

Developing an olfactory methodology for researching workplace smell: A research note



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Introduction: what's that, smell?

This paper describes a methodological approach to generating sensory data about workplace life and organizational milieu, developed during a British Academy funded project to empirically explore the role and importance of smell in office-based work environments. The research was carried out between 2009-2011¹, motivated by the following:

1. To address a historical lack of attention to smell in organization studies (despite burgeoning attention to olfactory issues in anthropology and sociology) as highlighted by Corbett (2006);
2. To provide a culturally informed counter-balance to the neuro-biologically rooted trends towards commercial utilization of smell for managerial ends, including sensory branding, marketing, workplace aroma-management techniques and so on (for an overview see Riach and Warren 2011); and
3. To contribute to the nascent field of sensory organization studies/ organizational behaviour by bringing together both authors' respective expertise in aesthetics and visual methodologies (e.g., Warren 2008) and embodiment, music and non-representational experience (Riach 2010)

We were particularly interested in exploring the entanglement of smell and culture, the body and the social, following recent writings in sensory anthropology which insist upon the culturally infused character of sensory experience and expressly argue against psychologically reductionist accounts of senses as 'triggers' for cultural interpretation based on neurological pathways and related brain activity (Howes 2009, 2010; Ingold 2011). In an organizational sense, we saw this assumption manifesting itself in the aforementioned aroma-management techniques (2 above), whereby unproblematic assumptions were being made as to the 'power of smell' to engender particular feelings, dispositions, attitudes and ultimately encourage certain behaviours – e.g., the smell of peppermint increasing mental alertness in schools (Shepherd, 2010). Importantly, underpinning these developments is a biologically-driven consensus that smell has a direct connection to the limbic system of the brain, evoking memories and associations with immediate and forceful emotional consequences (c.f. Shepherd, 2005) which has yet to be critically interrogated by organizational scholars.

Our research centred on the olfactory experiences of office/ white-collar workers because we considered that this occupational group were most likely to be impacted by current and future developments in aroma-management. Furthermore, the little attention that has been paid to smell at work within organization studies has focused on jobs where smell and the body are intrinsically part of the core tasks of work, such as heavy manual labour (Thompson 1983) or body work in care homes (e.g. Martin 2002). Our intention was to pay close attention to the everyday experience of work where the body is not regarded in this way, and where one might expect smells to be of a non-distinct, mundane character.

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Empirical questions were exploratory and included the following: What role do personal history, context and culture play in the reception of certain aromas? How do the macro and micro political realities of organizational life infuse the way smells are experienced and made sense of? How does smell organize and become organized by the workplace?

Specifically, the aims of the study were as follows:

1. To investigate the role of smell in experiences of work and in particular, the social processes through which smell is used to affiliate or distance oneself from certain beliefs, scenarios or identities relating to workplace behaviour. This is important to understand given the adoption of scent as a managerial tool.
2. To assess the efficacy of an 'olfactory methodology' in generating insights into contemporary organizational life, responding to concerns within the social sciences to develop more 'sensually complete' research methods: a timely and important agenda for organization studies and social science more generally.

It is the second of these aims that this paper addresses, critical discussion on the first of these aims can be found in Riach and Warren (2011) and more conceptually in relation to the body-culture-senses nexus in Riach and Warren (forthcoming).

Devising the 'smell interview': smell is non-representational

In our research we wanted to explore how smell and culture intermingle to produce meaning for people at work (and by extension result in value judgements about elements of that work) and so we needed a method that drew in the embodied experience of smelling, even though we knew this was by definition impossible because smell – and other sensory experiences – are largely considered to be non-representational. At the same time, however we were very interested in the meaning our participants made of these embodied 'smell experiences' since it was in the interplay between the two that we felt we would learn the most about how smell impacts on people's workplace experiences.

