SARAH PINK

DOING SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY

2ND EDITION

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My sensory ethnography research emerged from two projects developed with Unilever Research in 1999–2000, a collaboration that led to my book *Home Truths* (2004) which outlines the notion of the sensory home. My *The Future of Visual Anthropology* (2006) consolidated some of my ideas about the senses in anthropology and began to shape some of the ideas expanded on here. My subsequent publications about Slow Cities in the UK, Spain and Australia all engage (with) the senses for thinking through questions relating to research environments and participants *and* to understanding the approach of the movement itself. This research was during different stages of its development funded by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at Loughborough University, a Nuffield Foundation small grant and RMIT University in Australia and hosted by the IN3 at the Open University of Catalonia in Barcelona. Other research discussed in this book has been undertaken with colleagues through my CI roles in the 'Lower Effort Energy Demand Reduction' project (LEEDR), based at Loughborough University, funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (UK) through the UK Research Councils' Digital Economy and Energy programmes (grant number EP/I000267/1), and the 'Management of OSH in Networked Systems of Production or Service Delivery: Comparisons between Healthcare, Construction and Logistic' project funded by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), UK. For further information about the LEEDR project, collaborating research groups and industrial partners, please visit www.leedr-project.co.uk.

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While this book is independently written, some of the ideas and examples have been introduced in earlier articles. Earlier versions of the idea of ethnography as place-making have been developed in 'Walking with video' published in *Visual Studies* (Pink, 2007d) and 'An urban tour: the sensory sociality of ethnographic place-making' published in *Ethnography* (Pink, 2008b); selected examples from these articles are also discussed here.

About the author

Sarah Pink is Professor of Design and Media Ethnography at RMIT University, Australia. She has Visiting Professorships in Applied Cultural Analysis at Halmstad University, Sweden, and in Social Sciences, in the Schools of Civil and Building Engineering and Design at Loughborough University, UK. She is known internationally for her work relating to sensory, visual and digital methodology. Her most recent works in this area include the *Energy and Digital Living* website (2014) and the books *Doing Visual Ethnography* (2013), *Ethnographic Research in the Construction Industry* (co-ed., 2013), *Situating Everyday Life* (2012) and *Advances in Visual Methodology* (ed. 2012). Her research is usually interdisciplinary and is both funded by research councils, and developed collaboratively with research partners.

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. Sensory ethnography is used across scholarly, practice-based and applied disciplines. It develops an approach to the world and to research that accounts for how sensory ways of experiencing and knowing are integral both to the lives of people who participate in our research *and* to how we ethnographers practise our craft.

Ethnographers, from a range of different disciplines, are increasingly accounting for and commenting on the multisensoriality of the ethnographic process. As I wrote the first edition of this book in the first decade of the twenty-first century, 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 now being materialised into a new literature that accounts for the senses across the social sciences and humanities. In the half decade between the publication of that first edition of *Doing Sensory Ethnography* and this second edition there has been an explosion in scholarship and practice around the senses, across social science, humanities and arts disciplines including human geography, design, film and photography, anthropology, sociology and a range of interdisciplinary fields including cultural and media studies, education studies and health studies. Indeed, a sensory approach can be applied to most projects that involve human experience and practical activity. That does not mean that all ethnography should be done explicitly through the senses, but that to be theoretically and methodologically equipped to engage with the world sensorially is a key skill to own.

This book responds to the discussions and proposals that emerge from existing literature and practice, and draws on examples from my own and other scholars' and practitioners' experiences of doing ethnography with attention to the senses across domestic, urban and organisational environments. The central theme and

task of the book is to establish a methodology for *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. It differs from other books that account for the senses in ethnography, in a number of ways, notably because it is interdisciplinary. It moreover goes beyond simply playing the role of advocate for a sensory approach, demonstrating how we can learn through attending to the senses or showing how we might study the senses. *Doing Sensory Ethnography* instead offers an approach to doing and representing research. It proposes a way of thinking about doing ethnography through the senses.

A focus on methodology leads to the question of what 'bigger picture' is emerging that takes sensory ethnography beyond just studying the senses or using our own senses to study other people's worlds. It is important that we understand how knowledge and ways of knowing are produced, what particular qualities and types of knowledge are currently emerging and the implications of this for how researchers, artists, designers or policy makers comprehend the world and intervene in it, and how futures are imagined and made. To do this we need to understand the implications of particular research methodologies for how we research, account for and potentially participate in change-making. By drawing together contemporary scholarship and practice concerned with the senses in ethnography I show how what has been called the 'sensory turn' is part of a wider shift in how we might understand the world, and that this has implications for how we might intervene in the world – as designers, artists, activists, by influencing policy, as educators or through other forms of action. These turns are also increasingly orienting scholarship towards the future, in impulses towards the development of ethnography that along with design is change-making.

