

# Expanding the scope of a sociology of the senses

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## Introduction

This collection was planned primarily to demonstrate how investigations of the senses enhance the scope of urban studies, but also as a stepping stone to further sociological conceptualisations about how sensoria frame life in cities. Together, the case studies in this volume, written by observers with different academic backgrounds, provide responses to the questions that we asked and underscore the potential for expanding the scope of a crystallising sociology of the senses. In the following we will first point out implications of the work presented here for issues in contemporary urban studies. Then we will indicate some of the elements that indicate the naissance of a systematic subfield in sociology.

Four broad themes thread through the chapters: (a) the regulation of everyday life in different urban spaces and settings; (b) notions of sensory order and disorder, and the connection of the urban to ideologies; (c) spaces of belonging and exclusion: cities as hubs of socio-cultural diversity; and (d) role construction and performativity in urban contexts. In every case, researchers' concern with sensory qualities of place and their dynamics of (re)organisation elucidate particular socio-cultural classifications that inform inner awareness, locating both 'self' and 'others'. These are the classifications that determine the limits of 'rights', guide urban planning – and mutate in practice. Even in the chapters that do not deal specifically with issues of right and wrong as related to sensoria, it is clear that vocabularies related to sensory experiences are never neutral. Arranged, sorted, and bounded, shared categories are defended because they safeguard stability; the blurring of consensual classifications is hazardous to sociality as well as to the operations of authority (Douglas, 1999). Thus, in the social production of the senses, language is a central element and vocabularies are both psychological and political indicators. But language is not the only influential social structural factor. For limitations of space, we will look at one central social structural concern, the distribution of power. Even in studies where this is apparently not an issue, it is clear that sensory outcomes are impacted by the direct as well as the indirect exercise of power.

Power is the motor for reproducing inequalities among relatively vulnerable individuals and groups who, on their part, struggle to preserve sociality within

the framework of an interactive ethics. To ease the management of the city, for example, it is frequently admitted – and accepted – that officials negotiate in order to further the interests of powerful entrepreneurial sectors of the population. At the same time, as we see in the chapters by Duruz and by Felton, negotiations are pitched so as to ensure that municipal policies are perceived as honestly serving the well-being of the ‘ordinary’ citizen. In the chapters by Bennett and Earl, traditional patterns of kinaesthesia can be seen as power plays planned (albeit not calculatedly) to be embodied and integrated into the dispositions that configure participants’ lifelong habitus (Bourdieu, 1980). Designed for practical ends and for fostering feelings of authenticity in everyday life (Zukin, 1995), city streets and parks can also be shown to ‘radiate’ power that imposes both aesthetic and ecological values. Their forms mutely but no less effectively buttress positions of class and social status. Evidence of the power of aesthetic interests appears in how museums decide to shape their surroundings (Acosta and Duval, this volume) and in how people react physically and verbally to the built-up environment of London streets (Gomes). Weidner’s study highlights the power that is implemented in struggles over aesthetic consensus. Disagreements on taste in sounds created severe local conflict, the eruption of ‘peacock wars’. But the ideologically sound potential of overtly innocuous aesthetic sensoria may also be exploited in power politics. In the study by Kalekin-Fishman, initiating performances of canonic European music and regulating what popular songs can be broadcast are conceived and proposed as benevolent services but take form as more or less disguised exercises of political power.

In a few of the chapters the implementation of power for reproducing social inequality is the core message. Cohen, for example, points to the many layered ways in which aspirations to achieve minimal comfort in periods of extreme heat disadvantage the weak and reinforce inequalities. Similarly, Boucher analyses how powerful forces maintain substandard municipal services for impoverished populations and do not prevent deteriorating sensory experiences even in places destined to be oases of greenery in a large city. On the level of social interaction, on the other hand, people ‘in the street’ struggle with questions of how power is distributed among ‘equals’ and how these issues are resolved morally. The recognition of ambiguous meanings of deviant actions in chance street encounters in Kalyan’s New Delhi, like Hamish Win’s explorations of divergences in sensorial perspectives of humans and canines, are not necessarily indicators of unbridgeable distances. In the micro, for example, Win argues for a ‘transspecies ethics’ to ensure a balance of power.

