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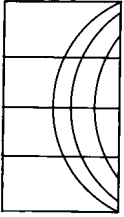
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Kelvin E. Y. Low

Ruminations on Smell as a Sociocultural Phenomenon

Introduction

My uncle stinks. When I was a child, he would love to ‘tease’ me by grabbing me around the waist and planting sloppy kisses on my cheeks, inevitably making me inhale his body odour, which was, to say the least, a never failing source of near asphyxiation. It does not help that he remains less than pleasing to the eye, and that his way of being is almost constantly called into question, even among his siblings. I made up my mind not to like him very much, and I am rather certain that this propensity to read him thus stems from, initially, his fetid constitution. Looking back at this odorous slice of my childhood, I am curious as to how one can have such prominent recollections/perceptions of another person, triggered largely by (malodorous) olfactory properties. Today, things have not changed. I often overhear my aunts and other uncles comment that their ‘foul-smelling’, thereby flagrant sibling somehow did not seem to be able to wash his clothes clean enough, wearing clothes that emanate a somewhat muddy and odoriferous scent, which did not seem to get enough of the sun after wash. That smell could shape perceptions and judgements of a person, in this case an obvious admission of dislike, provokes me into asking – what is the role of smell in everyday life experiences? To what extent is smell being employed as a social intermediary where social actors attempt to (re)construct their experiences in locating themselves and others in social life?

Such sensorial/olfactory enquiries stem not from a personal agenda to understand one’s past (or to maintain olfactory salubriousness), but instead, take the lead from Simmel’s proposition for a sociology of the senses, where he argues that social science, by focusing on large and visible structures in order to account for and analyse social life, remains an insufficient trajectory, for sensorial impressions are equally pertinent in social interactions. He contends in his article ‘Sociology of the Senses’:

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The fact that we perceive our fellow human beings at all through our senses itself develops in two directions, whose cooperation is of fundamental sociological importance. Impinging on the human subject, the sensory impression of a person provokes feelings of like and dislike in us, of our own exaltation or degradation, of excitement or composure, from his or her look or the tone of his or her voice, from his or her mere physical presence in the same room. . . . [Also], the development of sense impression extends in the other direction as soon as it becomes a means of knowledge of the other: what I see, hear or feel of the person is now only the bridge over which I get to them as my object. Just as the voice of a person has a quite directly attractive or repulsive effect on us, independently of what the person says . . . the same is probably true with regard to all sense impressions: they lead us into the human subject as its mood and emotion and out to the object as knowledge of it. (Simmel, 1997: 110–11)

Hence, this study attempts to move beyond ‘absolutely supra-individual total structures’ (Simmel, 1997: 110) towards individual, lived experiences where smell may be utilized as a social medium in the (re)construction of social realities. To begin, the following section peruses extant studies based on smell, in a three-pronged approach. First, I probe into propositions concerning the supposed low status of smell in relation to the other senses. Second, by putting up an argument for smell as a social medium that is present in our everyday life experiences, I thereby locate olfactory enquiries beyond physiological and biopsychological concerns, to further understand the role of smell in our day-to-day realities. This is accomplished by traversing the various select fields in which smell is analysed (i.e. history, anthropology, religion, gender, sociospatial analysis, etc.). As such, one can comprehend and critique theoretical/conceptual trajectories employed in social science research on olfaction.

Finally, looking at such approaches towards an understanding of our olfactory capacities provides ideas as to how one can ‘do’ a sociology of smell. To make a claim for smell as a social medium/intermediary is to say that smell possesses ‘social meanings because of the meanings brought to it by persons in the interaction process. [These] meanings remain stable over time but frequently they must be worked out and negotiated . . . by meaning attributing, interpreting beings who interact through time’ (Benson and Hughes, 1983: 21). And, as Synnott (1991: 438; my emphasis) opines:

Odour is many things: a boundary-marker, a status symbol, a distance-maintainer, an impression management technique, a schoolboy’s joke or protest, and a danger-signal – but it is above all *a statement of who one is*. Odours define the individual and the group, as do sight, sound and the other senses; and smell, like them, *mediates social interaction*.

Locating Smell in the Hierarchy of the Sensorium

Smell is a sociocultural phenomenon, associated with varied meanings and symbolic values/associations by different cultures (Classen et al., 1994). And whether we like it or not, we remain odoriferous beings despite all our cleaning routines; and these odours play important roles in virtually every sphere of social interaction, running the gamut from gustatory consumption, the home, personal hygiene, memories and nostalgia, to class, gender and ethnic dimensions of social life (Synnott, 1991). Perhaps smell is the only sense one cannot turn off. We can eschew touching and tasting, shut our eyes, or cover our ears. But we smell all the time and with every breath (McKenzie, 1923; Watson, 2000). Smell, however, is a highly elusive phenomenon (Classen et al., 1994), regarded as the mute sense (Ackerman, 1990; Howes, 1991; Watson, 2000), the one *sans* words. Smells are ubiquitous – they envelop us, emanate from us. Yet, when we try to describe smells, olfactory epithets do not quite provide accurate descriptions (Ackerman, 1990; Dann, 2003; Finnegan, 2002; McKenzie, 1923; Miller, 1997; Sperber, 1974; Wyburn et al., 1964). We have no names for specific odours, and when we employ words such as ‘smoky’, ‘floral’, ‘fruity’ and ‘sweet’, we are, in fact, describing smells in terms of other things (smoke, flowers, fruit, and sugar).

