite the question of how a sensory approach to ethnography might be situated as a *methodology*. However, with a few exceptions, the existing texts that approach questions around this theme tend to be concerned with either *arguing* for the place of the senses in ethnographic practice or, through fine-grained and detailed ethnography, *demonstrating* that ethnographers really ought to attend to the senses.

My interest in methodology led me to ask what 'bigger picture' was emerging: How could these more established and newer bodies of existing literature and new forms of sensory representation be understood as an emergent field of sensory ethnography practice? What concerns, themes, theories, debates, moralities and more have united and divided the scholars working in this multi disciplinary field of practice? And how might *sensory ethnography* thus be defined? It is now, I believe, the moment in time at

which an attempt to draw together contemporary scholarship and practice around the senses in ethnography is needed.

My starting point for this book is the anthropology of the senses. Indeed, social anthropology is the discipline in which most of the earlier 'sensory ethnographies', as well as my own work, is rooted. However *Doing Sensory Ethnography* is by no means simply a social anthropology book. Its theoretical commitments to place, memory and [p. 2 ↓] imagination reach out to ideas and practices developed across the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, these theoretical themes consistently resonate through the work of scholars concerned with the senses. The research for this book has taken me through diverse 'ethnographic' scholarly disciplines and interdisciplinary areas of study. It has also introduced me to new academic, applied and arts practices. Through this review, the work of some scholars has emerged as outstanding examples of how sensory ethnography might be done, whose work I return to discuss in several chapters. At the same time I was often disappointed to find how little other ethnographers (whose work demonstrates so well the significance of the senses in culture and society) have written about the processes through which they came to these understandings. In this vein, I would urge contemporary ethnographers of the senses to be more explicit about the ways of experiencing and knowing that become central to their ethnographies, to share with others the senses of place they felt as they sought to occupy similar places to those of their research participants, and to acknowledge the processes through which their sensory knowing has become academic knowledge. This is not a call for an excess of reflexivity above the need for ethnographers to represent the findings of their research. Rather, in a context where interest in the senses is increasing across disciplines, it is more a question of sharing knowledge about practice.

When preparing this book I was faced with a choice. I could either approach sensory ethnography through an exploration of practice conceived as multisensorial and emplaced, or I might examine in turn how different sensory modalities might be engaged and/or attended to in the ethnographic process. The book is structured through a series of chapters that each addresses issues and questions relating to ethnographic approaches, practices and methods, rather than by discussing sensory categories chapter by chapter. The decision to develop the narrative in this way is based on both a theoretical commitment to understanding the senses as interconnected and a

methodological focus on the role of subjectivity and experience in ethnography. This is in contrast to many recent ethnographic discussions of sensory experience (including my own – Pink 2004), the use of the senses in ethnography (Atkinson et al. 2007) and even a book series (*Sensory Formations*, Berg Publishers), which are structured through reference to different sensory modalities or categories.

Because researchers often focus on one or another sensory modality or category in their analyses, I in fact discuss plenty of examples of sensory ethnography practice concerned with mainly smell, taste, touch or vision. Indeed, in particular research contexts one sensory modality might be verbalised or otherwise referred to more frequently than others. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the experience the ethnographer is attending to is only related to that one category or to just one sense organ. Rather, the idea of a sensory ethnography advanced here is based on an understanding of the senses as interconnected and interrelated.

Doing Sensory Ethnography is presented through eight chapters. Chapter 1 defines sensory ethnography, situates it in relation to debates about how ethnography 'should' be done, and sets the interdisciplinary scene for the book. Here I explore the historical development of the focus on the senses in the key academic and applied disciplines where it is represented. This discussion identifies key debates, themes and convergences within and across these areas, providing a necessary backdrop against which to understand the developments discussed in later chapters, and in [p. 3 ↓] particular through which to situate ethnographic case studies in relation to historical and disciplinary trajectories.

