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Sensory ethnography: a creative turn

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical scoping and exploration of sensory ethnography. It combines a literature survey with some relevant fieldwork reflections. It aims to both recognize and appreciate the rise of sensory ethnography as a creative turn. In short, the essay provides a series of provocations and challenges around doing different descriptive ethnography. It is organized into three sections. The first section frames and unpacks sensory ethnography. The second section articulates sensory ethnography in action by outlining the author's autoethnographic journey in both martial arts and bouncing. The final concluding section, considers the future of sensory ethnography as a radicalizing and imaginative lens within organizational ethnography and related fields.

1. Framing and unpacking sensory ethnography

Framing the sensory and in turn unpacking the visceral, visual, aural, somatic, haptic and kinaesthetic realms is a daunting but worthwhile task. This arena has been variably referred to as the anthropology of the senses (Howes, 1991), sensuous geographies (Rodaway, 1994), sensuous scholarship (Stoller, 1997), sensing culture (Howes, 2003), the sensorial revolution (Howes, 2006), sensory studies (Bull *et al.*, 2006), ways of knowing (Harris, 2007), fleshy perspectives (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007), sensory phenomenology (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007; 2009), emplaced knowing (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013), a sociology of the senses (Vannini *et al.*, 2012) and ways of sensing (Howes and Classen, 2014).

Pink (2001, 2006, 2009, 2010, 2011a, b, 2012, 2013) who initially worked in visual anthropology, is a key figure in the popularization of sensory ethnography. Her call to view ethnographers as emplaced "sensory apprentices" gaining knowledge through embodied practice and empathetic engagement rather than an over reliance on textual representations is radicalizing. Sensory ethnography still uses traditional modes of representation but also vitally:

... directs epistemic attention to the ways in which the senses play a part in the performance and coordination of practices and in the subsequent interaction with the social and material world (Valtonen *et al.*, 2010, p. 377).

Pink outlines sensory ethnography as

... 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 practice our craft (2009, p. 1).

For some, the methodological roots of sensory ethnography lie firmly within earlier turns in visual anthropology, including filmic and video approaches. Later approaches have moved away from the analytic privileging of sight and vision and engaged with more sensory categories. Nakamura argues

Sensory ethnography is an emerging trend within visual anthropology, with practitioners focusing on at least two different aspects: the aesthetic-sensual and the multisensory-experiential (2013, p. 132).

Gibson and vom Lehn argue that the evolving domain of sensory sociology and the interactionist analysis of sense work are driven by efforts to “make the senses palpable, describable and workable” (2021, p. 8). Gibson and vom Lehn suggest that

The central idea involves treating the senses as much under-explored resources for sociocultural meaning as well as an important site of studying inscribed, negotiated, and embodied knowledge and practice (2021, p. 3).

To some, including myself, situating and understanding the sensory is most clearly articulated in the explorations of “body pedagogies” (Shilling, 2005b), body cultures (Eichberg, 1998) and physical cultures (Silk *et al.*, 2017) with the associated sensibilities in carnal and corporeal sociology as theoretical scaffolding (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 2002; Crossley, 2005, 2006; Wacquant, 1992, 1995, 2004, 2005, 2014, 2015; Weiss, 1999).

Accordingly, sensory ethnography attempts to unpack taken-for-granted bodily practices, skills, experiences and tacit knowledge. Harris *et al.* describe this as “the more ineffable and non-representational aspects of practice” (2020, p. 632), what philosopher Merleau-Ponty, who is regularly referenced, elegantly characterized as the complex relationship between “the visible and the invisible” (1958). The early rudimentary work on the “sociology of the senses” (1907) by sociologist Simmel was a relational analysis of mainly perception but it pointed towards the analytic importance of the sensory realms. Similarly, anthropologist Mauss discusses “techniques of the body” (1934), without unpacking reflexive embodiment in detail.

One of the main complexities and challenges here is that the sensory realms can be both an individual matter of embodiment and socially shared and situated subcultural phenomena. This dualism prompts various theoretic strands, debates and developments covering somatic and haptic phenomenology (Allen-Collinson, 2011; Williams and Bendelow, 1998), reflexive embodiment and body techniques (Crossley, 2005, 2006; Featherstone *et al.*, 1991; Ingold and Lee Vergunst, 2016; Shilling, 1993, 2004, 2005a; Turner, 1984) and sensory experiences (Pink, 2010; Sparkes, 2017; Stoller, 1989). Various seminal ethnographies have attempted to grasp the phenomenology of sporting bodies (Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007; McNarry *et al.*, 2018).