Also, sociologists have seldom researched the senses (Synnott, 1991), with the exception of Largey and Watson’s (1972) *The Sociology of Odours*. Perhaps such negligence is due to the low status of smell in the sensory hierarchy, as Synnott contends. He argues that one indication of the low status of smell is the lack of a specialized olfactory vocabulary. As mentioned already, odours are often defined in terms of other senses, such as sweet or sour (taste), or strong or weak (touch). Without an independent vocabulary, Synnott claims, it is hard to discuss the topic.

Further evidence that points to the low status of smell can be traced back to Aristotle’s hierarchy of the sensorium. ‘At the top were the senses of sight and hearing, whose special contributions to humanity were beauty and music; . . . at the bottom were the animal senses of taste and touch, which alone could be abused, by gluttony and lust respectively . . . in between was smell: it could not be abused’ (Synnott, 1991: 439–40). In Aristotelian terms, then, sight, hearing, taste and touch constitute the basic four, while smell falls in the middle, linking sight and hearing with taste and touch (Classen, 1993). Where Aristotle classified smell as the lowest sense, Kant did not even discuss the sense of smell in his aesthetics (Synnott, 1991). On top of that, not only has smell been diminished in modern western culture, but, also, in olfactory symbolism (Classen, 1993).

Classen suggests that olfactory decline would seem to have been accompanied by a rise in the importance of sight, justifying this proposition by saying that the increasing value accorded to sight and visual imagery from

the time of the Enlightenment onwards has been discussed at length in the works of, inter alia, Foucault (1970), Walter Ong (1977) and Donald Lowe (1982). The devaluation of smell in the contemporary West is also directly linked to the revaluation of the senses which took place during the 18th and 19th centuries (Classen et al., 1994). The authors highlight that philosophers and scientists of that period appraised sight as the 'pre-eminent sense of reason and civilisation, [while] smell was the sense of madness and savagery' (Classen et al., 1994: 4; see also Vroon, 1994: 4–11).

Jenner (2000), however, takes issue with the postulation of olfactory decline as inversely proportional to the importance placed on other senses, such as our visual abilities. He argues that such a way of reasoning may be problematic, as 'there is no logical reason why the enhancing of one faculty should lead to a decline in another' (Jenner, 2000: 143). Jenner contends that 'framing research in terms of whether there was a fundamental sensory transformation . . . seems an unhelpfully crude way of approaching the cultural history of the senses and of scents' (Jenner, 2000: 138). Instead of getting too carried away with imposing evolutionary narratives (where sight is always prioritized), Jenner cautions, we should channel our attention towards exploring the cultural meanings of particular odours in specific locations or within particular discourses, rather than attempt to understand smell as a low ranking sense. In doing so, we will come to understand the various ways in which smells are configured by, and underpin cultures, thereby gaining (olfactory) awareness of the extent to which sensorial interactions shape our everyday life experiences. The following section therefore addresses how studies concerning smells have been undertaken both in the (physical) sciences and beyond, lending countenance to my earlier contention that olfaction is not merely a biological property that we possess, but rather, a social medium that we often utilize in apprehending and (re)constructing social realities.

Sniffing out the 'Fields' of Smell

Most of the research on smell, understandably, has been of a physical scientific nature. Significant advances have been made in the understanding of the biological and chemical nature of olfaction such as Wright's (1982) *The Sense of Smell*, Bell and Watson's (1999) *Tastes and Aromas: The Chemical Senses in Science and Industry* and Martin and Laffort's (1994) *Odours and Deodorisation in the Environment*, among others. Psychology has also addressed the sense of smell. Various experiments have been done in an attempt to find out the effects of odours on the performance of tasks, on mood and emotions, on dieting and so on (Classen et al., 1994; see also van Toller and Dodd, 1992).

Moving beyond scientific boundaries, the study of the sense of smell has

developed and broadened over the past few decades. Studied historically, smell has been documented in such works as Ackerman's (1990) *A Natural History of the Senses*, Classen et al.'s (1994) *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* and Corbin's (1986) *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odour and the French Social Imagination*. Ackerman, for instance, offers a vivid typology of the five senses, arguing that our senses span not only distance or cultures, but time as well. She concludes by amalgamating the five senses into what is termed as 'synaesthesia', an intermingling of the senses. Corbin, on the other hand, puts smell on the historical map by situating his work in the context of 18th- and 19th-century France, integrating a wide range of disciplines that includes the histories of science and of medicine, psychohistory, urban studies and public health. In short, Corbin is interested in the various evaluative schematics and symbolic systems concerning olfaction.

