



Manchester
Metropolitan
University

4



ATMOSPHERIC METHODS GUIDE:

SENSORY PARTICIPATION

Dr Chloe Steadman & Loretta Lipworth

BACKGROUND

Academic research is said to be undergoing a 'sensory turn', with approaches such as sensory ethnography—paying attention to multiple senses throughout the research process—becoming more commonplace. Whilst participant observation is a key method in the ethnographer's toolkit, sensory participation involves attuning more keenly to multisensory and embodied experiences of place, and using the body as an instrument of research in knowledge generation. Practically, the person using the method will spend time in and/or move through an environment whilst paying attention to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures shaping their experiences of the place. Fieldnotes are typically produced as data, either written using a traditional pen and paper, a digital smartphone notes app, or verbally spoken into a sound recorder.

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...

- Consider how many fieldwork visits you want to make to the place under study. Given atmospheres can fluctuate over time, it could be useful to visit your research site across different seasons, days of the week, and times of day. This will depend on your research aims and how much time and budget you have available.
- Think about how you want to structure your fieldnotes. If less structure is preferred, fieldnotes can be recorded in an open way either using a notebook, digital notes app, or verbally spoken into a digital recording device. If more structure is desired, consider creating an observational template before entering the field, including sections such as: the time of day, weather conditions, location, the sense (sights, sounds, smells etc.), and how sensory stimuli impact the feel of the place.
- Make an initial fieldwork visit to familiarise yourself with your research site. During this visit, you might also want to devise a route that you will take through the place each time you visit, depending on the purpose of your study.

“I found that I was probably too ambitious. I couldn't get around to writing anywhere near... at the pace we were going. So I think I started defaulting towards visual”

(Melissa, Interview participant)

WHY USE SENSORY PARTICIPATION?

Sensory participation involves first-hand immersion into a place's atmospheres and encourages a more all-encompassing approach by focusing on the multiple senses shaping atmospheres, rather than a singular sense. Whilst observing both your own and other people's embodied and emotional responses to a place's atmospheres, this method enables behaviours to be observed in situ, rather than hearing about them when reported in an interview context. It is a flexible method and often combined with other techniques, such as interviews, photographs, and videos.

WHAT MIGHT BE CHALLENGING?

It can sometimes feel overwhelming trying to attune to multiple senses at any one time, and the visual sense can often be focused on too heavily as a result. Some people can feel the method lacks structure and prefer to instead produce fieldnotes using a more structured observational template. Too much focus can be given to describing sensory stimuli, rather than making the link through to how they inform what the place feels like.

“Although I have used this method before, I am finding it more difficult today to attune to the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures of the space at any one time. The high street, although relatively compact spatially, seems to elicit a large array of sensory information I am finding it difficult to attune to all at once”