2. Sensory ethnography in action: an embodied and embedded autoethnography of martial arts and bouncing

My autoethnographic journey in martial arts and bouncing merged. I had trained in martial arts prior to my longitudinal covert ethnography of bouncers (Calvey, 2000, 2008, 2017, 2019, 2021). My martial art training, mainly in Jeet Jun Do (JKD), provided me with the bodily image, capital and passport to study the stigmatized and demonized world of bouncers in the night-time economy of Manchester.

The dedicated study of martial arts is a relatively small and embryonic academic field in the social sciences but a growing and highly innovative area (Bowman, 2015; Downey, 2005; Frank, 2006; García and Spencer, 2013; Jennings *et al.*, 2010). Many of the key theoretic threads in the field have been broadly centred on embodiment (Spencer, 2012; Channon and Jennings, 2014) and habitus (García and Spencer, 2013; Spencer, 2009) with Wacquant’s (2004) ethnography of boxing a milestone for many in this field. The diasporic nature of martial arts has been recognized (Channon and Jennings, 2014; Delamont *et al.*, 2017) in the field. A stream of the literature has also specifically explored the rise of mixed martial arts (Spencer, 2009, 2012) and the increasing feminization of martial arts (Channon and Matthews, 2015), with others being concerned with more traditional styles. Much of the methodological push in the field is in forms of autoethnography (Stenius and Dziwenka, 2015), practitioner–researcher narratives (Jennings, 2013) and autophenomenography (Allen-Collinson, 2011).

My “heartful” autoethnography (Ellis, 1999, 2004, 2007) was saturated in moral compass conundrums and emotionality (Carter and Delamont, 1996; Holmes, 2010; Widdowfield, 2000)

due to the covert nature of it. Thus, positionality was a complex process of “being on both sides” (Calvey, 2021) for me, with the associated management of guilt syndromes. Autoethnography is a diverse tradition (Hughes and Pennington, 2017) and despite the critiques of its narcissistic tones (Atkinson, 1997; Delamont, 2009; Tolich, 2010), it was an appropriate way to explore my biographical layering.

These impressionistic sketches and thick description (Geertz, 1973) of my lived sensory experiences are attempts at faithful and layered accounts (Ronai, 1995) in a spirit of authenticity of the lived body (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). My version of sensory ethnography was very much in the mould of an immersive sociology of flesh and blood (Wacquant, 2015), with carnal connections (Wacquant, 2005). I aim to reflect on a series of fieldwork vignettes around sensory embodiment in action.

2.1 Learning energy flows, balance, timing and broken rhythm as praxeology

Internal energy flows are essential to many martial art systems such as Kiai in Japanese systems and Chi in Chinese systems. It is key in the development of power, both internal and external, and central to both offensive and defensive moves, particularly manipulating the balance of an opponent. I first encountered this in Tai Chi classes at university as an undergraduate in pushing and sticky hands movements. These were sensitivity and touch exercises that we would often do in close contact with partners in silence and with eyes closed. It was important to change pace and mix partners to deepen and enhance this practice. Our instructor was Chinese and spoke very little English, so our classes were primarily conducted as a physical demonstrable “showings” with lots of body manipulation from him. It was refreshing not to have the theory behind it explained so that you learnt in a much more sensory manner, what Potter (2008) describes as a dual sense of motion and self and Sheets-Johnstone (2003) as kinaesthetic memory.

In my later practices of “broken rhythm” within Jeet Kune Do (JKD) with Wing Chun inspired trapping drills, these earlier sensitivity drills became essential. JKD is a hybrid combat style founded by the icon Bruce Lee (Bowman, 2010, 2013, 2019; Jennings, 2019). My version of JKD was infused by our Chief Instructor’s genealogy with Kali and Silat from Indonesia, Shukokia Karate from Japan and Muay Thai from Thailand. Changing partners and feeling different bodily energy and the different angles people would move and their varying capabilities developed flexibility and responsiveness. The specific nature of the JKD dojo, which did not have a visible belt hierarchy, aided democratic training. The instructor continually implored us to learn by “feeling” techniques and moves and letting actions flow as second nature. When I was in Thailand having private lessons in Muay Thai, the grand master instructor always started the sessions with me standing on one leg for as long as I could, with the learning mantra of “without balance you have nothing”.

Sparring would often put body drills into true perspective as you had to cope quickly with unorthodox angles and less rule-bound interactions and collisions. It was profoundly a sense of “switching on” (Hockey, 2009) as your senses were heightened with adrenaline terms of being badly injured or injuring others. It was working out your “sense of motion” (Potter, 2008) and rhythm and timing (Goodridge, 1999) in a negotiated way with others.

Bodies could also be interestingly deceptive in this context, as you would have assumptions and expectations about certain body types and images, some of which were true and others wildly mistaken. Part of the learning journey here was failure, mistakes, frustrations, disappointments, lack of progress and lack of consistency, as well as managing an ageing body.