One notable work on the role of olfaction in diverse cultures is Howes's (1991) 'Olfaction and Transition', where he posits a connection between smell and transition, involving 'category change'. This postulation is exemplified via ethnographic illustration of rituals practised among groups such as the Malagasy of the Isle of Mayotte, and the Dakota of the Western Plains of North America. For the former, before boys are circumcised, and before virgin girls consummate their marriages, they are forced to inhale smoke emanating from a pot of burning seaweed, lemon and kapok seeds, coconut oil and other substances, while remaining under a blanket. This fumigation procedure may be perceived as effecting a transition from boyhood to manhood and girlhood to womanhood respectively.

As a corollary to the connection between olfaction and 'category' as just discussed, Synnott (1991) and Classen (1993) both touch on the issue of how olfactory symbolism is used to express concepts of 'oneness' and 'otherness', where smell contributes towards the setting up of bipolarities such as the evil odours of evil spirits vs the good odours of good spirits, or how men smell stronger, while women 'should' smell sweet and gentle. Additionally, the prescription of different olfactory characteristics to different races and different social groups is a universal trait, one that contains certain empirical bases, for body odours can differ among ethnic groups, due in part to the genetic factors and, also, due to different foods consumed (Classen, 1993: 79). Further, dichotomous polarities of different groups of people based on smell only serve to stir up certain ill will towards the 'other'. For 'the good is fragrant and the fragrant is good . . . [whereas] what smells bad is bad, and what is bad smells bad' (Synnott, 1991: 445).

Such polemic constructions premised upon smells and odours are also found in other fields such as religion, for instance. In Christianity, there exists what is termed the 'odour of sanctity' (Classen et al., 1994: 52). Such a concept is linked to the idea that classical deities frequently made their presence known through fragrance, and that the presence of the Holy Spirit

was thought by Christians to be signalled via a mystical fragrance as well. Simultaneously, the odour of sanctity stood antithetical to the stench of moral corruption. Fourteenth-century theologian John Wycliffe asserted that some men are good smelling while others are 'stinking to God' (Classen et al., 1994: 54).

The dichotomous polarization of odours can also be found in the area of gender. 'Men are supposed to smell of sweat, whisky and tobacco . . . [while] women, presumably, are supposed to smell "good": clean, pure, and attractive' (Synnott, 1991: 449). Gender differentiation of this ilk appears to be upheld by the names and typography of perfumes and colognes. In general, the names seem to express not only different but almost opposite polarities of self-concepts for the (so-called) opposite sexes. Synnott points out: 'Women's perfumes and fragrances include names such as Beautiful, White Linen, White Shoulders, Diva, Enchantment, etc, while men's fragrances are marketed as Boss, Brut, Polo, English Leather, L'Homme, etc.' (Synnott, 1991: 449). Ostensibly, such brand names alone could probably socialize and educate the two sexes into opposing roles and thereby behaviour, translating biological differences into gender/social hierarchy and gendered cultural representations: pink or blue, Beautiful or Boss (Synnott, 1991: 449) and so on.

The employment of bipolarities in analysing smells/odours is also evident in sociospatial analysis, spanning the fields of urban sociology and anthropology. Studies include Cohen's (1988) work on Thailand, Porteous's (1985) study on landscapes and Illich's (2000) observation on the olfactory properties of cities. Cohen's (1988) urban anthropological study of a *soi* (lane) in Bangkok, for example, drew his attention to the place of smell in Thai culture, where he coined the term 'olfactory dualism' in understanding how smell is tied in with personal cleanliness and neatness (*riab roi*), and the environment. He tells us that the *soi* that he observed was inhabited by a highly mobile population of singles, mostly single girls, working in tourism-oriented prostitution. The *soi* is rather polluted, with 'heaped-up refuse', 'stagnant swampy water' (Cohen, 1988: 42) and big rats living beneath the broken wooden planks of the footpaths.

As the Thai girls are very much preoccupied with matters of personal cleanliness, their careful attention to smell and hygiene is also extended to their customers. 'Body odour is a cardinal criterion of choice: most girls are less repulsed by a man who is old, ugly or obese, than by one who exudes bad body odour' (Cohen, 1988: 44). Many girls also refuse to accept Arab customers, given their appraisal that they stink. Even if Arabs usually reward the girls more generously than do white European customers, antipathy and rejection of the Arab customer are, interestingly, expressed in an olfactory idiom.

Cohen's olfactory dualism is premised upon his observation of how the

inhabitants of the *soi* can be oblivious to the non-human smell emanating from the public, and yet possess keen sensitivities to human body odours. He investigates this dualism by looking at the interplay between ecological and cultural factors, highlighting the absence of a civic spirit in Thailand noted by many authors. This disregard for cleanliness and tidiness of public areas is therefore more pronounced for the temporary inhabitants of the *soi*. People thus do not want to bother with public matters and sanitation, and would rather pay more attention to their own cleanliness. Evidently, smell does not merely remain at the level of a biological phenomenon, but rather is interpreted by social actors as they go about their everyday routine; in this case, with a propensity towards self-grooming and the need for smelling nice, even if the immediate space around them is pungent.