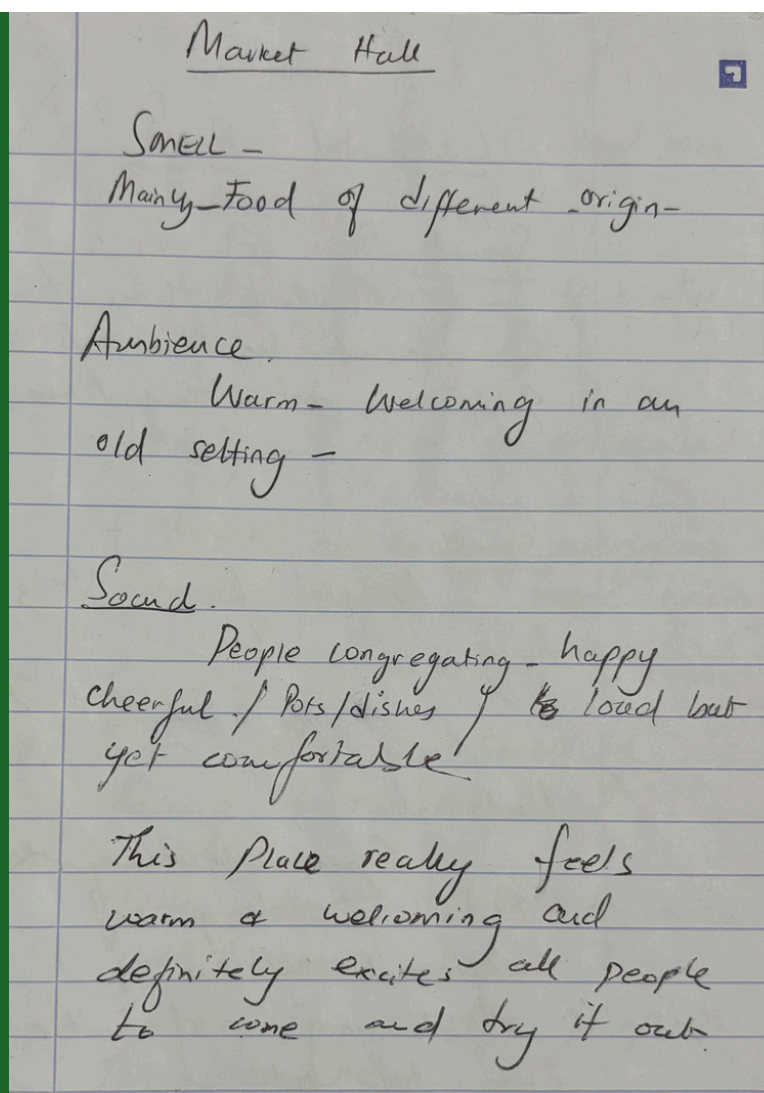
(Chloe's research diary)

PRACTICAL TIPS

- To reduce any potential feelings of sensory overload, build in regular rest stops during fieldwork. You might wish to pause and focus on each sense in turn within a contrasting range of spaces in the place being studied.
- The researcher and/or participants should consider how they want to organise their fieldnotes before entering the field. Some may prefer to record fieldnotes in an unstructured and open way, whilst for others it would be useful to create some sort of observational template in advance.
- Ensure to not just spend time describing sensory qualities of the place, but also reflect on how that makes the place feel. Reminders could be included to encourage links to be made between sensory information and atmosphere, either written on a notebook or including a separate section for this if using an observational form.

"I think if it's already written on my notepad, you know... so I just need to fill it in, rather than me just, you know, trying to scribble it down in different ways. I don't know what a mess I made. But yeah, that would have been helpful. So it's kind of really set up beforehand"

(Ruby, Interview participant)



Ruby's sensory fieldnotes

SENSORY PARTICIPATION IN ACTION

Chloe Steadman and Steve Millington used sensory participation to investigate challenges of atmospheric control on the North Pier- the oldest of three seaside piers found in the seaside town of Blackpool, UK. They visited and walked along the pier numerous times, attuning to the multiple senses impacting its atmosphere, and recorded their sensory experiences through fieldnotes written using both a notebook and digital smartphone app and later expanded and typed up. They combined the method with soundwalks, videowalks, and photography. Sensory participation enabled the researchers to immerse themselves into the atmospheres of the North Pier and sense its fluctuating atmospheres through their own embodied experiences.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SENSORY PARTICIPATION

Pink, S. (2015). *Doing Sensory Ethnography*. London: SAGE.

Steadman, C. (2024). Using multi-sensory methods to study atmospheres. In Steadman, C and Coffin, J. (eds). *Consuming Atmospheres*. Oxon: Routledge. 187-203.

To reference this guide:

Steadman, C and Lipworth, L. (2025). Atmospheric Methods Guide: Sensory Participation. Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University.

To read about other atmospheric methods, search online for the full guide titled 'Atmospheric Methods Guide' by Dr Chloe Steadman and Loretta Lipworth