2.2 Feeling pain and power through repetitive and reflexive body techniques

Much martial art training involved a type of feeling for the reflexive techniques that you would embody and sediment through repetition. You would often be instructed, ironically, “not to think

about it” to try and make the movements habitual and second nature. For instance, once you learnt your guard you would always have it there automatically as a type of muscle memory like learning to swim or ride a bike. Linked to this was “tapping” when you felt the pain of a correctly executed technique. You would guide your partner on how effective their technique was, that is, whether you actually felt it or not. Such acid tests were developmentally very important. Hence, pain management, injuries, bruises and body callusing (Spencer, 2009) are a constant part of the martial art apprenticeship (Wacquant, 2005; Downey *et al.*, 2015).

Bodily reflexive techniques are typically learnt and socially sedimented through repetition, hence the importance of Katas and forms in some styles, which are a rigidly choreographed set patterns and sequences of moves. Linked to this is the psychological disposition of both hitting and hurting others and being hit and hurt yourself, in controlled ways. The overriding social logic of the pugilistic subcultural (Wacquant, 1992; Jump, 2021) was the disciplining of the body in certain ways. Martial arts movement was a clear display of “knowledge in action” (Allen-Collinson, 2008, 2009, 2013).

2.3 A community of situated martial art practice and habitus

To a certain extent, martial art training is an inter-subjectively shared “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998) and form of “situated learning” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) as well as individual muscle memory and the sedimentation of repetitive body techniques of the self. You would learn by doing with others in a combination of watching and following your instructor and fellow pupils. What Jennings (2010) usefully characterizes as “shared cultivation”. Certain styles and clubs were metaphorically like families, which gave a sense of belonging across time and place (Partikova and Jennings, 2018). Similarly, the culture of bouncing had a strong sense of camaraderie and fictive kinship (Woodward and Jennings, 2011).

Learning martial arts displayed bodily capital (Wacquant, 1992, 1995, 2004, 2005, 2011, 2014, 2015). When I trained with someone who had surprisingly good technique and power, my question to them was often a biographical and historical one of what they had trained in before and for how long. In this sense, bodies are formative and change over time (Shilling, 2008). Often, they had trained from childhood and hence had deeply embedded bodily techniques. In this way, habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990, 2002) is a set of dispositions and preferences that members are socialized into and is tied up with a sense of place (Hillier and Rooksby, 2005). Wacquant, in his reflexive ethnography of boxing, argues that habitus, inspired by Bourdieu, is an attempt to

... develop a dispositional theory of action recognizing that social agents are not passive beings pulled and pushed about by external forces, but skilful creatures who actively construct social reality through “categories of perception, appreciation and action” (2015, p. 85).

The martial art habitus and their physical capital also had a gendered dimension (Thorpe, 2009; Themen, 2020) as it was a primarily masculine one with females often being pseudo masculine and performing a type of resistant feminism. Similarly, the bouncing world was hyper-masculine, with few females involved, although that number is rising. In terms of broad cultural capital, I found bouncing a predominantly working class sphere with martial arts being, contrastingly, much more mixed.

Being a martial artist and bouncer also became a pronounced part of my identity politics and body politic (Mensch, 2009), particularly as my work and leisure blurred and seeped into each other over time. Bouncing was a way to test my martial art training in the wild and was very different from dojo etiquette. What Foster (2015) calls “somatic metaphorism”, and Csordas (1993) calls ‘somatic modes of attention’, in that many martial artists rarely really fight, even if they do competitions, but are “fight-ready”. Many of the bouncers I worked with in my covert ethnography had come from martial arts backgrounds. They knew of my

martial art background as a form of credibility, trust and rapport but not of my academic research intentions. I was conducting my longitudinal covert study of bouncing at the same time as training in martial arts, which is a secret separation I managed. This “divided self” was a source of guilt for me, as well as having a spoiling effect on a life-long hobby (Rossing and Scott, 2016). Although I have finished the academic study of bouncing, I have never stopped training in martial arts.

3. Conclusions: the diaspora of sensory ethnography

As sensory ethnography has become more popular and, in turn, diasporic, it’s range of topics have including consumer research (Valtonen *et al.*, 2010), human computer interaction (Pink *et al.*, 2013), mobile media and digital society (Pink *et al.*, 2016), inclusive sensory ethnography, new media and disability (Alper, 2018), sensory judgements and medical practice (Maslen, 2017), bodily injury and somatic training in the military (Hockey, 2009, 2013; McSorley, 2012, 2013; Mensch, 2009; Scarry, 1985), technology and art (Jones, 2007), domestic energy (Leder Mackley and Pink, 2013), art and touch (Bacci and Melcher, 2013) and food and multiculturalism (Rhys-Taylor, 2018). This list is not definitive but a display of the increasing diversity.

