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ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:

SMELLWALK

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BACKGROUND

Smellwalks have become an increasingly utilised method as part of the 'sensory turn' and move towards unsettling the dominance of the visual in qualitative research, as well as the growth in more mobile forms of inquiry. Smellwalks involve actively attuning to smells whilst moving through a place, either as an individual or as part of a group, and recording observational notes about olfactory experiences, the intensities of smells and their impact on how the place feels. Smells encountered in a place might be in the background (constant), episodic (characterising a place), or short-lived (transient). The person doing the smellwalk may wish to 'catch' and follow a smell or actively 'hunt' for particular smells, and then record these in writing using a smellwalk form or verbally through speaking into a digital device.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Remember, this is a flexible method you can adapt to your particular research situation, but here are a few tips to get you started...


- Create a paper or digital smellwalk form for use in the field, including information such as description of the smell, its longevity, smell location, a smell intensity rating out of 5 or 10, and how the smell makes the place feel.
- If using the method with participants, decide whether you will follow a set route or allow participants to lead the way. If using a set route, it is helpful to refer to online maps and make a preparatory visit to ascertain the duration of the planned smellwalk. Ensure the smellwalk lasts for around an hour maximum, as sensory attention can wane and participants can become fatigued.
- If you allow participants to lead the way, consider providing some 'how to' guidance: for example, you could ask them to 'hunt' for a particular smell associated with a place, or ask them 'catch' a smell and then follow it.

“Even though I enjoyed trialling the method overall... my sense of smell was in constant competition with the more dominant senses of sight and hearing”

(Loretta's research diary)

WHY USE SMELLWALKS?

Smellwalks help people to attune deeply to the sense of smell, foregrounding a sensory modality which may usually be overlooked in everyday experiences of a place. Smellwalks can also be a fun method to use, whether conducted solo or in groups. The smells of place can be brought to life through dynamic and digital smellmaps and olfactory exhibitions if you have the skills in creating these, or are working in collaboration with somebody who does.

Description of smell 	Smell duration Is it lingering or short-term?	Where on the high street are you? Where on the high street was the smell?	Where does the smell come from? From a shop, market stall, item on the street etc.	Intensity of smell Circle the smell's intensity from 1 very weak to 5 very strong.	How does the smell make you feel? Positive/negative? How does it contribute to the high street's atmosphere?
sweet powders	short-term	side of the market	A flower bed.	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	feel happy (pleasant smell) draws attention → high street feels covered for
dry food / meat treats for dogs.	lingering	outdoor market	market stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	unpleasant / disruptive. feels out of keeping with human food being sold at the market feel a bit disgusted.
incense.	lingering	outdoor market	jewellery stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	pleasant - nostalgic as an associated childhood smell. feels 'authentic' / handmade products
fish.	short-term	outdoor market	fish stall	Weak 1 2 3 4 5 Strong	familiarity and expected smell at a fresh food market

Chloe's smellwalk form

"Some odours I was clearly smelling, but I found myself feeling puzzled and unable to detect the source of the smell or describe it in words"

(Chloe's research diary)

WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

Inclement weather can impact smellwalks negatively by making paper forms difficult to use, and because smells can be dispersed by wind or become less intense in wet weather. The smellwalk method is also difficult for people who do not have a well-functioning sense of smell, such as those afflicted by allergies or a cold, and sights and sounds can sometimes become foregrounded instead. Describing smells through language can be difficult if using more representational approaches, particularly in writing.

“I found myself having to work my body quite hard to attune to the smells of the high street, walking particularly slowly and breathing in through my nose more heavily, rapidly, and intentionally than I usually would”

(Chloe’s research diary)

PRACTICAL TIPS

- Digital devices and forms can be used to record smellwalk observations when wet weather causes difficulties using paper forms. If possible, the organiser(s) could schedule the smellwalk to take place during typically less windy/rainy times of the year.
- To help attune to smells, and ensure the sights of place do not become a sensory distraction, researchers and participants can pause and try temporarily closing their eyes (safely!) and breathing in more deeply than usual through the nose.
- If finding it difficult to describe smells through written language, a column for drawing pictures could be included on the smellwalk form. It could also be useful to build connections with those who specialise in creating digital smellmaps or olfactory exhibitions to learn about more creative ways of communicating smells.

SMELLWALKS IN ACTION

Louisa Allen used smellwalks to understand how the presence and absence of smells shaped the experience of Covid-19 in a suburban town in New Zealand. The author conducted six solo smellwalks of the town: three during lockdown and three outside of these restrictions, to access the changing smells of the place. Allen was subsequently able to compare the smells encountered during lockdown and out of lockdown, with more natural smells, for instance, dominant during lockdown as businesses were closed. Allen found smellwalks help to foreground the often unnoticed aspects of life and experiences which might elude written description, and ensure more than just the visual sense is attuned to.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SMELLWALKS

Allen, L. (2023). The smell of lockdown: Smellwalks as sensuous methodology. *Qualitative Research* 23(1): 21-37.

French, J and McLean, K. (2024). Two Centuries of Stink: Smell mapping Widnes past and present. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 67-89.

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