By shedding light on how urban environments are distinguished, valued, or reconfigured through time in the sensory experiences of everyday life (Lefebvre, 1996), the variety of relevancies noted in these studies and their implications of various mechanisms of power for shaping the sensory environment hint at the extent to which a sociology of the senses can add to our understanding of urban life. In the following we will outline some of the broader puzzles about power in the field of urban studies, for which we hold that sociology of the senses is pertinent.

## **Puzzles in urban studies**

With the ‘diverse medley of ideas’ that make up the field of urban studies, there are basically two approaches to analysing life in cities (Paddison and McCann, 2014). One approach is oriented to urban policy and design, the deliberate ‘top-down’ shaping of social structures. Alternatively, it is possible to look at how the city is experienced, absorbed, interpreted, and evaluated by disparate individuals and groups, from the ‘bottom-up’ so to speak. Among the classics of sociology, the work of Weber (1958) and Simmel (1976 [1904]) illustrate the two approaches, in both of which the exercise of power is prominent. For Weber, the analysis of the urban condition was part of his project of tracing the rationalisation of social life as integral to the evolution of modernity. His solution was to characterise what he saw as a succession of types of cities, with shifting centres of economic, political and cultural power in historical contexts. Simmel was also interested in the evolution of urban life but he described the experience of city life with its micro power plays, in terms of the dialectical relations of individuals and different configurations of ‘sociality’.

Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first there has been a flood of case studies that comprise a continuation of Simmel’s approach. Significant as initiators of an ethnographic tradition in urban sociology are the researchers of the Chicago school. Their work, focusing on the social ecology of the city (Park, 1952), exemplifies implications of Simmel’s approach for understanding problems that face people who need to adjust their lives to the densely settled industrial city of modern times. To date, ethnographies shed light on the complications and complexities of experiencing cities that are increasingly diverse. Among them are studies of the struggles against social exclusion by migrants and blacks, for example, as well as by political minorities and children in schools (cf. for example: Cavan, 1966; Gans, 1962; Hughey, 2012; Kornblum, 2002; Liebow, 1967; Nolan, 2011; Oejo, 2013).

In the top-down approach, theorists of different persuasions have suggested typologies that highlight the unique qualities of urban life as performance opportunities because of and in spite of pressures of the powerful. Examples of the characterisations of cities include sweeping descriptions of ways of life with the aim of distinguishing urban from rural living (Redfield, 1960; Toennies, 2001 [1887]). More dynamic descriptions relate to urban development as driven by the far from benign drive for technological innovation, spurred by constantly expanding exploitative capitalist enterprises (Castells, 1977; Harvey, 1973). In the various models of change, cities are seen to progress by stages: from ‘the industrial city’ to the ‘centre of mass communications’ and the ‘junction of transnational finance’, all ruled from centres of power (Castells, 1977). Different sequences of order and disorder have been identified in studies of colonial and post-colonial cities on the African, Asian, and Latin American continents, areas that for centuries have been exploited directly and subsequently indirectly, by European states (Elsheshtawy, 2008; Marcuse and Van Kempen, 1999).

In most of these models, as expected, cities are portrayed in the context of the state system. This approach has been put in question with the pulsating changes wrought by transnational conglomerates. There is, for example, wide agreement among researchers that cities have long outgrown the hold of state legislation related to boundaries (Brenner, 2009; Lefebvre, 1996). The clouding of city limits is largely attributed to globalisation. With its expansion, responsibility for the efficient conduct of transnational corporations, many of which circumvent the constraints of state-wide laws, is located in cities. Because of their complicated economic ties, TNCs (transnational corporations) connect through increasingly powerful ‘global cities’ which are always in flux. Thus, Sassen can rightfully assert that:

in the context of globalisation ... cities [are] one territorial or scalar moment in a vast world of trans-urban dynamics.... This is the city *not as a bounded unit*, but as a complex structure that can articulate a variety of cross-boundary processes and reconstitute them as a partly urbanised condition.

(Sassen, 2005: 354, emphasis added)

There are also important attempts to combine the top-down and bottom-up approaches, each locating centres of power differently. This grasp of city life is noted in social philosophy and also in planning and design. Viewing cities as outgrowths of ‘the urban revolution’, Lefebvre (1996) found it possible to map connections between the sweeping effects of capitalism on how cities are pressed into growth and change, and the styles of people’s everyday life. His approach was taken up as well by De Certeau (1984). Similarly, connections between macro or meso and micro can be traced in the evolution of ideas about planning. Activist architects, for example, who base their stand on field experiments in Europe and in Canada, believe that some of the problems of the distribution of power in cities can be solved by encouraging residents to take charge of urban artistic initiatives (UAIIs) (Rizzo and Galanakis, 2015). An approach simultaneously more widely applicable and more specific interprets architects’ tasks as ‘the way in which the writing [the representation of buildings], as a certain kind of form, impinges on the psyche’ (Eisenman and Vidler, 2013). Both form and psyche, to their minds, have to be considered by planners when creating and recreating living environments.