While most of the earlier 'sensory ethnographies', as well as much of my own work, were rooted in social anthropology, the reach and relevance of *Doing Sensory Ethnography* reflects the growing interest in the senses across disciplines. Its theoretical commitments to concepts of place, memory, imagination, improvisation and intervention reach out to ideas and practices developed across the social sciences and humanities. Moreover, these theoretical themes consistently resonate though the work of researchers concerned with the senses across scholarly and practice-based disciplines. Indeed, my research for this book has traversed diverse 'ethnographic' scholarly and practice-based disciplines and interdisciplinary areas of study. It has also introduced me to new academic, applied and arts practices. The work of some scholars has emerged as outstanding illustrations of how sensory ethnography might be done, and I return to their examples across the chapters. In writing the second edition of this book I encountered a much deeper wealth of literature and practice around the senses than was available for its 2009 edition. Yet, still many ethnographers (whose work demonstrates so well the significance of the senses in culture and society) have neglected to write about the processes through which they came to these understandings. In this vein I would urge contemporary ethnographers, artists and designers who engage with 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 part of their scholarship or practice. 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 practical activity conceived as multisensorial and emplaced, or I could 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 address 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 not always possible to understand as if separate categories, 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), where discussions 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 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, and might serve as a prism through which to understand multisensory experiences (Fors et al., 2013). 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 this Introduction, eight chapters and an Afterword. Chapter 1 both defines sensory ethnography, situates it in relation to debates about how ethnography 'should' be done, and sets the interdisciplinary scene for the book. 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 particular through which to situate ethnographic examples 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 though 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 'ethnographic interviewing' and 'participant observation' respectively. However, 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 examples 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 re-conceptualising them through sensory methodologies. Chapter 6 continues in this revisionary vein. Here I examine the role digital technologies might play in a multisensory approach to ethnography. First, I outline how we might go about understanding the sensory affordances and qualities of digital media as part of the very digital–material–sensory worlds in which we research. I then discuss how we might harness them for sensory ethnography practice. I discuss how digital visual and audio methods and media are being used to research sensory experience, knowledge and practice across the social sciences and humanities, as well as potential uses of locative and body-monitoring technologies in ethnography. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 also 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 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 developed to communicate something of both 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 edition of the book ends with a brief Afterword, where I draw together some of the themes of *Doing Sensory Ethnography* to reflect on the implications of design, intervention and future-focused research and practice for sensory ethnography.

This book is programmatic in that it argues for, and indeed undertakes, a systematic thinking through of the theoretical, methodological and practical elements that 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 sensory ethnography. Rather, 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.

I

Rethinking ethnography through the senses

ONE

Situating sensory ethnography

From academia to intervention

In this chapter I situate sensory ethnography as a field of scholarship and practice. I first outline the characteristics of sensory ethnography. I discuss its relationship to and growth out of other inflections in ethnographic practice, and identify its continuities and departures from existing ethnographic methodologies. I then locate it in relation to the intellectual and practical trajectories of discipline-specific scholarship and applied research. I focus on the disciplines of anthropology, human geography and sociology and on the practice of applied ethnography, art and design. Finally, I consider the potential of sensory ethnography in interdisciplinary scholarship and practice.

INTRODUCTION: SENSORIALITY

Doing Sensory Ethnography investigates the possibilities afforded by attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representation. An acknowledgement that sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand and represent other people's lives is increasingly central to academic and applied practice in the social sciences and humanities. It is part of how we understand our past, how we engage with our present and how we imagine our futures. This appreciation, which David Howes has referred to as a 'sensorial turn' (2003: xii), has been couched in terms of an anthropology of the senses (Howes, 1991a), sensuous scholarship (Stoller, 1997), sensuous geography (Rodaway, 1994), sociology of the senses (Simmel, 1997 [1907]; Low, 2005; Back, 2009; Lyon and Back, 2012; Vannini et al., 2012), the senses in communication and interaction (Finnegan, 2002), the sensorium and arts practice (Jones, 2006a; Zardini, 2005), the sensoriality of film (MacDougall, 1998, 2005; Marks, 2000), a cultural history of the senses (Classen, 1993, 1998),

the sensuous nature of the 'tourist encounter' (Crouch and Desforges, 2003) or of medical practice (Edvardsson and Street, 2007; Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007; Lammer, 2007), sensory design and architecture (Malnar and Vodvarka, 2004; Pallasmaa, 2005 [1999]), attention to the senses in material culture studies (e.g. Tilley, 2006) and in performance studies (Hahn, 2007), in branding (Lindstrom, 2005), the 'multi-modality' paradigm (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2001), archaeology (e.g. Levy et al., 2004; Witmore, 2004), history (Classen, 1998; Cowan and Steward, 2007) and within the notion of 'complex ethnography' (Atkinson et al., 2007).