Sensory ethnography will no doubt retain a prime pull for exploring various bodily crafts, skills and expertise’s in the sociology of sport and physical cultures as well as underpinning explorations within the sociology of the body. For some it is an integral part of complex ethnography which explores the contours of culture (Atkinson *et al.*, 2007). For others, sensory ethnography is intimately tied up with multimodality (Dicks, 2014; Dicks *et al.*, 2011; Flewitt, 2011; Hurdley and Dicks, 2011; Pink, 2011a, b).

As ethnography becomes an increasingly hybrid and interdisciplinary endeavour for some, sensory ethnography will likely be mixed and mashed with other styles. Some of these fusions will make theoretical sense, whilst others will not. This does not diminish its innovative lens and potentials. It is still a radicalizing turn for ethnography, similar to the textuality and postmodern wave from *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986) by Clifford and Marcus.

The influential *Tourist Gaze* (1990) by Urry has sensory sympathies as did *Eating Out: Social Differentiation, Consumption and Pleasure* (2000) by Warde and Martens. Accordingly, researchers have called for “sensuous tourism” (Crouch and Desforges, 2003) and “sensory-aware cultural consumer research” (Valtonen *et al.*, 2010, p. 375) to be more central in Tourism Studies. Valtonen *et al.* aim to

... encourage scholars to further investigate the multiple forms consumer sensuousness may take in the diverse settings of consumer culture and to develop methods for their adequate exploration (2010, p. 379).

The highly innovative work done in multi-species ethnography (Wels, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018, 2020) encourages ethnographers to both think and be explicitly trained in “multi-sensory methods and interpretations” (Wels, 2020, p. 343), inspired by indigenous animal tracking and following. Wels cogently reflects on the sensibility of sensory ethnography:

I increasingly went for words only, the easiest ethnographic data we can get in our over-saturated text-world of social and other media; that I treated the sensory and physical aspects of fieldwork far less systematic and consistent ways than words; that I had lost touch with the sentient nature of our sense making (2020, p. 359).

If we treat ethnography as a type of making (Ingold, 2013) and crafting (Atkinson, 2013), then sensory ethnography should be a standard part of its toolkit and not an exotic maverick. It is clearly part of thinking ethnographically (Atkinson, 2017). Sensory

ethnography is an innovative, if methodologically challenging, relative newer tale of the field (Van Maanen, 1988).

Warren (2008) calls for an aesthetic approach to organizational ethnography as she explored photography in her organizational fieldwork, which actively moves towards a sensual methodology and “sense-itising ethnography”. Warren later stresses, “through a process of acculturation, we are simply not accustomed to noticing much of the sensory stimuli we are continually immersed in” (2012, p. 114) and poses the interesting methodological question: “Even once we have noticed our ‘sense-scapes’, how do we go about recording and disseminating aesthetic data in ways that retain some semblance of the sensory character of such encounters?” (2012, p. 114).

As ethnography becomes an increasingly fashionable interdisciplinary endeavour, sensory ethnography will likely be mixed and mashed with other styles. The “processual ambiguity” (Pink, 2013) of sensory ethnography with less strict models or rules of representation brings it appeal but also problems as a catch-all umbrella term. Some of these interdisciplinary exchanges, fusions and interlocutors will make theoretical sense, whilst others will not, what Sparkes (2009) describes as the challenges and possibilities of ethnography and the senses.

Although sensory ethnography can still be broadly differentiated from traditional or conventional ethnographies, and in this sense is non-canonical, its increasing popularity is likely to make it a more contested and fragmented tradition. Van Maanen reminds us, in the face of potential relativistic experimentation: “The point and purpose of ethnography remains to render the actual and to do so persuasively” (2011, p. 232). Part of the reflexive push in sensory ethnography is also in recognizing and appreciating loss, failure, mistakes and absence in doing ethnography (Smith and Delamont, 2019) rather than sanitized ethnographic accounts which gloss over the colourful warts and all.

Sensory ethnography is still a set of descriptive practices, like other styles of ethnography, and, for me, forms part of a wider descriptive turn (Love, 2010, 2013, 2015, 2016). It partly then becomes a question of philosophic motive, in terms of what theory laden purpose sensory ethnography is used for.

Sensory ethnography is a different “art of attentiveness” (Vitellone *et al.*, 2021) and should be valued accordingly. In certain respects, sensory ethnography is a particular type of professional vision (Goodwin, 1994) that draws attention to taken-for-granted features in everyday life. Sensory ethnography attempts to develop a more expressive and experiential narrative for ethnography. Developing a sensory lens is a positively disruptive and analytically rich way of being ethnographic. It represents a creative turn for ethnography and is a vital part of the ethnographic imagination.

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