Ostensibly, most if not all scholars studying smell in the various fields of history, anthropology, religion, gender, sociospatial analysis, etc. have documented, analysed and conceptualized their works based, in part, upon bipolarities. We saw how the 'odour of sanctity' provided a differentiation between the 'holy' and the 'evil', between the 'good' and the 'bad'. In the case of gender, polemic constructions are also set up, in furthering the meanings and interpretations of perfumes and fragrance items for both men and women, carving out ideas of what men should be like, and what women should be like.

However, such a mode of conceptualizing remains insufficient in analyses of smells in everyday life. It would merely bob upon classificatory systems that tell us how people structure others and social realities. When we employ structural polemic such as the good smelling good, or the bad smelling bad, it is imperative to take a step back and reflect upon this seemingly clear-cut dichotomy. For 'good smells can be a cause for suspicion, mistrusted as a mask or a veneering covering something that needs to be hidden' (Miller, 1997: 247). Miller also points out that many bad odours become reasonably acceptable when knowledge of their origin is made known. For example, 'strong cheese is much more tolerable than if thought to emanate from feces or rank feet' (Miller, 1997: 247). So perhaps certain smells, including pungent ones, may be acceptable if one knows the origin. When this occurs, the bipolarities of 'good' vs 'bad' may not be adequate, thus, in how we perceive smells in society. This view is also echoed by Almagor, who points out that although a structuralist approach provides for an element of dichotomy (such as 'attractive' and 'repellent' smells), the approach fails to 'account for the nuances of odours that are neither extremely "bad" or "good"' (Almagor, 1990: 254), thereby assuming that polarities are necessarily self-contained with no spectrum in between.

Essentially, structuralism implies that all meaning is established by the principles of binary opposition, and that based on this bifurcate contrast, nothing carries any meaning in itself. Lévi-Strauss's 'emphasis on arbitrariness

of meaning . . . [seems to convey that the] explicitly abstract locus of structures [is] divorced in every way from the actions and intentions of actors' (Ortner, 1984: 136). Hence, Almagor has it right when he points out that by operating on the tenet of antithetical polarities, such a methodological trajectory cannot 'explain the range and significance of odours in daily life' (Almagor, 1990: 254).

To move beyond structuralist evaluations of smell and everyday life experiences, one possible way is to utilize a phenomenological approach (Rindisbacher, 1995: ix). By so doing, we would then 'take some distance from the existing theoretical ballast and focus instead on the level of concrete examples' (Rindisbacher, 1995: ix). In addition, other methodological toolkits under the framework of a sociology of everyday life include Goffman's interactional approach (e.g. Goffman, 1956, 1963a, 1963b), and Garfinkel's (1967) ethnomethodology. All of these theorists refer to the familiar and the commonsensical as the subjects of enquiry, to which the focus lies within everyday practices of social actors, largely neglected by grand theories/theorists. In essence, the 'common sense reality of everyday life [forms as] the bedrock source of sociological/[anthropological] knowledge . . . [where] the ordinary and common becomes the privileged source of the scholarly and the scientific, that is, if we are to talk realistically about human life as it is lived' (Weigert, 1981: xviii). The present study thus looks at the sensorial aspects of everyday life as the site of research and analysis, in particular, the sense/roles of smell. Hitherto, I have already explicated the ubiquitousness of smell in everyday life situations and experiences, and, in order to locate how smell would figure in our day-to-day realities, this is perhaps better apprehended within the domain of a sociology of the everyday life.

In so doing, the present study also attempts to supplement the dearth of olfactory research, particularly in the region of Southeast Asia, where research on smell remains in a nascent stage, with only a few contributions such as Cohen (1988) and Law (2001). Literature on the sociohistory of smell and its social meanings and associations has hitherto been focused on western societies and anthropological olfactory accounts have brought us to Brazil, Ethiopia and elsewhere (see Classen et al., 1994). However, peoples of Southeast Asia and their 'smell cultures' have received insufficient attention from scholars over the past few decades. Hence, through the empirical case study of Singapore as an example, I hope to contribute to existing studies by exploring the roles and meanings of smell beyond western societies. Additionally, I draw a link between smell and conceptual trajectories from literature on the body and society (e.g. Shilling, 1993; Synnott, 1993; Turner, 1984; Williams and Bendelow, 1998) to show how readings of the body as embodiment of social meanings can be further enhanced using smell as an intermediary/social conduit, thereby

extending social constructionist approaches towards understanding the body in society.