The approach to sensory ethnography advocated here does not need to be owned by any one academic discipline. Instead, across these fields of study scholars are creating new paths in academic debate through the theoretical exploration of sensory experience, perception, sociality, knowing, knowledge, practice and culture (e.g. Ingold, 2000; Thrift, 2004; Howes, 2005a; Pink and Howes, 2010; Ingold and Howes, 2011). The debates and arguments inspired by these literatures are shaping academic scholarship, empirical studies, interventions and futures across a broad range of substantive areas. They inform how researchers represent their findings in conventional written and audiovisual texts and in innovative forms designed to communicate about sensory experience. They also have implications for ethnographic methodology.

WHAT IS SENSORY ETHNOGRAPHY?

Uses of the term 'ethnography' refer to a range of qualitative research practices, employed, with varying levels of theoretical engagement, in academic and applied research contexts. Ethnographic practice tends to include participant observation, ethnographic interviewing and a range of other collaborative research techniques that are often developed and adapted in context and as appropriate to the needs and possibilities afforded by specific research projects. There is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practised. In this context Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont and William Housley have suggested that there has been a shift from the 'classic' emphasis on 'holism, context and similar ideas' to the increasing fragmentation of ethnographic research. They moreover claim this has led to a situation where 'different authors adopt and promote specific approaches to the collection and analysis of data' and 'particular kinds of data become celebrated in the process' (2007: 33).

Sensory ethnography as proposed in this book is certainly not just another route in an increasingly fragmented map of approaches to ethnographic practice. Rather, it is a critical methodology which, like my existing work on visual ethnography (Pink, 2013), departs from the classic observational approach promoted by Atkinson et al. (2007) to insist that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and

knowledge are produced. Indeed, as Regina Bendix argued, to research 'sensory perception and reception' requires methods that 'are capable of grasping "the most profound type of knowledge [which] is not spoken of at all and thus inaccessible to ethnographic observation or interview" (Bloch, 1998: 46)' (Bendix, 2000: 41). Thus sensory ethnography discussed in this book does not privilege any one type of data or research method. Rather, it is open to multiple ways of knowing and to the exploration of and reflection on new routes to knowledge. Indeed, it would be erroneous to see sensory ethnography as a method for data collection at all: in this book I do not use the term 'data' to refer to the ways of knowing and understanding that are produced through ethnographic practice.

To reiterate the definition of ethnography I have suggested elsewhere:

> as a process of creating and representing knowledge or ways of knowing that are based on ethnographers' own experiences and the ways these intersect with the persons, places and things encountered during that process. Therefore visual ethnography, as I interpret it, does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, the embodied, sensory and affective experiences, and the negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (Pink, 2013: 35)

Atkinson et al. have suggested that what they term 'post-modern' approaches to ethnography have 'devalued systematic analysis of action and representations, while privileging rather vague ideas of experience, evocation and personal engagement' (2007: 35). In my view, an acknowledgment of the importance of these experiential and evocative elements of ethnography is in fact essential, but a lack of attention to the practices and material cultures of research participants is not its automatic corollary. Moreover, while the concept of experience has unquestionably become central to ethnographic practice, recent methodological approaches to experience in ethnography are far from vague. Rather, they have begun to interrogate this concept (see Throop, 2003; Pink, 2006; Pickering, 2008; Pink, 2008c) to consider its relevance in social anthropology and cultural studies. These points are taken further in Chapter 2.

What ethnography actually entails in a more practical sense is best discerned by asking what ethnographers do. This means defining ethnography through its very practice rather than in prescriptive terms. For example, Karen O'Reilly, reviewing definitions of ethnography across different disciplines, has suggested a minimum definition as:

> iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject. (2005: 3)

While in this book I will go beyond this definition to re-think ethnography through the senses, the principle of O'Reilly's approach is important. Her definition provides a basic sense of what an ethnographer might do, without prescribing exactly how this has to be done. Delamont, in contrast, is more prescriptive in her definition of 'proper ethnography' as being 'participant observation during fieldwork' (2007: 206) – something that she proposes is 'done by living with the people being studied, watching them work and play, thinking carefully about what is seen, interpreting it and talking to the actors to check the emerging interpretations' (2007: 206). Delamont's interpretation reflects what might be seen as the classic approach to ethnography as developed in social anthropology in the twentieth century.