To be non-representational is to defy direct correspondence in language – such experiences are ineffable, as Gagliardi (1996) puts it. Try describing the aroma of coffee and how it makes you feel to get an instant sense of this. Likewise, the perfume and viticulture industries are littered with metaphors that desperately try to translate the peculiar visceral and emotional nuances of smell and taste into language so that we might share a codified system for fragrances (top notes, woody etc.) and wine (full bodied, flowery etc.), for example (see www.odettetoilette.com and Latour and Latour 2010, respectively), yet none of these come anywhere close to imparting the *actual* scent of the perfume or the quasi smell-taste aromatic experience of sipping wine, much less the *actual* experience for me or you. This irreducibility of sensory experience is at the heart of art theories that stress the 'presentational symbolism' of sensually derived aesthetic experience and which seek to establish the value of art as an expressive form in and of itself (e.g., Langer 1957). Aesthetic expression and sensory

apprehension 'tells' us that which is unsayable, yet integral to the human condition as Tilley (2008: 259) straightforwardly explains '...if I could say it, why would I dance it, or paint it, or sculpt it?' In relation to our olfactory methodology, we therefore needed to retain the importance of the bodily experience as irreducible since, after all, this is what we presume makes sensory and aesthetic experiences unique in the first place, and therefore worth studying.

In response, we decided to include observations of 'live smelling' in the research design. The first stage of our methodology was to invite participants to a 'smell interview' where they were asked to talk about 13 aromas offered to them, in turn, to smell. The smells were ordered (and in one case commissioned) in liquid form from scent engineering companies and were chosen to represent a range of odours one might encounter in an office workplace environment. They were offered to the participant on paper strips (mouliettes) similar to those used to sample perfumes at fragrance counters. Some of the liquids were coloured, some clear, and some were more viscous than others, traces of which could be seen on the mouliette, but the participants were not told what each smell was intended to represent until after they had finished talking about it. The smells were: coffee, pencil, sweat, furniture polish, damp/ musty, spicy food (curry), paper, carpet tiles, bad breath, strong perfume, wooden desk, engine oil²

A rationale for using video: smell is embodied

In a similar vein to the above, organizational scholars' attention to the body as an integral part of organizing processes has come under fire for treating the fleshy, experiential dimensions of embodiment as only important when discursively constructed (Casey 2000). What counts as 'fat', for example, what skin colour is seen as most desirable and/or attractive, and what combination of attributes is deemed to make up an appropriate organizational body, (which in our case of course includes the demarcation of one that smells right too), are culturally and situationally determined. These arguments have added greatly to our understandings of what it means to be materially embodied in a social world and especially so in organizations. But in doing this important work, have we literally 'written' the body out of the process in our emphasis on bodily experience as cultural text? In the same way that aesthetic sensations provide us with 'sense-ible knowledge' (Strati 1999) about the world we encounter that lose something (everything?) in translation, so in this project we believed the body needed to be considered as a source of somatic 'data' in itself and not just one that is understood through the lens of culture. In previous research, both of us have encountered the fleshy force of bodily dynamics - Samantha's examination of 'matter over mind' in the state of being a pregnant body at work, for example (Warren and Brewis 2004) and Kathleen's study of experiences of being an ageing body at work (Riach and Cutcher, 2014), had previously educated us both about the body's refusal to be 'explained away' or otherwise mitigated by discourse alone.

² Although not an 'office' smell, we included the smell of oily grease as having the potential for being 'other' to these people's workplace experiences.

With this in mind, we decided to pay attention to how the *body* expressed smell, as well as how the smelling subject recounted their discursive interpretation of those smells and their affects/ effects on them in words (see below). In practical terms, this meant we video-recorded the 'smell interviews' so as to observe the more instinctive, visceral reactions of our participants to the 13 different smells they were inhaling. The rationale for using video stems from Heath et al.'s (2010: 2) claim that video reveals 'elusive phenomena' in a format that is amenable to the researcher in ways that are much more convenient than interaction observed *in situ*. In particular our concern was to record how our participants' bodies responded to the inhalation of smells – which on later analysis included gesture, facial expression, bodily deportment, movement, non-verbal utterances (ooooh, Urgh! Erm?), shifting gaze, periods of prolonged silence and so on. As such, we were informed by a broadly multimodal methodological commitment – we wished to be sensitive to the different 'affordance or meaning potential' (Jewitt 2009: 24) that these bodily manifestations of smelling produced for the participant as they struggled to communicate their experience and interpretation of smell to us as researchers. The extent to which a multimodal logic can be applied to the senses is an interesting and problematic point. As Howes (2009, 2010) explains, because anthropological studies have repeatedly shown how the senses are differently valorized, combined and experienced in different cultures, attention to different modes (such as the hierarchical division of the 'five senses' in Western thought) tells us more about 'how 'culture mediates the relationship of brain and body to the world' (Howes 2009: 228) than it does about the affordances of particular modes. This returns us to the role of culture in embodied experience and focuses our methodological attention on 'the culturally patterned "loops" through the environment' (*ibid.*) that sensory processes rely on as much as their biological and/or neurological bases.