'Doing' Smell in Singapore: Preliminary Findings and Considerations

In order to exemplify how social actors employ smell as a social medium in their everyday life experiences (in particular, their perceptions of various groups of people, as well as presentation of self), and by suggesting how one can move beyond structuralist approaches in studying smell, I present select preliminary empirical data collected in Singapore. The process of using smell as a social intermediary in which one makes sense of and casts 'judgements' upon other people/places is in line with Rodaway's (1994) dual use of the term 'sense'. He offers that 'sense' contains a crucial duality, which could be interpreted first as 'making sense . . . [as referring] to order and understanding', and second, 'sense, or the senses, [as referring] to the specific sense modes [of] touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing and the sense of balance' (Rodaway, 1994: 5). He furthers this duality by contending:

These two aspects are closely related and often implied by each other. The sense[s] [are] both a reaching out to the world as a source of information and an understanding of that world so gathered. This sensuous experience and understanding is grounded in previous experience and expectation, each dependent on sensual and sensory capacities and educational training and cultural conditioning. (Rodaway, 1994: 5)

In this respect, the notion of 'perception' runs in similar tandem, where it involves both a process of the 'reception of information through the sense organs', as well as 'mental insight, or a sense of a range of sensory information, with *memories and expectations*' (Rodaway, 1994: 10; my emphasis).

With these, I argue that smell functions as a social medium employed by social actors towards formulating constructions/judgements of race-d, class-ed and gender-ed others, operating on polemic/categorical constructions (and also, other nuances between polarities) which may involve a process of *othering*. By othering, I mean that in smelling/perceiving the other's odour, an individual defines the self through a difference in smell, and also negates the other as the not-I based on a difference in odours. In short, the differentiation of smell stands as that which involves not only an identification of 'us' vs 'them' or 'you' vs 'me', but, also, processes of judgement and ranking of social others. Judgements may be imagined, based on one's past experiences and expectations, where smell could possibly be employed as a mechanism in stereotyping social *others* based on expected and presumed race, class and gender categories. In this manner, the processes of smell employed towards one's understanding and reading of social others run in

tandem with Rodaway's notion of perception, involving both memories and expectations.

Also, I explore here how smell can be used to demonstrate the dialectical link between body as 'self', and body as 'social' (Shilling, 1993), by looking at how social actors stress the constant need to smell 'nice' and therefore 'acceptable' before social interaction can be carried out smoothly. Here, I cull from Goffman's (1956, 1963a, 1963b, 1971) concepts of behaviour in social interactions to exemplify the idea that bodies 'are the property of individuals, yet are defined as significant and meaningful by society' (Shilling, 1993: 82). In sum, the article asks: (1) What are the ways in which social actors react to smells that they pick up from other people? (2) What social meanings are then associated with such perceived and emanated odours? (3) What social (dys)functions do these meanings fulfil, if any? (4) How is smell important for the individual and group? In exploring these questions, I hope to demonstrate that smells do possess a significant bearing upon human interaction and experiences.

'Doing' Smell – Ontology, Methods and Preliminary Analyses

The mode of *verstehen* employed herein is guided and informed by the *social constructionist* perspective of reality. Social constructionism emphasizes the world of experience as it is lived, felt and undergone by social actors (Collin, 1997; Guba and Lincoln, 2000). In this sense, realities stem from 'multiple, intangible mental constructions, socially and experientially based, local and specific in nature, and *dependent for their form and content on the individual persons or groups holding the construction*' (Guba and Lincoln, 2000: 110; my emphasis). It follows that notions of knowledge, meaning and reality are to be understood from the social actors' point of view, where perceptions and interpretations of smells are defined and rationalized from the way in which respondents employ smell as a social intermediary within their day-to-day experiences.

Garfinkel uses the term 'ethnomethodology' to refer to 'the investigation of the rational properties of indexical expressions and other practical actions as contingent ongoing accomplishments of organised artful practices of everyday life' (Garfinkel, 1967: 11). Here, social actors are treated as reality constructors (Mehan and Wood, 1994), where the ethnomethodological model stands as a characterization of the way social actors *create* situations and rules, and, consequently, create themselves and their social realities. Following this, the researcher would have to temporarily suspend all subscriptions to a priori or cultivated versions of the social world, focusing instead on how social actors themselves accomplish a sense of social order (Gubrium and Holstein, 2000).

Phenomenology questions our way of looking at and our way of being in the world (Wallace and Wolf, 1999), going beyond taken-for-granted

notions of social life. This sense of being is located in the everyday life world that comprises the mundane and the quotidian. Meanings in social life are thus produced, reproduced and maintained via a shared stock of social knowledge (Schutz, 1970). In order to make sense of our everyday life, the roles and meanings of smell are thus analysed via what is known as the 'second order construct' (Schutz, 1970), thereby distinguishing between everyday life knowledge ('first order construct') concerning the olfactory, and a sociology of the everyday life. By combining the tenets of social constructionism, ethnomethodology and Schutzian phenomenological sociology, the understanding of reality as drawn from my respondents' own constructions would pivot towards a more rational and 'objective' understanding (in the context of the respondents' formulations) of the role of smell in everyday life.