With rising tides of migration, planners’ orientations have tended to be directed toward ‘writing’ that will adequately serve the cities peopled with diverse psyches. Recently, however, some planners argue for going beyond the obvious, beyond the task of serving diverse occupations and diverse ethnicities. Their position is grounded in the conviction that ethical considerations are more important than using their expert power to prescribe order. According to Fainstein (2005), designers should aim to plan for what she calls ‘a just city’. And this is possible only if there is a political consciousness that supports progressive moves toward respectfulness of others and greater equality at national

and local levels. This view is expressed as well in documents published by the United Nations. Looking at the problems worldwide in its declaration for optimising *Our Common Future*, the UN-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development finds parallels between urban and rural needs. The document therefore advances the view that *sustainable development* depends on social and political concerns for the just distribution of power, in tandem with the collaboration of informed and technically adept engineers and architects.

In summary, we may say that while conditions in cities have been changing drastically within the last century, researchers and practitioners involved in urban studies have increasingly been concerned with issues related to the quality of civil life and the promotion of social, cultural, physical, and psychological well-being. By emphasising community ethics, they position moral authority to moderate the consequences of unrestricted or even of unruly uses of power.

### Connecting studies of the senses

Researchers in urban studies recognise that data about the senses add to the understanding of the complexity of life in cities. Even in top-down research of the kinds cited above, it is possible to add notes about prevailing sensoria that provide a feeling for what it probably means to experience cities holistically, as lived reality. Analyses of sensory phenomena salient in the evolution of cities can shed light on the modes of life that have successively prevailed in different periods of history (cf. Cowan and Steward, 2007; Degen, 2014). In the bottom-up work of the Chicago school (and their successors) with implications for the different ways in which conformity and deviance are coloured by sensory experiences on meso and micro levels, data about the senses in urban life are plentiful, but not usually explicated. Still these studies do convey connotations of multisensory urbanism and diversity, sensory disciplining of the city, sensory ambivalence, and sensory overload, together with the materialities that permeate urban planning.

And there are, indeed, studies that stress the senses. Apart from the highly focused studies of sociological approaches to the arts, the ethnographic tradition has inspired contemporary studies in visual sociology, studies of soundscapes, and the increasingly varied work presented in the disciplinary framework of anthropology (Classen, 1997; Howes, 2004). Thus, the chapters of this book fit in with a rich tradition of descriptive and hermeneutic ethnography, building on a widely accepted theoretical and methodological orientation. From their close observation of often disregarded routines, researchers of the senses provide analyses of significant cases and unearth the mechanisms that pattern sensory experience, determine the nature of social situations and shape lived reality. The respective sections that discuss issues of social inequality, social process and social change, challenges to normativity and problems of social cohesion, underscore the constructivist allusions of these studies.

In their concerns, the studies of this volume also point to reasons for seeking out additional methodologies and for enhancing the repertoire of theorisations

of the senses. In top-down urban studies the addition of information about sensory experiences is enlightening but far from systematic. Among the possibilities for extending ethnographic findings is the strategy of combining data from extensive interviews with observational data, as indeed was done by Gomes in London. But this only traces the surface. In urban studies, there are still only hints of how cities actually (rather than schematically, as in Hoyt, 1939) grow and change. How, in the process, life counters expert designs of urban spaces is a field that awaits exploration.

In the following section of the afterword, we will specify some of the assumptions that can serve as a foundation for expanding a subfield of the sociology of the senses oriented to urban issues, and indicate how these assumptions point to opportunities for expanding paradigmatic – methodological and theoretical – models of sensory research.

### **Adding to models of a sociology of the senses**

An axiom of sociological studies of the senses is the perception that there is a dialectical relationship between the sensory experiences that surround and invade everyday life and the sensoria that human beings produce (Chau, 2008, Low, 2012). The relationships cannot be summarised adequately in terms of how human beings function or as how individuals and groups are impacted by culture. To date, such statements, with support from the philosophical and the social psychological literature, have provided grounds for agreeing that making sense of the senses and doing the ‘somatic work’ of acquiring their habitual use and reflecting on them can be adopted by the sociological community (Vannini *et al.*, 2011). But a comprehensive sociology of the senses should and can include diverse orientations.