Language matters: smell is socio-cultural

Thus, notwithstanding all of the above and our insistence on the body as a source of data in its own right, an important part of the rationale for this study is, as Howes (2009, 2010) points out, that culture is imbued in smell and vice versa. Attention to the explanations our participants gave about their smell experiences during the 'smell interviews' was therefore as important as the embodied data we were keen to generate. The smells chosen as samples for the 'smell interviews' were deliberately intended to evoke participants' workplace experiences and associations to generate verbal narrative about how smell was understood and made sense of through associated psycho-social processes. Each interview was also preceded by a more general discussion about smells in the workplace (and explanation about the project, the interview process and ethical considerations). So while we were using video in what Haw and Hadfield (2011) refer to as 'extractive mode' to record bodily and non-verbal data for later analysis, playing the video back also allowed us to pay closer attention to the temporal, spatial and interactional character of the verbal commentary as well (Haw and Hadfield 2011: 35). It also allowed us to analyse the linguistic associations and interpretation

our participants' were making to what they were smelling, while their bodies were smelling too.

The 'smell interviews' engendered rich narrative about our participants experiences as well as the somatic reactions already discussed. As also noted above, our participants said nothing for quite a large proportion of their interviews as they inhaled the aroma, thought about it, smelled it again, frowned, smiled, made noises of delight or disgust in the act of being 'transported' to wherever it was the smell took them. Sometimes this was a definite 'place' evoking strong associations and memories, other times it seemed *just* beyond their grasp, a diffuse and subtle trace of a recollection and at others still, the smell evoked nothing other than a judgement as to whether it was pleasant or not in the here and now. But they also talked about the smells as they wove narrative around them, trying to make sense of what they were inhaling, what it reminded them of, what they felt and thought about it and/or what sprang to mind (as well as to body) when it was encountered. This sense making process has been admirably described by Waskul and Vannini (2008: 54) as 'somatic work' which refers to:

a diverse range of reflexive symbolic, iconic, and indexical sense-making experiences and practical activities. Through such experiences and activities individuals produce, extinguish, manage, reproduce, negotiate, interrupt, and/or communicate somatic sensations in order to make them congruent with personal, interpersonal, and/or cultural notions of moral, aesthetic, or and/or logical desirability.

It is this process of sense-making for congruence with (and production of) personal, interpersonal and cultural morality, aesthetics and logic with an organizational context that drove the analysis of this stage (see 'analysis' below). Episodes of congruence, dissonance and other relevant observations were noted and some interesting paradoxes were identified. For example, participants displayed pleasing reactions to some smells (e.g., smiling, recalling favourable memories and so on) that turned to disgust when the 'source' of the smell was revealed (e.g., ashtray, sweat, engine oil etc.). Some then proceeded to engage in a kind of reparative work, either emphatically rejecting that the aroma they'd just encountered was not reminiscent of the smell it was designed to emulate (and therefore their bodily reactions were privileged), or that on reflection, yes they could in fact smell the expected 'attributes' of the aroma now they 'knew what it was'. The social/ cultural interpretation invoked by knowing what the smell was 'of' changed, affirmed or augmented their bodily experience which was laid open for analysis, since the initial bodily reactions preceded the moment of the 'reveal' and could be returned to in contrast to the later assessments of the smell.

Situated dynamics: keeping smell diaries

Implicit in the above discussion is the importance of context to the interpretation – and, therefore we would argue the experience – of smells and smelling. Once a smell was labeled 'as' something, our participants' associations, interpretations and bodily responses through it changed in some way. In relation to smell more generally, the social place of smells is a key theme running through anthropological and sociological accounts of aroma (see contributions to Drobnick 2006). Put simply, what is an appropriate or expected smell in one context is not at all appropriate in another and this changes over time, between cultures, individuals, degree

of familiarity, activity and so on. Pink (2009) refers to this as the 'emplacement' of sensory experience to stress that the character of such experiences will shift depending on the precise configuration of space, body, cultural context, psychology etc.