Chapter 2 establishes the principles of a sensory ethnography and the theoretical commitments of the book. It examines a set of key concepts that inform the idea of a sensory ethnography through a consideration of existing thought and debates concerning sensory experience, perception and knowing. These fundamental questions, which are embedded in debates that are themselves not totally resolved, inform not only how ethnographers comprehend the lives of others, but also how they understand their own research practices. Here I also propose understanding sensory ethnography through a theory of place and place-making, and outline the significance of memory and imagination in the ethnographic process. The conceptual tools presented in Chapter 2 inform the analytical strand of the following chapters.

Chapter 3 takes a necessarily more practical approach to the doing of sensory ethnography. Here I identify and discuss how ethnographers might prepare for and anticipate some of the issues and practices that are particular to an approach to ethnography that both seeks out knowledge about the senses and uses the senses as a route to knowledge. In doing so I explore the reflexivity demanded by this approach and argue for an appreciation of the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of the sensory ethnography process.

Chapters 4 and 5 follow conventional ethnographic methodology texts in that they are dedicated to 'participant observation' and 'ethnographic interviewing', respectively. However, in fact the purpose of these chapters is to challenge, revise and rethink both of these established ethnographic practices through the senses. In doing so I draw from my own work and a series of case studies from the work of other ethnographers who attend to the senses to both review the theoretical and practical concerns that have grown around these methods and to suggest reconceptualising them through sensory methodologies. Chapter 6 continues this revisionary vein. Drawing from my own and other existing work in visual ethnography, I ask what role visual methods and media might have in a multisensory approach to ethnography. Here, building on ideas initially developed in *The Future of Visual Anthropology* (Pink 2006), I extend the discussion to review how visual methods are being used to research sensory experience, knowledge and practice across the social sciences and humanities – and to examine their potential for the representation of multisensory experience. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 respond to and develop further the understanding of the relationship between ethnography and place introduced in Chapter 2.

Chapter 7 approaches the issue of analysis in sensory ethnography. This is a question that (given the messiness of the ethnographic process and the frequent impossibility of distinguishing analysis as a separate stage from research or representation) some would be forgiven for thinking might be rather redundant. Accounting for this problem, I suggest thinking of analysis as a way of making ethnographic places. Analysis might be variously situated in the ethnographic process and not always distinguishable from other activities. It is indeed as sensorial a process as the research itself: a context where sensory memories and imaginaries are at their full force as the ethnographer draws relationships between the experiential field of the research and the scholarly practices of academia.

Chapter 8 discusses how the multisensory realities of ethnographers' and research participants' lives might be represented. Here I explore how representations might be [p. 4 ↓] developed to communicate something of the ethnographer's own experiences, and those of the people participating in the research, to their audiences, while simultaneously making a contribution to scholarship. This investigation both reviews existing sensory representation within academic contexts and goes beyond academia to explore sensory arts practice.

This book is programmatic in that it argues for, and indeed undertakes a systematic thinking through of, the theoretical, methodological and practical elements with which a sensory approach to ethnography might engage. Nevertheless, *Doing Sensory Ethnography* is not intended to be prescriptive. Rather, I suggest how a sensory ethnographic process might be understood and how it might be achieved, and in doing so discuss a wide range of examples of existing practice. I do not propose a 'how to' account of doing ethnography with the senses in mind, but a framework for a sensory ethnography that can serve as a reference point for future developments and creativity. Like any 'type' of ethnography, ultimately a sensory approach cannot simply be learnt from a book, but will be developed through the ethnographer's engagement with her or his environment. Therefore, at the end of this journey through the chapters, the reader should not expect to have learnt *how* to do a sensory ethnography. Instead, I hope that she or he will feel inspired to build on the exciting and innovative practice of others. The existing literature now offers a strong basis from which to reflect on the possibilities and opportunities afforded by an ethnographic methodology that attends to the senses in its epistemology and its practices of research, analysis and representation.

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