While classic observational methods certainly produce valuable in-depth and often detailed descriptions of other people's lives, this type of fieldwork is often not viable in contemporary contexts. This might be because the research is focused in environments where it would be impractical and inappropriate for researchers to go and live for long periods with research participants – for instance, in a modern western home (see Pink, 2004, 2013; Pink and Leder Mackley, 2012, 2014) or in a workplace to which the researcher has limited access (see Bust et al., 2007; Pink and Morgan, 2013). Limitations might also be related to the types of practices the researcher seeks to understand, due to constraints of time and other practical issues impacting on the working lives of ethnographers as well as those of research participants. In applied research other constraints can influence the amount of time available to spend on a project (see Pink, 2005a; Pink and Morgan, 2013). This has meant that innovative methods have been developed by ethnographers to provide routes into understanding other people's lives, experiences, values, social worlds and more that go beyond the classic observational approach. These are not short cuts to the same materials that would be produced through the classic approach (see Pink, 2007e; Pink and Morgan, 2013). Indeed, they involve 'direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives' (O'Reilly, 2005: 3). Nevertheless, they are alternative, and ultimately valid, ways of seeking to understand and engage with other people's worlds through sharing activities and practices and inviting new forms of expression. It is these emergent methods that are defining the new sensory ethnography as it is practised. The mission of this book is not to argue for a single model of sensory ethnography. Rather, I understand sensory ethnography as a developing field of practice.

As the definitions discussed above indicate, a set of existing methods are already associated with ethnography, and usually covered in ethnographic methodology books. These include participant observation, interviewing and other participatory methods. Ethnography frequently involves the use of digital visual and audio technologies in the practice of such methods (Pink, 2007a; Pink et al., 2004) and might also be conducted, at least in part, virtually or online (see Hine, 2000; Kozinets, 2010; Postill and Pink, 2012), in addition to the ethnographer's physical engagements with the materiality and sensoriality of everyday and other

contexts (see Pink et al., forthcoming). Whereas participatory methods often entail ethnographers participating in, observing (or sensing) and learning how to do what the people participating in their research are already engaged in (and presumably would have been doing anyway), interviewing normally involves a collaborative process of exploring specific themes and topics with an interviewee. Other less conventional methods may entail more intentional interventions on the part of the researcher. For instance, these could include collaborations such as producing a film, writing a song or inventing a new recipe with one's research participants. Moving into the design research field, it might involve co-designing prototypes of objects or services for everyday use (Halse, 2013) and usually has a future orientation that differs from the conventional focus on ethnographic writing on the ethnographic past. Doing sensory ethnography entails taking a series of conceptual and practical steps that allow the researcher to re-think both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meanings and values, ways of knowing and practices. It involves the researcher self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process: that is, during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, analysis and representational processes of a project. It also invites us, through growing connections between sensory ethnography and design ethnography (Pink, 2014; Pink et al., 2013), to re-think the temporalities of ethnography.

One might argue that sensory experience and perception has 'always' been central to the ethnographic encounter, and thus also to ethnographers' engagements with the sociality and materiality of research. This makes it all the more necessary to re-think ethnography to explicitly *account for* the senses. Indeed, when classic ethnographic examples are reinterpreted through attention to sensory experience, new understandings might be developed (see Howes, 2003). To some readers these dual arguments – that ethnography is already *necessarily* sensory and the call to re-think ethnography as sensory – may be reminiscent of earlier revisions. Around the end of the twentieth century it was proposed that all ethnographic practice should be reflexive, and is gendered (e.g. Bell et al., 1993), embodied (e.g. Coffey, 1999) and visual (e.g. Banks, 2001; Pink, 2007a). Another contemporary wave of technology and practice makes for online (e.g. Hine, 2000; Boellstorf, 2009; Kozinets, 2010) and digital ethnography (e.g. Pink et al., forthcoming). These perspectives were and are accompanied by powerful arguments for understanding ethnographic practice through new paradigms. A sensory ethnography methodology, as originally developed in the 2009 edition of this book, accounts for and expands this existing scholarship that re-thought ethnography as gendered, embodied and more. It also connects with the need to understand the experiential and sensory affordances and possibilities of digital technologies (Pink, 2015; Richardson, 2010, 2011). In doing so it draws from theories of human perception and place to propose a framework for understanding the ethnographic process and the ethnographer's practice (this is developed in Chapter 2). By connecting with recent developments in design anthropology (Gunn and