The 'smell interviews' were undertaken in a variety of settings convenient to the participant and included their homes, the researcher's universities, or the participants' workplaces. Whilst care was taken not to conduct these interviews in areas with particularly strong pre-existing aromas, e.g., near a cafeteria, the quasi-experimental approach taken meant that none of the 'live smelling' was actually carried out with participants smelling naturally occurring aromas, during the course of their normal working day in their usual, immediate workplace setting. Practical considerations would have made it difficult to spend time with our participants in this way, e.g., gaining access permission from line managers and the status of both researchers as full time academics with associated teaching and administration duties. Perhaps more pertinently, given that naturally occurring smells at work were likely (and indeed did) include aromas given off by other people and their activities, the extent to which participants would have been willing and able to discuss them with us in 'real time' was dubious.

To counter this, following the smell-interviews, we asked participants to keep a 'workplace smell-diary' for one week, making entries on a digital voice recorder which they were asked to carry with them as far as possible as they went about their work each day. Instructions were given to record a comment every time a smell was encountered. Participants were free to say anything they liked, but were asked for a minimum of information including where they were at the time they experienced the smell, the time of day and how it made them feel. Having already 'attuned' participants to their olfactory senses in Phase One (smell interviews), the rationale in this, Phase Two, was to transfer this process to a more natural setting. We chose to use voice recorders and not written diaries to allow – as far as possible – for the immediacy of smell experiences. However, due to the constraints of the workplace, several participants were unable to make recordings during the day but noted down instances to talk about in their diaries when possible, the above issue of not disclosing the 'smell imprints' of co-workers was also a key reason for this. Participants were then invited to a second interview with the researcher, where each diary entry was listened to and further discussed.

During the second interview, participants were also asked to draw a plan of their work environment and map the smells recorded in the diaries onto this in order to produce a visual representation of the 'smell scape' of their office environment. While some of the 'smell action' plotted on these maps occurred in close proximity to the participants' desk and commonly frequented areas, what was striking about this part of the methodology was the difficulty people had in pinning a smell down to a specific location in the office – they asked whether they should attribute the smell to its source (if they knew it), the spot where they specifically encountered it or note it on the plan everywhere it had diffused to. Analysis of this stage of the methodology led to the development of our concept of the 'sensual signifier' that

we argue is an example *par excellence* of intercorporeality at work (Riach and Warren, forthcoming). The ephemeral and unbounded character of smell as both a material property of the object that gave rise to it and a subjective experience within the person smelling it shows how materiality and sociality are immanent to one another. Unlike the sense organs for sight or hearing, which to a large extent can be closed off to prevent the 'outside' getting 'in', smell is unavoidable since it occurs whenever we inhale.

Analysis

In practice, the audio tracks from the video recordings were transcribed, loaded into NVivo 9 and coded following established protocols for analysis of qualitative interview data. As well as undertaking coding strategies emerging from key debates in anthropology exploring actions and behaviour associated with smell (such as Classen et al's 1994 classification of olfactory dimensions), the data was interrogated through grounded forms of coding. Second stage analysis then drew on a variety of techniques to connect together the basic coding structure. This included patterning identification (Hatch, 2002) to identify co-supported themes or ideas that at first appeared distinct, and dynamic strategies, where particular objects, smells or descriptions were followed through the various transcripts to identify points where there were changes to its character in terms of development, transformation, perceptions or attributes.

The videos were analysed using Transana, one of the few software programmes designed for qualitative analysis of this kind, with instances of bodily expression being compared to the associated narrative in a shuttling back and forth between the body's communicative capacity and the associated verbal explanation and we will be further reflecting – both methodologically and conceptually – on the process we undertook for a future publication.

Conclusions: a work-in-progress

The project described here was highly exploratory and we are extremely grateful to the British Academy for seeing the potential in our research and for funding the empirical part of the project. As such, both methodology and concepts were highly inductive and experimental, drawing in a range of ideas that are truly interdisciplinary, from neuroscience through anthropology to applications in the arts and commerce. Navigating through these has led us back to focusing on the body and its sense making capacities and in particular how bodies-who-organize are intercorporeal, particularly following the work of Thomas Csordas who is himself influenced by Merleau-Ponty's thesis that the body and culture are indivisible in the act of perception (see Riach and Warren, forthcoming). The biggest challenge in carrying out the empirical part of this project, then, has been to methodologically try to retain this culture-body immanence, without deferring automatically to meaning-making from verbal discourse. We intend to continue thinking and feeling our way through these tensions in future articles and publications.

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