For discovering how people assign meaning to sensory experiences and how they produce ‘red-hot’ or ‘cool’ sociality (Chau, 2008), ethnography is an endlessly rich tool. But in an expanding sociology of the senses, researchers have an obligation to explain how sensoria interweave with urban processes. Operating on and with experiences that define lived reality, moreover, the sociologist analyst of the senses is confronted with the challenge of unravelling experiences that purport to be no more than routines, local webs of the taken for granted. Overall, these include the interrelations of sensoria in interaction, in social structures, and in the nitty-gritty of organisational processes and procedures, as well as in governance and the tides of global events. Only in part can the nature of these relationships be fathomed from holistic descriptions of experience. The potential for clarification and explanation can undoubtedly begin to be realised by adopting more varied methodologies for exploring the sensory input that is always available.

### *A glance ahead – potential research tools*

A century after Simmel’s diagnosis, the overload of sensory stimuli in experiences of the city is commonplace. Partly induced by encounters with materials,

and partly induced by biological processes, the surfeit in urban contexts is apparently incontrovertible. In ethnographic studies, it behoves the researcher above all to describe, analyse and characterise observables. These may be delimited as the experiences of groups and individuals, and they are usually rightly presented as phenomenologically complex events. We believe that the sociology of the senses can go beyond the personal (not always individual) experience to mesh with and enhance in-depth understandings of what Abel (1952) calls ‘the big questions’ confronting sociological theory: in-depth study of heterogeneity and unity, freedom and constraint, social integration and individuation, determinants of social change, of progress and regression, of conflict and compassion. It is possible, for example, to gain a detailed grasp of how power is sensorially programmed under different circumstances, of the global structures that have causal effects on inequalities, and the transnational and transcultural impacts of the persistent cultivation of poverty in a globalising world.

With the adaptation of research tools available in the technologies of different scientific fields, a sociology of the senses can add determining details to analyses of urban society. Distinctive quantitative working definitions for sensory processes which individuals perceive to be internal and unmediated, such as those that have been developed in psychophysics and the neurosciences (see e.g. Steingrímsson and Luce, 2012) may be useful operationalisations of the senses for quantitative studies of stratification, for example. Furthermore, there are urban contexts in which there are opportunities to combine measurements derived from sensitive equipment with scores on reactions to the stimulation of different senses that have been developed in market research and in tourism (Litvin, 2008; Valenti and Riviere, 2008; Zuckerman *et al.*, 1978). Indices of how sensory competencies are connected with social constructs can be seen in research in educational assessments as well. Detailed measures developed to assess the sensory competence of children of primary school ages include tools for assessing visual, aural, and haptic capacities as well as body awareness, balance, and motion. In this type of assessment, scores are correlated with children’s capacity to generate new ideas and to take part in planning (Parham *et al.*, 2007).

The repertoire of measures is wider still. Given that the senses are in-depth experiences in individuals, researchers may find it useful to mobilise approaches borrowed from psycho-analysis in order to understand the connections of sensory experiences with roles, and to contextualise them (Chodorow, 1999; Freud, 1901). In more general terms, sociologists are likely to find that different kinds of sensory empathy are forms of social capital; and following up on how such capital can be exchanged for economic or political advantage is a promising channel of research. Constructs formulated on the basis of these privileged definitions, will enable sociologists to compile novel typologies to help disclose how sensory salencies are likely to modify social consequences on macro, meso, and micro levels, and how they can be modified by them.

Refined analyses of sensory input can be decisive in studies of the social formation of space and place on all three levels and at their interfaces. Within urban

regions, viable definitions of sensory elements are key to an understanding of the creation of ‘place’ which is so significant in the formation of individual and group character. Sensory research can refine modes of predicting the achievement of place by contrast with placelessness, of the authenticity of place as lived in space, and of identities of ‘insiders’ by contrast with ‘outsiders’ (Freestone and Lin, 2016). In this context, measurements of the senses can help decode observations such as the statement that for geographers ‘an object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with action and reflective mind’ (Tuan, 1977: 18).