Preliminary research on smell was carried out using three main methods – breaching experiments, narrative interviews and participative observation. In following the ethnomethodological trajectory, breaching experiments were conducted with respondents as pilot tests in the initial stages of the research, in trying to unpack that which is commonsensical and taken-for-granted towards eliciting reactions and responses concerning smells picked up by, or pointed out to, the respondents. Breaching experiments involve rule-breaking or common sense jarring behaviour in order to make explicit the underlying expectations. In 'violating' the taken-for-granted assumptions of everyday life, one can then watch and see how social actors repair or reconstruct the breach in the social fabric (Garfinkel, 1967). Second, narrative interviews were conducted, each lasting between 60 and 75 minutes. Third, respondents were asked to engage in participative observation, in which 'fieldwork' was conducted by the researcher together with the respondents. These are elaborated later in the article.

Breaching experiments were carried out in a few ways. In the case of 'gender-ed' smells, I wore fragrances that were commercially marketed for females, and sought to test how such scents may/may not provoke responses from those around me. In addition, I deliberately asked what others thought of the fragrance, in a bid to elicit any reflective evaluation or interpretation. Moving beyond immediate olfactory assessment, I then probed further, as to what social actors mean when and if they do ascribe 'race' or 'gender' to certain scents that they pick up, or have pointed out to them. The unpacking of everyday 'normality' was achieved via conversational breaching, where if social actors were to utilize labels such as 'smelly' or 'pungent', I prodded further, asking what they meant exactly in employing such labels. This uncovered the sense-making/rationalizing processes as to how social actors orientate themselves in the construction of their social realities, with smell as an intermediary.

A friend who was with me when I was wearing the 'female' scent asked

if I was using a new perfume. When asked what she thought of it, her response was that it smelled a little too sweet for a male to wear, and when probed further as to whether she made a distinction between how a male and a female *should* smell, she offered:

I think a woman's perfume should be fruity and floral, whereas men's cologne should be musky, like tobacco, with a bit of sweat.

Her response indicates that categorically, males and females are 'supposed' to smell differently, and more pertinently, when the oppositional polemics are defied (when a male smells like a female), her ways of social/gender ordering are disrupted as expectations are not met. As she opined, 'it's just like how men can't wear skirts, [for they] must be strong, not weak. Also, [like] pork roast smells nice but not on a person.' Another friend who picked up my scent described it as being 'spicy' and 'aggressive', pointing out that it smelled not quite like me, as he knew a little about me as a friend. When asked to clarify, he offered that having known me as someone who was not aggressive and rather mild-tempered, the scent just did not cohere with who I was. These examples show that, on one level, smells that are expected from different groupings of social actors (such as that based on gender in this case), when contradicted, lead to a disruption of how one sees/smells social reality by using smell in constructing categories of 'male' and 'female'.

On another level, smell may also be used as an indicator of an individual's personality, where the scent must gel with the traits of the person. In sum then, employing breaching experiments are ostensibly a good point of departure to tap into smelled but unnoticed, expected, background features of everyday life experiences. When the sense of 'normalcy' is being disrupted, what is brought to the forefront is that olfactory experiences are first made 'visible', and are then unpacked from our taken-for-granted behaviour, moving towards unravelling the sense-making/rationalizing processes that social actors go through in orientating themselves (subconsciously) in the construction of their social realities.

Another method employed towards tapping into how social actors regard smell in their everyday life experiences is through the use of narrative interviews (see PuruShotam, 1998), developed from the epistemology of Schutzian phenomenological sociology. PuruShotam (2000: 24–5) notes:

The narrative interview is founded upon a mature tradition of theory construction on narration, in linguistics and literature. The primary assumption herein is that human beings have a fundamentally narrative relation toward themselves, perceiving and accounting for their social experiences by a continuous narrational stream vis-à-vis a shared stock of knowledge. This stock of knowledge both gives to experience its social dimensionality, while draws its source from the narrational relationship human beings have.

The starting point of narrative interviews stands as: 'Tell me about your experiences with smell'. Generally, this opened up a flow of narration that the respondent so chose to share with me, which I was careful not to interrupt, except for clarifications, or for follow-up questions based on what the respondent had shared. Further questions were therefore thought of in situ, dependent wholly on where the respondent was leading the researcher. In this manner, taking my cues from the respondent would lead us to talking about experiences and stories about smell that concerned him or her the most. This would, therefore, be in accordance with the social constructionist mode of understanding, where notions of smell as regarded, experienced and perceived by my respondents are tapped into as I sought to understand the multifaceted ways in which smell can be utilized as a social medium. After each interview is completed, reorganization of the data obtained is accomplished based on conceptual categories (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). These include, but are not limited to, individual and group dynamics of smell in the presentation of self and social interaction, constructed olfactory configurations of social others based on gender and race, and the need for a regulation of smells on social actors and the general environment, etc. By so doing, 'evidence from which the category emerged is used to illustrate the concept . . . [allowing for] a relevant theoretical abstraction about what is going on in the area studied' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967: 23).

One of the more prominent themes that recurred throughout the interviews undertaken concerned how social others were read based on racial groupings, with smell as a conduit of judgement. The various categories of 'Indian', 'Chinese' and 'Malay' surfaced via smell as an intermediary, exemplified by the responses below:

Like Sikhs and Indians smell differently. I think Muslims . . . or Malays . . . I think it's due to the food that they eat, the type of food maybe, that they cook at home. It does permeate the environment that they are in, into their clothing, into their breath . . . into their skin. If you enter a house without . . . let's say it has very innocuous furnishing. You can actually tell by the smell . . . or you can at least pick it up nearer the kitchen. You can actually tell what kind of family, whether it is Chinese, Malay or Indian family. I would presume that a Chinese . . . if they don't have incense burning, probably can't tell it from a Caucasian type of environment, but Malays and Indians, definitely. (Vince)

All Malays smell nice . . . like . . . er . . . when . . . when I walk . . . let's say in Geylang, and there's a lot of Malays right? There's no tendency for me to like, stop breathing, you know like how you . . . when it's very crowded you tend to inhale stale air, but . . . for me don't have lor. I still . . . breathe normally and they all smell nice. . . . This guy, my friend, he went to Amsterdam to study, and he went like, ok lah, of all the races right, Malays smell the best. Chinese smell like this, Indians smell like this . . . the Holland girls like this . . . but Malays smell the best. Even though that they are not wearing perfume, there's this natural scent. And I know I see like . . . I go out with a lot of guys right, I erm . . . Chinese guy, I told you right, they got a sticky smell, a bit of a turn-off, so if

you want to kiss them you go like, oh . . . and then, Indian guy . . . I think don't talk about Indian guy lah [*laughs*]. Even like, in houses you know, there's a smell. If . . . if you go inside a Chinese house right, . . . you know a Chinese house there tends to be cluttered. Do you agree? It tends to be cluttered and then, it's usually sticky and untidy, and ya, most of the houses I've been are like that. So . . . and . . . obviously when a house is dirty right, it gives out this smell. And with the incense burning and all, and then for an Indian house, they have like curry powder in the house, and there's a very strong smell as well. Whereas for a Malay house, right, it's . . . the smell is very different. You can . . . you can distinguish. Like when I go in right I will straightaway know it's a Malay house. And it's usually because . . . of the smell and of course the way the house looks. Ya but more often than not it's the smell. (Aishah)

Ostensibly, associations between race and smell are often made, where respondents tend to stereotype categories of 'Indian', 'Chinese' and 'Malay' as if they were homogeneous groupings. Furthermore, the notion of the racial/olfactory other is extended with an investigation of how particular places in Singapore, such as ethnic enclaves, conjure immediate olfactory perceptions, termed as 'smellscapes' (Dann, 2003; Porteous, 1985; Rodaway, 1994). This perception is (re)produced when respondents link place to people, by locating specific olfactory zones such as 'Little India' at Serangoon Road, Golden Mile Shopping Complex at Beach Road ('Little Bangkok') and 'Little Burma' (Peninsula Plaza)¹ with 'Indians', 'Thais' and 'Burmese' respectively. As a corollary, the notion of racial others faces a further dichotomy (not just 'Chinese' vs 'non-Chinese' for instance) of locals vs foreigners (see Abdullah, 2005), as the above ethnic enclaves are typically filled with a deluge of foreign workers hailing from such places as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Thailand and Myanmar. To explicate notions of 'racial smellscapes' that emerged from my fieldsite observations, these are what my respondents had to say while walking around such ethnic enclaves:

I see Bangkok. I smell the market smell, like . . . you know that sour smell, and then I think it's that . . . you know in Thailand the streets they have a lot of that kind of . . . you know . . . food lah, the food smell. I think it's the ingredients they use right? Ya. I think it's only a Thai smell because Thai for the fact that they use this kind of ingredient which gives you this kind of smell and this kind of taste. This kind of feeling. (Danny)

When I got off the taxi [at Tekka Centre in 'Little India'] I caught a whiff of . . . oh my god! Can die! I don't understand why places must have different groups . . . like here a lot of Indians. Here got the Indian food smell, like . . . and . . . you see ah, it's very hard for me to like differentiate between smell of Indian food and smell of Indians, because to me they are both moving into one. Usually the smell of Indians right, it's associated with their food isn't it? Like they eat a lot of curry . . . so that's why they smell like that. Strong. How would I describe the place? Er . . . personally I . . . don't like it, because . . . it's really like . . . overwhelming . . . and they sell things which I don't fancy and . . . and . . . it stinks. To put it brutally, they are very smelly, I don't like it. And the people here stare. It unnerves me. (Khaliza)

Evidently, olfactory spaces/ethnic enclaves conjure up images of 'olfactory communities' in urban life. Ethnic communities become more pronounced when the olfactory enters the process of judging and likening one either to a 'relevant' or a 'non-relevant' ethnic grouping. By so doing, the idea of ethnic communities is constantly a lived experience instead of a pre-given, and more often than not, the sense of smell aids the individual social actor in continually carving out olfactory zones of ethnic differentiation. Additionally, the process involves also an accomplishment of the visual towards perceiving and thereby 'placing' social actors into ethnic categories, oftentimes reinforced by physical locales such as ethnic enclaves in Singapore. By using the sense of smell as a point of entry, this brief exemplification therefore demonstrates how everyday life olfactory experiences and the various ethnic communities are linked, where smells are assigned and 'read off' social actors, and this process intensifies when these same social actors are perhaps too easily, further socially demarcated via ethnic spaces in Singapore.