Sophisticated measurements of the production of sensoria can take the lead in proposing solutions for the problem of scale as well. In general, a field of the sociology of the senses can be important for discerning the meaning of cosmopolitanism as opposed (or not) to the methodological nationalism of state-centredness (Beck, 2003). Detailing trends in the sensory scaling of mega-cities can clarify the contemporary meaning of an urban area. It can also guide the characterisation of differences between cities that are global and cities that are still crucially tied to state legislation, as well as of meaningful differences between global cities in the ‘North’ and in the ‘South’ (Brenner, 2009; Sassen, 2005). More focused descriptions or measurements of how sensory input and sensory experiences combine into culturally acceptable patterns, can also help demystify micro puzzles such as: delimitations of neighbourhoods, or even the varied modes of congregation of human beings and other actants in urbanised assemblages (Latour, 2005).

Thus, a wide range of quantitative and qualitative measures can be the basis for tracing nuanced associations between sensory input and performances of interaction, developments in social relationships, formations of groups, as well as behaviours that are pertinent to the explication of norms, statuses and roles, assessments of values, as of different kinds of engagement with social institutions, the types of social processes that indicate realisations of the ‘big questions’.

### *Theorisations*

Given the varied repertoire of operationalisations that is available for adaptation from different disciplinary literatures, it will be intriguing to see what kinds of theorising will be popular in the developing subfield. Like the chapters in this volume, a great deal of the work in cultural analyses of meanings assumes that the sensory realities have to be analysed within paradigms of constructivism. To our minds, this approach is not the only one possible. With the arsenal of available tools and with new tools that will undoubtedly be honed, it is highly likely that researchers of different professional dispositions will have the resources to select approaches more freely.

For one thing, an orientational shift that seems inevitable is the notion that with the enhancement of methodologies, the sociology of the senses invites sociologists to engage in Mode-2 Science (Gibbons *et al.*, 1994). This entails



refining distinctions by engaging non-sociologist stakeholders in locating questions from real life and in describing their own sensations and their own feelings. Such partnerships disclose ways to uncover the heterogeneity and plasticity of the social world; the complexity of reasoning and of the practicalities of social causation; the applicability of theorising causal powers in relation to the social world; and the intellectual coherence of the perspective of scientific realism in social science. This approach meshes with the potential of the sociology of the senses for transnational and transcultural comparative research. Moreover, we presume that a sociology of the senses will increasingly engage flexibly with disciplines from both the social and the natural sciences in order to make an impact on practice. Legitimated by the rich ethnographic and phenomenological literature of the last century, the emerging sociology of the senses will inevitably draw minimally on psychology, anthropology, geography, architecture, physics and biology to mediate the complex practices of construction and planning and to make the kind of comprehensive theoretical as well as methodological gains that are possible. As we see it, because of the spread of potential methodologies, the sociology of the senses will be open to dealing with theorising the existential challenges of transnationalism, and with the challenges of transdisciplinarity (Nicolescu, 2011; see Introduction, this volume). Theoretical channels are available.

As the sociology of the senses matures, we may expect researchers of diverse persuasions to explore varieties of theorising of sensorial events in their publications. Including the widely explored constructivist approach, it has been suggested that there are at least seven types of theories that can serve as frameworks for work in sociology (Abend, 2008). In studies of the senses to date, most of them have not been attempted. Among the types of theorising that await researchers on the senses are: (1) theories in which the senses, or aspects of the sensory experience, are conceptualised as variables, and embedded in propositions designed to assess hypotheses; (2) theories that emphasise explication; (3) causal theories at different levels of mathematical complexity; (4) hermeneutical theories based on analyses of how sensory experiences are treated in sociological classics; (5) theories that derive from a particular world view such as feminism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism; (6) accounts in terms of norms; and (7) the approach most familiar in work on the senses to date, theorisations of the social construction of reality.

Since urban environments can be seen as achievements of multi-faceted sensory networks that are embedded in the social order/disorder in diverse ways, clearly different types of measurement can provide essential knowledge to advance sociological theorisation. By taking advantage of the techniques and technologies that have been developed for assessing sensory traces in disciplines of the social and the natural sciences, a systematic sociology of the senses has the potential to investigate the complex dialectic of sensory adaptations and initiatives in urban studies through diverse types of focused theoretical inspection. There is a world of process and experience that awaits detailed elucidation, aspects of how the senses intersect with urban realities.

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