Concluding Remarks

By employing a sociology of the everyday life as a theoretical orientation towards exploring the roles of smell as a social intermediary, I have shown that 'the mundane, repetitive and taken-for-granted aspects of daily life are of considerable significance in the life experiences of specific individuals and groups' (Bennett and Watson, 2002: xxiii). This is particularly pertinent, as reading the racial other, for instance, is predicated not merely upon the visible/visual such as skin colour, clothes, or other markers. Rather, racial categorization transpires, also, via the olfactory, and this takes place through processes of stereotyping, arising from an individual social actor's expectation of person/place and smell, and, thereby, arriving at a perception of the racial other. Social/ethnic/olfactory prognosis thus takes place when there is an intersection between the visual and the olfactory.

Although this article has argued and put forward preliminary empirical data in explicating the social aspects of smell as a social intermediary, I end here by alerting the reader that similar analytical trajectories can be applied to the other senses as well, where the fundamental premise underlying the auspice of a sociology/anthropology of the senses is where sensory perception, interpretation and employment are sociocultural, and not merely biological (Classen, 1997b). In other words, our senses of sight, hearing, touch, taste and smell are not merely means of apprehending physical phenomena, but also form avenues for the transmission of cultural values, social classifications; essentially, how social actors construct reality with the

senses as guiding/transitory mediums of understanding. As Classen (1997b: 402) contends:

When we examine the meanings associated with various sensory faculties and sensations in different cultures we find a cornucopia of potent sensory symbolism. Sight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or for sexual experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political power or social exclusion. Together, these sensory meanings and values form the *sensory model* espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society 'make sense' of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular 'worldview'. There will likely be challenges to this model from within the society, persons and groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted.

Having laid out the premises of this study, I suspect, one may argue that by focusing merely on smell to a possible exclusion of the other senses, I would have been culpable of sensory bias, and that the role of smell in everyday life experiences can only be (more sufficiently) understood within the context of multisensorial social realities. To allay such a probable concern, I draw inspiration from Classen et al. (1994: 9–10), who contend:

. . . historians, anthropologists and sociologists have long excluded odour from their accounts and concentrated on the visual and the auditory, without being accused of any sensory biases. The argument, must, therefore, be turned around. . . . By demonstrating the importance of odour and olfactory codes . . . [one can then] bring smell out of the Western scholarly and cultural unconscious into the open air of social and intellectual discourse, [for] it is only when a form of sensory equilibrium has been recovered, that we may begin to understand how the senses interact with each other as models of perception and paradigms of culture.

The selection of the olfactory as an entry point, therefore, is necessitated, as analyses of all five senses cannot be fully addressed in their entirety within the scope of this project. Instead, by focusing on the sense of smell, and concurrently, considering briefly, the simultaneous workings of the other senses, I thereby delimit the boundaries of empirical concern here. Essentially, the principal focus of the article lies not in the odours themselves, but as iterated, how people *think* about odours, i.e. the metaphorical and symbolic associations and meanings of smells that people impute. Through the examination of the routine, the unexamined and the banal, I hope to gain some insight into how the quotidian fits into the larger social order.

Notes

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- 1 These ethnic enclaves were pointed out through the narrative interviews conducted with respondents, and hence were incorporated as fieldsites for the present research. Little India lies on both sides of a 200-metre stretch of Serangoon Road, spanning Rochor Canal Road to Lavender Street. The area comprises shop-houses as well as a few high-rise housing development board flats. Shops in the area sell items ranging from foodstuff, textiles, jewellery, to clothing, travel bags and aromatherapy products. Some refer to Little India as 'Tek Kah', which means 'the foot of the bamboos', a reference to the proliferation of bamboo clumps in earlier days (*The Strait Times*, 1992; see also Siddique and PuruShotam, 1982). Golden Mile Shopping Complex, otherwise known as 'Little Bangkok', houses more than 150 shops that take up three levels, offering mainly Thai products from dried foodstuffs to a supermarket (*Phan Thai*, which means 'Your Friend') that holds Thai items of many varieties. There are also liquor-licensed coffee shops, travel agencies and mobile phone shops in the complex. This 32-year-old building is often filled with Thai nationals, either construction workers or maids, who congregate in the grounds over the weekends, chatting, drinking and eating (*The Strait Times*, 2001). Similarly, Peninsula Plaza, standing at 30 storeys tall, comprises shops that cater largely to Myanmar nationals, from eateries to sundry shops, as well as other shops such as photography and film outlets, mobile phone shops and boutiques.

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